

## Chapter 5

# Interviews

---

**5.01** A total of 493 witnesses were interviewed by members of the Investigation Committee's legal team. These interviews covered over 150 Industrial Schools, Reformatories, special schools, residential homes, national schools, secondary schools, hospital and other childcare facilities. Some of the institutions were cited by only one or two witnesses. The material catalogued here consisted of uncorroborated allegations that were unchallenged and unproven and therefore did not have probative value in yielding conclusions about any institution or event. The interviews do, nevertheless, demonstrate the range of abuse complained of in such institutions and the circumstances in which it can arise and are a reference for identifying weaknesses in the systems and indicating areas needing diligence and possibly reform.

**5.02** Interviews are summarised in the following categories:

- Boys Industrial Schools and Reformatories
- Girls Industrial Schools and Reformatories
- Orphanages
- Hospitals
- Special schools and schools for the deaf
- National schools
- Other childcare facilities.

### Boys' Industrial and Reformatory Schools

**5.03** Interviews were conducted in respect of 10 schools that admitted boys only. Nine of these were the subject of Investigation Committee reports. Over 250 ex-residents attended for interview many of whom proceeded to oral hearing.

#### *Physical abuse*

**5.04** The principal complaint of male interviewees was of physical abuse. The persons identified as being responsible for harsh physical abuse were almost exclusively religious Brothers, priests or nuns. Lay teachers did not feature prominently in the accounts of physical punishment given by interviewees although a small number described lay teachers and lay staff who were employed as night-watchmen, or farm workers as cruel and severe.

**5.05** Almost all of those interviewed described a regime of punishment. Although the 10 schools that were covered under this category were in different parts of the country and run by different religious orders, the accounts of physical abuse from all of them were strikingly similar.

**5.06** There was a constant threat of punishment that left the boys fearful all the time. The pervasiveness of punishment derived from the fact that even slight or small misdemeanours attracted blows with the leather strap and most Brothers carried leather straps with them at all times. Boys were beaten

if their beds were not made properly or if they were last out of the showers. Boys were also beaten in the classroom for failure at lessons. Many ex-residents stated they were beaten for bed-wetting and this was a practice across all of the schools in this category.

- 5.07** Severe beatings were often associated with allegations of impurity or masturbation, which was also common across all of the schools.
- 5.08** In addition to punishment for offences either trivial or grave, there was the added fear created by punishments administered for no apparent reason. Interviewees recalled being called out of the classroom or being taken out of the dormitory and being beaten without any explanation. This made it impossible to avoid punishment and many recalled a sense of constant fear. As one man stated 'You got hit for nothing'.
- 5.09** Religious staff members were described as volatile and unpredictable by some complainants: 'He would fly off the handle a lot'; 'he was a bully'; 'he was a vicious man' and some were described as being obsessed with immorality and sex. One or two Brothers were described as smelling of alcohol when they beat the boys.
- 5.10** There were some differences in the way in which physical punishment was administered across the different schools. In some schools boys were stripped and beaten across the back and buttocks with leather straps for fairly trivial offences. In other schools such punishments were rarer although there were instances of severe, almost ritualistic beatings in almost all schools.
- 5.11** Absconding was treated as a very serious offence in all schools and usually attracted the most severe punishment. In all cases, boys who absconded were punished and in almost all cases this punishment took the form of severe physical beatings with a leather or a cane. Head shaving was reported by some interviewees in some schools.
- 5.12** Punishments were usually administered either in the presence of or within the hearing of other boys. One interviewee recalled a boy being taken out of the classroom and being savagely kicked and beaten by a Brother. He said that he could actually hear the punches and kicks and the boy crying for the Brother to stop.
- 5.13** There was no evidence from the interviews that any attempt was made to hide or disguise the fact that severe beatings were administered. On the contrary, many recalled the fear and terror of seeing and hearing these beatings: 'the whole class went silent and could hear what was going on'.
- 5.14** Boys who were in these schools in the late 1970s reported less systemic abuse but could still recall incidents of severe corporal punishment either directed at them or other boys.
- 5.15** The most common implement reported for inflicting punishment was the leather strap. In nine out of the 10 schools covered by this category, it was the norm to receive blows with the leather on the hands or the buttocks. A number of interviewees stated that there were coins stitched into these straps and some recalled a larger heavier strap as well as a smaller one. One teacher was described as having a special stick made. There was no consistency as to the number of strokes and it appeared to depend on the individual teacher.
- 5.16** Other implements, such as hurleys, canes, chair legs and dowels, were mentioned as well as fists and feet.

## ***Sexual abuse***

- 5.17** Sexual abuse by members of staff was alleged in respect of all the schools in this category. The number of persons alleging abuse varied from over 50 percent of complainants in some schools to 10 percent in others. In most schools the range was between 30 and 40 percent of complainants interviewed.
- 5.18** Sexual abuse, where it was perpetrated by staff members, followed similar patterns. The boy was usually alone with the perpetrator, and the abuse, which ranged from inappropriate touching to rape, was usually conducted in a way that made the boy fearful of a beating if he resisted. Boys were instructed to tell no-one about what occurred and they felt they had no option but to stay silent. There were some reports of staff offering kinder treatment to boys they had singled out for sexual abuse. One interviewee said that although he knew that what the Brother who abused him was doing was wrong, he tolerated it because it made him feel special and loved in the school. He said the Brother would give him treats and watch out for him and he never blamed the Brother for what he did to him. It was a matter of survival for him.
- 5.19** In general, however, witnesses alleged that sexual abuse was conducted in a random and impersonal manner. The boy did not appear to matter a great deal and there appeared to be no communication or affection shown to him by the perpetrator. This was one of the more striking aspects of sexual abuse in boys' institutions. In most cases, even where boys alleged that they were assaulted over a long period by a particular Brother, there was no evidence that any kind of 'relationship' built up.
- 5.20** Boys who were sexually abused felt ashamed and did not discuss what had occurred with their fellow pupils. Interviewees reported seeing boys coming out of Brothers' rooms looking distressed, but they did not discuss what had happened even though they, the onlookers, were aware that the boys had been abused. The secrecy enforced by threats by the perpetrator was reinforced by shame and humiliation on the part of the victim and the boys themselves.
- 5.21** In a handful of cases, the victims reported abuse to the management of the school. These complaints usually resulted in a beating and nothing was done to prevent the abuse. In some cases the interviewees said that the alleged perpetrator was transferred although they did not know if there was any connection with their complaint and the transfer.
- 5.22** In a small number of cases, boys reported being sexually abused by female carers. They were fondled and taken into bed with the carer. They were generally young children of five or six when this occurred.
- 5.23** Many interviewees stated that they were aware of sexual abuse of other boys by staff members. In particular, interviewees recalled boys being removed from their beds at night and being taken to a Brothers' room. Interviewees also stated that some night-watchmen in three schools abused boys during the night. Interviewees alleged sexual abuse by visitors and lay staff, but the incidence was far less than that perpetrated by religious staff..
- 5.24** In all schools abuse by other boys was a problem but in some schools it was endemic and there appeared to be little done to control the bullying that younger, weaker boys were subjected to. One interviewee described peer abuse as 'rampant' in his school and another said that he was raped by a gang that operated in the school. Boys who lived in schools where supervision was weak and peer sexual activity and abuse were common described the constant fear and helplessness they felt. They could not report what was happening to them for fear of reprisals and they had to suffer in silence.

