

## **Sweden**

### **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**

#### **Introduction**

The outbreak of the coronavirus and the spread of the COVID-19 disease have resulted in a global crisis affecting human life and health. At the same time, the socio-economic consequences and financial impacts on many families are contributing to increased stress and anxiety. Crisis and disaster research show that the crisis is affecting the population unequally. Those with the least resources and in the most disadvantaged circumstances are generally those who suffer the greatest strain. The coronavirus crisis threatens to exacerbate the vulnerability of children and young people at risk in their home environment. Greater isolation can increase the incidence of violence and control. Those who are vulnerable might also find it more difficult to receive information and seek support.

Below follows a description of measures affecting children in Sweden and the most important measures for children due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Measures affecting children in Sweden**

There are no official orders of a lockdown or curfew in Sweden. However, the general recommendations are to limit social contacts and to stay at home in case of symptoms of a cold and, whenever possible, to work from home. Students in upper secondary school, municipal adult education, universities, and higher vocational education are studying through distance learning since March (this recommendation will be removed from 15 June). It is not allowed to arrange or participate in meetings with more than 50 people. The societal and economic effects due to uncertainties caused by financial stress and disruption of everyday activities and routines, are affecting individuals, including women and children who are victims of domestic and/or gender-based violence.

The Public Health Agency does not currently consider it necessary to close all schools in Sweden. There are no scientific evidence indicating that such an intervention would have any significant impact on the pandemic, nor has any major transmission of COVID-19 in schools been reported.

Closing pre-schools and primary schools would have a negative impact on society. For example, it could put vulnerable groups, such as grandparents, at risk if they help out with childcare.

School is also a place of safety and stability for many children. Before closing a school, there must be plans made for alternative places where the children should go instead. However, it is of utmost importance that staff and children who have any symptoms of illness stay at home.

The Swedish Parliament has passed a bill (2020:148) allowing temporary closure of schools and pre-schools due to extraordinary events, making it possible for the Government or the head of a school to close schools under particular circumstances. There is also a regulation (2020:115) regarding the provision of education for pupils during a school closure.

It has been decided that all upper secondary school instruction should not take place in school premises but should be conducted via online or distance learning. Upper secondary school students' study from home. The regulation however allows for a smaller proportion of students in the school's facilities, given that this is possible with regard to the contagion. This makes it for instance possible for students with special needs to get the support they need at their schools, individually or in smaller groups. The recommendation on distance education will be removed from June 15 and upper secondary schools are hence open from this date.

### **Measures for children in Sweden**

In the light of the consequences of the COVID-19 virus and its impact on already vulnerable groups the Swedish Government has decided to allocate 100 million Swedish crowns in 2020 to non-profit organisation activities addressing increased vulnerability resulting from the outbreak of COVID-19. The money will go to organisations that work with children at risk and with women, children and LGBTI people who are victims of violence; it will also go to organisations working to end domestic violence and 'honour'-based violence and oppression.

The Swedish Gender Equality Agency has been tasked with identifying and developing effective working methods that municipalities can use to spread information about domestic violence and 'honour'-based violence and oppression, and to establish contact with victims of violence. The work will be based on the specific circumstances and conditions resulting from the outbreak of COVID-19.

There is a need of accurate and updated information for children on COVID-19 and the Ombudsman for children in Sweden has worked closely with the Public Health Agency of Sweden to develop and promote child friendly information, including for different age groups and children with special needs.

Continuous coordination's take place at the initiative of the Public Health Agency of Sweden every two weeks together with the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, the National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish National Agency for Education, 1177 Vårdguiden and the website Youmo.se. The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden is also part of an overall assessment coordination process lead by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency concerning the effects on children and young people of the pandemic since there is a need for a qualified analysis on the effects for children in several areas.

