

## SC SHOCKED AT 2 LAKH 'MISSING' CHILDREN

Relevant for: Government Policies & Welfare Schemes | Topic: Welfare of Children - Schemes & their performance; Mechanisms, Laws, Institutions & Bodies

Discrepancies in two government-commissioned surveys, both a year apart, submitted in the Supreme Court show that over two lakh children, said to be residing in childcare homes, are "missing."

A 2016-17 survey, commissioned by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development, shows that 4.73 lakh children reside in care homes nationwide. However, the number of children in care homes came down to 2.61 lakh in the data submitted by the Centre before the Supreme Court in March 2018. The data were gathered by the Centre from the States.

### 'Very disturbing'

The Bench of Justices Madan B. Lokur, S. Abdul Nazeer and Deepak Gupta said they found the disparity "very, very disturbing," and children were not just numbers. "It shows how serious the problem is. What is to be done? It makes us feel very sad that children are treated only as numbers. They too have soul, they too have heart," Justice Lokur said, when *amicus curiae* Aparna Bhat pointed out the discrepancy.

"We do not know what happened to the balance two lakh children. Either the childcare homes had given an inflated number of children to get more funds or these children are missing," Justice Lokur observed orally.

The *amicus curiae* said that of the 9,589 childcare institutions across the country, 1,596 were overcrowded and 97 districts were without childcare homes. She referred to how children were subjected to corporal punishment and other abuses in these homes.

The court asked Ministry officials present how many children were missing in the country, "besides these two lakh."

If the law was followed, in letter and in spirit, the horrific abuse of children at shelter homes in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, and in Deoria, Uttar Pradesh, could have been prevented, Justice Lokur observed.

The Bench proposed to set up oversight committees at the national and State levels to monitor the functioning of childcare homes. Counsel for the Centre sought time to seek instructions on the suggestion.

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