- 5.25** Many of the men who alleged experiences of sexual abuse reported feelings of shame and deep anger. For some it left them sexually confused for many years after leaving the institution and led to lifelong psychological problems as well as problems with relationships and friendships.

### ***Emotional abuse and neglect***

- 5.26** General physical conditions were not a particular feature of boys' complaints apart from food, which was generally described as poor and inadequate with many recalling hunger during their childhood in the schools. They alleged that food, even where it was adequate, was often almost inedible. In one school the food was described as quite good but there was not enough of it.
- 5.27** Issues such as overcrowding, poor clothing and bad hygiene were not regarded as being as significant as the physical and sexual abuse and bullying that were described by most of the complainants. Fear, loneliness, and isolation were, however, dominant themes.
- 5.28** These 10 schools were the bigger residential schools and therefore large numbers of residents were a feature. Many described their fear at seeing the huge number of boys older and bigger than they were and for many of them being bullied became part of their lives..
- 5.29** Lack of family contact was a significant factor. Many of the pupils had one or both parents alive, but contact was minimal.
- 5.30** Interviewees were asked for positive memories of their time in the schools and, for most of them, these revolved around sport and recreation. Where games were organised for the boys, they were generally enjoyed and appreciated. Films, music and games were mentioned. A significant number of interviewees had no positive memories.

## **Girls' Industrial Schools and Reformatories**

- 5.31** Twenty-two girls' Industrial Schools and Reformatories were mentioned by complainants in the course of interviews with the Commission. Of these, one school was also the subject of a full Investigation Committee report. The other 21 schools were each the subject of a small number of complaints. They were small schools run by religious orders of nuns and were generally in rural locations throughout Ireland.

### ***Physical abuse***

- 5.32** Twenty of the 22 girls' Industrial Schools were cited by interviews for administering physical punishment that in their view amounted to abuse. Although most of the complaints were in respect of pervasive, arbitrary and unpredictable punishments, a significant number of complainants described incidents of extreme abuse and cruelty. The accounts given at interview disclosed a wide divergence between different schools and there was less evidence of a policy of abuse across the system.
- 5.33** There was variation from school to school and the level and severity of physical punishment appeared to depend to a very large extent on the Resident Manager. In all schools in which physical punishment was alleged, the complainants spoke about the pervasiveness of such punishments and said that even minor misdemeanours would be punished by a slap or a 'clatter'.
- 5.34** In some schools, the Resident Manager was described as being extremely abusive. Girls were punished by being beaten with leather straps, canes, and other implements. They said they were beaten on all parts of their bodies, with or without clothing on.

- 5.35** Complaints of physical punishment in girls' Industrial Schools mentioned as a particular feature lay workers who were alleged by a large number of interviewees to have perpetrated severe punishment and abuse without any accountability to the nuns who managed the schools. In addition, older girls were often left in charge of younger children and were permitted to use such physical punishment as they deemed appropriate without any supervision or control.
- 5.36** Other punishments were cited, such as being locked into a dark room for a long period of time, being deprived of food and privileges, and in one or two cases girls having their hair shaved or cut tightly.
- 5.37** Even in schools in which corporal punishment was described as fairly mild, there was still an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty amongst the children because of the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of the punishment. Children who were engaged in ordinary day-to-day activities could be smacked, slapped or beaten for little or no reason. This made children distrustful of adults and they felt isolated and undermined throughout their childhood.
- 5.38** Complainants spoke of beatings that were so severe that they ended up in the infirmary for a number of days and even weeks. Some said that the doctor or a nurse would have been aware of their condition but would not have been told how it had happened. In one case an interviewee said that she had marks all over her body from a beating with a whip and the doctor was told that it had been caused by an older girl. Another interviewee recalled Dr Anna McCabe, the Department of Education Inspector, seeing her. She believed Dr McCabe did not accept the explanation by the Resident Manager and insisted on speaking to the Resident Manager about the condition she found the child in. The interviewee believed that the particular nun who administered the beating did not beat the children as much after that event.
- 5.39** Interviewees reported beatings mainly for misbehaviour consisting of answering back or being careless or inadvertent in their chores or daily activities. They also reported physical punishment in school and many reported being fearful whilst in the classroom. Most of the children in these smaller Industrial Schools were educated in external schools and many reported feeling singled out and 'picked on' by nuns and teachers in the external school.

