

THE FIRST CHILDREN'S EMBASSY IN THE
WORLD MEGJASHI
REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA



www.childrensembassy.org.mk



sos@childrensembassy.org.mk
info@childrensembassy.org.mk



@megjashi
@soshelplinemegjashi

(02) 2 465 316

070 390 632

ANNUAL REPORT ON THE
WORK OF THE MEGJASHI'S
SOS HELPLINE FOR
CHILDREN AND
YOUTH

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FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH 2020

Publisher:

First Children's Embassy in the World – Megjashi

Str. Nosta Novakovikj 22a, 1000 Skopje

Telephone:

+3892 2465316

E-mail:

info@childrensembassy.org.mk

Editor:

Dragi Zmijanac MA – Chairperson and founder

Translation and proofreading:

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02 2465 316, 070 390 632

sos@childrensembassy.org.mk, info@childrensembassy.org.mk, fb – first children`s embassy in
the world

<https://www.facebook.com/megjashi/>

<http://www.childrensembassy.org.mk/>

Prepared by Violeta Ilioska, *SOS Helpline Psychologist and*
Jordanka Cherepnalkova -Trajkoska, *SOS Helpline Coordinator*

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The First Children's Embassy in the World Megjashi - Republic of Macedonia and the team of the SOS helpline for children and youth, would like to express their sincere gratitude to everyone showing trust in us during this specific year for all humankind, by addressing us regarding problems affecting the children and youth. We are grateful that we are recognized as a place where everyone can be heard, understood and advised and thus enabling us to fulfil our mission as an organization, which is to create a better world for every child.

Special thankfulness is to be given to our past and present volunteers who selflessly dedicate their abilities, knowledge and time in the work of the SOS helpline.

Our appreciation is also directed to our collaborators that we addressed during the support of our callers for a more suitable advice, support or solution. Without intending to overlook anyone, we give our thanks to the Coalition for Fair Trials, the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, the Hope Crisis Centre, Mother Teresa's Order of the Missionaries of Charity, the Public Institution - Inter-municipal centre for social work (JUMCSR) Skopje and especially to the intervention team, the Sector for Internal Affairs Skopje, the Sector for Internal Affairs Ohrid, and the Ombudsman.

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Megjashi's SOS Helpline for Children and Youth

The SOS helpline for children and youth has been operating for 27 years since October 1993. During all these years, certain kind of assistance and/or advice was provided to 21,087 reported cases.

WHY IS SOS HELPLINE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH NEEDED?

Everyone that cares for the children's well-being, their rights, everyone that wants to draw attention to abuse, neglect, violence, poverty and exploitation, calls the SOS helpline. We are on the other side of the line, carefully listening and whenever necessary we always address an appeal to the public for raising awareness about certain question. Furthermore, we classify and analyse the data obtained through the SOS helpline and present it in the form of an annual report. We use these analyses in the reports to inform and influence the policy makers and decision makers, and together with our collaborators we try to reshape the children's lives for the better.

PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SOS HELPLINE

The operation of the SOS helpline is firmly grounded in the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasize the children's rights to privacy and protection against injury. The principle of confidentiality and anonymity thereby is at the core of the work. If the severity of the problem requires, data on the callers and the child concerned are submitted to the competent institutions only.

The objective of the SOS helpline for children and youth is to enable information sharing and support for a violated child right, assistance in advocacy and lobbying, promotion of the child rights and promotion of the SOS helpline as a medium for helping children. During the conversations, ready-made solutions to the problems are not given, because there are no universal solutions, but a discussion on possible alternatives for solving the problem that was brought to our attention is made.

WHO IS BEHIND THE SOS HELPLINE?

The professional team of the SOS helpline consists of pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, lawyers and volunteers of these profiles. The volunteers have special place in the operation of the SOS helpline.

HOW SOS HELPLINE WORKS AND WHO ARE ITS COLLABORATORS?

During its operation, the SOS helpline for children and youth establishes cooperation with several stakeholders - competent institutions, other non-governmental organizations that work in the field of children's rights or in some way are affected by the child rights, as well as with individual professionals. Depending on the type of problem brought to our attention by the callers and depending on the violation of the children's rights, the service engages in action with written

addresses to the competent institutions. The service monitors the procedures undertaken by these institutions in relation to the case and reacts if it is noticed that they do not act in the children's best interests.

