

# **Desperate for help**

**Report analysing calls to Family Rights Group's advice service from families of children in need or at risk.**

By Cathy Ashley and Claudia Kanow

January 2014



## **1. Purpose of the Report**

This report analyses:

- The number of families who have contacted Family Rights Group's advice service since April 2007 and patterns in demand;
- The main concerns identified by families contacting the service and whether there has been any significant changes and what factors lie behind this;
- The key underlying problems identified by families contacting the service and whether there has been any significant changes since the financial year 1 April 2007-31<sup>st</sup> March 2008.

## **2. Background**

Established in 1974 Family Rights Group (FRG) is the charity in England and Wales that advises families whose children are involved with, or require, local authority services because of welfare needs or concerns.

We promote policies and practices that:

- help children to be raised safely and thrive within their family and community;
- give children and their families a voice when decisions are made about their lives.

The Charity campaigns for effective support to help struggling parents and family and friends carers, who are raising children that cannot live at home.

### **2.1 The advice and advocacy service**

Family Rights Group will advise over 7000 families this year, and more than 218,000 will access help from the our website.

Staffed by experienced social workers and lawyers, or advocates with equivalent expertise in child welfare practice and law, our service offers in-depth, expert and non-judgemental advice. Advisers listen to the caller's situation, give information on the law and what processes social workers should follow, discuss the caller's options, and support them to make realistic choices.

The advice service is funded by the Department for Education (DFE) until March 2015. It comprises the following elements:

- A confidential, free phone line open Monday to Friday (9.30am-3pm);
- Advice in response to email and letter enquiries; and
- Moderated electronic discussion boards for parents and separately for family and friends carers (i.e. family members, such as grandparents or older

siblings, or friends who are raising a child who is unable to live with their parents).

The above are analysed within the report. The service also includes an interactive website and a wide range of legal and practice advice sheets.

## 2.2 Methodology

Data for this report has come from two sources; a bespoke database compiled and maintained by Family Rights Group, and a call management system maintained externally.

All advice enquiries are recorded by advisers onto Family Rights Group's database, which allows for statistical analysis over time and across multiple variables. Data extraction and preliminary analysis were performed by running database queries on the raw data, and further analysis was carried out using MS Excel.

All demand data included in this report relates to *unique* users only. This means that the person is only counted once, no matter how many times they have sought help from Family Rights Group's advice service during the year. For ease we refer to families seeking advice as callers, but their enquiry may be made via phone, email, the discussion board or letter. In the analysis, we based a year on the financial year 1 April -31<sup>st</sup> March.

## 2.3 Context

Since 2007/8 referrals to children's services and the number of children on child protection plans have risen<sup>i</sup>. Care order applications have also increased sharply since 2008<sup>ii</sup>. Undoubtedly this is partly attributable to a shift by agencies to more risk averse practice since the death of Baby Peter Connelly as well as the impact on families of the recession. Studies have highlighted the link between poverty and some forms of child maltreatment, especially neglect, emotional and physical abuse and new research demonstrates the significantly increased likelihood of children living in the most deprived neighbourhoods ending up in care compared to those in the wealthier neighbourhoods<sup>iii</sup>. The most common explanations centre on the stress factors associated with poverty and social deprivation, including unemployment and debt, which are further compounded if drug misuse and mental health issues come into play<sup>iv</sup>. We are now picking up from the advice service, that this is being compounded by the impact of the welfare reforms on the lives of some struggling families. Financial pressures on local services are further exacerbating the situation with many non-statutory services being closed, making it much harder for families to access the specialist, non-stigmatised support they need when problems first emerge. Cuts in particular to domestic violence services including refuge places<sup>v</sup>, mean that the significant numbers of mothers who contact us who are victims of domestic abuse, have few, if any, options to address social worker concerns about the child being at risk due to the violence.

This report examines the effect of the above on the nature, type and number of enquires made by families seeking assistance from Family Rights Group.