### ***Sexual abuse***

- 5.40** Sexual abuse did not feature regularly in the complaints of interviewees who were pupils of girls' Industrial Schools. No school was described of having an endemic or systemic problem of sexual abuse. However, individual serious incidents of sexual abuse were reported by interviewees against priests, lay workers, godparents, and men in families to whom the children had been sent on work placements. The sexual abuse alleged ranged from inappropriate touching to rape, and in all cases where children were sexually abused by men there was a fear and reluctance in reporting the abuse to the management of the schools.
- 5.41** Where a priest was alleged to have abused girls, a number of interviewees said that they believed his activities were known to the management of the school but were not addressed by them. Even if girls stated that they were uncomfortable about being with the priest in many cases no notice was taken. This was not universally the case: one or two examples were cited where girls complained about the behaviour of a priest and they were never again placed in the position of being alone with that priest.
- 5.42** A number of interviewees spoke of being sexually abused by older girls in the Industrial School. This abuse, which was often in the context of physical bullying as well as sexual bullying, occurred in two or three schools that were mentioned by interviewees.

- 5.43** The majority of interviewees spoke about being completely ignorant about the facts of life and of not being properly prepared for, or provided for, when menstruation occurred. Many girls reported being terrified when they got their first period and having to depend on older girls to tell them how to deal with it.
- 5.44** In general, the attitude to sexuality was repressive and humiliating. Many interviewees reported feeling ashamed of their own bodies and embarrassed and overly modest even in the company of other girls.

### ***Emotional abuse and neglect***

- 5.45** Some interviewees recalled that food was generally fair and they had no recollection of being hungry in the institution. Others said that the food was very bad. All of the accounts of the food would indicate that it was meagre or basic in most institutions although one interviewee stated that she never felt any hunger while she was in the convent, that there was lots of food served there and that the only time they were hungry was if they were deprived of food as a punishment.
- 5.46** In general interviewees did not complain about clothing, although some did say that they felt marked out by their clothes when they attended external national schools. Accommodation and standards of cleanliness varied from school to school and depended on the Resident Manager who was in charge. In general, however, the school was kept to a very high standard and girls were required to polish and scrub and clean the premises on a daily basis. There was a very big emphasis on chores and work and many interviewees described drudgery and hard physical labour as being their predominant memory of life during their childhoods.
- 5.47** Very many of the interviewees from girls' Industrial Schools had been in care all of their lives. Those who came later into the institutions tended to come as a result of family breakdown or illness or death. The children in girls' Industrial Schools tended to be there for a longer period of time and their memories of their childhood were compressed over a 10- or even 14-year period. However, the predominant and most commonly cited memory of girls who had been placed in Industrial Schools was the humiliation and degradation that they were subjected to by the religious and lay staff. Girls, particularly those born out of wedlock, reported being denigrated because of their birth. One interviewee stated that a feature of the school was the fact that no-one ever felt that you were part of any family or had any real identity. She said there were no birthday celebrations, no toys and no real recreation.
- 5.48** Many of the interviewees reported very low self-esteem. One interviewee said that she felt the biggest complaint that she had was that there was no emotional support for the children whatsoever. She said birthdays were not celebrated and that children had very little to look forward to in their day-to-day lives.
- 5.49** Many interviewees reported that their education was affected by having to work in the institution. They said that they were taken out of classes early in order to care for children or to wash and clean or to do work in the farms or gardens. They also claimed that their education stopped before the Primary Certificate because they were moved full time into working in the institution. Very few interviewees proceeded beyond national school level and this was a source of great disappointment and frustration to many of them who felt that had they been given a chance in their childhood they could have had better careers and better standards of living in their adult lives.
- 5.50** Most interviewees said they had very little contact with the Industrial School once they had left at 16 years of age even though they had lived most, if not all, of their childhood in the care of the school. Very few reported any emotional attachment to the people who had cared for them or to the school itself. When asked whether they had positive memories interviewees would sometimes identify a particular nun or a particular care worker as having been kind. Some interviewees said



that their most positive memory of their time in their school were the friendships they made. They said that although there was a degree of bullying from older girls, by and large the girls looked out for each other and this created strong bonds between some of them that they had to this day.

**5.51** Many of the interviewees were concerned at the impact their experiences in Industrial Schools had had on their own parenting skills. Some of them felt that they had to struggle very hard to be good parents to their own children and many of them felt they had failed in this regard.

**5.52** In general, the interviewees stated that they were not prepared properly for life after the institution and were not properly supported by the institution once they left. Many of these women suffered life-long problems with addictions and depression and they stated that the damage done in these early years stayed with them throughout their lives.

## **Orphanages**

**5.53** The Committee's legal team heard complaints about a total of 12 orphanages that operated in the state during the relevant period. Nine of these institutions had fewer than four complainants, one had six complainants, and two others had 13 and 14 complainants respectively. Unlike Industrial Schools, orphanages did not take children that were committed by the courts but instead children were sent to orphanages by families who had either broken down irretrievably or who were going through a temporary traumatic event or had suffered bereavement. Children usually stayed in the orphanage until they were 12 and then they either went back to their family or extended family or they were placed in an Industrial School if there was no family available to care for them. Orphanages were run by Religious Orders of nuns, Brothers and by lay people. They did not have internal national schools and children from orphanages attended outside national schools. Orphanages did not provide industrial training of any sort although children were required to do quite an extensive round of chores and maintenance in the school.

**5.54** Where a parent was still alive at the time of a child's committal to an orphanage, there tended to be more contact between the child and the parent and in many cases the stay in the orphanage was terminated by the child's return to the family.

## ***Physical abuse***

**5.55** The 12 orphanages whose residents were interviewed by the Commission varied greatly in terms of physical punishment and abuse reported by interviewees. In cases where the interviewee was also attending to discuss an Industrial School, the orphanage was sometimes contrasted very favourably with the school that the child subsequently attended. For example, one complainant said that he had been placed in the orphanage because of abuse by his father. He stated that he and his brother were sexually and physically abused whilst he was at home and that he was removed to a children's home in Dublin. He said that he had great memories of the home that they 'looked after the children 100 percent'. He said that a lot of love was felt and shown to the children in that home. He was subsequently sent to another institution that he experienced as extremely abusive and about which he had come specifically to the Commission to complain.