Megjashi's SOS helpline is part of the global network of SOS Lines called Child Helpline International (CHI), an international network organization recognized as a strategic partner in strengthening the role of the SOS helplines for children in Europe by the European Commission and the Directorate-General for Justice. This global network is also recognized worldwide and has a significant role in improving the exercise of children's rights based on real data.

Operational Administrative Data on the SOS Helpline

Helpline name: SOS Helpline for Children and Youth

Address: Str. Kosta Novakovikj No. 22A, Skopje

Region of operation: Macedonia

SOS helpline's working hours: every working day from 8 am to 4 pm, after hours availability on working and non-working days (SOS helpline volunteers)

E-mail contacts: sos@childresembassy.org.mk, info@childresembassy.org.mk,

Website: www.childresembassy.org.mk

Facebook: First children's embassy in the world; <https://www.facebook.com/megjashi/>

Telephone contacts of the SOS helpline: +389 (0)70 390 632 and/or +389 (0)2 2465 316

Line payment exemption status: both telephone lines available (landline and mobile) are not free of charge, we are lacking support for the free international number of SOS helplines for children 116 111

Data Classification Methodology

The case classification methodology consists in recording each contact (report) as a single case, following the basic framework structure of key categories and subcategories prepared by the global network of SOS Lines CHI, to which Megjashi is a member. Megjashi participates in the annual surveys conducted by CHI among its members, based on which it then prepares a report that can serve as an argumentative tool for advocating children's rights before governments, as well as to improve the work of the lines, members of the network.

Framework structure consists of:

- Eight categories of data that refer to the context of the case (contact), but do not refer to the reasons for the call. This includes the categories of age, living environment, vulnerable groups, relationships, location of the problem, region, callers, type of contact

- Four topics related to the reasons for the call (endangerment, health, social welfare, etc.), with 11 categories distributed within, and subcategories within each of the categories.

Summary of the SOS Helpline Work's Findings for 2020

A general observation for this reporting period is that the work was done in extraordinary conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The calls we received on the administrative phone were diverted to the mobile phone of the Counsellor working on the SOS helpline for children and youth, so that there was no interruption in the service availability.

This year experience confirms that the trend of reporting cases of children's rights violation by adults continues. It is mostly done by the parents.

Children are still silent and afraid to report violence. They do not feel safe reporting violence, especially when it occurs at home and is done by both parents or one of the parents does not show understanding and thinks it is acceptable for children to be beaten.

During this twelve-month period, problems for which the citizens most often contact us are problems related to the right to protection against violence, the right to education and the right of access to other institutions.

Likewise, a common problem was exercising parental rights, granting custody, exercising the right to alimony, as well as calls related to changes in the mental state of children in periods of divorce and impaired communication with their parents, without considering the child's opinion on which parent they want to live with. In many of the reported cases, abuse of the child's personality and violation of the child's rights by one of the parents have been observed, who in such situations do not always consider the children's opinions, needs and interests. In most divorces, children are victims, they are direct witnesses to the disturbed communication of their parents, and the consequences of that directly affect them.

Professional services within the institutions should direct their work towards undertaking measures and activities to improve the communication of parents with their children, to guide them on how to recognize the violence and to encourage them not to keep silent, not only for the physical, but also for the emotional and psychological violence, to work on self-acceptance, in order to make children feel safe and protected.

Children are often manipulated by their own parents during divorce proceedings. In their desire for power and dominance, wanting to hurt the partner with whom they have decided not to be together anymore, parents hurt their children. They do not communicate with their children; they think that material goods and financial security are sufficient. They forget about love, tenderness and about moments spent together. They forget that children's attention cannot be bought.

Stronger efforts should be made by all stakeholders to increase the awareness of parents that their actions create conditions for the occurrence of a syndrome in the child, an alienated

child, which in the further child psychological development can cause tremendous and irreparable damage.

