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Children of the pandemic

AN OVERVIEW OF THE EFFECTS OF THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON VULNERABLE
CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN SWEDEN



STENBECKS
STIFTELSE



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Introduction

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Introduction

THE MISSION OF Stenbecks Stiftelse is to support brave voices, ideas and actions that strengthen the influence of children and youth and that improve living conditions for the most vulnerable children. We empower changemakers, activists and organizations who are there to support when the public systems fail.

During the pandemic, the work of these individuals and organizations have become even more crucial. Although it is still too early to make conclusions about the long-term effects of the pandemic on children and youth, we have already seen several alarming reports about the consequences, as the most vulnerable have been deprived of safe environments, structure and stability.

At the same time, many of the organizations working for these children and youth are struggling to keep up with the increasing workload they are currently facing. Many also report that the economic effects of the pandemic have made it even harder for them to finance their work.

For this report, we have collected and summarized facts and statistics from different actors in the child rights field. Our ambition has been to give an overview of the effects of the pandemic on Swedish children and youth, as well as for those who fight for their rights and their well-being.

The primary intention for this report is to serve as a basis for strategic discussions on how we at Stenbecks Stiftelse can best use our resources to help counter the negative effects of the pandemic on children and youth. We do, however, hope that it can also be useful for others in the sector.





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Summary

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Summary

AN OVERVIEW OF reports that have been published by children's rights organizations and authorities since the pandemic hit Sweden clearly shows that the situation for many vulnerable children is alarming.

Several reports have shown record high statistics on indicators related to children's vulnerability. BRIS has reported dramatic increases in numbers of children seeking support for issues related to mental health issues. The numbers of children turning to BRIS for support for issues related to conflicts in the family and domestic violence have been at all-time high, as well as numbers of women and girls contacting support organizations and shelters for issues related to different kinds of abuse.

Many of the alarming trends are also visible in public statistics, e.g. the number of notices of concern (orosanmälan) to the social services regarding children have increased, as well as the number of reports of domestic abuse against women and children. Especially alarming statistics relate to e.g. sexual abuse cases against girls, which have increased by several hundred percent.

However, many of the problems that have followed as indirect consequences of the pandemic are, to a large extent, hidden problems, since they occur within the family and as a result of increased isolation and lack of protective environments or outside control. This is reflected e.g., by the fact that the number of police reports on violence towards children in general has decreased during the pandemic. Most likely because no one was there to see and report the abuse, which in itself is a big reason for concern.

Rather than creating entirely new problems, the general impression is that the consequences of the pandemic have worsened an already alarming trajectory for children that society was failing even before the pandemic. The number of children experiencing mental health issues, for example, has increased continuously over the last few decades, a development that has likely been accelerated in the last year.

Although all children and youth in Sweden have been affected by the pandemic, one of the most obvious consequences is that those who were especially vulnerable to start with, have been exposed to even bigger risks. Children in unstable or violent homes, children with difficulties in school, newly arrived children with few contacts with Swedish society and children in socio-economically underprivileged areas are some of these. A particularly vulnerable group that has been highlighted by organizations as Save the Children are children and youth exposed to honor-related violence.

Although it is difficult to make conclusions about the long-term effects of this, it is likely that the divide between children with and without safe and stable family conditions will increase as a result. One area where several researchers as well as teachers have expressed concerns for the long-term effect is the risk of children falling behind because of closed schools and homeschooling. Again, those children who were struggling to keep up to start with and who have an unstable situation outside of school, are those who suffer the most negative consequences. Other reports also indicate that it may be

even harder for young people with little or no education to enter the labor market in coming years because of the negative effects on the service industry, which is often where young people have their first job.

Due to restrictions, many support organisations targeting children and youth at risk have not been able to carry out their support activities as planned. At the same time, the need for support has increased, and e.g. organizations offering support activities online and through call services have reported drastically increased workloads.

With the increased media attention on vulnerable children, some organizations have been able to raise funds for additional support activities. For many smaller organizations, on the other hand, the pandemic has instead made it harder to fund their activities. Apart from struggling to keep up with meeting increased support needs, many report not having been able to e.g. carry out advocacy activities.

