



Summary of Barnrättsbyrån's report "Who Will Believe in Me? A Report on Sexual Abuse Against Children in Institutional Care"

Full report in Swedish, pdf:

https://barnrattsbyran.se/app/uploads/2023/03/SiS_rapport_digital_pdf_uppslag.pdf

Executive summary

The report investigates sexual misconduct and violence in the special residential homes of the National Board of Institutional Care (SiS), where children are forcibly placed due to extensive psychosocial issues. SiS, endowed with specific powers like locked wards, faces persistent scrutiny for serious misconduct, including physical violence and sexual abuse against children. The study by Maria Andersson Vogel aims to systematically analyze the occurrence of sexual abuse against children in institutional care, filling a crucial knowledge gap. Findings reveal a significant reporting discrepancy, raising concerns about the authority's response to the severity of cases. The majority of perpetrators are staff members, predominantly male, engaging in prevalent forms of harassment, sexualized comments, and non-physical offences. Interviews underscore victims' fear and insecurity, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive, institution-wide approach to address and prevent further abuse.

Introduction And Background

Children and youths in Sweden can under certain circumstances be forcibly placed in specialized youth homes operated by the National Board of Institutional Care (SiS). These children and young individuals are assessed to have extensive psychosocial issues and deemed by social services to require "particularly careful supervision" in accordance with the law specifying special provisions for the care of the young (LVU). The group of young people placed in these homes is

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heterogeneous, and their issues often involve complex combinations of criminality, mental health issues, substance abuse, school-related problems, family issues, as well as exposure to violence and abuse.

As part of its mission, SiS has several specific powers, including the ability to have locked wards, conduct body searches, place children in seclusion rooms (isolation), administer drug tests, or make decisions regarding private care.

Numerous inspections, oversight measures, and other reports have consistently identified serious misconduct at SiS, including both physical violence and sexual abuse against children. In Sweden, the “Vanvårdsutredningen” (Child Neglect Investigation) is an important example, along with reviews from the Parliamentary Ombudsman, the Health and Social Care Inspectorate, and the Swedish Agency for Public Management.

Lack of Systematic Overview

Despite knowledge of the occurrence of sexual misconduct and violence against children placed in SiS care, there has been a lack of a systematic overview and compilation of the extent of these issues. This report, produced by the World Childhood Foundation and the Children’s Rights Bureau (Barnrättsbyrån), investigates and analyzes the occurrence of sexual abuse against forcibly placed youths in the specialized youth homes. The primary content of the report consists of a study conducted by Maria Andersson Vogel with the aim of examining the extent and ways in which sexual offences and violence occur towards placed children and young individuals in these specialized youth homes.

Andersson Vogel’s study is based on public records obtained from SiS and the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO). This information has been supplemented with qualitative interviews with previously placed youths/young adults who have experienced sexual abuse and violence, as well as documentation from SiS’s personnel disciplinary board and judgments from district and appellate courts. The public records obtained from SiS and IVO are limited to a period of 40 months (January 1, 2019, to May 4, 2022).

The research has long concluded that closed care environments with significant elements of control and discipline are associated with particular risks for forcibly

placed children and young individuals. However, both in Sweden and internationally, knowledge about the prevalence of sexual violence against forcibly placed young individuals is limited. There is also limited knowledge about offender profiles, even though male staff members appear to be overrepresented.

Risk Factors in Closed Institutional Environments

Regarding sexual misconduct and violence in institutional settings, it is emphasized that far from all offenders actively seek out the location with the intention of committing offences. Instead, the motivation to commit such acts is often triggered by the context, and the institutional environment plays a significant, often decisive, role in whether sexual misconduct and violence occur or not. Locked institutional care thus imposes very high demands on authorities and personnel in how they work to counteract and prevent sexual misconduct and violence.

Reports and Complaints

The presentation of results shows a total of 209 reports of incidents/complaints where some form of sexual misconduct or violence occurred during the 40 months that the study is focused to, which translates to over five reports per month. The most common form of documentation is based on children's complaints to IVO. During the 40 months, SiS prepared 29 Lex Sarah reports (Lex Sarah is a Swedish legal obligation for certain authorities to report misconduct/mistreatment) concerning some form of sexual misconduct or violence, while only 9 of these seem to have been forwarded to IVO through formal Lex Sarah notifications. This discrepancy between the number of Lex Sarah reports and notifications indicates that only a minority of cases are considered to represent or are suspected to be serious misconduct, prompting a formal report to IVO.