Findings and Results Overview regarding the SOS Helpline Operations

Contacts (Reports)

Contacts or reports indicate every first communication, i.e., every case made. The communication for every, or almost every contact continued with several conversations up until the desired solution of the contacted problem has been reached. For better understanding, when we say "contact" or "report", we refer to a single case of reporting a child's right violation.

Defining the gender of children and youth to whom the contacts (reports) refer

According to the framework, whenever possible, all data are broken down and analysed by gender, i.e., each total number of contacts (reports) is analysed in relation to the gender of the child or the young person affected by the contact.

Male: Children or young people who primarily identify as male.

Female: Children or young people who primarily identify as female.

Unspecified: Children or young people who primarily do not identify as male or female.

Unknown: Children or young people whose gender cannot be identified for various reasons.

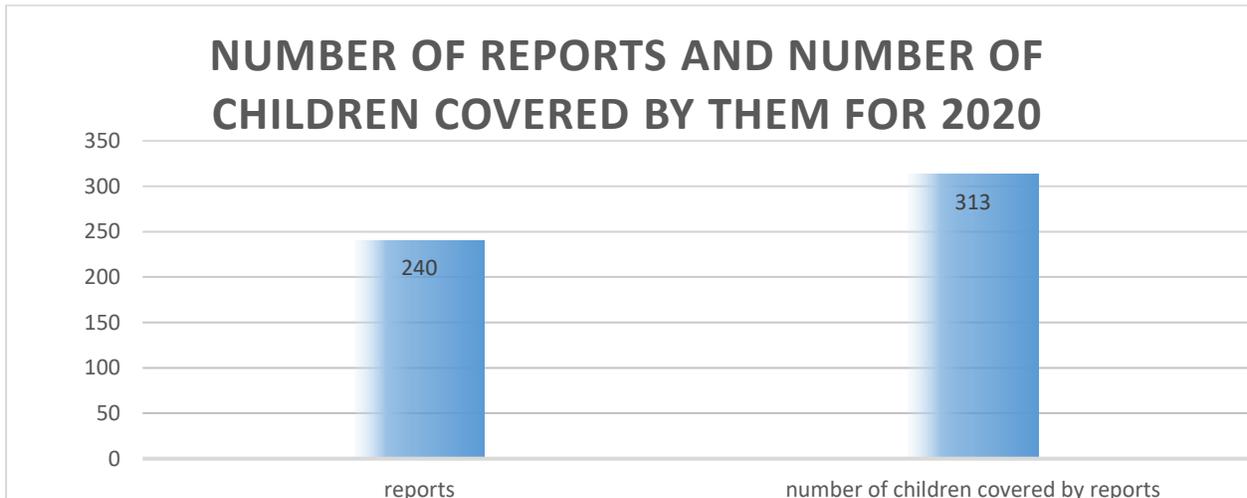
Basic Contact (Report) Information

This section provides general demographic information for the contacts, including the number of reports received and the number of children covered by these reports, followed by the age and gender of the children to whom the reports relate, as well as the ethnicity of the children covered in the cases. This section also includes a demonstration of the way we received the reports - via the administrative telephone line, via the SOS helpline's or Megjashi's Facebook page, by mail or by direct addressing at Megjashi's premises (in the period between January and the beginning of March 2020, until the protection measures against COVID-19 were introduced, when Megjashi's office has been and remained closed to clients until the end of the year).

Total Number of Contacts (Reports)

During 2020, a total of **240** initial contacts (reports) were made, and additionally **287** follow-up conversations. The total number of children and youth covered by the reports is **313**. Compared to last year, the number of reports has more than doubled.