Just as there may be long-term effects on children and youth in some of the challenges brought by the pandemic on child's rights organisations and civil society in general will likely also have long-term consequences. One of the risks identified by MUCF (Swedish Agency for Youth and Society) is that the voice of the civil society is further weakened, which may also in the longer perspective weaken the democratic system. As the immediate effects of the pandemic become less visible, there is also an obvious risk that it will be more difficult for the organizations to fund their operations, while the needs to fight the negative consequences for children and youth remain urgent.



CHILDREN OF THE PANDEMIC

Overview

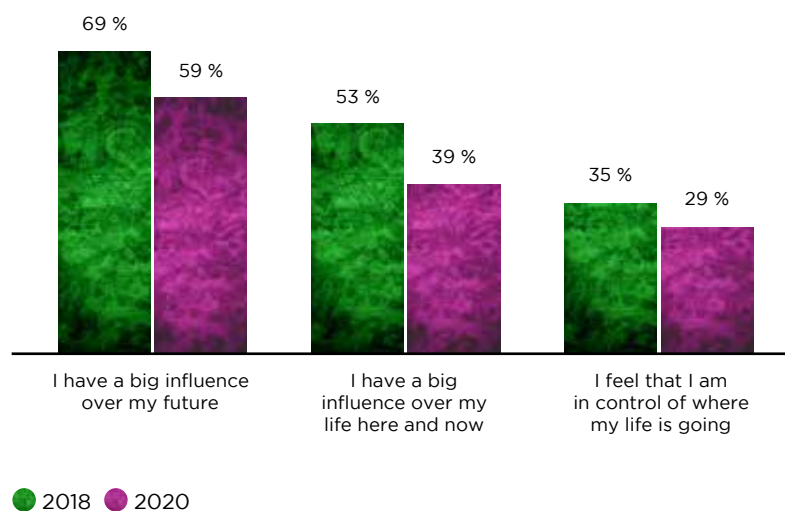
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Overview

1. MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AT ALL-TIME HIGH LEVELS

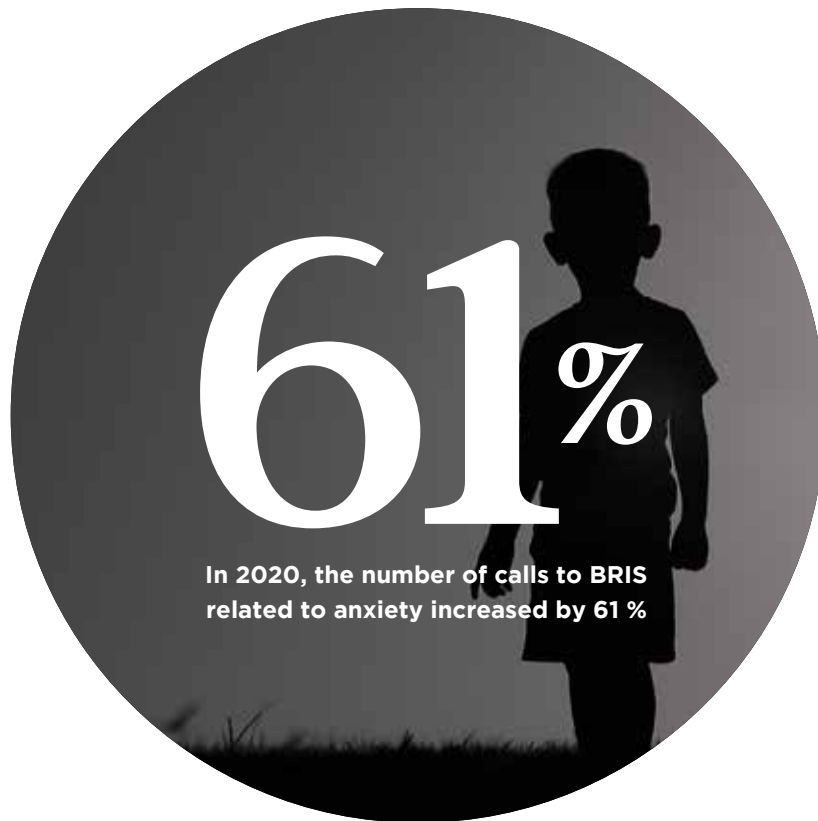
THE PREVALENCE OF mental health issues among children and youth in Sweden has gradually increased over a long period of time. In 2020, almost half of all 15-year-old children in Sweden reported having recurring psychosomatic problems, and the number has almost doubled since the mid-80s (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020).

