

**Ireland's 'invisible' children**  
By Catherine Reilly

Metro Éireann, April 2008

*Because of what support workers describe as flawed family reunification procedures, some families have resorted to bringing in their children illegally.*

These kids may have Irish accents; their names may feature at roll call every morning; they can probably be seen playing on the street, or in the park with the local soccer or Gaelic football team on weekend mornings. But the State has no record of them. Most children of immigrants are in Ireland perfectly legally, but because of what immigrant support workers describe as flawed family reunification procedures, some families have resorted to bringing in their children illegally. This practice extends to bringing in husbands, parents or siblings, but the most sensitive cases involve children. *Metro Éireann* is aware of a number of such incidences, but none of the parents of these children wanted to go on the record. Even those who spoke under condition of anonymity stressed that they did not want too much detail about their situation published. The problem is mostly evident among immigrants who originally came to Ireland as asylum seekers, but who attained residency on the basis of having an Irish-born child (a procedure that has since been closed by the Government).

Theo\* has lived in Ireland for several years. He is originally from a country in west Africa. He lives in the Dublin area, holds a good, responsible job – and his children are thriving in school. His neighbours not only like Theo and his family, but respect them immensely. He originally came to Ireland as an asylum seeker, but subsequently got residency on the basis of an Irish-born child. He made attempts to legally bring in a son – a minor, who had remained in his homeland. These moves came unstuck, however, as in Ireland there is no right to family reunification for those granted residency under the Irish-Born Child Scheme (controversially, when the scheme briefly re-opened in 2005, applicants were required to sign a declaration underlining this fact. Theo's residency pre-dates the requirement to sign this declaration). Eventually Theo's son came to Ireland 'on the quiet'. For now, Theo's young boy is happy – playing soccer in the neighbourhood, doing relatively well at school, and enjoying a normal family life. But when it comes to Leaving Cert year, and the subsequent form-filling for college or job opportunities, life will get complicated. It is something Theo tries to put to the back of his mind, but it is difficult.

Nancy\* is from Nigeria. She also has residency under the Irish-born child scheme and signed the form that relinquished her right to family reunification. Having left two young children in her homeland with family members, she says this separation – and the prospect of it continuing indefinitely – nearly drove her to suicide. "The form we filled in, there was a clause that we don't have the legal rights to family reunification," she recalls. "It was so difficult for me... it led to depression, and I was on antidepressant tablets." At the end of her tether, she organised to have the children come to Ireland "through the back door", as she puts it. She later went to the authorities to inform them that they had entered the country, and her children now have legal status in Ireland. Her story perfectly reflects the often inconsistent and sometimes haphazard methods and procedures relating to family reunification in Ireland.

Last November, a report by researchers at University College Cork pinpointed the terms of the Irish-born children scheme as separating thousands of families and ultimately disadvantaging them. The report was based on interviews with 38 immigrant families who have residency under the 2005 Irish Born Children Scheme. The researchers said that the declaration requiring applicants to admit they have no family reunification expectations was at the core of the problems that successful applicants are now encountering, which include mothers – without their husbands – accessing social welfare because of their single mother status. Some 17,000 people were granted residency in Ireland under the scheme, which was introduced after the citizenship referendum ruled out automatic citizenship for the Irish-born children of non-Irish parents. Even if successful applicants attain Irish citizenship in the future, they will still have no copper-fastened right to reunification with close family abroad.

*\* Names have been changed to protect their identities*

*This article was produced with support from the Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS).*