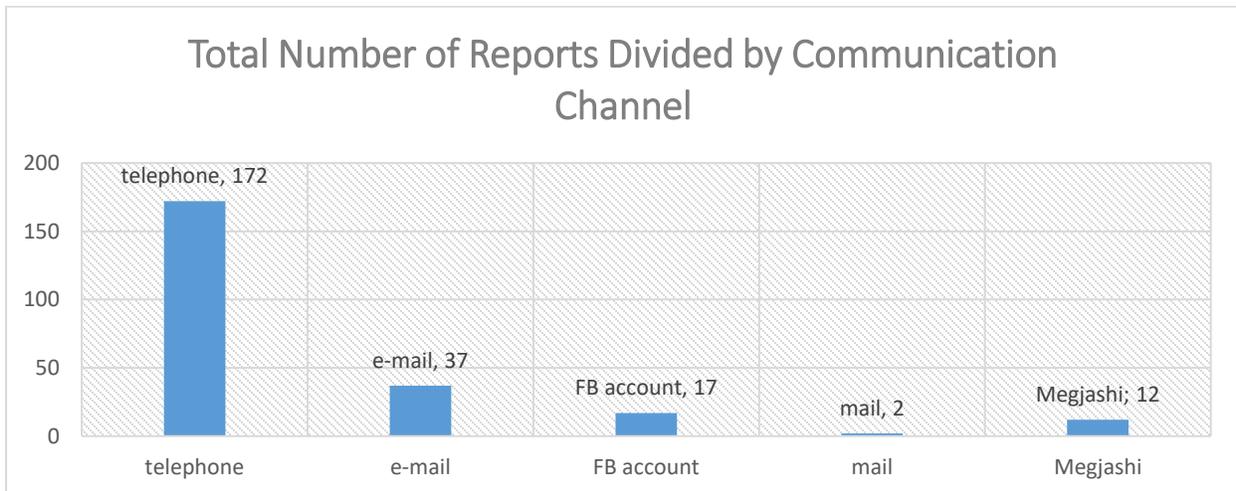
Chart 1. Number of contacts (reports) and number of children covered by them



Number of Contacts (Reports) According to the Communication Channel

In this twelve-month period, the communication with the reporting persons was mostly established through the administrative (landline) number of the Children's Embassy Megjashi, where a total of **172** reports were received. There were **37** reports received via e-mail in this period, **17** reports on the FB page/Messenger, **2** reports received via mail and **12** reports were submitted in person at the premises of Megjashi.

Chart 2. Contacts According to Communication Channel



Total Number of Children and Youth by Age and Gender

The reports for the reporting year of 2020 refer to problems that affected 95 boys, 92 girls, and for 126 children the gender is unknown.

The following table shows the distribution of children to whom the calls referred by age and gender and it shows that most of the reports in which male children are affected are between 10-12 years old, while most of the reports in which female children are affected are between 0-6 years old. Taken by age group, most of the reports referred to children aged 4-6, followed by 10-12 and in third place, in terms of reports frequency, reports refer to children aged 0-3 years.

Table 1. Children/youth to whom the call refers, according to age group and divided by gender

Age	Male	Female	Unspecified	Unknown	Total by age
00 - 03	7	18	0	11	36
04 – 06	15	17	0	9	41
07 – 09	16	10	0	4	30
10 – 12	21	15	0	4	40
13 – 15	9	11	0	6	26
16 – 17	10	9	0	3	22
18 – 25	6	2	0	1	9
25 +	0	1	0	0	1
Unknown	11	9	0	88	108
Total by gender	95	92	0	126	313

Number of Children According to the Living Environment

According to the callers' living environment, as shown in the table below, most children, or **279**, live in urban areas, **23** children are covered by reports from callers living in rural environment, for **11** it is unknown.

The number of callers from rural areas, as in previous years, remains very small compared to the number of callers from urban areas. Among the possible reasons for this may be the lack of information of people living in rural areas regarding the children's rights, the manner and procedure for their protection, as well as the insufficient promotion of the SOS helpline in these areas. Certainly, the reasons include the fact that most of the population lives in urban environment.

Table 2. Children/youth to whom the call refers, according to the living environment - urban and rural, divided by gender.