**5.56** There was a wide range of different experiences across different institutions and whilst some orphanages were described as well equipped with good food and clothing, others were described as grim, frightening places. In these institutions physical punishment was the first response to any misdemeanour or wrong doing. Institutions varied as to the level of physical punishment administered. In orphanages that catered exclusively for boys, the level of physical punishment was quite high and children were beaten with canes, leathers and other implements by religious and lay staff.

- 5.57** Bed-wetting was a problem for many of the interviewees as they were in these institutions as very young children. The standard response to an incident of bed-wetting was to be punished physically and humiliated in front of other children.

### ***Emotional abuse***

- 5.58** Interviewees who were in orphanages during their childhood were often there for short periods during traumatic times in the family. For these children the experience of being committed to an orphanage was one of extreme isolation and loneliness. They spoke of how badly they missed their parents and their family and they found it very difficult to settle into the regime of the institution.
- 5.59** Other children were committed to the orphanage because they were born out of wedlock and for these children a lifetime in care was usually the norm. All of the interviewees who experienced childcare in the orphanage system prior to going in to the Industrial School system described the orphanage system as being kinder and more benign than that experienced in the Industrial School system. Although the regime could be harsh and discipline severe, it was not as cruel as their experiences in subsequent institutions.
- 5.60** Where orphanages were described as cruel, it was usually because of one or two staff members who were particularly harsh. There was no evidence that there was a systemic policy of cruelty throughout the institutions and there was some evidence that, where staff members were abusive towards children, management intervened and eventually the perpetrator was removed.

## **Hospitals**

- 5.61** Nine hospitals were mentioned by interviewees to the Investigation Committee's team. Each institution was subject to one complaint except one hospital, which was the subject of five complaints.

### ***Physical abuse***

- 5.62** Six hospitals were described by complainants as being physically abusive, some to a greater extent than others.
- 5.63** In terms of hospital treatments two complainants in two separate institutions complained about the lack of pain relief they were given following medical treatments or during illnesses. One complainant stated that they were in great pain when attending the physiotherapist in one particular hospital, and another recalled the immense pain of the physical exercises he would have to perform in his callipers. This was exacerbated in both cases by the lack of any explanation given to the children as to the procedures they were undergoing, or the details regarding their specific illnesses. One complainant recalled how she genuinely believed she was going to die and was not given any reassurance or shown any compassion by those in charge.
- 5.64** Three complainants complained about being slapped for wetting the bed and wetting the floor. One complainant described how she wet the bed as her calls for the bedpan to be brought to her were ignored by those in charge. She stated that once the bed was wet she was left sitting in it for hours and slapped as a punishment. Another complainant, who was a patient in another hospital, described a similar situation where she wet the bed because she wore a restraint in bed and was therefore unable to get up to go to the toilet. As punishment she was made to wear the wet bed sheets.
- 5.65** Nearly all the complainants described an oppressive atmosphere within the hospitals, with punishments often meted out for simple indiscretions or accidents such as spilling milk on the



floor or dropping a Bible. Complainants described the generally very rough nature in which they were treated on a daily basis; one complainant particularly recalled the rough, uncaring way in which her hair was brushed by a nun. Other complainants remember generally the feelings of dislike shown to them by the nuns and nurses and were often called names such as 'nuisance' and 'pest' while being slapped.

**5.66** A few complainants recalled being slapped and beaten about the head, while one described being beaten with a number of implements including keys and plastic tennis rackets. Furthermore, some recall being stripped before receiving their punishment.

**5.67** One interviewee described the teacher who taught within the hospital as particularly severe. He recalled the teaching nun as a 'brute' and a 'savage' and described how she beat him during lessons even though he was still confined to his bed at this point. The complainant eventually became well enough to receive schooling whilst sitting at his desk, but states that the beatings became even worse at this point and he was beaten with a stick.

**5.68** Two complainants complained about being beaten for not eating the food served to them, which they found extremely distasteful. One complainant recalled hiding food she could not eat under her pillow as she was scared about the reaction of the nuns. However, she was caught and beaten as a result.

### ***Sexual abuse***

**5.69** Two individuals made complaints to the Commission regarding sexual abuse. These complaints involved two hospitals. One complainant described being abused by a visiting priest on a number of occasions. She stated that the nurses did not seem to know about the abuse, as they would call her out of the ward to do odd jobs or fetch things for the priest, and it was during this time that the abuse took place. She stated that she did not blame the nurses, as she believed they were genuinely oblivious to the abuse. She remembered being upset when her mother came to visit, but did not reveal the abuse at this stage. She did reveal the abuse some time later to her sister.

**5.70** A male complainant stated that he was abused by the doctor who has treating him. He remembered that he was moved into a private room, and it was here during the evening times when there was only one nurse on duty that the abuse took place. The complainant recalled that the abuse occurred on two separate occasions, but after that the doctor 'never came near him' again. He also recalled that his father paid the doctor in cash for the procedure and that the doctor gave his father a small amount back, stating that his son was 'a great patient'. The complainant described this as a 'door closing' for him and he felt as if he were trapped. He never disclosed the abuse to his father or anyone else until he undertook counselling as an adult.

### ***Neglect and emotional abuse***

**5.71** The main complaint made in this respect was the fact that the children were often confined to bed, suffering from intense boredom and fear. Many described the oppressive draconian regime as one that instilled fear within them, and the nuns and nurses who cared for them as 'cold, rude and unpleasant'. Nearly all complainants, covering all institutions made a similar complaint to some degree. A few stated that they were provided with recreation time, albeit for a limited period. One complainant recalled being allowed out in the yard for half an hour daily, while another recalled being allowed to play with other children in the gymnasium for a short time.

**5.72** A number of the complainants recalled being given very little information about why they were in the hospital or what procedures they were undergoing.. This extended to the belief that their parents were not given sufficient information about procedures and treatment their children were

undergoing. One complainant also mentioned that the nurses would tell the children what to say to the doctors when they were being examined, and enforced this through fear of punishment.

