

Unemployment, debt and poverty are impacting on the mental health of adults, adolescents and children

Mental Health Commission recommends action to alleviate the human cost of the economic crisis

Wednesday 28th September 2011. The number of people suffering from mental health difficulties is increasing as a result of the recession, while at the same time the Government is faced with difficult decisions regarding spending on services for those people, according to a report published by the Mental Health Commission (MHC) today.

The Minister of State responsible for Disability, Equality, Mental Health & Older People, Kathleen Lynch, TD, today launched the report, entitled *The Human Cost*, at the Mental Health Commission. "This paper provides us with unequivocal evidence of what we would all suspect instinctively – that the economic downturn is increasing the level of mental health problems in society.

"We know that an increasing number of people are suffering stress and anxiety and consequently there is a greater demand for mental health services. We must take measures to reduce the pressure on individuals as much as we can while at the same time ensuring services are there for those who really need them."

Dr Edmond O'Dea, Chairman of the Mental Health Commission said: "Recent reports by advocacy groups and representative bodies show that the demand for mental health services is on the increase.

"It's clear that the recession affects everyone. For those with pre-existing mental health problems issues such as debt and unemployment are likely to make things worse. But people with no previous history of mental health difficulties can also be affected given that some of these individuals may have little previous experience of coping with hardship or financial insecurity," he said.

The Mental Health Commission consulted with a broad range of organisations including the Financial Regulator, Banking Federation of Ireland, NGOs, MABS, GPs prior to developing the *Human Cost* paper.

A number of initiatives have already been put in place by these sectors. This report recommends further action including:

- Training for staff in dealing with people in serious financial difficulty. Priority for training staff in financial institutions should be given to staff in arrears management units.
- Greater availability to all relevant staff of basic information on mental health and its connection with debt, and on dealing with vulnerable customers.
- The improvement of communication between financial institutions and voluntary sector support services to share information.

The Human Cost report shows that all areas of the mental health sector are seeing increased demand. At community-level by mid 2010 one in ten calls to the Samaritans in Ireland were described as 'recession-related'.

A recent Irish study has shown that during the boom years of the 'Celtic Tiger' male and female rates of suicide and undetermined death were stable between 1996 and 2006, while suicide among unemployed men increased. The suicide rate in Ireland increased from 424 in 2008 to 527 in 2009, an increase of 24%.

Financial strain is strongly associated with both the onset and maintenance of common mental health problems. Primary care services are the gateway to mental health services and the majority of common mental health problems are treated at this level. Anecdotal evidence and the increase in the prescription of drugs commonly prescribed to treat mental health difficulties illustrate the fact that the economic hardship has added pressure at primary care level and at GP level.

The report also shows that children with good mental health are able to develop emotionally, intellectually and creatively and have the resilience to cope with problems they might encounter. They are able to form satisfying relationships and live life to the full. There are many factors which adversely affect mental health in childhood and economic adversity or poverty is one such factor. A study in Great Britain (over 12,000 participants aged between 5 and 16 years) found that 16% of children from families with a weekly household income of under £100 had mental health problems, compared to 5% with weekly household income of more than £600.

Chronic exposure to poverty increases adolescents' risks for disorders such as depression, and behavioural risks such as substance use, early sexual activity and criminal activity. The awareness of financial difficulties in their families has also been found to negatively impact adolescents' mental health; being associated with depression in adolescent girls and drinking to the point of intoxication in boys. The awareness of familial economic difficulties was also associated with a sense of helplessness, and feelings of shame and inferiority in adolescents.

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Issued by Murray Consultants on behalf of the Mental Health Commission

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