Often these families are characterised as hard to reach, resistant to change or consistently failing to co-operate with services, the findings from this report challenge these assumptions.

### 3. Data on advice service users – demand and those assisted

#### 3.1 Demand for the advice service

7370 families contacted Family Rights Group’s advice service in the six months between April 2013 - September 2013. ***This is a 70% increase compared to the same period two years ago (April-Sept 2011) and includes a 12% increase compared to Apr-Sep 2012.***

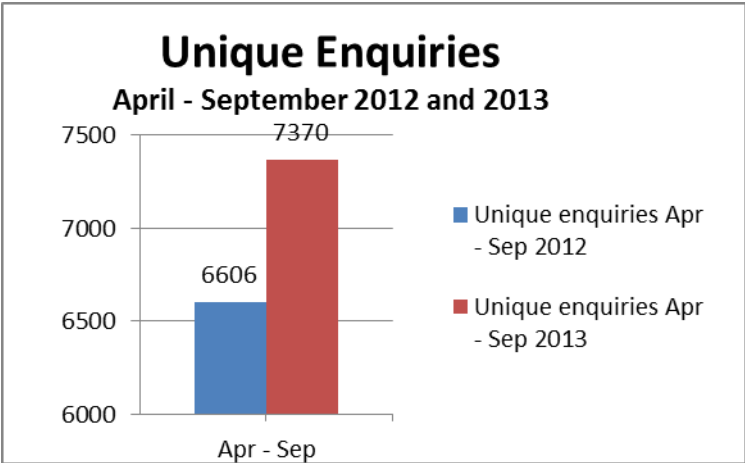


Figure 1

#### 3.2 Numbers of families assisted by the advice service

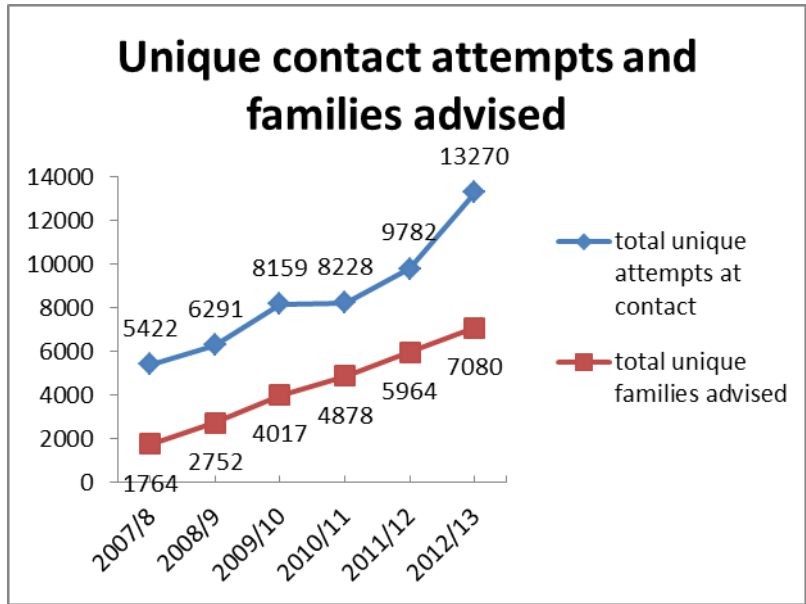


Figure 2 shows both the numbers of people trying to contact Family Rights Group’s service and how many of these the service has managed to advise. ***There were 7848 more people seeking advice from the service in 2012/13 than in 2007/8.*** Far from being ‘hard to reach’, these families are desperate to get advice