Reports of sexual misconduct and violence occur across different authorities but are unevenly distributed among the institutions. Only one institution lacks documented reports of complaints and similar issues related to sexual misconduct and violence. Differences between institutions may be due to the extent to which events are noticed and documented, but it may also be an indication that the extent of the problem varies between institutions.

The absolute majority of those described as perpetrators in the reported incidents are staff members at the youth homes, accounting for 193 out of the 209 documented cases. Nine of the reports concern another young people, and in seven of the documented cases, it is not possible to determine who committed the offence. In cases where the gender of the suspected perpetrator is known, the pattern is clear: the most common perpetrator in the material is a male staff member. In the five rape cases identified during the period 2017–2022, the accused is a male staff member, and the victims are all girls.

Victim's Fear and Institutional Responsiveness

The most common form of sexual misconduct and violence by staff is categorized as harassment, followed by descriptions of non-physical offences such as sexualized comments and glances. Descriptions of more serious transgressions, categorized as abuse in the study, are also relatively common. Some of the documented reports seem to involve a more general sense of insecurity linked to private and bodily integrity.

The interviews conducted as part of the study indicate that young individuals subjected to sexual violence by staff feel fear about disclosing their victimization, a fear related to uncertainty about what will happen and a concern about not being taken seriously.

Only a small portion of the complaints and narratives that reach IVO and SiS are deemed by the authority to be serious enough to be reported to the personnel disciplinary board. The significant difference between the number of documented incidents/complaints and the number of cases leading to notifications to IVO and/or the personnel disciplinary board raises questions about the extent to which the authority takes the stories of the young individuals seriously. The fact that reports of sexual misconduct and violence occur at all, but one of the 21 homes also leads to the conclusion that this is not an issue for individual institutions but for the entire responsible authority.

Testimonies and Expert Commentary

Part two of the report includes two extended testimonies from girls with personal experience of sexual abuse during their placement at SiS. The girls' stories testify

to the common occurrence of misconduct and violence, and how a generally threatening and violent environment creates insecurity and a sense that it is not worthwhile to speak up and report. The third part of the report consists of expert comments that, from various perspectives, illuminate the results of the study and the issue of sexual abuse in institutional settings. Based on its extensive work to highlight deficiencies at SiS, the Children's Rights Bureau states, among other things, that the compilation provides a clear picture of an authority that does not take children's stories seriously and where the rights of the personnel and the employer's perspective are often prioritized over the safety of children. Childhood concludes in a closing comment that neglect investigations in several countries have pointed out the fact that institutional environments enable and conceal systematic violence, misconduct, and sexual abuse. Sweden is no exception.

Key Findings:

- **Discrepancy in Reporting:** The study reveals a substantial difference between the number of documented incidents of sexual misconduct and violence, and the formal notifications to authorities, indicating potential challenges in recognizing and responding to the severity of these cases.
- **Staff as Predominant Perpetrators:** The absolute majority of reported incidents involve staff members at SiS's youth homes, with male staff being overrepresented. This highlights a concerning pattern of abuse within the institutional setting.
- **Common Forms of Misconduct:** Ranges from harassment, sexualized comments, and physical/non-physical offences. Non-physical offences emerge as the most prevalent forms of sexual misconduct by staff. There are five rape-convictions from 2017 to 2022. This indicates a pervasive culture that compromises the well-being and safety of the placed youths.
- **Insecurity and Fear Among Victims:** Interviews with victims suggest a prevalent sense of fear and insecurity among young individuals subjected to sexual violence by staff. This fear encompasses concerns about disclosure

repercussions and doubts about being taken seriously.

- **Institutional Responsibility:** The occurrence of sexual misconduct and violence at almost all of the 21 youth homes underscore the systemic nature of the issue, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive, institution-wide approach to address and prevent further instances of abuse.