The prevalence of mental health issues follows a general increase in the number of youths stating that they feel a lack of control over their life situation and that they worry about the future.



Source: Ungdomsbarometern 2021

Although it is difficult to identify the immediate consequences of the pandemic in terms of children's mental health in general, reports from child's rights organizations show a dramatic increase in anxiety and stress. In a survey conducted by Storasyster, an organisation that supports women and girls who have been sexually abused, around 50 percent of the target group state that symptoms such as stress, anxiety and sleep deprivation have increased during the pandemic.



Notably, BRIS reports that they had almost 32,000 curative contacts with children in 2020 – this is the highest number ever reported by BRIS. Specifically, the biggest increase was seen in calls from children experiencing anxiety (61 percent increase compared to 2019) and depressive symptoms (55 percent increase).

BRIS reports that challenges related to homeschooling and lack of social connections are frequently mentioned in the contacts. They also conclude that for children struggling with negative thoughts and emotions, the lack of distractions has made more room for these.

2. INCREASING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE – BUT FEWER POLICE REPORTS

AS A CONSEQUENCE of children having to spend more time at home during the pandemic, those living in dysfunctional homes have been more exposed to abuse. This correlation has been shown in a number of reports from around the world, e.g. Save the Children International has reported that the cases of domestic violence have doubled during periods when schools have been closed.

As in the case of mental health issues, the increased risk of abuse is also visible in the number of support calls received by BRIS. The number of calls received by BRIS concerning psychological and physical violence increased by 32 and 28 percent respectively in 2020. Besides the increased time at home and the absence of external protective factors, BRIS emphasizes the stress caused by negative social, economic and psychological consequences on families at risk as another explanation behind the increased domestic violence.

With this background, it may be surprising that the number of police reports of domestic abuse against children *decreased* in 2020 compared to 2019. However, the reason is most likely that during the pandemic, exposed children have had fewer contacts with adults outside of the family (e.g. school and pre-school teachers), who are typically the ones to report domestic abuse against children. The abuse is simply not being reported to the police because no one is there to notice it.

“ The abuse is simply not being reported to the police because no one is there to notice it. ”

Save the Children and other organizations highlight the fact that children exposed to violence in the name of honor (hedersvåld) are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of the pandemic. They report that many children in this group have been more isolated and prevented from seeking help and support.

3. DRAMATIC INCREASE IN SEXUAL ABUSE

SEVERAL DIFFERENT REPORTS show that women and girls are affected worst by the increased domestic violence during the pandemic.

The number of women and girls seeking support at the support centers and shelters that are members of the umbrella organization Unizon increased dramatically in 2020. In total, 121 of Unizon's member organizations had more than 138,000 support contacts, which just as for BRIS, is the highest number ever reported.

When it comes to domestic abuse against women and girls, the increase is also visible in statistics of reported crimes. This includes the number of reports of sexual abuse. 84 cases of sexual abuse of children 15-17 years were reported in 2020, which is an increase by several hundred percent compared to 2019. The police have also reported an increase specifically in internet related sexual abuse against children as a consequence of more children staying at home and being active online during the pandemic.

When it comes to domestic abuse of women in general, the number of police reports increased by 14 percent in 2020. However, it should be noted that these too are largely a hidden type of crime, and that these statistics should be interpreted with caution.



4. THE VULNERABLE GET MORE VULNERABLE

ALTHOUGH ALL CHILDREN and youth in Sweden have been affected by the pandemic, one of the most obvious consequences is that it puts those children who are especially vulnerable to start with, at even bigger risk.