Figure 2

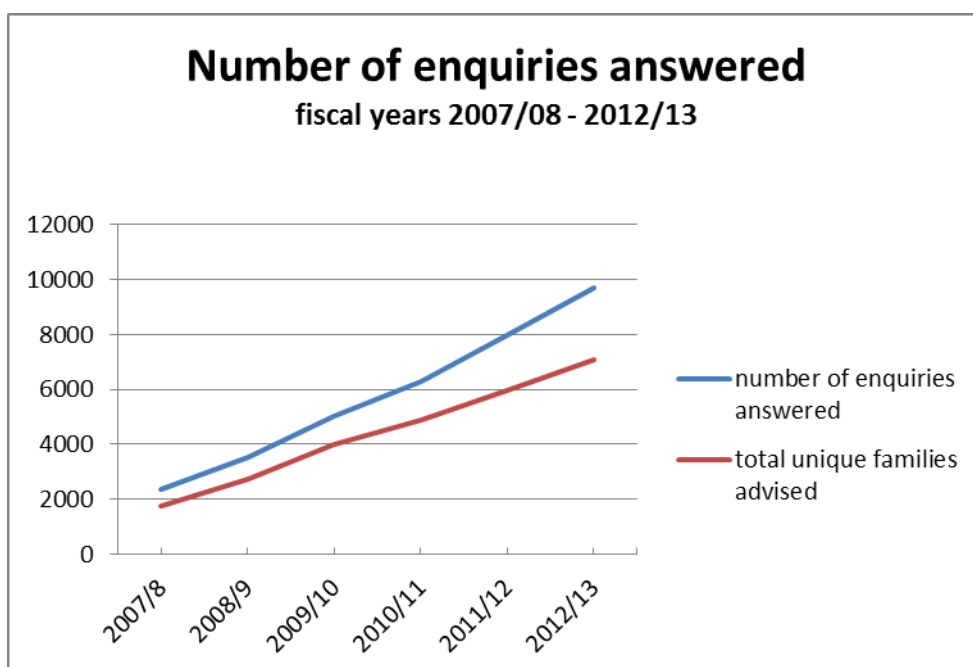
and help

The number of families Family Rights Group advised has increased from 1764 in 2007/8 to 7080 in 2012/13 i.e. a rise of 301%.

Nevertheless, despite the rise in families assisted over the last few years, **we were able to advise less than 6 in ten families contacting us during 2012/13.**

In April 2013 we reduced the opening hours of the advice line by 30 minutes (from 3.30pm to 3pm) due to a 10% reduction in the DfE contract price. Nevertheless, due to significant efforts made by staff, we have managed to advise roughly the same numbers of families between April-September 2013 compared to the same period in 2012.

The number of people requiring more intensive support over longer periods of time is slowly increasing. In 2007/08 the proportion of enquiries which were made by repeat



users<sup>vi</sup> was 33%, whereas in 2012/13, this proportion has risen by 4 percentage points. This increase reflects a shift in the type and the complexity of the problems which service users face.

Figure 3

### 3.3 Demographics of families contacting the service

Our advice service is primarily used by parents, who make up 64% of those we advised in the first six months of 2013/14 (1 April - 30 September 2013). Wider family and friends comprise 32% of those we advise, these are primarily family and friends carers, including grandparents and older siblings who are *raising children unable to live with their parent*. Practitioners comprise the remaining 4% of those we advise.

24% of those contacting our service in the first six months of 2013/2014 (1 April - 30 September 2013) were men, which compares favourably to other family related

advice services<sup>vii</sup>. That most people contacting the service are women is unsurprising given the division of childcare responsibilities in our society and the high numbers of calls in which domestic abuse is a factor. Moreover, it is consistent with research that children’s services tend to focus upon the mother, and that too often non-resident fathers are not assessed as a risk or resource for the child, nor supported and engaged in decisions about their child<sup>viii</sup>.

Analysis of the ethnicity of those contacting us in the first six months of 2013/14 found that the proportion of White users of our advice service is broadly in line with the English population (85%). However, there is a higher proportion of Black callers (9%) and mixed ethnicity callers (4%) than in the general population, these figures are more in line with that of the child in need population<sup>ix</sup>

**31% of the families using our service have a household income of less than £5000 a year**, and 60% have a household income of less than £15,000 per year<sup>x</sup>. According to official data £21,788 was the 2010/11 median UK household income<sup>xi</sup>, and low income is defined as 60% of this level (i.e. £13,052)<sup>xii</sup>.