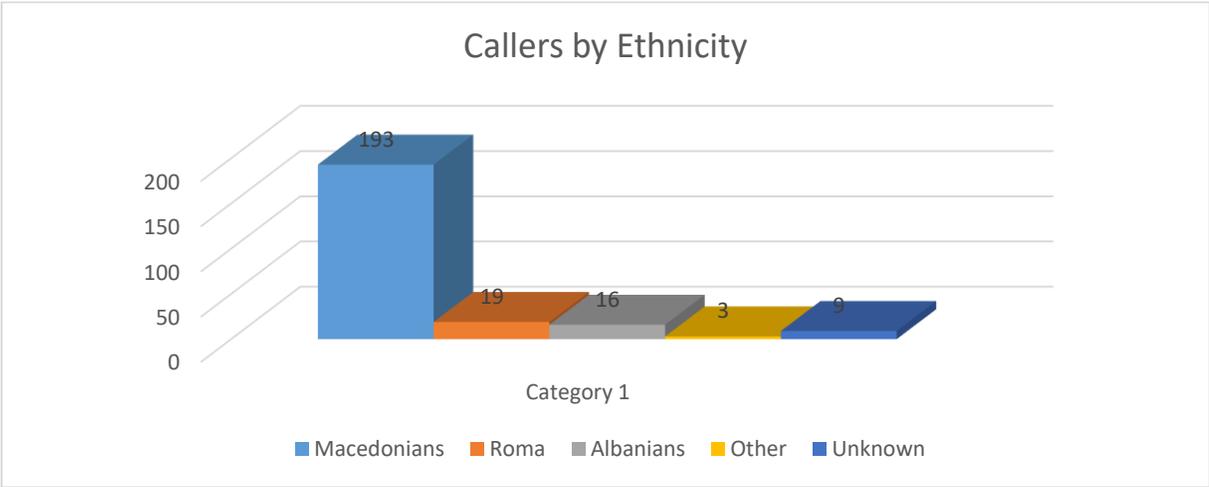
	Male	Female	Unspecified	Unknown	Total by environment
Urban	92	90	0	97	279
Rural	2	2	0	19	23
Unknown	1	0	0	10	11
Total by gender	95	92		126	313

Number of Contacts (Reports) by Ethnicity

Regarding the ethnicity of the callers, as shown in the chart, **193** of the total callers are Macedonians, while **19** are Roma and **16** callers are of Albanian ethnicity. Only **3** of the contacts (reports) are from callers belonging to others (ethnic groups) and for **9** persons the ethnicity is unknown.

According to this situation, most of the calls are from Macedonians (as a result of the fact that in Macedonia the largest percentage of residents are of Macedonian nationality), which confirms that in the future it is necessary for Megjashi to find a way to bring the SOS helpline closer to the other ethnic groups, for example to engage operators who speak Albanian, but also Turkish and other local languages.

Chart 3. Ethnic Structure of Contacts



Contacts (Reports) According to Problem Category

Concerning the reasons for the contact (report), we noted that all four topics - endangerment, health and social welfare and, in rare cases other reasons for report, are represented.

Within the first topic, the contacts, i.e., the reports refer to problems and rights violations that fall into the category of violence. As to the second topic - health, most of the reports refer to problems in the category of mental health, and a lower number to the category of physical health. Regarding the third topic - social welfare covers several problem categories - accessibility, school and family relationships.

Graphic presentation of the most common categories of problems due to which the users of the SOS helpline called is given below, followed by a more detailed presentation of the results. As the graph shows, the most common reason for contacts (reports) is a problem related to family relationships (27% of all contacts), followed by violence (25%), accessibility (21%), and mental health (14%). The problem categories related to school (7%) and physical health (3%) are also represented with lower portion.

