

WEBINAR SERIES

COVID-19 and Children's Rights

3rd edition: "Intrafamily violence"



SUMMARY REPORT
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**Building a Europe
for and with children**



COVID-19 and Children's Rights

Webinar series of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child

3rd edition – “Intrafamily violence”

22 November 2021

Summary report

Prepared on behalf of the Children's Rights Division

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Council of Europe

Summary Report

“The Parliamentary Assembly is deeply concerned about the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children (any person under the age of 18), who have faced family bereavement, isolation, the spread of poverty and reduced access to public services (including health, education and social protection). Violence against children has increased, including domestic and sexual violence. (...) The current generation of children, which is sometimes referred to as “Generation Covid”, will face the consequences of this public health crisis for many years to come unless adequate measures are taken.”

[Resolution 2385 (2021) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, para. 1]

I. Background

Following a thorough exchange of views on the [challenges posed by COVID-19](#) to children’s rights in June 2020, the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child ([CDENF](#)) entrusted the Secretariat to organise a webinar series on the most urgent issues threatening children’s enjoyment of their rights in the context of the current pandemic. Each webinar is dedicated to a specific children’s rights challenge: education, mental health and intra-family violence. While the first responses to these issues have been identified in a number of member states, implementing policies effectively remains a challenge for all countries. This is where the CDENF webinars seek to make a contribution.

The aim of the webinar series on COVID-19 and children’s rights is three-fold: (1) providing for a platform for exchanges on the most urgent challenges to children’s rights; (2) enabling a focused exchange on national practices implemented in response to these challenges during the pandemic by governments and other organisations; and (3) increasing awareness of relevant stakeholders on specific children’s rights issues and the management of the pandemic situation, bearing in mind the indivisible nature of human rights.

Over 600 days have now passed since the first lockdowns began in March 2020, and many European countries are still struggling to come to terms with the pandemic on the one hand (in terms of variants, new “waves” of contamination, and the necessity to ensure vaccination and potential further lockdowns) as well as its implications for policies and services across the board (disruptions of access to rights and services) on the other. The fundamental rights of children in particular have been affected in serious and multiple ways.

First, lockdowns have had a significant impact in terms of education, which is a crucial right of the children, recognised by article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and made central to the fourth of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, the first of the three-webinar series tackled the difficulties concerning the implementation of appropriate policies in the area of [education](#).

Over time, health has come to the fore as another major concern for the welfare of children throughout the various lockdowns, and more specifically mental health. Considering the importance of the right to health, especially mental health, for children's enjoyment of all of their rights, the second of the three-webinar series tackled the emerging trends and difficulties concerning the implementation of appropriate policies to promote the well-being of all children.

Violence against children is another major concern in these particularly troubled times, as the sharp rise in intrafamily violence, amongst other forms of violence, observed by many services in the first months of lockdown has not significantly abated. Ensuring the right to a life free from violence is therefore another critical aspect of the rights of the child that has been durably affected by the pandemic and was also addressed by the third webinar in a specific manner (see programme appended).

II. Main features of the webinar

On Monday 22 November 2021, the Council of Europe held the 3rd edition of the CDENF webinar series on COVID-19 and children's rights focused on "Intrafamily violence", so as to bring together CDENF members, participants and observers with other experts for an in-depth exchange of views on this theme. Being scheduled a few days after 18 November, the event was also meant to be a contribution of the Council of Europe to the celebrations of the 7th edition of the [European Day for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#), with this year's theme "Making the circle of trust truly safe for children". It was aimed at reflecting on the following themes in a series of interactive discussions: prevention, detection and reporting of violence within the family; sexual violence in the family circle; and support to children and families by professionals during lockdown (child contact constraints, reporting etc.).