To strengthen communication with children and young people, Minister for Gender Equality, with responsibility for the rights of the child, anti-discrimination and anti-segregation, Åsa Lindhagen, held together with experts from authorities and a child rights organization a press conference for children. The experts were from the Public Health Agency of Sweden, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, the National Board of Health and Welfare and Bris – Children's Rights in Society. Child reporters were first given the opportunity to ask questions. At this meeting several questions were brought up and discussed such as what do you do to

prevent children from getting infected? Why should adults work from the home if they can, but children still go to school, are children not as important as adults? When can I meet my grandfather again? Minister Åsa Lindhagen has also held another press conference with the Minister for Education, Anna Ekström and the Public Health Agency of Sweden, to answer children's questions about the new corona virus.

Minister Åsa Lindhagen has also had, among several meetings with authorities and organizations, a meeting with the Children's Rights Delegation in Sweden (the Government's forum for dialogue between the Government and the civil society organizations in Sweden working with the rights of the child nationally and internationally) to get a description of the situation for children and young people due to the new corona virus.

Minister Åsa Lindhagen has also debated children's vulnerability online during the COVID-19 outbreak with Facebook Sweden and the civil society organizations Friends and ECPAT Sweden.

Sweden, as a member of the board and the executive committee, also participates continuously in meetings with the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children and the topic highest on the agenda is the protection of children during the COVID-19 outbreak. Sweden is also a pathfinding country within the Partnership and therefore participated in the webinar Tackling COVID-19's hidden crisis: violence against children on May 13 arranged by the Partnership and Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children. Preventing sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children is high on the agenda for the UN, and in particular for UNICEF, not least in its actions in response to COVID-19. As UNICEF's third largest contributor of flexible core funding, and with an additional un-earmarked donation to UNICEF amounting to 40 million Swedish crowns due to COVID-19, Sweden indirectly supports this work. Sweden is further the largest donor to UN Women, an organisation which has strongly advocated for the special needs, rights, roles and empowerment of women and girls in the ongoing pandemic. UN Women has for example developed policy guidance on COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls.

In January 2020 the Swedish Government appointed an inquiry on further strengthening protection under criminal law against sexual violations. The remit includes to analyse the law concerning criminal liability for sexual offences where the perpetrator and victim are not in the same physical place but communicate e.g. over the internet. While not prompted by the outbreak of COVID-19, this measure is mentioned in the light of concerns that the pandemic may lead to greater vulnerability to abuse online.

The Children's Welfare Foundation Sweden has been granted funds from the Government in 2019 and 2020 to conduct a national and recurring study on adolescents' exposure to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation and particularly online. The Swedish Government believes it is important to monitor young people's exposure to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. This is especially important when the current situation with the spread of COVID-19 may lead to greater vulnerability to abuse online.

The Swedish National Board of Institutional Care has carried out child impact assessments and involved children before deciding on a visitor ban due to the spread of the COVID-19. The assessment showed that the ban was not in the best interest for the children, but necessary to reduce infection, therefore compensatory measures were taken.

The Swedish Government have assigned The Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency, due to the spread of the COVID-19 and the decreased possibilities for physical visits, to distribute 24 million Swedish crowns to the regions with the purpose to develop and strengthen the digital contact opportunities at establishments for patients with mental illness.

For 2020, the Public Health Agency of Sweden distributes 60 million Swedish crowns to civil society organizations for efforts aimed at promoting mental health and preventing mental illness and suicide as well as initiatives aimed at children in migration. As a result of COVID-19, the Public Health Agency of Sweden has allocated additional funds to a selection of the organizations that have been granted funds for the purpose of adapting activities etc. due to the spread of COVID-19.

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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.**

It is possible that the risk of some crimes against children has increased while the risk of other crimes simultaneously has decreased. For example - schools in Sweden has largely remained open but upper secondary education (schools for children aged 16-18) has been conducted through distance learning. This might reduce the risk of assault for this age group since a significant portion of the assaults take place in schools. Younger children still attend school but there have been more children absent from schools than usual. This might raise the risk of missing cases of assault and rape against younger children since many cases are discovered by teachers.

There might be an increased risk of internet-related crimes against children, for example child pornography and grooming because a larger portion of the population is at home and might attempt to commit such crimes. At the same time more parents are at home which might lead to a better supervision of children's activity online.