#### 4. The subject of calls

The following is an analysis of enquiries dealt with by Family Rights Group’s advisers which have been categorised on the advice database. The categories and data are explained in more detail below.

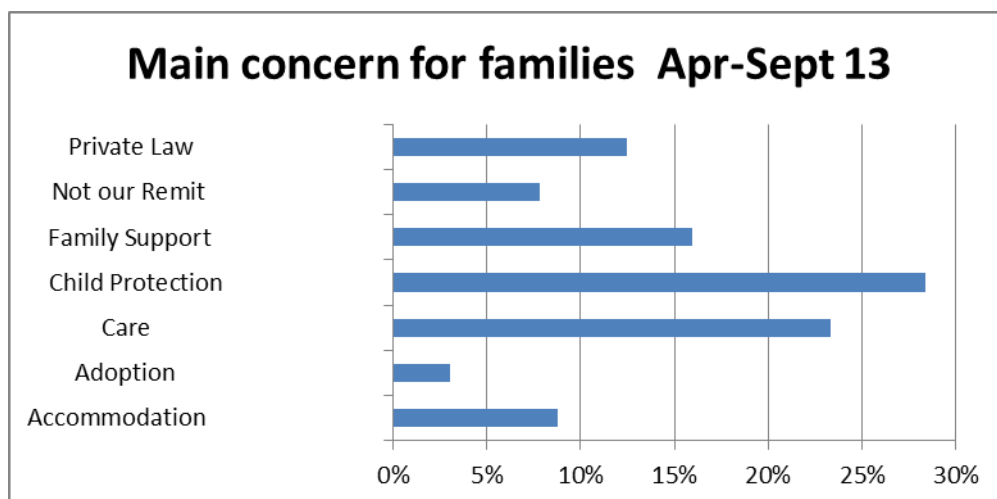


Figure 4 Main issues of callers as a percentage of all enquiries where a main issue was specified

#### 4.1 Child protection

- We received more enquiries about child protection than any other subject – these comprise 29% of categorised enquiries between 1 April-30 September 2013. These are mainly from parents whose children are subject to child protection inquiries because social workers are concerned the child may be at significant risk of harm or where the child has a child protection plan.
- Between **2007/8 and 2012/13 there was a 434% rise in the number of families who enquired about child protection** (from 407 in 2007/8 to 2173 in 2012/13). The number of child protection related enquiries remained stable in the first six months of 2013/14 i.e. from 1 April- 30 September 2013 compared to the same period in 2012/13.
- Domestic violence, parental mental ill health and parental substance misuse (especially alcohol misuse) are the most common underlying problems in child protection related enquiries. **Domestic violence related child protection enquiries rose by an extraordinary 1146% between 2007/8 and 2012/13, from 35 to 436.** This is explored further in section 5

## 4.2 Care proceedings and the care system

- The second latest number of enquiries to our advice service between 1 April and 30 September 2013 are from families contacting about children who are either in care, or who are subject to care proceedings (the court process whereby children's services apply for a legal order to take a child into care).
- **Care related enquiries rose by 40% (from 611 to 856) in the first six months of 2013/14 ( 1 April 13 - 30 September 2013 ) compared to the same period the year earlier.** Particularly stark within this category is the rise of enquiries from wider family members including family and friends carers during this period, which rose by 51%.
- Domestic violence, mental health and parental substances misuse (particularly drug misuse) are the most common underlying problems in care cases.

## 4.3 Family Support

- **There was a 474% rise in families enquiring about family support (where they or their child have unmet needs and need help from Children's Services) between 2007/8 and 2012/13 (from 213 to 1223).** In the first six months of 2013/14 (1 April -30 September 2013) those advised slightly fell (by 13%) compared to the same period a year earlier.
- Most commonly, families wanted advice about accessing financial support. A significant number also contacted us about lack of appropriate service provision or getting an assessment for their child.

