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**SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
AGAINST CHILDREN  
AND ADOLESCENTS:  
PERCEPTION OF  
PROFESSIONALS ON  
THE PROTECTION  
NETWORK DURING THE  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to understand and analyze the perception of professionals about the protection network for children and adolescents, victims of sexual violence, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a qualitative research, based on the notions of contextualization and understanding the complex paradigm. Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire during the period from March to June 2020. Six coordinators linked to the Tutelary Council and Specialized Reference Centers for Social Assistance (CREAS) participated in the study, from the protection network of a municipality in the interior of the state of São Paulo. Data were analyzed thematically, anchored in the Paradigm of Complexity. It was found that for professionals, sexual violence against children and adolescents was impacted by social isolation, with consequences for complaints to the protection network due to underreporting and the worsening of living with the aggressor. Furthermore, lack of assistance from the protection network during the period of social isolation also impacted the effectiveness of the work process; and the occurrences revealed the need to implement protection policies. This way, understanding the sexual violence phenomenon, observing the current scenario and apprehending the actions announced by the federal government guide recommendations for Brazilian public policies regarding coping with times of social isolation.

**Keywords:** COVID-19. Social isolation. Sexual Offences. Child Sexual Abuse. Adolescent.

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the lives of millions of children and adolescents, leaving them “orphaned or without” their main caregivers. During this period, they faced profound changes in their daily lives, including the

interruption of school activities as well as challenges in family life, resulting in a state of stress that researchers refer to as a “hidden pandemic” (HILLIS et al., 2021). The effects of the pandemic on the child and youth population were amplified by the worsening of the global socioeconomic crisis, rather than the direct morbidity of the disease. During 2020, the social distancing measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus resulted in the closure of schools, affecting more than 1.5 billion children and adolescents worldwide (CABRAL et al., 2021). According to data from the United Nations Children’s Fund - UNICEF (2021), Brazil faced the highest number of school days lost during the pandemic. It is estimated that there were 191 days of interruption, affecting about 44 million students. As Reinach and Burgos (2021) add, the school plays an important role as a possible channel for complaints, and the fact that it is closed during this period can expose children to more delicate situations, demanding expanded assistance. This concern is aggravated by the fact that, unfortunately, the people who are supposed to protect and love are primarily responsible for the violence committed against this population at a peculiar stage of development (UNICEF, 2020).

Violence can be conceptualized as a complex and multifactorial phenomenon, influenced by several factors, including historical, cultural, biological/individual, social and economic aspects. This issue has been a constant presence throughout history around the world (AQUINO et al., 2021). Sexual abuse is described as a form of violence that can occur with or without physical contact, with or without the use of force, involving an adult or older adolescent and a child or adolescent. These abuses can happen both in the home and outside, and do not involve the purchase of sex. The perpetrator

may be someone known or unknown to the victim. This relationship between aggressor and victim is characterized by inequality of power, with the aggressor exercising control over the child and/or adolescent, nullifying their will and treating them not as subjects with rights, but as objects to obtain pleasure and sexual satisfaction (BRAZIL, 2021). Sexual violence against children and adolescents often occurs within the family environment, being a form of abuse known as intrafamilial. In this type of violence, the aggressor is related to the victim by ties of kinship, legality or affinity, such as parents, adoption, stepfather and other examples (BRASIL, 2021). Currently, children and adolescents who are victims of violence follow a complex and non-systematized path within institutions and bodies in the Education, Social Assistance, Health, Public Security and Justice sectors in Brazil. This course aims to meet the needs of dealing with the consequences of violence, holding perpetrators accountable and preventing further occurrences. Tutelary Councils, Specialized Social Assistance Reference Centers (CREASs), Childhood and Youth Courts, Legal Medical Institutes, as well as health units, hospitals and victim care programs, are component bodies of the protection network (MACEDO, 2019).

