News



An angel and statue of Mary are pictured at a cemetery in Tuam, Ireland, where the bodies of nearly 800 infants were uncovered at the site of a former Catholic home for unmarried mothers and their children. The photo was taken Jan. 12, the day a commission investigating the treatment of women in such homes released its report. (CNS/Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters)

by Joe Little

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An Irish government investigation has found that 40 percent of "illegitimate" infants died in the country's religious-run mother and baby homes during parts of the 1930s and 1940s. It says this was almost twice the death rate among other Irish babies born to single moms in 1945-46.*

The report, released Jan. 12, says the frequently Catholic-run homes "did not save the lives of 'illegitimate' children; in fact, they appear to have significantly reduced their prospects of survival."

The quasi-judicial probe also found that the proportion of unmarried mothers admitted to the homes during the last century was probably the highest in the world.

It quotes a report co-authored by the Catholic bishop of Cork in 1951 urging the legalization of adoption in Ireland partly to "lessen the export of babies to America," which it conservatively estimated amounted to 500 children in 1950 alone.

The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was sparked by the discovery of a mass grave on the former campus of a home. It says the country's residential institutions for single moms and their babies saw admissions peak about 50 years ago.

The almost 3,000-page report is the culmination of five years' work by the state-established commission comprising one female and one male expert and its chair, Judge Yvonne Murphy.

It was established by the state following the revelation by an amateur historian, Catherine Corless, that there were no burial records for 796 children who had spent their short lives in the Catholic-run, state-owned and government-regulated home in her local town, Tuam, County Galway.

The report notes that the children — who, like their mothers, were systemically discriminated against and shunned — were not buried in the Tuam's town cemetery, whose sanctified ground was located just across the street from the home.

The Tuam scandal had unfolded largely behind high walls in a market town in the country's poorest — and predominantly agricultural — province during the first four decades of southern Ireland's independence from Britain. But not everything was hidden: some of the home's children attended the local grade school and Corless recalls them emerging from behind a 10-foot-high wall to go there.

Opened in 1925, the Tuam home was closed by the Catholic Bon Secours Sisters in 1961.

In 2019 the commission concluded in an interim report that the babies and young children identified by Corless were probably buried in unmarked graves on the home's campus. It also said its researchers had found a significant number of human remains in 20 chambers that had been built inside a disused sewage tank on the campus.

Bone sample analysis indicated the babies were as young as 35 fetal weeks and as old as 2 to 3 years.



Baby clothing and other items hang from a wall at a cemetery in Tuam, Ireland, where the bodies of nearly 800 infants were uncovered at the site of a former Catholic home for unmarried mothers and their children. The photo was taken Jan. 12, the day a commission investigating the treatment of women in such homes released its report. (CNS/Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters)

According to the Jan. 12 report, the age range found in the disused sewer was representative of the cohort of about 82,000-plus babies in homes throughout the country, which the state coordinated in cooperation with several church denominations.

The report indicates that most of the 160,000-plus residents (mothers of most babies stayed in the homes) were processed through the homes for a half century up to the mid-1970s — hidden in clear sight of a society of 3 to 4 million people.

Release of the new report had been hotly anticipated for years. During his visit to Ireland in August 2018, Pope Francis apologized for abuse inflicted at Catholic institutions in the country.

Paul Redmond, a survivor of one of the homes and chairperson of the Coalition of Mother and Baby Homes Survivors, told NCR he had hoped the report would be wider in scope and would have also investigated hospitals that may have been involved in exporting children out of Ireland.

Redmond's coalition has called on Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin to delay briefing the Irish Parliament on the report or offering a public apology to survivors in order to give those affected by the findings more time to digest, discuss and come to terms with the material.

"We want to know exactly what the state is apologizing for," said Redmond, who also called for redress — including financial compensation — to help mitigate the trauma suffered by thousands of former residents and their families.

The report says that the proportion of Irish unmarried mothers admitted to mother and baby homes or county homes in the 20th century was probably the highest in the world.

The peak of admissions to the 18 homes reviewed was in the 1960s and early 1970s. Fourteen of the homes provided about two-thirds of all admissions. They were run by Christian organizations, mainly congregations of Catholic sisters.

A further four were chosen for review by the state as a sample of its own network of county homes. They provided about one-third of admissions in the period under examination, 1922-1998, when the last home was closed. Most of their admissions preceded 1960.

The report says the vast majority of the child residents were classified in law as "illegitimate" and, because of this, suffered discrimination for most of their lives. This status was abolished by parliament 33 years ago.

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Over 500 people testified to the commission, which sat behind closed doors. The report states that the vast majority of children born in the institutions have no memory of their time there.

The report says that before legal adoption became available in Ireland in 1953, children leaving the homes had three destinations. Some were boarded out, often as unwaged farm laborers; others were "nursed out" or given to women to care for with a fee paid by the state, while a further cohort ended up in other institutions such as Catholic-run industrial schools.

In 2009, those institutions were roundly condemned by an earlier Commission of Investigation for inflicting systemic sexual, physical and psychological abuse on boys and psychological abuse on girls.

The Jan. 12 report says that many of the women who lived in the baby homes "suffered emotional abuse and were often subject to denigration and derogatory remarks."

"The overwhelming majority were first-time mothers and they were uninformed about childbirth," it states.

**Correction*: *The lead paragraph of this article was updated after initial publication to clarify an error introduced in the editing process regarding the data in the Jan. 12 report concerning the death rate of children in Irish mother and baby homes in the 1930s and 1940s.*

[Joe Little is the former religious and social affairs correspondent for RTÉ, Ireland's national public service TV and radio broadcaster.]