

LUMOS
Children belong in families

Preventing the violence of institutionalisation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children belong in families, not institutions. Institutionalisation separates children from families and communities, deprives them of liberty and exposes them to avoidable harm. Institutionalisation is a preventable form of violence against children.

For more than 20 years, Lumos has worked globally with governments, partners, communities and people with lived experience to transform care and protection systems for children. The evidence is clear: violence can drive family separation, and institutional care can expose children to further violence, neglect and lasting developmental harm. Lumos therefore recognises institutionalisation itself as a form of violence against children.[1]

Institutionalisation is a preventable form of violence against children. It causes direct and lasting harm, increases exposure to abuse and reflects wider poverty, discrimination and exclusion. Family separation can be prevented, and children can return safely to families. Where this is not possible, high-quality family-based alternative care provides the best option for children.

Ending institutionalisation requires more than closing buildings. It requires government-led, rights-based care reform: strengthening services that keep children safe in families, building family-based alternatives, and aligning policy, financing, workforce and accountability so change can scale and last. This is why Lumos places ending violence against children at the heart of its strategy and calls for coordinated action across child protection, disability, health, education, justice and social protection.

Why institutionalisation is violence

It heightens children's exposure to abuse
Children in institutions face heightened risks of physical and psychological abuse, sexual violence, exploitation, neglect, corporal punishment, isolation, starvation and inadequate healthcare.[2] Research has found substantially higher rates of violence in residential facilities than in family-based care.[3] For children who have already experienced harm, institutional placement can compound trauma rather than provide safety.

Repeated national and international inquiries have shown that abuse can persist for decades where institutions isolate children from families, communities and independent scrutiny.[4] In the gravest cases, these violations amount to torture. The problem is not simply a failure of individual institutions: it is inherent in a model built on segregation, confinement and unequal power.

It deprives children of rights and damages development
Institutionalisation harms children's physical growth, cognition, attention, mental health, relationships and ability to form secure attachments.[5] It also separates children from family and community life and, by its nature, deprives them of liberty. The UN Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty concluded that institutions are "unable to operate without depriving children of their liberty".[6]

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities protect children's rights to family life, safety, identity, development and inclusion. In 2019, the UN General Assembly explicitly recognised the harm caused by family separation and institutionalisation.[7]





"If you want to end violence, ask children"

Young people who work with Lumos have identified violence as a core priority. A 2026 survey led by Lumos' Global Youth Advisory Board found that children with disabilities were three times more likely than children without disabilities to say adults never took their safety disclosures seriously. Children with care experience were three times more likely than their peers without care experience to identify residential care as a site of bullying.

Institutionalisation is structural violence

Institutionalisation is not only associated with individual acts of abuse. It is also a form of structural violence: harm embedded in laws, policies, public systems and funding choices that create unequal power and life chances.[8] **Three features are central:**

- **Poverty**: Children are often separated from their families not because they lack love or care, but because families lack the income and services needed to meet basic needs. When states fail to support families, poverty is wrongly converted into a reason for separation.
- **Marginalisation:** Institutionalisation disproportionately affects children and families facing racism, classism, ableism and other forms of discrimination. Ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, Indigenous and First Nations communities, unmarried mothers and people with disabilities are particularly affected. In some contexts, including that of colonialism, institutions have been used deliberately to control or suppress communities.[9]
- **Misuse of resources:** Most children in institutions could live safely with their families if the right support were available, or in family-based alternative care where separation is unavoidable.[10] Funding institutions diverts resources from services that prevent separation and keep children safe in families.



Disability, violence and institutionalisation

"States parties should recognise institutionalisation as a form of violence against persons with disabilities."

UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2022

Children with disabilities are disproportionately institutionalised and, once placed, are more likely to experience violence and less likely to have it recognised or reported. In some European states, children with disabilities comprise as many as 78% of children in institutions.[11]

Violence can be disguised as care, protection or therapy. Smaller "home-like" facilities and group homes can reproduce an institutional culture through segregation, restricted choice, fixed routines, staff control and separation from family and community.[12] A family-like institution is still an institution.

Articles 19 and 23 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities require inclusion in the community and protection of family life. For children, there is no substitute for growing up in a family. Ending disability-based violence therefore requires an end to all forms of institutionalisation, alongside accessible support for children and families.[13]

What must change

Institutionalisation is preventable. Governments, service providers and donors should recognise the violence of institutionalisation and transform care and protection systems for children by redirecting policy, practice and funding towards:

- preventing unnecessary separation through inclusive health, education, social protection and community services;
- supporting families, including kinship carers, to care safely for children at home;
- providing high-quality, family-based alternative care when separation is genuinely necessary;
- ensuring children, particularly children with disabilities and those with care experience, shape decisions and can report concerns safely;
- ending investment in institutions, including small-scale facilities and group homes, and financing a planned, rights-based transition from institutional to family-based care for all children; and
- strengthening safeguarding, accountability and independent oversight throughout reform.

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[1] Better Care Network, Lumos and World Childhood Foundation (2026), Addressing children's care as integral to ending violence against children globally.

[2] Better Care Network (2017), Violence Against Children in All Care Settings; Sherr, Roberts & Gandhi (2017), Child violence experiences in institutionalized/ orphanage care; van IJzendoorn et al. (2020), The Lancet Psychiatry.

[3] Pinheiro (2006), World Report on Violence Against Children; Rogers, Wilson & Dixon (2026), scoping review of violence in alternative care.

[4] Better Care Network, with Lumos and World Childhood Foundation. Op. Cit., Barnrättsbyrån & World Childhood Foundation (2023) Who would ever believe me? A study of child sexual abuse in Swedish institutional care . https://childhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/child-sexual-abuse-in-swedish-institutional-care-2023-eng-final.pdf

[5] van IJzendoorn et al. (2020), Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children: a systematic and integrative review.

[6] Nowak (2019), United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, p.501.

[7] UN General Assembly Resolution 74/395 (2019), Rights of the Child.

[8] Galtung (1969), Violence, Peace and Peace Research; New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry (2024), Abuse in Care.

[9] Lumos, 'Learning Curves: A Global Thematic Review of Education and Institutional Care' (April 2024), page 5. https://www.wearelumos.org/resources/learning-curves-a-global-review-of-education-and-institutional-care/

[10] Csáky (2009), Keeping Children Out of Harmful Institutions, Save the Children.

[11] UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2022), Guidelines on Deinstitutionalization, including in Emergencies; General Comment No. 5 on Article 19 of the Convention.

[12] Prof. Angharad Beckett and Dr Miro Griffiths, 'Ableism as Violence' (2026)

[13] The 2026 guidelines on disability-based violence of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provide guidance to duty-bearers on how to identify, address and end disability-related violence, in-line with their Convention obligations, including ending the institutionalisation of persons with disabilities: CRPD/C/8, Guidelines on identifying and addressing disability-based violence – Advance unedited version (October 2026)

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