The event was moderated by Ms Christel de Craim, Chairperson of the Committee of Parties to the Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Lanzarote Committee), and involved the contribution of a number of speakers, including (in replacement of Baroness Doreen Massey, member of the Parliamentary Assembly, Ms Tanja Kleinsorge, Head of Secretariat of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Ms Maria José Castello-Branco, Vice-Chairperson of the Lanzarote Committee, and Ms Theoni Koufonikolakou, Chairperson of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC); as well as representatives of national governments represented on the CDENF, including Ms Florica Chereches, President of the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions (Romania), Ms Joan Mullan, National Manager for Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Services, Tusla Child and Family Agency (Ireland) and Ms Marion Escudier, Legal Officer, General Criminal Policy Office, Directorate of Criminal Affairs and Pardons, Ministry of Justice (France).

The event was also broadcasted live and the video recording can be found on the [website](#) of the Children's Rights Division (CRD). CRD's social media also covered the event.

The event gave participants the possibility to take stock and reflect with various stakeholders on how the health crisis may have led to a **children's rights crisis**, and on how to better prevent and **respond to new forms of violence against children**. It also looked at **measures to build resilience and rehabilitation** and examined **alternative solutions** that had been adopted in different countries.

III. Mapping out the impact, the challenges and opportunities posed by COVID-19 with regards to intrafamily violence against children

The right of all children to a life free from violence is primarily enshrined in article 19 the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). As demonstrated by European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) case law, articles 2 and 3 of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) create a positive obligation for States in terms of prevention, investigation and prosecution of violence against children, and article 8, paragraph 2 can be relevant when protecting the child from violence entails some disruption to family life. Additional conventions apply in specific cases, such as the [Istanbul Convention](#) on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and the [Lanzarote Convention](#) on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Articles 7 and 17 of the [European Social Charter](#) also help to flesh out the implications for policy of this right. The Sustainable Development Goals also include indicators related to this right, with Goal 16.2 committing to “*End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children*”.

The family is the first and foremost sphere where children's development and socialisation takes place; it is also the child's first source of protection and care. “Intrafamily violence” refers to the different types of violence a child may be exposed to in the framework of the family (which includes domestic violence and so-called “educative” violence from parents, as well as sibling-to-sibling violence and other types of maltreatment). In the framework of lockdowns, the term therefore also refers to the violence a child is insufficiently protected from in their own home and “circle of trust”, where most of the sexual violence against children happens as well. This was the main focus of the [European Day for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#) of 18 November 2021: “Making the circle of trust truly protective for children”. Most speakers made an explicit reference to this imperative.

a. Impacts and challenges

The months and years since the COVID-19 pandemic have been particularly complicated and challenging for children and families on many levels. In many countries, alerts have gone out for an alarming rise in abuse and violence, particularly in the framework of the family and/or against girls. The reasons behind the increased incidence of violence against children are complex and

multidimensional, and frequently relate to **old and persistent systemic deficiencies and gaps in services**, particularly in those countries where the social “safety net” had been weakened by budget cuts: as Ms Theoni Koufonikolakou, Chairperson of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), underlined, “*societies that have passed through austerity measures and fiscal restrictions that affected gravely their social tissue were even more challenged throughout the crisis*”.

According to UNICEF, 98% of children worldwide have been confined to their homes for different lengths of time, with insecurity acting as an added stressor to **exacerbate pre-existing conflicts and tensions**, particularly when pandemic-related socio-economic difficulties have compromised the parents’ capacities to appropriately care for their children. Restriction measures have **curtailed contact with 'traditional' reporters of abuse** (such as teachers, doctors, social workers), entailing a decline in the detection and reporting of abuse. Access to health care, to prevention services and assistance or follow-up services has also been severely hampered - especially for school-based services.