From the enactment of the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA), Brazilian legislation recognizes childhood and adolescence as peculiar stages of development and establishes the need for full protection of this population, in order to guarantee their development in conditions of freedom and dignity. Notifications of suspected or confirmed violence were established as compulsory and must be reported to the Tutelary Council, in accordance with legislation, which is the reference body for investigating cases and referring victims and their families to specialized care services. The

notification can also be carried out with other institutions, which must act in conjunction with the Tutelary Council, such as the Child and Adolescent Protection Police Stations and the Public Prosecutor's Office. (MACEDO, 2019).

The protection network for children, adolescents and their families in situations of violence is characterized as a space where partnerships, cooperation and articulations between institutions and actors involved are established. This network plays a key role in stopping violence, providing a comprehensive view of situations and allowing for the planning of integrated actions. A proper functioning of the network makes it possible to share responsibilities in relation to cases, allowing each professional, sector or service to act according to its expertise. This promotes a more effective and comprehensive approach, aimed at the well-being and protection of children, adolescents and their families involved (PINTO et al., 2017; GARBIN et al., 2017).

In view of the current situation and complexity, it is necessary to know the articulation of the network, how it was affected during the pandemic, as well as the perception of professionals to provide greater assistance to children and adolescents, therefore, investments in studies of this nature that can mobilize families and professionals in the area of social assistance and health, with a view to subsidizing actions of promotion, intervention and strategies aimed at confronting violence in the spaces of life of children and adolescents, contributing to break the cycle abuse that tends to be repeated in different generations and segments of society. Therefore, the objective of this study is to know and analyze the perception of professionals about the protection network for children and adolescents, victims of sexual violence, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## METHOD

This is a study based on a qualitative research approach, which will use the theoretical and methodological framework of the Complexity Paradigm (MORIN, 2007). Thus, in order to understand the uncertain process that involves human beings in care and attention in the context of a pandemic, it is necessary to take a look at the whole, and also include the individual, social and biological dimensions. According to Morin (2007), it is a framework based on concepts that are constantly under construction, without a final point, which tends to seek the reconnection of knowledge, in an attempt to understand the multidimensionality that involves care. Enabling the construction of knowledge about the study carried out, the principle used will be the dialogical one that requires the conjugation and association of contradictory factors in the analysis of a certain phenomenon, producing (re)organization and complexity (MORIN, 2007).

The field of study was a municipality in the interior of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, which has a population of 703,000 inhabitants according to a demographic census (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 2019).

The CREAS services of the municipality constitute the Special Social Protection organized within the scope of the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), in which there is the provision of specialized services, programs and projects, aimed at families and individuals in situations of personal risk and social, with the characteristic of violating fundamental rights provided for in the Federal Constitution and in the Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA). This type of protection is performed at two levels: medium and high complexity.

The Tutelary Council is a public, autonomous body whose objective is to ensure

compliance with the rights of children and adolescents, and must act whenever the rights of children and adolescents are threatened or violated by society, the state, parents or guardians. Therefore, it is an institution that lends itself to serving the population most underserved by public policies.

The municipality described in this study is organized as follows in relation to the social protection network: CREAS 1 and tutelary councils 1 and 3 in the south zone; CREAS 2 and tutelary council 2 north and west zone; and CREAS 3 and tutelary council 1 in the east zone.

Six professionals participated in the study, three who hold a coordination position at CREASs 1, 2 and 3 and three members of the Tutelary Councils 1, 2 and 3. The criteria for selecting the institutions was to constitute a social protection body that directly serves allegations of sexual violence against children and adolescents. In Tutelary Councils there is no coordination position, therefore, the selection criterion for the professional responsible for the unit was the counselor present on the day, since there was a rotation of these due to social isolation. Participants were invited in person and there were no refusals.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, the period of analysis was from March to May 2020. The script consisted of four questions that guided our discussion and allowed a unique look of the researched on the object of study: 1) What the registration data that CREAS/ Tutelary Council has on sexual violence suffered by children and adolescents from March to May 2020; 2) What is your technical perception about the period of social isolation and its relationship with the recording of sexual violence against children and adolescents; 3) What is your perception of the impact of social isolation during the COVID 19