- Parental mental ill health, support needs for a child with disabilities, domestic violence and adolescent behaviour problems are the most common underlying problems in family support-related enquiries.
- Although housing related concerns are a small proportion of family support enquiries, they have risen by 3600% between 2007/8-2012/13 from 1 to 37 and continued to increase (by 69%) in the first six months of 2013/14 (1 April – 30 September 2013) compared to the same period a year earlier.

#### 4.4 Private Law

- Private law enquiries are primarily mothers or fathers wanting advice about contact with their ex-partner, when there has been some children's services involvement or family and friends carers wanting help with managing contact with the child's parents or securing a residence or special guardianship order for the child. or
- Private law enquiries rose by 235% between 2007/8 and 2012/13 (from 192 to 643). Whilst a significant rise, it is below the overall increase in enquiries.
- However, ***private law enquiries from 1 April- 30 September 2013 have increased by a startling 62% compared to the same period in 2012 (from 284 to 459)***. This reflects the increased dependence of families upon the advice service, as result of the impact of legal aid changes and the difficulties that even those who still qualify for legal aid have in accessing a legal aid lawyer in their locality willing or able to represent them.
- Parental separation is a common underlying factor in private law enquiries, with a significant increase in domestic violence as an underlying concern, rising by 94% between April to September 2013 compared to the same period the year earlier (from 32 to 62)

#### 4.5 Voluntary accommodation

- These enquiries relate to children who are in the care system or where the local authority or their families are proposing the child should become looked after under S20 of the Children Act 1989 i.e. with the agreement of their parents, those with parental responsibility or the young person themselves if they are aged 16 or 17.
- Voluntary accommodation related enquiries from families rose by 215% between 2007/8 and 2012/13. Whilst a significant rise, it is below the overall increase in enquiries that we have dealt with during that period.
- ***However, there was a 43% rise in accommodation related cases dealt with from 1 April – 30 September 2013, compared to the same period in 2012/13 (from 226 to 322)***
- The most common problems underlying accommodation related enquiries are adolescent behaviour, parental mental ill-health and domestic abuse.



## 4.6 Adoption

- In 2012/13 there were 219 families contacting primarily about adoption related queries, which is a small proportion (4%) of categorised advice enquiries. Nevertheless adoption related calls doubled (200%) between 2007/8 and 2012/13. They stabilised in the first six months of 2013/14 compared to the same period a year ago.
- The majority of adoption related enquiries are from parents whose children are being adopted despite their objection and are seeking advice about the court process itself or about maintaining contact with their child, who is being adopted.

## 5. Main underlying problems faced by families contacting the advice service

Enquiries are categorised by Family Rights Group on the database as to the underlying reasons why the child is regarded as being at risk or in need of support ***Domestic violence now is the most common underlying concern.***

