

Latvia

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.**

Currently it is still difficult to tell, if the threat of child sexual abuse has changed during the emergency situation, as different specialists express different opinions. Administrative data from different institutions do not show any increase in the number of cases of violence against children. However, some specialists are concerned that currently it is the “quiet period” and that the real increase in the identified cases of violence will be seen in autumn when children return back to schools. On the other hand, some other specialists say that during the emergency situation children victims of domestic and sexual violence had to stay at home much longer and therefore were more motivated to look for help and to report particularly latent cases of sexual violence.

- 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.**

Since 12.03.20 when the emergency situation was declared, Hotline for children and youth that operates 24/7 provided 1226 psychological consultations for children, young people and adults. In May, 312 consultations were provided. In 56% of cases, children called, in 44% of cases adults called. Out of all the adults, a large number of callers were bystanders, e.g., neighbours - 35%. The specialists of the Hotline note a significant increase in the number of calls by adults during this period.

The most topical issues were:

- Different informative questions on the right of the child;
- Violence against children (neglect, emotional, physical, sexual violence);
- Behavioural difficulties of children, low motivation to study;
- Emotional problems of children, self-harming behaviour;
- Internet security;
- Problematic peer relationships.

Out of all calls, in 37 cases information was passed to social service, custody court and/or police. The reported issues were neglect, emotional or physical violence, parental alcohol problems.

As to the specialised state financed crisis centres (shelters) for victims of domestic violence (children, women and women with children), there are 173 places in total. Twice a week, the crisis centres were sending the updated information on free places to the Ministry of Welfare. As to 23.03.2020, there were 124 clients (including 111 children) in the shelters; as to 22.04. there were 119 clients (including 102 children); as to 20.05. there were 110 clients (including 98 children).

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.

As soon as an emergency situation due to COVID-19 was declared, the issue of domestic violence prevention, including violence against children, was one of the most discussed at different levels.

Parliament Commission on Social and Employment measures has held two meetings on issues concerning domestic violence with participation of representative of different ministries, State and municipal police, and NGOs. There were also several seminars organised by the Union of Latvian Municipalities and regular communication within an inner group organised by the Ministry of Welfare.

The following priorities were defined:

1. intensive monitoring of the situation (data from crisis centres, from the State police and municipality police, data from hotlines, communication with social services).
2. Informing society.
3. Educating specialists.

It is important to mention, that during the emergency situation, crisis centres for children victims of violence continued their operation, as well as social workers and other specialists continued their work. Social workers were advised to organise their work mostly distantly, however in cases of emergency it was also possible to meet clients. Schools were closed, but pre-schools stayed opened even though the number of children who could attend them was limited.

In general, data from the hotlines (not only hotlines for children, but also for adults), as well as data on police calls show a moderate increase in the number of calls. The majority of calls were about anxiety, uncertainty, quarrels with family members. An important issue that came out were the problems of organising access rights in cases of divorced families. In cases where partners divorced due to domestic violence, access rights became the good way for violent partners to manipulate. Hotline for children and youth noted an increase in the number of calls received from adults (parents, neighbours) and particular interest on the side of parents on the issues of organising home-schooling and positive discipline. The State Inspectorate for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and an NGO "Dardedze" that specialises on work with children who are victims of violence have announced designated phone numbers for the period of the emergency and provided additional consultations to parents.

Even though the number of calls has increased, the number of reported cases of violence, including sexual violence, did not increase.

In order to identify possible latent cases of violence, municipal police in cooperation with social services has contacted every so-called "crisis family"- families with difficulties the services knew before.

Another way to identify possible latent cases of violence was during delivery of free daily meals to schoolchildren from poor and large families.

Particular attention was paid to informing society in general and particularly bystanders on the necessity to stay alert and to report if they suspect domestic violence or violence against children. The main message was to stress that all services, including crisis centres, continue to be opened and it is possible to receive help. Numbers of hotlines and chats were published on social networks almost daily, including information for people with hearing loss.

The State Inspectorate for the Protection of the Rights of the Child has also launched a series of video expert consultations for parents on positive discipline, guaranteeing the rights of the child during the emergency situation and possibilities to receive assistance. Particular attention was also paid to internet security.

Several guidelines for specialists were developed and published. First of all, short guidelines for social workers and police officers on how to work with cases of domestic violence during the emergency situation. The main message was that for victims of domestic violence in the situation of limited movement it is particularly difficult to call for help therefore specialists should be particularly aware of the indirect signs.

These guidelines were followed by three longer guidelines for social workers on how to organise their work with “risk families” during the emergency situation, how to work with cases of domestic violence and violence against children and how to work with cases of violence during the emergency situation. Several online seminars and discussions have also been organised.

- 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.**

No information received.