- 5.73** In relation to visits by parents, circumstances differed between individual complainants in individual hospitals. Some complainants recalled their parents visiting at regular intervals, often every week. However a few complainants recalled that their parents were often turned away from visiting them or encouraged to cut down on the number of visits they made. One complainant recalled that her parents were only allowed to wave at her through a window.
- 5.74** One complainant highlighted the fact that although her mother visited her every second week there was always staff around and so she was unable to tell her mother about any difficulties she may have been experiencing. Furthermore, those complainants whose parents were able to visit them recalled that often gifts or treats given to them by their parent were taken away by the nuns.
- 5.75** Food was another major complaint registered to the Commission. Several complainants recalled being made to eat distasteful food and a small number stated that they were often hungry. As punishment, one complainant recalled being beaten for not eating, while another remembers being jeered at and called names for being sick after eating the porridge. One resident stated that while they received a good breakfast, their dinners were 'terrible' and stated that the older children were fed better than the younger ones.
- 5.76** Within the hospitals, the standard of education appears to have ranged quite significantly. A number of complainants spoke in complimentary terms as regards the education they received during their stay in hospital. One complainant stated that she was given the opportunity to attend classes when she started to recover and that she enjoyed these classes. Another complainant recalled completing her Primary Certificate while resident in the hospital and a further complainant stated that she was well educated during her stay in one particular institution.
- 5.77** In contrast, one complainant recalled there being no designated part of the hospital for education and stated that she only saw the teacher once a month and only learned a song during her time in hospital. Another complainant experienced severe physical punishment during class, not only from the teacher in charge, but also his fellow pupils who were encouraged to hit him for misdemeanours and threatened with beatings themselves if they did not hit him hard enough.
- 5.78** Two complaints were made as regards physical neglect in two separate institutions. One complainant alleged that she received only two bed baths during her six-month stay in the hospital and never had her hair washed at all during this period.

### ***Positive experiences***

- 5.79** A few complainants recalled instances of kindness during their stays in the hospitals and could pick out one or two more kind and compassionate nuns and nurses.
- 5.80** One complainant described how, while he was resident in one hospital, the regime changed for the better with the arrival of a new nun. He described the nun as 'progressive with great vision'. She got rid of the old staff and improved the education of the children by introducing new teachers from the training college. He described the improvement of the food and how they were brought on trips to Croke Park and Butlins. This same complainant also stated that Christmas was a good time in the hospital and that birthdays were marked.

### ***Adult life experiences***

- 5.81** Nearly all complainants have suffered ongoing negative results stemming from their time in these hospitals. Many described frequent nightmares and many continue to suffer from depression often

accompanied by a social phobia and a sense of separation from their family members, particularly their parents and their own children.

- 5.82** One complainant was also treated for eating disorders, while another has received treatment for obsessive–compulsive disorder.

## **Deaf and special schools**

- 5.83** Nine deaf and special schools were named by complainants in the interview process. The Investigation Committee interviewed 81 individuals in relation to these schools. Three of these schools were the subject of a report by the Investigation Committee.

### ***Physical abuse***

- 5.84** Of the 81 complainants heard in the deaf and special schools, the vast majority complained of some form of physical abuse. Physical abuse seemed to permeate every aspect of their daily lives in these schools. Almost all the complainants described beatings, which were often severe and capricious.
- 5.85** Physical abuse was described as being used as a method of control and many complainants felt they were hit for no reason most of the time. Others described how they were unaware of the offence they had committed and did not understand why they were struck. A number of complainants described incidents for which they were punished including: not eating quickly, signing, poor performance in class, bed-wetting, refusal to eat food and failure to comply with the regimented toilet regime. Complainants referred to numerous implements being used during incidents of physical abuse. The most commonly cited was a leather strap, along with bamboo canes, keys, blackboard dusters, a bicycle pump, electrical flex and wooden spoons.
- 5.86** During the interview process, many incidents of extreme violence were described. Some complainants talked about specific individuals being particularly violent and recalled incidents where they were punched and kicked in the face and abdomen. Others recalled having their hair pulled and being beaten on the bare buttocks. The children in the deaf schools described being slapped around the ears, which was particularly painful because they had hearing aids.
- 5.87** In relation to education, individuals reported being fearful in the classroom. They described being physically punished for bad handwriting, writing with their left hand, poor speech and use of signing.
- 5.88** Complaints described being beaten if they made an accusation of sexual abuse against a religious, lay staff or fellow student. They stated that on many occasions they were unjustly accused of inappropriate sexual behaviour, for which they were severely beaten.
- 5.89** Peer abuse was also described as a regular occurrence in some schools. A number of complainants described how they were beaten by other boys in the schools and how the religious and lay staff was unaware or indifferent to it.

### ***Sexual abuse***

- 5.90** Although it appears from the interview process that sexual abuse was not as widespread as physical abuse, the majority of interviewees recounted some form of sexual abuse. These included sexual abuse by lay staff, members of the religious and their peers. Descriptions of these incidents include fondling, groping, attempted rape, oral rape and inappropriate discussions of a sexual nature.

**5.91** A large number of the interviewees noted being touched inappropriately whilst in various locations in the schools. A number of interviewees recalled the abuse occurring in the dormitories, showers and classrooms. In relation to the dormitories, a number of complainants recalled incidents of being fondled in their beds. Other noted that the abuse occurred when they were ill and had been sent to the infirmary. Numerous complainants described being fondled in the showers and others noted being watched while showering. Another form of sexual abuse that witnesses recalled was inappropriate conversations. Such conversations were graphic in nature and left the complainants feeling uncomfortable.

**5.92** A small number of complainants described how visitors to the school, in particular other religious persons, abused them. This abuse was largely described as fondling.

**5.93** Complaints involving lay staff were also recalled. A number of complainants stated that they had been sexually abused by night-watchmen. A number of complaints also talked about peer abuse in this context. They described such abuse as being rampant, with the older boys often sexually abusing the younger ones.

### ***Emotional abuse and neglect***

#### **Education**

**5.94** The biggest complaint with regard to the deaf and special schools was the poor level of education received. That said, opinions differed and some individuals felt institutions offered them great educational opportunities they would otherwise have been denied.

**5.95** The overriding feeling from the interviews, however, was that these institutions had let them down in terms of their education and many felt lasting effects on their adult lives.