Around 10 percent of all children in Sweden grow up in relative poverty. The number of children in financial vulnerability is estimated to decrease by approximately 30,000 children per year (Rädda Barnen, 2018). It is too early to say how this will be affected by the long-term economic effects of the pandemic. However, it is clear that the increased financial stress on families brought by the pandemic, will have the most dramatic impact on these children. Many of these children have seen parents with insecure employment lose their job, or unemployed parents becoming more isolated. These children are also most likely to live in overcrowded homes and to be excluded from social activities, which are risk factors for both physical and mental health issues.

More than one in five children in Sweden has at least one parent with alcohol problems. These problems risk being worsened as a consequence of the pandemic, which also increases the risk of children being abused. Although the general alcohol consumption has decreased slightly during the pandemic, the amount of alcohol sold at Systembolaget has increased. This indicates that more people are drinking at home rather than in more controlled environments.

The number of 'notices of concern' (orosanmälan) to the social services regarding children increased by five percent in 2020. 40 percent of these are related to concerns for parents' abilities to take care of their children due to e.g. psychological illness, substance abuse or neglect.

“ The number of ‘notices of concern’ to the social services regarding children increased by five percent in 2020. ”

5. EFFECT ON CHILD'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

THROUGH THE ORGANIZATIONS that Stenbecks Stiftelse work with, we have received reports from children and youth at risk that indicate they have had less access to help and support from the public support systems during the pandemic. Storasyster, an organisation that supports girls and women who have been sexually abused, is one of the organisations that state their target group have had to wait longer to receive e.g psychiatric help.

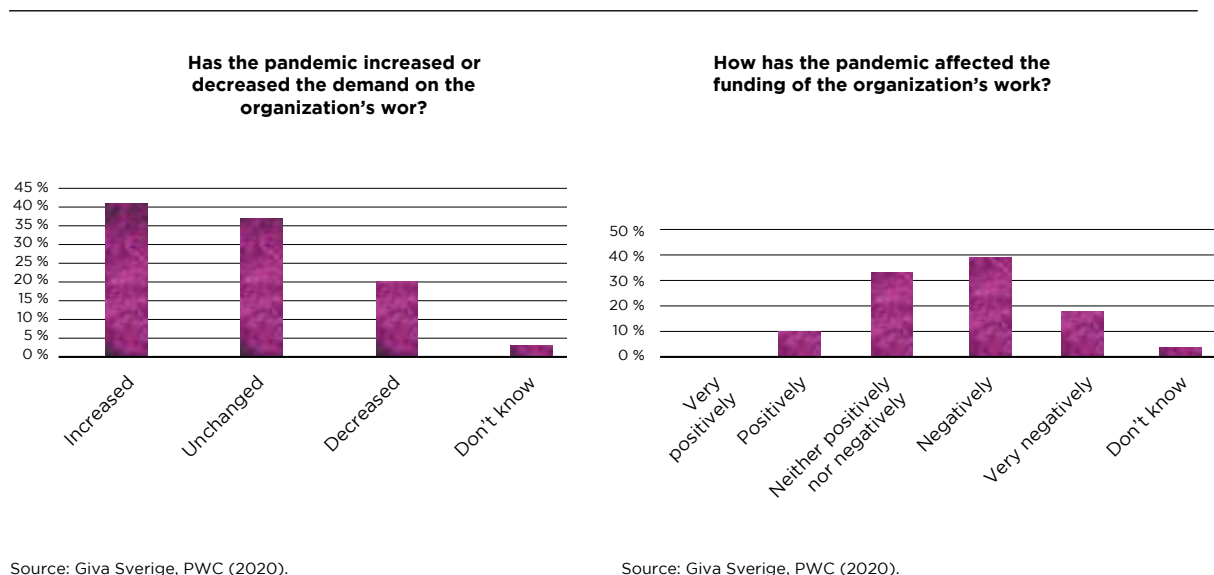
In this situation, the work of civil society organisations becomes more important, but also more challenging. As the reports from e.g. Bris and Unizon indicate, many of the organizations working for children's rights have had a drastically increased workload during the pandemic. This trend was also echoed in a survey among leaders in civil society organizations conducted by PWC and Giva Sweden in April 2020. A little over 40 percent stated that the demand on the services provided by the organization had increased, whereas only 20 percent say it had decreased.

