

Czechia

Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

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13%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019	207	6,553 ¹
Institutions for people with disabilities	204	1,823
Institutions for children 0-3	26	265 ²
Number of children in family-based/ foster care in 2019		20,295

Alternative recommendations

Children in Alternative Care:

- The government should assess thoroughly the impact of the COVID-19 crisis to build back better by strengthening personnel capacities of institutions and preparing feasible guidelines to ensure child needs are fulfilled including their participation in education.
- Family counselling services should be reinforced
- The government should harmonise the fragmented child-protection system currently administered by three ministries¹ to be able to coordinate and cooperate during the crisis situation such as COVID-19 and provide adequate support to vulnerable children and young people in alternative care.
- Develop a long-term strategy for the rights of the child and short-term national action plan on investing in children.
- Set up a Ministry for Family, Children and Youth.
- Set up an Ombudsperson for Children.
- Support civil society organisations active in this field, especially those promoting the rights of the child.
- Ensure child friendly justice.
- Actively promote the Child Guarantee at the EU level.
- The government should provide schools with financial aid in order to ensure that all children have a laptop and Internet connection to use for online learning activities.

To support children and families, the government should:

- Introduce an Act on Children and Youth, implementing the

Convention on the Rights of the Child and respecting the principle of acting in the best interest of the child.



1 Statistická ročenka školství – Statistical yearbook of education

2 Bývalé kojenecké ústavy v roce 2020.

1 Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family; Ministry of Health; and Ministry of Education.

Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



Child Poverty - Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Negative developments

Home schooling is an important problem to address because online lessons and homework were not accessible to all the children. It proved to be especially difficult for families already experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, school tests raised serious difficulties, notably when preparing children for the test to get to secondary schools and for the high school graduation exam.

Visits to children in hospitals or social facilities had to be banned or restricted.

NGOs also daily face serious challenges due to the coronavirus. Many social services had to be stopped because of the pandemic, for example, while physical workshops, seminars and conferences had to be postponed or cancelled.

NGOs have registered an increase in cases of domestic violence.

Positive developments

Financial benefits



The government provided financial benefits for parents staying at home in order to care for children when schools were closed down. The benefits amounted to up to 80% of the daily wage and were prolonged from nine days to the end of the school year.

TV educational programmes



A public national TV channel has been created to provide education to those children that had to stay at home.

Child benefits



The government proposed a bill to introduce substitutional maintenance payments for children of a single parent.

Examples of good practice

Numerous workshops were set up to sew facemasks in buildings that had been closed to the public (like theatres), and the masks were then distributed for free.

The Czech Children and Youth Council (national umbrella NGO) successfully lobbied the government to allow children's vacation camps to open during the summer break.

Volunteers from several NGOs (e.g. the Red Cross and Scout) were also buying and delivering food and medicines to families under quarantine.

An initiative of medicine students was assisting those families and homes with nursing.

Example of bad practice

A ban on visits in prisons was imposed during the lockdown. Later, visits for one person at a

time were allowed, but it meant children were still prevented

from visiting their detained or imprisoned parent. Now, only

one minor (more siblings are not

allowed) may accompany an adult visitor once a month for one hour.

Policies for Investing in Children

National strategy to tackle child poverty

Czechia does not have a separate national strategy to fight child poverty, despite the urgent need for one. This clearly shows that, in recent years, children have not been a priority for politicians, media and society in general.

The country has not established a coordinated system and comprehensive strategy for the rights of the child. Responsibilities are divided among several ministries which do not communicate with each other and resist any changes to the status quo.

EU influence on national developments

The EU has not been able to pressure the government to implement child-centred legislation. It should issue more binding guidelines on the issue and monitor their implementation more efficiently.

The EU should advocate for school meals to be free for all children. In the process, priority should be given to the food provided to children in kindergartens, and then in elementary schools.

The EU should also call for the state to provide kindergartens free of charge for all children from the age of three years and free of charge afternoon courses at elementary schools. This would help to ensure homework assistance in all those

cases in which parents are not able to assist their children.

The EU should call for the state to prevent domestic violence and offer mediation services to families free of charge.

The 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations were generally well drafted, but lacked any mention of children that could have been used to better protect children's rights in the country.

Access to financial resources and services of high quality

The government's effort to ensure adequate resources and services to families and children is reasonable, but should improve.