**5.96** There were a number of issues unique to the deaf schools. A lot of these complainants took issue with the prevalence of 'oralism' as the method of teaching. Most of the children were taught in this way but a large number of the complainants described how they struggled to get to grips with this method of teaching and fell behind in their education as a result. 'Signing' was forbidden and children could be physically punished if they were caught 'signing'. The strapping of hands was another method used to prevent children from 'signing'.

**5.97** The deaf and dumb children were allowed to use 'signing'. However, as they were in the minority they felt stigmatised by this. Further to this, the partially deaf students were segregated from the profoundly deaf students and a number of these complainants described being looked upon as stupid and felt that the other children were favoured.

**5.98** Some of the children in the special schools felt that they had been misdiagnosed and sent to the wrong type of institution. As a consequence they complained that they struggled to fulfil their potential while in these schools.

**5.99** In general, the majority of interviewees were very unhappy with the standard of education. Many complainants recalled being called stupid and being terrified of making a mistake in school for fear of punishment. The environment of fear and punishment in these schools stifled their ability to learn. As a result, many stated that they struggled finding employment and had difficulty with some of basic tasks in their every day lives such as reading and writing.

#### **Food**

**5.100** Another major issue arising from the interview process was the standard of food in the schools. Many complainants noted that the food lacked variety and described it as being very bad, smelly,

salty and stale. Some used the term 'prison food' and others felt it was served in a prison-like fashion, with bars on the windows and a military style of serving food.

- 5.101** Some complainants stated that there was never enough food and thus they were always hungry. This resulted in them having to steal food from the kitchen or eat things such as raw onions from the garden to supplement their diet.
- 5.102** Interviewees recalled that when they returned home on holidays, or if relatives came to visit them, their thin appearance would be noted. Many described being ravenous and would devour their food when they returned home. Complainants stated that they used their home visits as a way of gaining weight that they had lost while in these schools.
- 5.103** Incidents of force feeding were also recorded. Complainants felt coerced into finishing their meals through threats of physical punishment. This regime of force feeding coupled with the poor quality of food as described above left many of the complainants feeling ill after meals.

### **Toilet regime**

- 5.104** A strictly regimented toilet regime was recounted to the Investigation Committee in the interview process. Many noted that they were forced to go to the toilet every morning and failure to perform resulted in physical punishment. One individual spoke of being given laxatives to enable him to follow the routine. Many described how they suffered fear and anxiety as a result of this. Some complainants now believe that this toilet regime has caused them long-term side effects such as bowel problems.
- 5.105** Interviewees also talked about being humiliated and slapped for bed-wetting. This was a common theme throughout many of the interviews.
- 5.106** Many complainants felt that the general atmosphere of fear that pervaded these schools resulted in them being fearful even of teachers and religious staff whom they described as being good and caring. This resulted in complainants being fearful of reporting various incidents of physical, sexual and emotional abuse to these members of staff.

### **National schools**

- 5.107** The Investigation Committee examined in detail the career of one teacher, Mr John Brander<sup>1</sup>, who had physically and sexually abused children in national and secondary schools for over 40 years. The report into Mr John Brander is outlined in full in Volume II of this Report and covers many of the circumstances of abuse outlined by interviewees to the Commission.
- 5.108** Interviews were conducted in respect of 63 national schools that were situated all over the country. These schools were owned and managed by the diocese in which they were located or by religious congregations. They were operated by lay teachers or religious or both. Interviewees spoke of experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse whilst attending school, principally at the hands of teachers.
- 5.109** Of the 63 national schools mentioned by complainants, 52 were each the subject of one allegation. Nine were the subject of two allegations. Two schools were the subject of more than two allegations of abuse; one had five past pupils who made allegations of abuse and one had 10 past pupils making such allegations.
- 5.110** Sixty-nine interviewees were male and 16 were female.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym.

### ***Physical abuse – male interviewees***

- 5.111** Over 95 percent of the adult male interviewees complained of physical abuse by one or more teachers during their school days. These complainants acknowledged that corporal punishment was the practice at the time in national schools and were quite clear on the difference between ordinary physical chastisement and abusive and excessive beatings. Although there were some allegations against lay teachers and nuns, the overwhelming majority of complaints were against religious teaching Brothers.
- 5.112** Complainants appeared to have been most frightened and most damaged by teachers who lost control of their tempers. One Brother was described as beating ‘in a frenzy’. Another was described as ‘losing it completely’ and yet another as ‘frothing at the mouth’ during a beating. Where teachers lost control in this way, the children were subjected to extreme and excessive punishments. Beatings were administered with leathers, sticks and other such implements and were on all parts of the bodies. Boys were punched and kicked and terrorised for long periods. In some schools boys were required to drop their trousers and receive strokes of the leather or cane on the bare buttocks. These beatings were most frequently a response to a failure at lessons rather than any misbehaviour on the part of the child.
- 5.113** Interviewees reported seeing children bleeding and bruised after such beatings. Actual physical harm was also reported, such as the loss of teeth or being knocked unconscious, although doctors or parents were usually not told the real cause of the injury.
- 5.114** Extreme and excessive beatings administered regularly in the classroom had a negative impact, not just on the child who was the victim of the beating but on all the children in the classroom and those within earshot. Interviewees said that the pain, anger and humiliation caused by excessive beatings prevented them from learning properly at school. Many reported leaving school at 13 years of age with a very low standard of education.
- 5.115** It was frequently observed by complainants that not all pupils were treated the same way by violent teachers. This indicated that although there was a lack of control there was also awareness on the part of the teacher that beating some children would cause more trouble and they were able to control their violence in respect of these children.
- 5.116** Brothers or teachers who were violent were known within the school system. Interviewees often singled out two or even three Brothers in the same school who were excessively harsh on pupils and could often name other Brothers who were kind and good. It was regarded by interviewees as significant that Brothers who themselves did not operate a violent regime, tolerated and/or ignored violence in their fellow teachers. This was particularly marked where the principal of a school had a violent disposition. In those instances the children felt hopeless and isolated in the face of the cruelty they experienced whilst in school.
- 5.117** The majority of interviewees said that they did not speak to their parents about what was occurring in the classroom. They believed that their parents would not support them and that it would make matters worse when they returned to class. Some parents did appear to regard severe beatings as a normal part of school life; as one said: ‘sure we all got beaten’.
- 5.118** Some children did speak to their parents and where parents intervened there was some evidence that this reduced the violence the child was subsequently subjected to. In general, however, parents appeared to be as helpless and intimidated by the teachers as the child was. Many witnesses indicated an awareness of the helplessness of their parents and said they kept the suffering to themselves rather than worry and upset their parents who they believed could have done nothing about it anyway.



