

Independent Child Safeguarding Review Global Report

Executive Summary

The Independent Child Safeguarding Review (ICSR) was commissioned by the International Senate of SOS Children's Villages (SOS CV) to find ways to address the complex topic of historical abuse. As part of the ICSR, historical cases of abuse that took place at and around SOS Children's Villages in four countries in different regions of the world were reviewed over a period of four years. This global report sets out consolidated findings and recommendations from the four country reviews with the aim of contributing to improvements in safeguarding practice.

It is important to note that this report only offers learnings from four country case reviews where there have been historical failures in safeguarding and cannot be regarded as a review of the organisation as a whole, either in the past, or as an assessment of the current situation. The ICSR team is aware of excellent and often ground breaking child safeguarding initiatives across the organisation; however, they are not the focus of this report.

As an alternative care service provider, SOS CV carries a particularly high child safeguarding risk profile. A key finding of the ICSR is that during the timescale considered by the review, SOS CV did not adequately consider and mitigate child safeguarding risks and therefore exposed children to abuse. Substantial gaps in the available case files mean that a great number of questions about the abuses remain unanswered including the total number of victims and survivors and the type of abuses they were subjected to, or a complete picture of how the organisation responded in each case.

As well as child abuse, the review was provided with evidence of serious abuse of whistle-blowers and SOS primary caregivers who reported abuse.

The ICSR found substantial evidence of failures of safeguarding in all country case reviews, as well as bullying, discrimination, abuses of power and concerns of nepotism reported within SOS right up to the most senior levels. Such a culture enables abuses of power and powerfully inhibits reporting safeguarding concerns. What is absolutely clear from the evidence, is that there were grave and prolonged organisational failings, and in a significant number of incidents, there is no evidence that perpetrators operated with anything other than functional impunity.

Many of the incidents reviewed appear to have occurred before the launch of the SOS Child Protection Policy in 2008 or Code of Conduct in 2011. This review found that since then and particularly since 2012, when practical child safeguarding procedures started to be put in place, significant progress on child safeguarding has been made across the federation, led by skilled and tenacious child safeguarding professionals, in often challenging circumstances. Including: more targeted prevention efforts, increasing the capacity of internal child safeguarding investigators and improving reporting and responding procedures across the federation.

A notable strength of SOS CV is its' willingness to learn from past mistakes and adapt policies, procedures and practices accordingly, with many such new initiatives developed based on learning from the cases considered by the ICSR. This report makes recommendations on how SOS Children's Villages can build on this progress to continue to strengthen safeguarding of children and young people across the organisation and further mitigate the risk of the safeguarding failures reviewed in ICSR focus countries reoccurring.

Key areas for improvement are identified in the following areas:

1. Child Safeguarding measures within SOS Children's Villages International
2. Leadership and organisational culture
3. Oversight, governance and accountability
4. Care quality and the role of primary caregivers
5. Justice and support for victims, survivors, and whistle blowers