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At the same time as the workload increased, many organizations also reported that the ability to generate funding had decreased. In the survey referred above (from Giva and PWC), more than half of the respondents stated that the pandemic had made it harder to raise funds.



Another report issued by Giva and PWC in May 2021, indicates that in fact the total funds raised by charitable organizations increased in 2020 compared to 2019. This was mainly fuelled by donations from the public, whereas funding from most other revenue sources seems to have decreased. One explanation for the increased giving from the public is likely that the increased social needs has been in focus in the media.

It should however be noted that the financial impact of the pandemic has been different for different types of organizations. In its report from May 2021, Giva and PWC conclude that around half of the charitable organizations increased their funding in 2020, whereas for the other half, the revenues decreased. Those who have been most affected by decreased funding are smaller organizations. Almost two of three organizations with a turnover of less than 5 MSEK, have seen decreased revenues. For some organizations, income generating activities more or less stopped during 2020. As an example, Majblomman, an umbrella organization for 560 local associations that support families in poverty, report their organizations were not able to carry out their revenue-generating activities in 2020, and consequently, most of its support to the target group was put on hold.

To counter some of the increased workload for organizations, the government has allocated earmarked contributions to organizations that support vulnerable groups. In April, a support package of 100 MSEK for organizations working with women, children and HBTQI persons was announced, and in October, an additional contribution of 50 MSEK to youth and children's rights organizations was announced. However, in relation to the massive needs, it could be questioned how big the impact of these extra contributions toward civil society organizations has been. To give some perspective, the total support packages to the business sector during the same time-period have been valued at almost 400 billion SEK.

“ This development could be seen as an acceleration of a general weakening of the voice of civil society organizations that has been ongoing for several decades. ”

Another aspect of the impact on civil society organizations that has been raised by MUCF is that their capabilities for advocacy and political influence has been reduced during the pandemic. Partly because they have to prioritize other tasks, and partly because the pandemic tends to over-shadow all other political issues. This development could be seen as an acceleration of a general weakening of the voice of civil society organizations that has been ongoing for several decades.

Just as with the impact on children and youth, it could be assumed that the organizations who were struggling financially before the pandemic have seen the most negative impact.



6. AND THEN WHAT – LIFE AFTER THE PANDEMIC

AS SOCIETY WILL hopefully start to once again move towards a more normal state (or 'new normal'), there is a great uncertainty as to what the long-term consequences of the pandemic for vulnerable children and youth will be.

In the report "1 year with the pandemic", Save the Children stresses the risk of long-term health effects on children from under-privileged groups. They warn that once a child loses its leisure activities, it is hard to start over again, especially in families where there is little or no support from parents.

Another risk that is highlighted in a number of reports are the long-term consequences of closed schools and homeschooling. In a report from Lärarnas Riksförbund (trade union for teachers), the teachers express concern that the long-term development of children with special needs and children who do not have Swedish as their mother tongue, will be negatively affected. This concern has also been echoed by different researchers.

**“ Many organizations fear that as the
most immediate threat from the covid-19
virus wears off, so will the focus on
its social consequences. ”**

The Institute for Labour Market and Education Policy Evaluation (IFAU) predict that the effects of the pandemic on the economy will also make it more difficult for young people to enter the labor market in the coming few years. Many young people get their first jobs in the service sector, a sector which has been hit especially hard by the pandemic. Just as there may be long-term effects on children and youth, some of the challenges brought by the pandemic will likely also affect civil society and some of the child's rights organizations in the long term.

During the pandemic, the increased vulnerability of children and youth has received a lot of media attention. Many organizations fear that as the most immediate threat from the covid-19 virus wears off, so will the focus on its social consequences. This could then create a situation where the organizations will need to continue working against the negative effects of the pandemic, but with less chances of attracting resources to cover its costs. In a survey among civil society organizations by made by MUCF, 94 percent states they will see negative financial consequences of the pandemic one year from now. MUCF has also expressed a concern that in the longer term, the weakened voice of civil society organizations, combined with the effect of some organizations being weakened or ceasing to exist, may have negative consequences for the democratic system as a whole.





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Children of the pandemic