Chart 4. Problem Categories Reported in Contacts

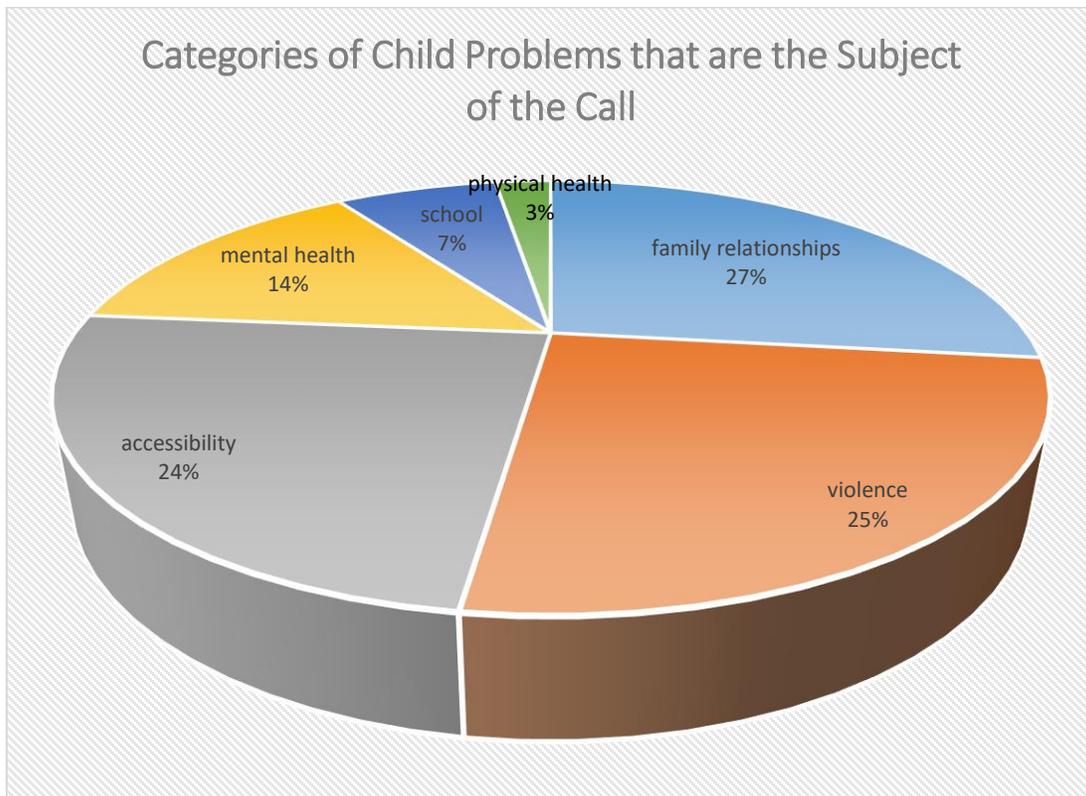


Table 3. Total number of children/youth by problem categories for the period January-December 2020

Problem Category	Total
Family relationships	112
Violence	105
Accessibility	101
Mental health	59
School	29
Physical health	10
Discrimination and social exclusion	7
Children gone missing	3
Total	426

In most of the reports, more than one problem is reported, so the number of children affected by the problem category is higher than the number of children covered by the reports.

- **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS – 27%**

Most of the children, as many as **112**, are covered by the reports related to the problem of child's right violation during divorce proceedings, and violation of decisions for child's encounters with the other non-guardian parent issued by the centres for social work.

This is an alarming number and indicates that additional measures and parents' education should be implemented during their separation. They should be given more attention and their awareness should be raised about the harm they do with their conflicting mutual communication, while not considering the child need, the natural need they have to love both parents equally; anything that gets in the way of realizing that need, does great harm to the child.

- **VIOLENCE – 25%**

105 children were victims of violence in various forms, which covers 25% of the total number of children covered by the calls for the reporting year of 2020. These reports refer to several types of violence:

- bullying - **7** children are covered,
- economic exploitation - we have a report for **2** cases,
- mental/emotional violence refers to **29** children,
- neglect (unconcern) - **25**,
- sexual abuse via the Internet¹ - **4**,

¹ According to CHI: Online sexual exploitation of children includes all acts of sexually exploitative nature committed on a child who is in some way related to the surroundings through the Internet. Child Sexual Exploitation Material

- physical violence –22
- sexual violence - 13
- child marriage - 1
- unspecified, other - 2

- **ACCESSIBILITY – 24%**

Approximately the same number of children (**101** children in total) is included in the reports of violation of the accessibility right and refers to problems related to:

- Contacts related to problems with accessing various social or economic services and assistance, the number of children covered by the reports is **32** children.
- Essential needs - basic needs not available to **32** children,
- Access to education, **20** children,
- Problems with access to health care, inability to obtain the necessary medical assistance, necessary health care - **9** children with this problem have been reported.
- Unspecified, other – **5**
- Contacts related to problems with accessing legal services - advice, need for legal representation refers to **4** children.
- Mental health services - **1**

- **MENTAL HEALTH - 14%**

Slightly lower is the percentage of children - 14% (48 children) affected by **emotional distress - anger problems**. Emotional anxiety related to the experience of anger or frustration is a response to several different reasons for which the contact was made. Anger is an emotion that involves a strong sense of dissatisfaction and hostility caused by something real or unreal. Frustration is an emotional response to dissatisfaction that can arise when one encounters resistance to achieving a goal.