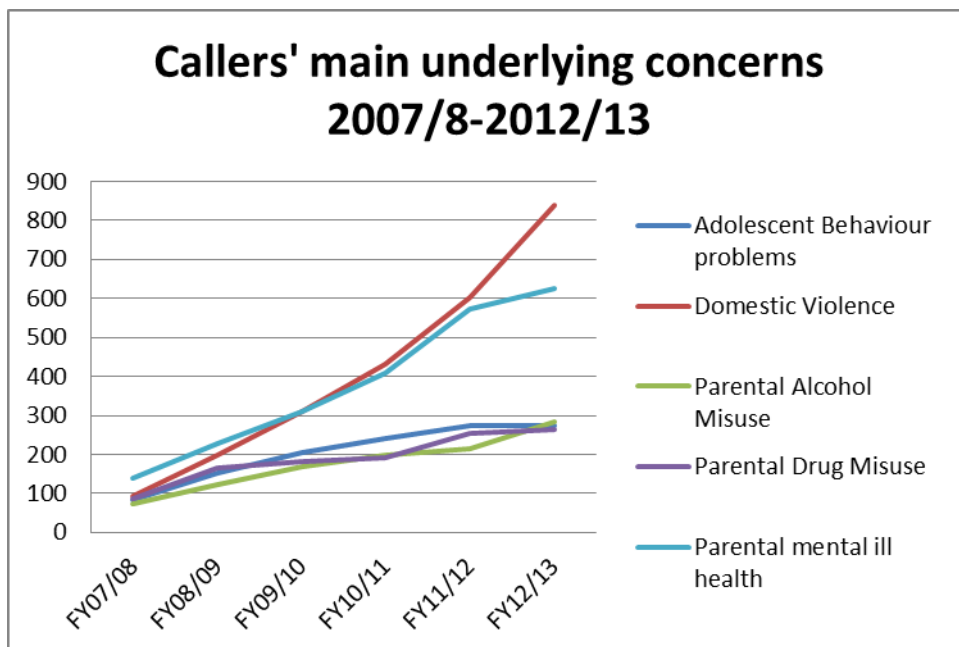
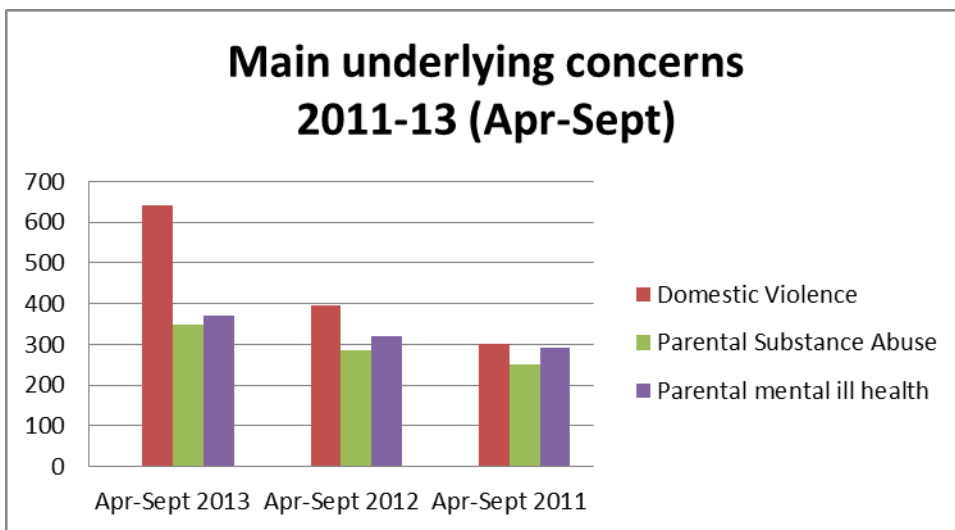


Figure 5 Main underlying concern of callers 2007/8 to 2012/13 where a main concern was specified

- Figure 5 vividly demonstrates that the proportion of enquiries where domestic violence was a factor has increased massively. **Domestic violence related enquiries increased by 803% between 2007/8 and 2012/13 from 93 to 840.**
- Moreover, **enquiries where domestic violence was an underlying concern has continue to rise to shocking levels - by a further 62% between April and September 2013 compared to the same period a year earlier (395 to 641).**



**Figure 5** Main underlying concern of callers April-September 2011-April-September 2013 where a main concern was specified

- **Domestic violence is now (1 April – 30 September 2013) a factor in a over a fifth (22%) of child protection cases advised by the Family Rights Group.** This is up from 17% during the same period in 2010/11.
- **2114 times as many families seeking advice about child protection stated domestic violence was a factor in the first six months of 2013/14 (1 April 2013-30 September 2013) than during the same period in 2007/8.** The total number of families advised about issues relating to child protection increased 6 fold during the same period.