The Swedish Police Authority has identified a higher risk for children to be subject to sexual abuse on the internet, as children spend more time online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Swedish Prosecution Authority cannot at this stage draw any conclusion about possible changes during the spread of COVID-19.

**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.**

Firstly, we would like to mention that there is no official orders of a lockdown or curfew in Sweden so far during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the general recommendations are to limit social contacts and to stay at home in case of symptoms of a cold and, whenever possible, to work from home. Students in upper secondary school, municipal adult education, universities, and higher vocational education are studying through distance learning since March (this recommendation will be removed from 15 June). It is not allowed to arrange or participate in meetings with more than 50 people. The societal and economic effects due to uncertainties caused by financial stress and disruption of everyday activities and routines, are affecting individuals, including women and children who are victims of domestic and/or gender-based violence.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from the statistics on reported offences on the impact of COVID-19 on crime, especially when it is only a matter of comparisons between single months. The number of reported offences is not only affected by actual crime but may also be affected by the propensity to report crimes and the efforts made by the justice system to detect and deal with crimes. For some types of offences, individual cases may also give rise to a large number of reported offences. Particularly small categories of crime can also give rise to large percentage differences between months. The following are data on reported offences in March and April 2019 and 2020 respectively, see table 1. The figures include more than just sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children (the Lanzarote Convention), which means that our answer is slightly wider den the requested answer. The presented statistics also includes e.g. “common” abuse.

Table 1

|   | 2019 | 2019 | 2020 | 2020 |
|---|------|------|------|------|
|   | Mar  | Apr  | Mar  | Apr  |
| Grooming                                | 17   | 15   | 26   | 23   |
| Child pornography crimes                | 100  | 66   | 121  | 117  |
| Assault against children of 0-6 years   | 365  | 347  | 328  | 303  |
| Assault against children of 7-14 years  | 1229 | 1146 | 933  | 920  |
| Assault against children of 15-17 years | 655  | 627  | 503  | 548  |
| Rape, all ages                          | 617  | 602  | 588  | 558  |
| Rape of a child age -15                 | 159  | 155  | 164  | 162  |
| Rape of a child age 15-17               | 94   | 79   | 96   | 84   |

It can be noted that reported child abuse has decreased in March and April 2020 compared to the corresponding months of 2019. Abuse against children is often reported by pre-school and school staff, and for at least some age groups studies show that violence also often occurs on school premises or in the school yard. The decrease could thus reflect the fact that children are to a lesser extent physically in school during the pandemic, although it is not possible to confirm. Rape against children has also decreased during March and April however it is uncertain if this is a drop in reported offences has a connection to the pandemic. By contrast, the number of offences reported on grooming and child pornography offences has increased. It is not possible to determine from the statistics whether it is due to increased efforts by the authorities or an increase in vulnerability.

The Swedish Police Authority have noticed a decrease in the number of reported crimes committed towards children during April this year compared to the same period last year. But it is difficult to draw any conclusions of these numbers. The statistics do not show whether the decrease means that the actual crime has decreased or if fewer number of crimes have been reported.

Regarding the Swedish Prosecution Authority, see the answer under question 1.

**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.**

There is no information or concerns about any negative impact of the social services safeguarding measures, based on measures taken by the Government due to the spread of the COVID-19. We have no information that the social services activities for children e.g. the exercise of public authority has failed to fulfil its mission due to the consequences of COVID-19. Safeguarding measures are prioritized by the municipalities.

The Swedish Gender Equality Agency has been tasked with identifying and developing effective working methods that municipalities can use to spread information about domestic violence and 'honour'-based violence and oppression, and to establish contact with victims of violence. The work will be based on the specific circumstances and conditions resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19.

The Public Health Agency of Sweden has allocated 13,320,000 Swedish crowns to organisations working with promotion and prevention in the area of mental health and suicide prevention, including children in migration, due to the current COVID-19 situation.

**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.**

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Minister Lindhagen has also had a separate meeting with Bris – Children's Rights in Society, which is a children's rights organization which offer children support via a telephone helpline, chat and email.