- 5.119** In addition to information about excessive and violent teachers, interviewees also spoke of the constant and pervasive presence of high levels of physical punishment in classrooms. The strap or the cane was used extensively and was the response to even minor infractions. Many complainants identified this as a significant factor in preventing them from succeeding academically. They said they were paralysed with fear and incapable of absorbing information or of learning school work.
- 5.120** Interviewees were able to distinguish teachers who used excessive punishment from those who did not. Teachers who behaved in a moderate, controlled non-threatening manner were singled out as being better teachers and interviewees reported learning much more in classes where violence was not a feature. Even if a child encountered only one or two benign and kindly teachers in the course of their national school education, this was often enough to give them a basic foundation in education and they recalled those teachers with gratitude.
- 5.121** A number of male interviewees were in national schools run by female Religious Orders until the ages of six or seven after which they moved to boys-only schools. Although in general experiences in very young classes were better than in older classes, a significant number of interviewees described extremely harsh and excessive physical punishment on very young children. Nuns and teachers were described as using leathers, canes, sally rods<sup>2</sup> and heavy rulers on children as young as three and four. Where children were treated with cruelty at such an early age, their ability to advance in school was greatly impaired.
- 5.122** Because physical punishment was accepted as the norm in all national schools until the 1980s, it was difficult for children to be heard and listened to when they tried to identify cruel or excessive violence. Very often violent teachers were seen as good teachers and parents tolerated excessive punishments in the belief that their children would benefit in the long term. The opposite was more often the case.
- 5.123** There was no evidence of school principals, school inspectors, fellow teachers or boards of management taking the initiative to curb excesses in teachers. Occasionally, where parents made complaints, the child would see that the violence was reduced, but there was no sanction taken against the offending teacher. Some interviewees described how the teacher was very well respected in the local community and had the support of local clergy and was therefore regarded as 'untouchable' by the ordinary people in the parish.
- 5.124** Interviewees who had been subjected to excessive, extreme or constant physical punishment in their national schools were angry and damaged even into late adulthood by the experience. Many of them said that it resulted in loss of religion, dependence on alcohol and drugs, depression and psychological illness, and an inability to trust or form relationships. Many also said that they themselves responded with violence to situations in their own lives, as it had become a learned response for them.
- 5.125** It is impossible to calculate the impact of a culture of severe physical punishment in some primary schools that permeated the education system in Ireland until the mid 1980s. What was clear however was that although some adults survived and even thrived in primary education many suffered greatly as a result of their experience.

### ***Sexual abuse – male interviewees***

- 5.126** Forty male interviewees reported being sexually abused whilst in national school. Thirty four of these reported that their abuser was a male religious. Two reported a female religious and four stated they were abused by male lay teachers.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sally rod – a long, thin wooden stick, generally made from willow, used mostly in Ireland as a disciplinary implement.

- 5.127** Although two or three interviewees reported a 'benign and kindly' relationship with the teacher who sexually abused them, in general sexual abuse was accompanied by violence and the threat of violence. Children were brought to the front of the classroom and fumbled and touched inappropriately by teachers in front of other school pupils. This led to humiliation and jeering and for many interviewees was the most enduring and painful part of the experience of sexual abuse. Much abuse went further than fondling and some interviewees reported been kept back after class or brought to isolated areas of the school where they were subject to a much more serious level of sexual assault, amounting for some of them to full rape. In almost all cases where teachers sexually assaulted pupils, interviewees reported that the abuse was on-going for the duration of the child's time in the teacher's classroom. Interviewees reported being sickened, terrified and humiliated by sexual abuse in the classroom and feeling isolated and hopeless in the face of the teacher's apparent power.
- 5.128** In general interviewees did not speak to their parents about what was happening. Most of them said that they thought their parents would not believe them. In some cases where the child did tell the parents what happened they were disbelieved and punished for speaking ill of the teacher.
- 5.129** There were some assertions that the activities of some Brothers and some visiting clergymen were known to the management and teachers in particular schools. Evasive action was taken to try to prevent children being alone with particular priests or Brothers. In one instance an interviewee reported that schools would be rung ahead to warn them that a particular priest was coming and the children would be prevented from being alone with them.
- 5.130** Where sexual abuse went beyond touching and inappropriate fondling, it was conducted in secret and with the threat of violence if the activity was disclosed.
- 5.131** What was the most significant element of the reports of sexual abuse of children who were attending day schools was the helplessness and powerlessness and isolation they felt. Children were not listened to and not believed. Adults who saw what was happening ignored it and instead of confronting the abuser they sought to minimise the contact with children. This was totally ineffectual as the abuser was usually able to devise means of singling children out and accessing them alone.
- 5.132** The impact of sexual abuse on the adult lives of victims varied with the individual, but a number of significant responses did emerge. In general, men who had experienced sexual abuse at the hands of religious Brothers or priests reported that they had no religion or no respect for religion. Interviewees were in general extremely damaged by what had occurred. Many of them reported feelings of great anger and hurt, depression and other psychological illnesses, drug and drink addiction and an inability to form relationships in adult life. Many wanted to see the abuser named and punished for what had occurred and were anxious to establish whether other children had suffered in the same way that they had. Many victims carried the humiliation, embarrassment and fear throughout adulthood.

