

Ireland's abuse report: Stories from victims, stories from employees

DUBLIN, Ireland – The report by Ireland's independent Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse highlighted stories from victims of abuse at government-run institutions, but also presented testimony by priests and nuns who worked at the schools and orphanages.

Many of those placed in the institutions were considered “needy.” The report said the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children inspectors, usually retired police or military officials, were known as “the cruelty men,” and children would hide when they saw them coming for fear they would be taken from their parents.

The 2,600-page report included the following incidents:

- At Goldenbridge Industrial School in Dublin, children who had been taken away from their parents would regularly wet their beds; for this, the Sisters of Mercy beat them on their hands and buttocks. Children who had wet their bed were obliged to wait on a landing for their punishments, and one complainant said that this waiting was worse than the actual beatings. In an attempt to stop bed-wetting, the sisters would not give water to some children in the evening, so some children would drink from toilet bowls to assuage their thirst.
- At Artane Industrial School in Dublin, one boy who soiled himself was forced to eat his own feces by a Christian Brother, who admitted the incident in his evidence to the commission.
- In 1944, an inspection of St Michael's Industrial School, run by the Sisters of Mercy in Cappoquin, found children living in overcrowded conditions and on a semi-starvation diet. A doctor found that, of 75 boys, 61 were under the normal weight for their age-height groups by 3-21 pounds.
- In the 1980s, children in Cappoquin were left in the care of an alcoholic nun, who was regularly drunk on duty, who beat children regularly and who would take a girl to bed with her every night.

- In 1950, the bishop of Galway wrote to the Christian Brothers about one of their employees at Salthill Industrial School whom he said was beating boys severely. The bishop wrote that the man's "methods would evoke indignation if they were directed against brute animals."

- In 1944, St. Anne's Reformatory School in Kilmacud, outside Dublin, was established to accommodate girls who were considered a risk to other children because of sexual experiences. Girls as young as 8 who had been raped or abused, or even those children in contact with such girls, were considered unsuitable for an ordinary industrial school and were sent to St. Anne's.

Employees of the institutions also told the commission their stories.

For example, boys who were troublesome at other Christian Brother schools were often sent to a school in Letterfrack because of its isolated location. One brother who served in Letterfrack in the 1950s told the commission: "The whole experience, I cannot justify it.

"The system was strict and we were told at the very beginning that unless we had discipline, that there would be chaos, there would be chaos. One of the brothers said to me, 'Whatever you do, don't smile, walk along with a very serious face,' and ... I was shivering in my boots. Quite a number of the lads there were big strong lads ... huge guys there; I was shivering in my shoes because I never had this experience."

One of the Sisters of Mercy at Goldenbridge told the commission: "You would be very conscious of 150 children not having the hug and the love and the care of someone who really loved them closely. ... In our time you didn't do that, you didn't come near or hug people. That would have been part of our training as well. In hindsight, I think it was a good thing, because I might have been accused of something very different if I had hugged or loved, as you might want to do."

A lay teacher who worked at Goldenbridge for more than 30 years described it as "not a happy place."

"I was glad to get out of it," she said. "When you have the children sulking, shouting at each other across the room and shouting at you and calling you all kinds of

names, it's very hard to put up with it. It wasn't a happy atmosphere, no. There were some lovely children in it, that never gave you a bit of trouble, you felt like hugging them but you didn't, you couldn't, because the bold ones would take it out of them - 'teacher's pet.' "