

Thank you, Anna. And thank you to the SRSG and End Violence for inviting us all to this important and timely webinar.

My name is Maria Schillaci and I am a child psychologist and the program director of Barnafriid, the National Centre on Violence Against Children in Sweden. For the Q & A and the final remarks, our director Professor Laura Korhonen will also join us.

Sweden's National Centre on Violence Against Children was initiated by the Swedish government in 2015. The objective is to do research, to develop effective evidence-based programs and to be a competence-center for all actors working with violence against children. We work both nationally and internationally and collaborate with governments, authorities, academic institutions and civil society. A special focus of the center is directed towards professionals working directly with children who are victims of violence and neglect.

In the ongoing Covid -19 pandemic we see a need for an assessment from a child's perspective with an emphasis on children's situation and special vulnerability. Crisis and distress are known risk factors for children's health and

well-being including violence. And in the current situation, actually **ALL children should be considered a risk group.**

Why?

Because the already known groups of vulnerable children need attention, but the vulnerability can be bigger even in other, currently unidentified, groups of children.

As you may know Sweden as a country has chosen a different path during Covid19. The preschools and schools up to age 16 have never been closed, we are socially distancing but we have never been in lock down.

So, the questions that we at Barnafriid are asking right now are:

- Has the pattern of violence against children changed in Sweden during the Covid-19?
- What impact has the Swedish path on tackling Covid 19 on violence against children?
- And can we draw any conclusions already now?

The discussion in Sweden has mainly been about the risk of increased vulnerability when people are forced to live in isolation due to the pandemic; partly that the situation of already vulnerable children can get it even worse; but also the danger of increased online sexual abuse due to children spending more time on social platforms.

But - are there any valid statistics on how things are going so far?

The information right now is based on an increased number of calls early during the pandemic to helplines and chats directed to children, but no exact figures or comparison over time have been published.

The social services, Child and adolescent psychiatry and pediatric medicine have not indicated an increased influx of patients. Statistics on reported crimes in April showed no indication of increased violence against children.

So, in regard to this, do we have a problem?

Yes we actually do, and that is the lack of up-to-date and valid statistics

that makes it difficult to say whether or not violence against children has generally increased during the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden.

As it is now, we are grappling with the matter. The decisions that must be made then are to a large extent based on an assumed risk, and data from other countries, which may have chosen alternative ways to handle the Covid-19 pandemic compared to Sweden.

In the future, it will be an important and necessary task to study how children's vulnerability and the problem of violence differ between the different countries with the alternative solutions. But already in Sweden an assessment is needed for an understanding of how the system works as a whole. To do this, reliable numbers and indicator data are necessary.

As a precautionary measure, we therefore propose:

- that helplines and chats openly report their statistics. This should be an important early indicator of the need for support and shifts in the same
- that national and international key players come together and jointly define what kind of statistics on violence against children should be followed up

- that this data is analyzed with expert support, taking into account known risk factors for violence.

We do not have the whole picture clear about violence against children in Sweden during Covid-19.

There is a risk that the system does not reach those who need help.

But at the same time, one might ask what could be the explanation if violence has not increased?

Sweden as a society has been working long-term on child protection issues - since the beginning of the 20th century. There are reasons to assume that we have succeeded in building a system that can stand up well during the crisis!

But the system's resilience can never be taken as given.

On the contrary, the prevailing situation requires that data is followed up and analyzed constantly in a logical and scientific way. This is not least for the upcoming work on maintaining and strengthening protective societal structures, with also reforming them appropriately and with a wise allocation of resources.

If Sweden succeeds in paring the supposed increase in violence against children, this will be a proof of concept that proactive preventive measures during a crisis will pay off. In the future it will be interesting to see whether the decision to keep preschools and schools open may have been a decisive measure for child protection during Covid-19.

The issue of violence against children is important to society and should be constantly reviewed and high on the agenda.

In order to meet future challenges – and reach goal 16:2 - reliable and knowledge-based data must be the golden standard for all pathfinding countries to address the safety and well-being of our children.

Our children - that in the ongoing crisis have shown wise behaviour and incredible ability to adapt for which we all can be proud.

So if not now - then when? Global co operation and coordination is needed now to prevent this health crisis from also becoming a child rights crisis. Let the convention of the rights of the child lead us through this.

Lastly - we welcome the joint global leadership of the SRSG and End Violence on this important subject and we look forward to continuing contributing with our knowledge, programs and network to this.

Thank you.