### ***Physical abuse – female interviewees***

- 5.133** Female interviewees reported physical abuse by nuns, female lay teachers and male lay teachers. Although there were individual reports of extreme and excessive violence, in general female interviewees spoke of physical punishment as being more pervasive than extreme. Complainants recalled an atmosphere of constant fear in some classrooms with leathers, canes, rulers and other implements such as chair legs being used.
- 5.134** Punishment was administered for failure at lessons and for minor infractions and was reported as being disproportionate and unpredictable.

- 5.135** A small number of interviewees reported physical abuse at the hands of male teachers, which was excessive and dangerous. Very small children were subjected to kicks and punches by male teachers, which could have caused serious injury.
- 5.136** Boys who attended girls' schools up to the age of seven or eight reported a less harsh regime than that which operated in boys' national schools, although individual teachers, lay and religious, were identified as being cruel and vindictive.
- 5.137** Where girls reported physical abuse to their parents, there tended to be a more positive reaction. One interviewee recalled that her father confronted a nun who had beaten her with a bamboo cane and she was not beaten again. She said that she would have told her father sooner if she had known what the outcome would have been.
- 5.138** Many interviewees recalled the intense fear they felt whilst in an abusive class situation. One recalled feeling sick every morning at the prospect of the day ahead and another recalled begging her mother not to send her to school. The fear was not just of the prospect of being beaten themselves but the horror of watching other children being beaten. What was striking in the case of female interviewees was how many of them were subjected to severe punishments with sticks and straps when they were little more than babies.
- 5.139** Interviewees reported that the impact of the physical abuse experienced in national schools stayed with them into adulthood. It impacted on their ability to learn and on their attitude to school generally. It gave them low self-esteem and poor self-confidence and many felt that it impaired their ability to succeed in later life.

### ***Sexual abuse – female interviewees***

- 5.140** Three female interviewees reported sexual abuse by male teachers whilst in national school. They were aged between five and eight when the abuse began and it involved invasive touching and kissing. All three complainants reported feeling embarrassed and ashamed but they did not tell their parents at the time. They suffered severe after effects of the abuse, including nervous breakdown, eating disorders, nightmares and low self-esteem.

### ***Emotional abuse***

- 5.141** Although interviewees reported psychological and emotional effects from physical or sexual abuse, children in national schools were less vulnerable to emotional abuse than those in institutional care. Three interviewees specifically complained of emotional abuse whilst in national school, although many did refer to emotionally abusive attitudes and practices in schools generally. In particular, children were mocked or jeered because of their family backgrounds, or because of poverty. Many reported being humiliated or verbally abused in the course of physical punishment. For most interviewees, the emotional scars they carried into adulthood were because of the frightening atmosphere in classrooms, the feeling of anger and helplessness in the face of abusive teachers and the apparent indifference of adults to the plight of children left at the mercy of harsh and irrational teachers. Some interviewees mentioned feeling let down by parents who knew what was happening but did not try to prevent it.
- 5.142** Not all schools were abusive and the people who came to the Commission were those who had had particularly unhappy experiences. Many were anxious to point out that not all nuns, Brothers or lay teachers were bad, and that many were good and kind teachers.
- 5.143** All interviewees were asked whether they were interested in reconciliation but the vast majority said they were not. For many the hatred they felt for the teacher who had mistreated them was still quite real and they did not think they would be able to forgive the perpetrator.

## Children's home

- 5.144** Three complainants were interviewed in relation to a children's home and each had distinct and individual experiences. One alleged corporal punishment was used regularly, two alleged serious sexual abuse by different lay staff and one of these also alleged lack of supervision by care staff which led to him being sexually abused by a relative who visited him. The complainant implied that his abuser had easy access to him, stating that there were no gates or cameras in the home. This complainant notified staff of the abuse but they did not take any action.

## Mother and baby homes

- 5.145** There were two complainants from mother and baby homes, who had given birth to children there whilst under 18 years of age. They both described a regimented 'prison-like' atmosphere, where they were made to wear uniforms and punished for talking and laughing. They further described how both pre- and post-natal care was non-existent. They described suffering humiliation at the hands of the nuns who were both verbally and physically abusive; one interviewee described being hit on the back of the legs with a leather strap. They described how they were emotionally traumatised during their time in the home.
- 5.146** A third complainant recalled her time spent in the home as a young child. She was neglected and claimed she was left for long periods alone in a cot and consequently suffered delayed development.

## Private schools

- 5.147** In relation to the complaints against private schools there were two interviewees. Both complained of sexual abuse; one complainant described ongoing sexual abuse by a priest on staff for a period of four years. This complainant further stated that other boys were victims of this priest. The sexual abuse was primarily fondling. The complainant stated that this priest would, following football matches, pick different boys for 'inspection' and bring them to his room to make sure that they had washed themselves properly. In response to this allegation the Congregation in question stated that they did not intend to dispute the complainant's statement and apologised.
- 5.148** A lay member of staff was alleged to have sexually abused the second complainant on one occasion. He detailed how approximately six years later he informed his family but was not believed. A number of years later he made a statement to the Gardaí. He also described how he was the victim of peer abuse as the older boys in the school bullied him. He described the food as extremely bad.
- 5.149** Neither complainant reported the abuse while in school.

## Conclusions

- 5.150** Many of the children in these institutions were particularly vulnerable because they were ill, or were suffering from some disability or were orphans without adults to protect them. The guiding principle that the more vulnerable the person, the greater the duty of care, should have ensured the institutions provided the kind of care commensurate with the children's needs. The complainants not merely claimed that their needs were not met but alleged that some adults exploited their vulnerability by abusing them and by not according them the respect due to all human beings. Children must be respected and consulted, and their interests must always be paramount in the way in which care is provided.

- 5.151** In national schools, the assumption that children are being educated in a professional way should not be taken for granted. The Department of Education and Science, the diocese, the board of management and parents need to assess the quality of the school by looking beyond its academic proficiency. The developmental and psychological needs of the child are equally important. Children must be facilitated in making complaints and their complaints must be listened to.
- 5.152** It must never be assumed that any particular teacher or carer 'would never behave like that'. There are no recognisable or common traits that mark people out as abusers. People who are otherwise respectable, law-abiding pillars of the community can be child abusers and it is the responsibility of all adults in society to listen to and protect children from such people.

