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News Release

Child endangerment in Switzerland: A wake-up call from the Optimus Study

The Optimus Study Switzerland published today, shows that every year, Swiss child protection agencies register between 30,000 and 50,000 cases of child endangerment. These children need help and support because they are subject to physical or psychological violence, are neglected, witness forms of violence, or are sexually abused.

Zurich, 13 June 2018 – In Switzerland, a range of public and private organizations are in charge of protecting children from violence, assault and neglect. The third cycle of the Optimus Study, initiated and funded by the UBS Optimus Foundation, provides a comprehensive overview into forms of endangerment, levels of support provided and how well the system works. In a sample of 432 Swiss child protection agencies, more than 80 percent participated in the most recent survey. The results showed that, each year, between 30,000 and 50,000 children come into contact with child protection agencies such as government-sponsored bodies (KESB/APEA), hospitals, the police and victim aid services.

The reported cases are likely just the tip of the iceberg. The results of the current study imply that the services do not always meet actual needs. For one, because there are significant differences in services available across different regions of Switzerland, which means some children may have better access than others. Secondly, there are differences in the degree to which child welfare organizations capture the same kinds of endangerment in boys and girls. Thirdly, the data show that children who have suffered physical maltreatment come into contact with child protection agencies relatively late: they are on average older than ten years.

Myriam Caranzano, physician and child protection expert from Canton Ticino says: "I find it particularly disturbing that the youngest, and therefore the most vulnerable children, are the least protected."

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Switzerland is duty-bound to do everything it can to protect children. A better understanding is needed how to provide all children – regard-less of where they live, their gender or their age – with the necessary support. An improved, standardized data collection is essential in the context of country-wide monitoring, to understand the reasons for possible disparities and service gaps.

Christian Nanchen, Head of the Cantonal Office for Youth – Canton Wallis, says that "the most efficient measure would be to create a legal basis for child protection at the federal level."

To this end, Phyllis Costanza, CEO of the UBS Optimus Foundation, would like to present the latest study as a call to action, with recommendations on how to improve child protection in Switzerland: "We have achieved a lot since the Optimus Study was initiated, but a lot remains to be done."

Background information

A Representative Database

The Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts – School of Social Work and the University of Lausanne, Observatoire de la maltraitance envers les enfants used a stratified randomised procedure to select 432 of a total of 643 organizations from the civil child protection (KESB/APEA), social- and health-care sectors, and the criminal justice system, and invited their participation in the study. Eighty-one percent of the organizations contacted made their data available, in part through national databases of the Federal Office of Statistics. The extraordinarily high participation shows that practitioners in the field were convinced of the relevance of this study. It also shows that it is possible to establish a national, representative database on the issue of child endangerment.

Who is behind the study?

Prof. Dr. Andreas Jud (Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts – School of Social Work) and Prof. Dr. René Knüsel (University of Lausanne, Observatoire de la maltraitance envers les enfants) are the Study Leaders for the third cycle of the Optimus Study. Together with their research teams, they developed the study design and methodology, and were responsible for the data collection and analysis

The Optimus Study was launched in 2007 with financing for ten years. The UBS Optimus foundation, a charitable foundation of UBS, is committed to the welfare of disadvantaged children all over the world. The UBS Optimus Foundation focusses on education, child protection and child health. The Optimus Study was a ten-year research project with the goal of collecting data on the extent and forms of violence against children and youth, in order to identify the gaps in a selected number of child protection systems and to develop more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

In various cycles, data on violence against children was collected in China, South Africa and Switzerland. The results can be found at the following website: www.optimusstudy.org.

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