pandemic on the network of services and protection for children and adolescents in our municipality?; 4) What is your critical and reflective position as Technical Coordinator of the CREAS/Telementary Council service in relation to the pandemic period in our municipality? The interviews were carried out at the professionals' place of work, in a reserved room, with an average time of 10 minutes. Data collection was terminated due to data saturation. Participants working in the Tutelary Council were identified in this study with the nomenclature of Professional Council Tutelary, followed by the Arabic numbers 1, 2 or 3. As for the participants active in CREASs, they were identified with the name: Professional CREASs, followed by the Arabic numbers 1, 2 or 3.

The analysis based on Complexity was based on a process indicated by Pádua (2015) guided by the following steps: 1- classification and organization of the collected information, requiring a critical and attentive reading of the material, noting relevant points. 2- Comprehension of the meanings of the interpretation of reality, of the studied group, through the process of decomposition of the lines for later categorization of the phenomenon.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the proposing institution, under number CAAE: 19722819.9.0000.5393, in accordance with Resolution n. 466/12, of the National Health Council, on research with human beings.

## RESULTS

From the participants' responses to the script, it was possible to list three central categories on the issue of sexual violence that affects children and adolescents during the pandemic caused by COVID-19, and the perceptions of professionals regarding the protection network. The categories were

named: Category 1 - Sexual violence and social isolation: consequences and impact of complaints on the protection network; Category 2 - Lack of assistance from the protection network during the period of social isolation and Category 3 - Policies to protect child victims of sexual violence:

### **CATEGORY 1 - SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION: CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACT OF COMPLAINTS ON THE PROTECTION NETWORK**

The professionals' discourse highlighted that the number of cases of sexual violence increased during the period of social isolation.

*With social isolation, the risk for children and adolescents becomes even greater, as they are living more directly with the aggressor; however, we see that these cases are underreported, as the complaints have not reached us as before. (Professional Tutelary Council 1)*

The category points to the understanding of the issue of underreporting and the aggravation of living with the aggressor, we observe severity and damage, that is, lack of protection and recognition as a social and health problem.

The resumption rules are provided in the Decree, published in the Official Gazette of the Municipality, and concern the opening hours and occupancy rate of establishments, as well as compliance with the health protocols provided for in the São Paulo Plan, implemented by the state government. With regard to the public service, the Decree maintains the suspension of face-to-face classes in the municipal education network throughout the month of June, and recommends that the private sector suspend classes in basic education, secondary and higher education, free and professional courses.

*Children and adolescents are not part of these face-to-face protection systems and may*

*be more subject to forms of negligence and violence, exposure to the street, alone at home. (Professional CREAS 1)*

*In this pandemic phase, children and adolescents often stay at home all day, they end up being more vulnerable because they are in contact with the abusers themselves, without access to surveillance agencies such as the school. (Professional Tutelary Council 3)*

*During this period, some cases of young children who suffered physical violence are of great concern to us, episodes of violence committed by family members after the abusive use of alcohol and other substances. (Professional CREAS 3)*

In the present study, the categories that emerged from the interviews denote a perception of the participants about the impact of social isolation, focused on a construction of elements that characterize the increase in violence. Due to the emergence of COVID-19, social isolation measures were implemented to prevent the spread of the virus, however these social restrictions led to a disorganization of routines, causing damage to social relationships, leisure activities and work activities. The violence experienced inside the homes was remarkable, emerging in the participants' speeches. The family context is the one that can best protect or expose children and adolescents to violence during the period of social isolation.

## **CATEGORY 2 - LACK OF ASSISTANCE FROM THE SAFETY NET DURING THE PERIOD OF SOCIAL ISOLATION**

*Due to the advent of the pandemic and social isolation, the network of child and adolescent protection services has reduced or even suspended its activities in cases involving this demand. (Professional CREAS 2)*

Due to determinations and guidelines, the services continued remotely and by rotation,

weakening the assistance and monitoring, restricting access to service users.

