

Austria

Information provided further the statement by the Lanzarote Committee Chair and Vice-Chairperson on stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

No information received.

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Responses to specific questions by the Bureau of the Lanzarote Committee on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse

- 1. To what extent, if at all, has the threat of child sexual abuse/exploitation changed due to COVID-19? If so:**
 - Please tell us about whether the level of risk has increased/decreased/remained the same and if possible specify this with regard to the various types of sexual offences against children (Articles 18-23 of the Convention);
 - You may also wish to indicate any emerging trends relating to child sexual abuse/exploitation, as the result of COVID-19, and point at measures taken to address them.

With regard to Sections 207a and 206 of the Austrian Criminal Code (StGB), there was no noticeable increase in the number of suspicious cases reported during the initial restrictions.

- 2. Did lockdown cause child sexual abuse/exploitation cases (identified/reported) to increase, decrease or stay the same? Please submit data (number of victims/offenders) and highlight what you think may explain the trend.**

Based on the available reporting system, the Federal Ministry of Justice has not yet noticed any anomalies, changes or increases in the above-mentioned area of offences. However, due to the lack of statistics and/or (group) reporting obligations of the prosecution offices, the currently available figures are not conclusive and as new reports of crimes may be made after the removal of the COVID-19-restrictions, future trends are not foreseeable now.

A stable indicator for the detection of a change in the situation are the suspicious activity reports from US Internet Service Providers communicated via the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). A possible increase, caused by the fact that more people are staying at home (home office etc.) and thus have the opportunity to take appropriate action, will probably only be noticeable after a certain time delay.

- 3. Please also tell us whether and how general child safeguarding measures were, or are likely to be, affected by measures taken by governments in response to COVID-19. In addition, highlight any additional, specific measures put in place during lockdown to ensure reporting by victims of child sexual abuse/exploitation as well as to support and assist them, and whether these measures will be maintained even when the lockdown is lifted.**

Support for victims of domestic violence

In order to minimize personal contacts at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria, counselling services offered by victim protection institutions have mainly been provided by telephone, via e-mail or online. Personal contacts have been reduced to the bare minimum, though are being taken up step by step as of lately.

Funding of the national 24/7 helpline has been increased to expand online counselling services. Support via “help chat” was expanded both in terms of accessibility (extension of the time frame) and in terms of foreign-language counselling. Since the introduction of exit restrictions in March 2020, an increase in calls of approximately 50% has been reported.

Furthermore, a specific helpline for men at risk of resorting to violence due to the stress factors increased by the Corona Crisis has been newly established. It is run by men's counselling centres working with a victim protection-oriented approach. The help line is available from Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at local rates throughout Austria; communication is also offered via e-mail.

In order to maintain protection of victims in shelters (such as women's shelters, sheltered housing, etc.) in case of a suspected infection, victim protection institutions work closely with the health authorities (no case known so far).

The same applies in cases of (suspected) infection of perpetrators barred from home. Here, the police cooperates closely with the health authorities in order to avoid a risk to victims in case of a necessity of quarantine.

The women's shelters have taken measures to provide the highest attainable level of protection for residents and staff against infection. At present, the reception capacities are sufficient. In addition, the federal states have made provisions for the availability of alternative accommodations.

Simplification to file interim injunctions

The “Protection against Violence Act” has unlimited validity regardless of the corona protection measures. In response to exit restrictions, filing interim injunctions has been simplified: Under normal circumstances an interim injunction needs to be applied for in person at the respective district court of the victim's place of residence. For a limited time-period due to the corona crisis, an application for an interim injunction can be submitted to the relevant court via post, e-mail or fax. Support to prepare and submit the application is given by the Victim Protection Facilities and the police.

Information campaigns and press conferences on domestic violence

The Austrian federal government has compiled a comprehensive package of measures to ensure continued support for women affected/ threatened by (sexual) violence throughout the corona crisis and to respond to the prevailing situation with specific measures:

In order to draw attention to the increased risk of domestic violence and to inform the broad public about the extensive net of support services available and further measures taken, several press conferences were held by the Minister for Women's Affairs, the Minister for Family Affairs, the Minister for Justice and the Minister of the Interior.

In addition, information flyers on local support available in case of domestic violence have been distributed in food stores. Also, a brochure giving a nation-wide overview on victim protection facilities has been made available online in multiple languages in order to inform as many ("potentially") affected victims of domestic violence as possible.

Furthermore, an information campaign has been started in daily newspapers, television and social media to promote the 24/7 Helpline, the helpline for men and the newly established website "Sicher zu Hause" (Safe at Home).

(Some of) the Federal states also launched information campaigns on support services for victims of violence.

- The criminal prosecution of perpetrators and the access to the courts for victims of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse is and has been secured at all times during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Victim support organisations were advised on Covid-19 measures at court and prosecution services and are updated regularly.
- The website of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Justice offers a Covid-19 sub-link for the public, containing (i) general information on Covid-19 specific measures at court and prosecution services, (ii) a Covid-19 Q & A section, and (iii) specific information on Covid-19 related laws, respective amendments and ministerial orders. Links were set to Covid-19 awareness raising websites from other ministries and NGOs.