The most common cause of this psychological condition in children is the relationship of the parents arising from the divorce. Parental disagreement about seeing, contacting and meeting of one of the parents with the child or children following the divorce and upon granting custody to one of the parents. The following reasons are stated in the reports:

- Addictive behaviour - **1**
- Self-concern - **2**
- Substance abuse - **1**
- Self-injurious behaviour - **1**

(CSEM) refers to material that portrays and/or otherwise documents actions that are sexually abusive and/or exploitative to the child. It covers materials showing child sexual abuse and other sexually explicit content showing children, such as sexual posing and child sexual abuse generated by computer material. CSEM can also be a sexualized image that does not have to represent child sexual abuse. CSEM may also be photographs of children in the pool, for example, taken without the knowledge or consent of the children or their guardians.

- Suicidal thoughts - 1
- Unspecified, other – 5

OTHER PROBLEMS

Lower number of children covered in the reports are concerning the following categories of problem: school - 29 children, discrimination and social exclusion - 7 children, physical health - 10 children, children gone missing - 3 children.

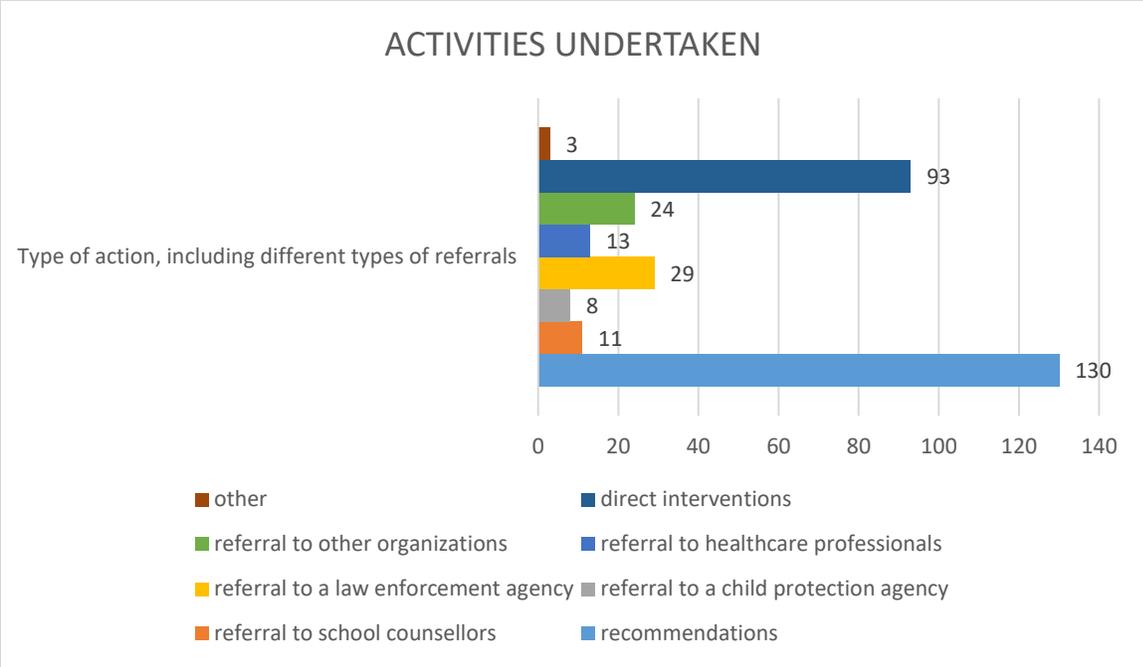
Activities Undertaken

During this 12-month period, most interventions were undertaken to provide direct assistance or support to contacts in which **93** children were affected. In addition to direct assistance, contacts (reports) related to **130** children and young people were provided with recommendations, contact information of the relevant institution, then contacts involving **24** children or young people were referred to other institutions, while contacts that covered **29** of the children were referred to law enforcement agencies/institutions. Most often the contacts were directed to the following services and institutions depending on the problem reported:

- the professional services in the school
- the agency (institution) for child protection in the country,
- various health professionals, general practitioners, psychologists/psychiatrists,
- referrals to emergency services.