Finally, children and parents have become particularly dependent on the digital environment during the lockdowns: globally, the use of internet has increased by 50 to 70% from March to April 2020 alone, with the Zoom platform experiencing in particular a staggering 535% rise in the number of daily connexions, according to UN Women. A rise in **online and ICT-facilitated violence**, particularly against children, has corresponded. Interpol and Europol have also confirmed that the sharing of child sexual abuse content has increased dramatically.

b. Turning challenges into opportunities: making protection systems pandemic-proof

Despite the many unprecedented challenges for intervention, most States tried to address this rise in violence in new and innovative ways, frequently using ICT to do so; and these initiatives correspond to the good practices presented below. The **mobilisation of international and regional organisations** to provide advice and tools (such as the recently Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly-published [“Around a Lake”](#) film), and to share their knowledge has proven invaluable. In spite of all, the intense activity in a very constrained situation has given us important insights for the future.

ENOC in particular has undertaken a [mapping](#) of how **Covid-19 emergency legislation has affected children’s rights and well-being**, and of the lessons learnt to ensure better preparedness and capability, with more than 74% of ENOC members participating in the survey.

This has led to a number of key findings. Regarding the overall situation, a consensus emerged that **emergency measures had had a negative impact on violence against children**; and there was widespread concern that children were at **increased risk of domestic abuse, online abuse, general abuse and neglect, or child sexual abuse**. But the data regarding this violence were found inadequate in many cases, which highlights the need for better data.

Regarding the response by services, in the majority of jurisdictions, governments struggled to **maintain services to protect children who may be at significant risk of harm** (domestic abuse and neglect, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation). The increased time spent at home and away from schools means that children were more exposed to violence in the family. The increased use of internet means they were more exposed to cyberbullying, grooming, or online sexual abuse and exploitation. At the same time, children had fewer opportunities to receive help from services. The problems caused by children being confined at home, and unable to access protection or support services was described by one respondent as a “double vulnerability”. Adapting to the new reality meant that States needed to **increase the capacities of telephone helplines and online services to help children to seek help**.

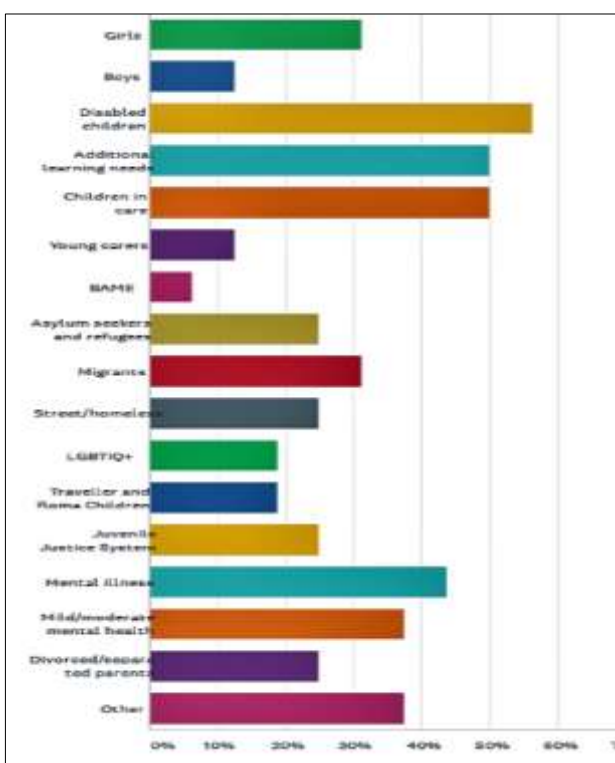


Figure 1. Comparative increase of violence during lockdown for different types of children (ENOC data, 2021)

Another important finding from this report is that, overall, **all children did not experience the same rise in violence**. Specific groups of children were identified as particularly vulnerable, especially girls, as well as disabled children and all children with additional learning needs and children in alternative care. Other types of discrimination were also linked to higher increase rates, as shown by Figure 1.

The findings from this survey of ENOC members have led to recommendations and to a better understanding of exactly how important **robust, reactive prevention and protection systems** are: those lessons need to be remembered and acted on to avoid similar shortcomings in the future.