<https://www.justiz.gv.at/home/covid-19~7a5.de.html> (in German language).

- In order to draw attention to the increased risk of domestic violence due to restrictions and to disseminate the support services available and further measures taken, press conferences were held by the Minister for Women's Affairs, the Minister for Family Affairs and the Minister for Justice.

The Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth provides ongoing information via the website www.gewaltinfo.at about various offers of help for children and young people in crisis situations. The website contains a great deal of information on the topic of violence in the social environment and the site is continuously updated to reflect the most recent picture.

The site is promoted monthly by a newsletter, which helps to achieve a high level of awareness.

The number of page views due to the COVID 19 crisis has increased from 42,577 to 45,296 between February 2020 and March 2020. There has also been an increase of new visitors from 87.5% to 89.3% vs 2019.

In the course of the COVID 19 pandemic, information on various offers of help for children and young people was included on www.gewaltinfo.at from the beginning of the lockdown.

For example, a link was made to the information service of the Professional Association of Austrian Psychologists (BÖP), which offers help during quarantine and domestic isolation in the current crisis and shows how difficult family situations can be overcome without violence.

The Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth website www.gewaltinfo.at contains numerous references to helplines and information pages of non-governmental organisations:

The website www.gewalt-ist-nie-ok.at offers information on domestic violence for children and adolescents and is continuously updated by experts from the Autonomous Austrian Women's Shelters to meet current requirements, also in the context of the Corona crisis.

The emergency number "Rat auf Draht" 147 for children, adolescents and their caregivers is also promoted by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth website www.gewaltinfo.at and contains valuable advice for children and adolescents, at any time - anonymously - free of charge.

The child protection centre "Die Möwe" also offers free anonymous and confidential advice in crisis situations for children and young people via www.die-moewe.at. The Child Protection Centre "Die Möwe" is supported by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth for child protection work as well as various other child protection centres are.

The service site of the Federal Association of Austrian Child Protection Centres also offers various helpful information for families in crisis situations.

From the very beginning of the Corona crisis and on an ongoing basis, the Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth has supported initiatives that serve to protect children and young people from domestic violence, sexual assault and neglect. For 27 years, the Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth has been supporting violence-prevention projects, including projects for children and young people within the framework of the "Platform Against Domestic Violence". This platform serves as an instrument for networking aid facilities, as an Austrian-wide forum for the exchange of experience and as a contribution to raising public awareness.

45 established organisations such as child protection centres, women's counselling centres, youth facilities, senior citizens' associations, men's counselling centres etc. cooperate in the field of violence prevention and intervention with the following objectives: Reducing violence, increasing the detection rate, initiating interventions efficiently and raising awareness.

The web portal devoted to the entire spectrum of counselling services in connection with separation and divorce (<https://www.trennungundscheidung.at/elternberatung-vor-scheidung/beratung-vor-einvernehmlicher-scheidung-gemaess-%C2%A7-95-abs-1a-aussstrg/englisch-english/>) has proven its worth, especially during the time of the COVID-19 lockdown. In the period 17.03.20.-19.05.20 parental counselling before divorce (according to § 95 para. 1a AußStrG) was called up a total of 14,217 times; ordered family, parental and educational counselling (according to § 107 para. 3 line 1 AußStrG) a total of 3,408 times.

A further notable observation was that in the period the hotline of the Ombudsman for Children and Young People (0800/240 264) was used mainly outside the business hours - i.e. already from 7:00 AM until midnight.

On the 30/31 January 2020 Austrian delegation of departmental representatives joined the review of the combined 5th/6th periodic report of Austria concerning the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which took place at the United Nations headquarter in Geneva.

During the CRC universal periodic review in Geneva, a joint meeting of the Children's Rights Board with the Austrian delegation members and the CRC-affected departmental representatives concerning the topics of the Concluding Observations was planned for 13 March 2020. The planned focus of the meeting was to continue working on the comprehensive implementation of children's rights in Austria.

Due to the COVID-19 measures this date was CANCELLED.

4. Finally, please tell us whether children have been duly listened to on decision-making concerning their protection against sexual abuse/exploitation during this period. Please also tell us whether and how children will be involved in decision-making on or assessing the impact of COVID-19 measures in the future.

The Federal Association of Austrian Child Protection Centres offers child-oriented answers to COVID 19 in various information sheets ("Talking to children about corona"; "How to help children deal with the virus"; "Information sheet for families during home quarantine because of COVID 19"). This information is produced in a practical way based on work with affected children and families.

Most child protection centres can be reached during the Corona crisis with considerably extended telephone hours. For acute crises that cannot be dealt with over the phone, individual tailored solutions are available.

The Child and Youth Advocacy Offices in the federal states also offer comprehensive information material for children and young people in crisis situations.

The Austrian League for Child and Youth Health also offers practical support for the care of children and young people at home during COVID-19.