*No access to surveillance bodies like the school... (Professional Tutelary Council 3)*

Education, whether it be kindergarten, fundamental, secondary, integral, environmental, brings innumerable benefits for the child's future, because educating is creating a perspective of change and for the abused child, any and all changes that may rescue him from the risk situation in which is found.

*Most are working in a remote system and with a reduced team because many belong to the risk group. (Professional Tutelary Council)*

So that the network can work in a way that guarantees and seeks the inclusion, promotion and protection of children and adolescents against violence, it is important to highlight some actors that are important in this articulation with the CREASs or the tutelary councils, be it the Education Network, Health Services, in particular mental health, Police Stations/Specialized Police Stations, among others that are necessary to qualify and strengthen this confrontation.

*Adolescent in violation of bonds or history of violation: Adolescents who are out of face-to-face school activities or even having difficulty accessing online content, parents are often unable to help or guide their children with classes and adolescents end up losing interest in their studies, going to the streets and being exposed to crime and drugs. (Professional Tutelary Council 2)*

At the current time of the pandemic, changes in the behavior of children and adolescents, especially aggressiveness and isolation, are considered signals in the suspicion of victimization, thus avoiding confusing these reactions with lack of domestic education or shyness, which induce to characterize the problematic child, failing to evaluate the social environment in which he

is inserted. Waiting for violence to materialize only in identifiable physical marks to then diagnose and conduct is to consider the child as a biological body, omitting its existence as a biopsychosocial being, on the other hand, the humanized look allows the observance of emotional stigmas that reflect the suffering of an abused childhood.

*The pandemic exposes the fragility and inequality of different population segments that need permanent inclusion and protection, for human dignity. (Professional CREAS 3)*

### **CATEGORY 3 - POLICIES TO PROTECT CHILD VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

With regard to knowledge of the importance of protection policies for child victims of sexual violence, it was found:

*The period of pandemic and social isolation has exposed the urgent need for investments in public policies, mainly in social assistance policy. (Professional CREAS 2)*

It must be noted that the analysis of a public policy is not restricted to reading the budget, but we cannot fail to consider that it points to fundamental aspects such as: financial investments for the area, established priorities, the perspective of the proposed decentralization, among others. Allied to these aspects, the issue of participation and social control, access to service to users and the quality of services are added to the analysis process.

*Due to social isolation, it was difficult for us to reach these children. (Professional Tutelary Council 2)*

*The biggest concern is the absence of everyday school life, which is a protective network of the utmost importance, where children and adolescents signal and/or denounce the violence suffered. (Professional CREAS 3)*

*The day care center is our great partner and the "eyes" that observe the behavior of mothers*

*and children on a daily basis and feed the protective network with valuable information to guide interventions. (Professional CREAS 3)*

Violence, provoked in children or adolescents, also leaves several symptoms in the institutions they attend. At school, they can be found: low performance, lack of attention and concentration, aggressive behavior, passivity, apathy and even crying. Social isolation is a necessary measure to reduce the transmission rate of the new coronavirus, flattening the contamination curve, but at the same time, the confinement itself and the social impacts can encourage the reproduction of sexual violence in homes. Measures to combat this violence must, in parallel, be strengthened and adapted in this context, especially through the protection network.

Faced with the increase in the occurrence of violence during the pandemic period, the participants of this study highlighted the lack of assistance by the protection network and the need for a more cohesive and active protective network through public policies, some institutions and social organizations have developed informative and educational material to guide and promote the prevention and confrontation of violence during this period of social isolation.

### **DISCUSSION**

The data from this study highlight the perception of professionals, recognizing that in the period of social isolation there was an increase in the number of sexual violence against children and adolescents in all regions of the city, in addition, there was an understanding of the issue of underreporting.

There was a lack of necessary care during the period of social isolation and the lack of an emergency action plan for victimized children in the municipality in question. We observed important factors involving

the dynamics of violence against children, the impact of quarantine on the provision of care services and coping with situations of violence and how health, justice and social assistance institutions are also aggravating factors. In turn, the difficulty of accessing health institutions, which in this context work on a priority basis for cases of COVID-19, is an element to be considered at this juncture in the municipality.