IV. Good practices in fulfilling children’s protection needs during the pandemic

Many good practices have been presented during the webinar, regarding the different services and stages involved in the prevention of intrafamily violence, its detection and prosecution, and the overall protection of victims. Ms Florica Chereches, President of the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions (Romania) and Ms Joan Mullan, National Manager for Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Services, Tusla Child and Family Agency (Ireland), presented some initiatives that were taken in their countries regarding violence against children in general.

Furthermore, Ms Maria José Castello-Branco, Vice-Chairperson of the Lanzarote Committee and Ms Marion Escudier, Legal Officer, General Criminal Policy Office, Directorate of Criminal Affairs and Pardons for the Ministry of Justice (France) focused on measures undertaken to protect children from sexual violence in particular.

In the field of **awareness-raising and overall prevention**, in Slovakia simple leaflets were created for owners of shops, cosmetic stores and pharmacies with information for their employees on how to react in case the potential victim of violence reaches them at their workplace with request for help. In France, emergency instructions (“fiche réflexe”) were sent to all pharmacists to help refer potential victims of sexual violence, children in particular, to specialised services and give them information on their rights; a campaign was also broadcasted on television and radio regarding child helpline 119, accessible 24/7.

Regarding the **protection of vulnerable children**, Denmark enabled children with special social, educational or treatment needs to stay in their day care or school. In Ireland, children in care were one of the priorities from the start, along with child protection and services against sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV). A series of measures to maintain **continuity of services** for high-risk children and families with domestic violence was implemented, with a focus on innovation and greater use of technology in provision of services, which led to the emergence of new models of shelter and safety for families.

Regarding **online security**, the Directorate General of Education in Portugal issued recommendations in conjunction with the National Centre for Cybersecurity and the National Commission for Data Protection, titled “Study at Home: Security Recommendations”. In France, specific law enforcement “cyber-patrols” scanned the darknet and remained on the lookout on social media and online gaming platforms. With the help of NGO “L’enfant bleu”, an avatar was created on Fortnite: children experiencing situations of violence and maltreatment could add the avatar in their list and access counsellors from the NGO without raising unwanted attention. The platform for referring situations of online violence was also reinforced, by increasing fivefold its staff.

Access to justice was the lever Austria focused on, by simplifying the filing of interim injunctions (submission to the relevant court can now be made via post, e-mail, or fax).

Finally, Romania responded to the challenge using a **multi-faceted, all-of-society approach**, by implementing a comprehensive National Support Programme for Children, which includes 70,000 hours of psychological and psychotherapy counselling for children, the introduction of new themes within the school curricula, including online safety and emotion management, the training of 7,000 specialists, the setting up of hearing rooms especially tailored to the needs of children in each county and of an alert mechanism for missing children, an online platform for children and parents as well as a toll-free emergency helpline for children.

V. Main takeaways and lessons learned

The extreme circumstances and the suddenness of the COVID-19 crisis highlighted all the shortcomings and flaws of existing systems to protect children from violence, particularly inside the family. Yet at the same time, never has it been so critical to **ensure that the circle of trust**, those who are closest to the children, and particularly parents, be made **truly safe for children**.

The **lack of data** on violence against children, often highlighted by the UN Committee on Human Rights in its observations to periodic reports, has been sorely acknowledged during the webinar, as has the lack of children's rights impact assessments that in the emergency were not systematically carried out.

The Lanzarote Committee, has issued a number of recommendations for the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic that can be found notably in its [Statement by the Lanzarote Committee Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson on stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the COVID-19 pandemic and collected practices from its Parties](#). PACE has also done so in some of its most recent reports on the [Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights](#) and [Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and co-operation in Europe](#).

