

# Singapore: More sexual assault cases involving those under 16 committed by family members and relatives



## SINGAPORE

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A model house which the police use when handling victims of child sexual abuse cases. - The Straits Times/ANN

SINGAPORE, Feb 12 (The Straits Times/ANN): The number of sexual assault cases involving victims below 16 years old allegedly committed by family members and relatives increased by 61 per cent in 2021 from 2019.

Figures provided in Parliament last Monday by Minister for Home Affairs and Law, K Shanmugam

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Leon Perera.

There were 186 cases in 2020, up from 153 cases in 2019. Between January and November 2022, there were 190 cases.

Perera, who is from the Workers' Party, told The Straits Times that he posed the question after observing a worldwide increase in domestic violence cases during the Covid-19 pandemic.

He was concerned that Singapore is facing similar trends.

A report published by the United Nations in 2021 found that 23 per cent of more than 16,000 women surveyed from 13 countries, including Thailand and Bangladesh, said Covid-19 has made them feel more unsafe at home.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) investigated 2,141 cases of child abuse in 2021 – the highest in 10 years and 63 per cent more than the 1,313 cases in 2020. These cases included physical and sexual abuse, and neglect.



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Ms Corinna Lim, executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), noted how children find it more difficult to report abuse because of their high dependence on family members for financial and practical reasons.

She said: "Often, perpetrators might exploit this by emphasising the disastrous consequences of disclosing the abuse, such as having the family unit broken, the breadwinner removed and trauma inflicted upon other members of the family."

Lawyer Cory Wong from Invictus Law Corporation said victims do not have to be afraid as there are measures in place when they report abuse and go through court proceedings.

Wong added: "The court can impose bail conditions to prevent accused persons from residing with the victim and contacting them. Physical screens are also used to shield the victim from seeing the accused when giving evidence in court.

"A gag order also protects the identities of victims so they do not have to worry about people viewing them differently after their sexual assault."

He said victims can seek help in schools, which are safe spaces where teachers and counsellors are trained to identify and report child abuse to the relevant authorities.

The police will also set up a new Sexual Crime and Family Violence Command this year, which will

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It will be staffed by officers who have specialised expertise in such cases and good victim management skills.

Kristine Lam, principal social worker at Care Corner Project StART, which tackles family violence, said the social service agency guides children known to experience or have witnessed violence to identify five trusted adults in their lives.

She added: "Care Corner speaks to those adults the children have identified to encourage them to listen to the children when they share both good and bad experiences.

"This can help them identify everything from school-based bullying to sexual violence."

These children are also taught to say "no" assertively when they find themselves in an unsafe situation, which may prevent potential abusers from targeting them or escalating the abuse.

Under the MSF's fostering scheme, foster families provide safety, stability and shelter for children who have been abused, Wong said.

Zaharah Ariff, executive director of Casa Raudha, which supports victims of domestic violence, said victims can be referred to the non-profit organisation's crisis shelter by MSF, the police and other organisations.

The location of the shelter, which has 42 beds, is not listed publicly to protect those staying there.

She added: "Victims of sexual abuse may become depressed or have suicidal ideation. They need a safe space for their body and mind to heal." - The Straits Times/ANN

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