The multidisciplinary protection network is the means found by society, the State and support institutions not only to bring to light the massacres suffered by the abused child, but, mainly, to develop emerging initiatives that include the federal entities, society, the family and public agencies in the direct care of children and adolescents. The actions developed by the integral protection network for children and adolescents, conferred with the legal support of the Federal Constitution and the Statute of Children and Adolescents, allow for comprehensive care in a more humanized way for these citizens.

The great paradigm of enabling the rights of children and adolescents, expressed in the ECA, created the bases for the emergence of a feeling of intolerance in relation to sexual violence against children and adolescents. These results require a tool for these professionals to appropriate elements to better understand the issue, and thus be more efficient, effective and effective in their work. to violence, since it is not enough to receive isolated information or denunciations on the subject, but rather to approach this discussion in a solid way, and not only in the work in which they are inserted.

The need to expand these services in the municipality is a continuous recommendation beyond the pandemic, but which is gaining evidence at this juncture. The pandemic reveals the fragility of a policy for child victims of sexual violence, where the state has not

invested in the implementation of the main actions to combat violence, making access for victims even more difficult.

Violence situations challenge the professionals of the CREASs and Tutelary Councils, from assistance to the construction of strategies to guarantee rights, including health. In the field of Collective Health, this study aims to broaden the understanding of the intersectionality and comprehensiveness of care for children, adolescents and family's victims of violence. To this end, it is anchored in the Paradigm of Complexity, which will allow overcoming the fragmentation of the phenomenon of violence and understanding the interdependence between the component elements of violence in contexts of social vulnerability.

The complexity paradigm emerged specially to seek an understanding of complex phenomena, such as violence. According to Morin (2007), the different elements of this phenomenon coexist with uncertainty and change remains in constant interaction, being at the same time one and multiple. Complex thinking makes it possible to access, articulate and organize the elements and information of reality in order to perceive and interrelate the local, the global and the multiple relationships between parts-whole-context (CARLOS, 2014).

Despite so many studies and advances, there is still much to be thought about the recognition of violence, in the daily routine of professional practice, the advancement of discussions and policy formulations is still not compatible at the level of professional performance. On the other hand, advances in terms of policies still fall short of what is perceived as a need for confrontation.

Instead of claiming a policy that takes into consideration, the totality and complexity of the phenomenon, this study corroborates what other authors have pointed out about



the importance of articulating humanization policies to think about actions aimed at educators, adding as a proposal that this articulation also contemplates policies to combat violence.

It is expected to contribute to the reflection on the theme of violence against children and adolescents, although it is known that this subject does not end with the results of this research, on the contrary, this was only the possible cut at this moment, and it is highlighted that new and more in-depth studies need to be carried out as a subsidy for professionals in the prevention and solution of violence that plagues children and adolescents.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This study sought to understand and analyze the perception of professionals about the protection network for children and adolescents, victims of sexual violence, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it was observed that for professionals, sexual violence against children and adolescents was impacted by social isolation, with consequences for complaints to the protection network due to underreporting and the aggravation of living with the aggressor. Thus, the severity and damage caused by the lack of protection and

recognition as a social and health problem is verified.

Furthermore, lack of assistance from the protection network during the period of social isolation also impacted the effectiveness of the work process; and the occurrences revealed the need to implement policies to protect child victims of sexual violence. Fragility and the absence of emergency action plans for victimized children and adolescents were also observed. Thus, the understanding of the phenomenon of sexual violence, the observation of the current scenario and the apprehension of the actions announced by the federal government guide recommendations for Brazilian public policies regarding coping with times of social isolation.

It is also believed that the socialization of this study contributed for professionals to rethink their actions during the period of social isolation and open up to new perspectives in search of more effective interventions, in the face of violence against children and adolescents. In addition, it is hoped that this research can become the starting point for further studies that cooperate with the ethical and legal commitment to the protection of children and adolescents who are victims of violence.

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