In acting upon the matters and the provision of support to the children to whom the contacts referred, the SOS helpline team often cooperated with the centres for social work in Skopje and other cities, the Department of Interior, the schools, the Association of Young Lawyers, the Coalition for Fair Trials and other stakeholders and organizations in order to provide better and more effective support to the reporting persons. Over this year, we achieved close and successful cooperation with the Skopje Centre for Social Work and their Intervention Team on several occasions. In reports related to violence against children, inadequate parental care, failure to act according to the issued decision to see the parent after divorce, are some of the successful examples for which, together with the Centre, we have managed to improve the rights exercise of more children.

Chart 5. Activities Undertaken



Contacts (Reports) in the State of Emergency Period due to the Covid-19 Epidemic

Problems with the child's right to see a parent during the pandemic were further increased due to the state of emergency and travel bans, which were undertaken to protect against the spread of the virus. This situation was abused by many parents and they used the moment to alienate the child from the other parent.

Due to the situation because of the COVID19 epidemic, the number of calls for material and financial assistance increased.

Problems related to the provision of basic means of protection (masks, gloves, gowns) and basic means of subsistence were also one of the characteristics of the period of emergency. During this period, we had 7 reports from child health institutions requesting the provision of protective equipment, sterile masks, surgical gloves and medical gowns and 32 reports requesting assistance in providing basic means of subsistence.

From the obtained data which are summarized in various categories and subcategories of problems and other data that were collected when receiving a report from persons on one of the SOS channels, we concluded that in this period of one year, the reports were referred to problems related to the non-functionality of the inter-municipal centres for social work.

Promotional Activities for the SOS Helpline for Children and Youth

In order to promote the SOS helpline for children and youth, especially during the epidemic, several activities were implemented to bring this service closer to children and youth. Through April, two short promotional videos were made in which Megjashi's mascot, Bushavko, explained to children of how and why he calls the SOS phone to get support and how he spends a day during the quarantine. These videos were broadcasted on several national and local televisions during the quarantine in May and early June 2020. The same video was later promoted in November and December as part of the Peace Education Programme campaign, by broadcasting it in the public transport (in buses of several busiest routes) in Skopje.

The SOS helpline was also promoted within the research on the situation of children's rights at national level, and in the course of November, several blogs on topics close to young people and prepared by the young volunteers of the SOS helpline were published through Megjashi's social networks.

The Role of the Volunteers in the SOS Helpline for Children and Youth

The volunteers have always been and are a very important part of the SOS helpline work. Every year new volunteers who receive continuous training on various topics are recruited.

From the very beginning of its existence, the First Children's Embassy in the World Megjashi promotes and encourages volunteerism and peace activism, continuously developing active citizenship based on the principle of non-violence. Volunteering in FCEW Megjashi is especially encouraged in the work of the SOS telephone for children and youth and the development and operation of the telephone line is largely supported by volunteers.

Over the years, many young people, students and proven professionals in the field of psychology, social work and legislation have volunteered in Megjashi. All volunteers complete training on the rules, behaviour and operation of the SOS helpline.

Through the years, the volunteers have met with pupils from all schools in Macedonia, conducting many workshops in schools, in order to better inform them about children's rights, to raise awareness among children about their rights and opportunities to contact the SOS helpline's professionals.

This year, six female volunteers joined the SOS team, including students, high school pupils and professors. This team of volunteers prepared several blogs on popular topics for young people, as an effort to get closer to this population and to be recognized as their supporter. Some of these blogs were published on Megjashi's website and Facebook page, and the established fund of texts shall be further published in the next year of 2021. Some of the female volunteers also answered the calls during the shifts in the afternoon on weekdays, as well as on the weekends.