The Prime Minister promised in a public statement in June 2020 to

establish an office of Ombudsperson for Children. The bill was drafted but not adopted; the government failed to push for it.

Czechia needs to implement a vast number of political instruments in the future in order to ensure adequate resources and services. The most urgent are:

- promoting job sharing practices
- establishing a shorter working week
- setting up universal child benefits and universal basic income
- investing in education in order to ensure that all children enjoy the same opportunities.

Children's participation

In 2005, the School Education Act established student parliaments

in schools. Participatory structures exist in some municipalities and regions, such as the National Children and Youth Parliament. However, these operate on a

voluntary basis, without their own budgets, and without being regulated by law.

A representative of the Children and Youth Parliament was invited to participate as a full member of the governmental advisory body (Committee for the Rights of the

Child) at its last session, on 16 June 2020.

Individual participation at the courts of justice has improved since 2015.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Similar to other countries the Czechia announced a lockdown between March and May 2020 which lead to the closure of most public institutions including schools. At the same time, strict measures on personal protection and social distancing were introduced.

In the Czechia there are three ministries that oversee child protection. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responsible for social services and the social and legal protection of children; the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports administers institutional care for children from three to 26 years and leisure-time facilities for children and youth; and the Ministry of Health

covers institutional care for children under three years. As observed by Eurochild member the NGO Big Dipper North during the pandemic, different ministries have released different guidelines, in some cases contradictory to each other.

Children, vulnerable children in particular, did not have access to the usual channels which provide help such as schools, other relatives, day-care centres or even special therapy centres. Big Dipper North points out that civil society organisations were forced to come up with innovative solutions such as counselling and provision of therapy over the phone, skype and other online platforms.

This extraordinary situation has put an extra strain on residential care facilities: institutions for children and social residential services (e.g. shelters for mothers with

children, facilities for immediate assistance to children). All children had to stay in the facility for the whole time which meant an enormous increase in work for the professionals working in these institutions. The increased demand for extra personnel remained unmet from the authorities. Instead other organisations and individuals including private philanthropists and universities provided support. Furthermore, some workers in residential facilities took voluntary weekly shifts remaining in the building for 24h and longer according to the needs. Children (aged three to ten) of health- and social-care professionals were allowed to attend kindergartens and schools thanks to regional authorities' decision.

An extra challenge was to guarantee progress on education in all

residential settings. Social workers were helping children to attend online education. In some cases, one social worker assisted five to eight children of different ages without adequate technological equipment. Other challenges included postponement of medical treatment, growing mental health problems of children and the burden of compliance with very demanding hygiene guidelines.

Residential facilities recorded a higher number of escapes by children and it took some time before the Ministry of Education offered some recommendations on how to proceed when a child returned. In general, there was a lack of basic information and support on how to take care of children in non-standard conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs issued an order allowing

visits by parents to institutional care facilities as well as allowing children to stay (visit) outside the institution. However, many institutions banned the visits (both in and out) to protect children and staff.

Two months of social isolation lead to many conflicts between children and between children and carers because there was no mental-health support to either children or carers to help them face this extraordinary situation. The Big Dipper North NGOs highlights how determined the pedagogues/carers working in institutions were since they took over all roles of: a substitute parent, a teacher, a medical doctor and a psychologist to ensure the wellbeing of children.

Foster families felt the greatest burden when the schools and kindergartens were closed. It was challenging to manage home education (according to school demands) as well as to secure technical support for this type of education. One of the parents always had to stay at home with the children and could not work. They also approached sponsors to obtain laptops so that children

could follow the school assignments correctly. Due to the closure of ambulance or day-centres foster families received the various types of support via online counselling. Contact between biological parents and children was not restricted, but there was less contact by mutual agreement among the foster family, the biological family and the service provider in order to protect the health of all. In most cases everyone cooperated and temporarily limited face-to-face contact.

Most NGOs in Czechia are financed from multiple sources (grants, donors, state subsidies and self-financing). As the economy has slowed down this was reflected in the income of NGOs (some grants were suspended, the number of donors was reduced because their own business went bankrupt, etc.). Although some services for families and children are funded by the state, NGOs still need to seek additional funding because the subsidy is only available for some activities. Usually there is only project funding by the government, no core funding. The Big Dipper North NGO points out that the financial sustainability of NGOs providing social services

is a long-term problem. EU funds are available to pilot or innovative projects in the field of prevention however, the sustainability of these projects is not secured by other means of funding.