In part this change may be explained by a change in the law which led to the definition of harm in the Children Act 1989 being amended in 2005 to mean that any child who witnesses domestic abuse may be at risk of, or actually suffering, harm, which would trigger intervention by the state. The more risk adverse culture within many children's services departments, also means more of these families are likely to be subject to statutory intervention. As stated earlier higher

incidences of domestic abuse are also likely to be the consequences of greater stresses on family life as a consequence of the economic climate. The experience of many mothers, who are domestic violence victims, is that their children become subject to child protection processes, in an environment in which they have few, if any options, given the combined impact of welfare and legal aid reforms, and diminishing support services for victims and indeed reduced perpetrator programmes. The focus of children's services is often upon the mother to safeguard the child, with the fathers too often being overlooked nor assessed as a risk or a resource<sup>xiii</sup>.

Far sighted social work practice and procedures, investment in domestic violence related service (for adult and child victims, and perpetrators) and effective social work training, are all critical in addressing this situation and safeguarding current and future abuse victims.

### For further information

For an in-depth analysis of users' perceptions' of the service and how it is impacting their and their children's lives as well as a cost benefit analysis, please see the *Evaluation of Family Rights Group Advice and Advocacy Service* (October 2012) published by FRG<sup>xiv</sup> or contact our office.

Office tel : 0207 923 2628.

Advice line tel: 0808 801 0366

Website: [www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

---

<sup>i</sup> DfE: Characteristics of children in need in England - 2010-11 and 2012-13  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/characteristics-of-children-in-need-in-england-2012-to-2013>

<sup>ii</sup> Cafcass: care applications in November 2013 <http://www.cafcass.gov.uk/news/2013/november-2013-care-demand-statistics.aspx>

<sup>iii</sup> Bywaters, P., Brady, G, Sparks, T. and Bos, E., Deprivation and Children's Services Outcomes; what can mapping looked after children and children on child protection plans tell us? Funded at Coventry University by the Nuffield Foundation, 2013-14.

<sup>iv</sup> Dyson (2008) Child Protection Research Briefing Poverty and child maltreatment (NSPCC)

---

<sup>v</sup> Women's Aid (2013) A growing crisis of unmet need  
<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/page.asp?section=00010001001400130004&sectionTitle=Growing+Crisis+of+Unmet+Need>

<sup>vi</sup> A repeat user is one who has contacted and been advised by Family Rights Group's advice service twice or more within any 12 months financial year

<sup>vii</sup> Hall N, Day L, Scott (2009) DfE Research Report Parent Know How –Telephone Helplines and Innovation Fund Strands Evaluation, DfE

<sup>viii</sup> Ashley C (Ed) (2011) *Working with risky fathers*, Family Rights Group

<sup>ix</sup> 75% of children in need as of 31st March 2013 are White, 8% are Black, 8% are from a Mixed background and 7% are from an Asian or Asian British background Source: DfE statistical release SFR45/2013 Characteristics of children in need 2012 to 2013.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/characteristics-of-children-in-need-in-england-2012-to-2013> The 2011 census data for England reported 85% of the population are White, 8% are Asian or Asian British, 3.5% are Black or Black British, and 2% are of Mixed background.

<sup>x</sup> Cumulative results of biannual survey of advice service users (latest survey September 2013)

<sup>xi</sup> DWP (2012) Households below average income.

[http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/hbai/hbai2011/pdf\\_files/full\\_hbai12.pdf](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/hbai/hbai2011/pdf_files/full_hbai12.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> Child Poverty Act 2010

<sup>xiii</sup> Ed. Cathy Ashley. Contributions by Clare Roskill, Claire Fraser, Brigid Featherstone, Sean Haresnape and Bridget Lindley (2011) *Working with risky fathers: Fathers Matter Volume 3: Research findings on working with domestically abusive fathers and their involvement with children's social care services* (Family Rights Group)

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.frg.org.uk/about-us/our-impact>