But other over-arching recommendations were made and presented during this webinar to help build better child protection systems for the future – these are put in the focus at the end of this report to inspire the design of future governmental policies and programmes in the light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic:

ENOC in particular listed five main recommendations:

- **Embed children's rights** in legislative, policy and budgetary decision-making, so that children's rights are given priority in decision-making at all times, including at times of public emergency;
- Ensure that decisions and actions at all levels **do not adversely discriminate against children and/or specific groups of children at any time**, including at times of public emergency;
- **Enhance children's knowledge and understanding of their rights**, through education and information so that children can exercise their rights, including in times of public emergency;
- **Ensure that children's views are heard** and given due weight in any decision-making process that directly or indirectly affects them, so that their views are fully taken into account in times of public emergency;
- Ensure that government at all levels and public organisations are **accountable for how they comply with children's rights** at all times, including in times of public emergency.

ENYA, the European Network of Youth Advisors, developed the following list of recommendations which was also shared by the ENOC representative:

- **School psychologists** should be involved for supporting students' emotional well-being. This will also empower children, help them identify violations and tackle feelings of guilt;
- Support for families affected by domestic violence, including emotional support by **social and mental health services**;
- Police must protect children and young people in a public emergency, rather than seeing them as a problem. **Police should be provided with training** on how to communicate effectively with children and young people;
- There should be an increase in **training for teachers and other professionals** working in schools on how to prevent situations of violence against children, how to identify abuse and how to respond appropriately;
- Governments should properly **research the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable children and young people**;
- There should be a **strong advertising campaign through social media (especially on Instagram)** to create awareness about national helplines for children that aim at providing emotional support to children who are victims of abuse.

List of resources

CDENF, Lanzarote Committee and other Council of Europe bodies

[Protecting and empowering children during the Covid-19 pandemic \[EN\]](#)

[CDENF Factsheet "the COVID-19 pandemic and children: Challenges, responses and policy implication" \[EN\]](#)

[Statement by the Lanzarote Committee Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson on stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the COVID-19 pandemic \[EN\]](#)

[18 November: End Child Sex Abuse Day - 2021 Edition \[EN\]](#)

PACE

Link to the new film "Around a lake" available in 5 languages:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZVFge1e41bYPN8o0g3VvhkmkvJLLwqh>

Relevant Resolutions of the Assembly:

[Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights \(coe.int\)](#)

[Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and co-operation in Europe \(coe.int\)](#)

UN and other international organisations and agencies

[Hidden scars: how violence harms the mental health of children | UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children](#)

UN Women: [Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19](#)

[COVID-19 Child sexual exploitation and abuse threats and trends – \(Interpol\)](#)

[Exploiting Isolation: Offenders and victims of online child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic– \(Europol\)](#)

International associations

ENOC. COVID-19 – [Learning for the future. Mapping the impact of emergency measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on children's rights in ENOC member states](#). Synthesis report (2021)

Annex

Programme - Monday 22 November 2021 - 2:00-3:30 (CET)

14:00	Opening by the moderator <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ms Christel de Craim, Chairperson of the Committee of Parties to the Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Lanzarote Committee)
14:05	“Setting the scene”: the increase in intrafamily violence against children during the COVID-19 health crisis <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ms Theoni Koufonikolakou, Chairperson of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children
14:15	The multiplication of risk factors and reporting abuse during lockdown measures <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ms Florica Chereches, President of the Romanian National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions- Ms Joan Mullan, National Manager for Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Services, Tusla Child and Family Agency, Ireland
14:35	Protecting children from sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ms Maria José Castello-Branco, Vice Chairperson of the Committee of Parties to the Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Lanzarote Committee)- Ms Tanja E. J. Kleinsorge, Head of the Secretariat, Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)
14:45	Video “The Lake” produced by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
14:50	Special measures adopted to prevent and respond to sexual violence against children in the context of the pandemic <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ms Marion Escudier, Legal Officer, General Criminal Policy Office, Directorate of Criminal Affairs and Pardons, French Ministry of Justice- Ms Maria José Castello-Branco, Vice Chairperson of the Lanzarote Committee
15:00	Round table (questions and answers)
15:25	Closing remarks by the moderator

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