Since the traditional support mechanisms were not in place (schools, community centres, other relatives) telephone and help line services received more demands. They have not recorded higher rate of violence against children.

Progress on child protection and care reform

The transformation of the care system for children at risk in the Czechia was approved by the government in 2012 in the National Strategy for the Protection of Children's Rights and in the National Action Plan for its implementation (for the years 2012-2015, not fulfilled, the foreseen follow-up plan has not been adopted by now). The progress towards deinstitutionalisation of children in alternative care has been very slow.

As the Child and Family Association points out, the placement of children under three years in institutional care in the Czechia is unusual not only for an EU country, but also for the rest of the developed world. They also believe that in the vast majority of cases, institutional care is unnecessary, in addition to increasing spending on institutional health and social care, money which could be spent more efficiently on supporting families at risk and the development of family-based care. New legislation and an amendment to the Act on the Social and Legal Protection of Children introduced in June 2020 by the Czech government has offered some progressive solutions, see below.

The aim of the amendment is to ban placing children under three in institutional care and increase the remuneration for foster parents. The amendment introduces the restriction of the placement of children under three years in institutional care. Out-of-home placement and services should be provided to only those children under three years old whose condition requires intensive specialised health care.

The amendment also introduces an obligation, therefore, for all institutional facilities to notify social and legal protection bodies for children, because currently, many children are placed in children's institutions by their parents on the basis of a contract with the facility, without informing social and legal protection bodies who cannot then offer timely assistance to families. DCI Czechia suggests that this practice should be prevented by law.

According to the government there is a long-term shortage of foster carers, particularly for short-term care, partly due to the fact that their remuneration has not been increased since 2013. The amendment to the Act on the Social and Legal Protection of Children attempts to respond to this by increasing it up to CZK 22,000 (EUR 800) a month.

The amendment also comes with a care allowance of CZK 15,000 (EUR 555) per month for young adults when they become too old for

alternative care in order to support them in their further studies. Higher education is key to their further professional employment and independence from state social support systems. The amendment also provides for assistance to these young people in finding and maintaining housing.²

Although the amendment was long-awaited the professionals including the Child and Family Association pointed out its weaknesses.³ They regret that the adopted government proposal does not reflect the recommendations of experts in the care sector and does not respond to the long-term efforts to introduce a comprehensive concept⁴.

EU funds

There were specific calls for proposals to tackle the issues of vulnerable families and children. For example, the Ministry of Labour implemented a project financed from the European

Social Fund (1 January 2016 to 30 June 2019) "System development and support of instruments for the social and legal protection of children". The project focuses on: supporting the transformation of the system for children at risk; strengthening inter-ministerial and multidisciplinary cooperation; support for social and legal protection bodies for children and other key actors in the field of networking services for vulnerable children and their families. Its ambition was to create service networks at the local, regional and national levels to ensure modules for lifelong learning for social workers and the development of family-based care.

A large amount of EU funds managed by the Ministry of Education was spent on the inclusion of children who are socially excluded or at risk in mainstream education. Eligible applicants included schools, school facilities and NGOs. The aim was to integrate disadvantaged children into education to be able to achieve

better educational outcomes and increase their chances for better employment and living standards. There were also systemic projects that aimed at adjusting the current legislation and funding support measures for children and families from disadvantaged communities (e.g. a teaching assistant).

² MPSV prosadilo významnou pomoc pro pěstouny a ohrožené děti

³ Otevřený dopis k návrhu novely zákona o sociálně-právní ochraně dětí ochranné dětí

⁴ They consider a new measure that introduces different remuneration for short- and long-term carers unfair and not justifiable. They insist that long-term care is desirable from the point of view of the child's needs and, as a number of studies have shown, also more economical for the state than institutional care. There is still an insufficient number of long-term foster parents too, which is why hundreds of children, who could otherwise grow up in a family background, are placed in institutional care completely unnecessarily every year. The remuneration for caring for one child is insufficient (CZK 12,000/EUR 444 per month), and does not correspond to the minimum salary (CZK 14,600 = EUR 540). If the foster parent is not employed, he/she even has to pay extra for health insurance. Other support services for foster families remained underfinanced too.