

Croatia

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

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20.7%

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 2018	38	6,259 ¹
Institutions for children with disabilities	25	5,437
Institutions for children 0-3	13	822
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2018	3	210
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2018		2,276
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2020		181

1 These numbers include all services provided by the institutions to children and not only those in the accommodation. In Croatia there are ten more institutions for children and youth with behavioural problems in which there are a total of 1,108 children.

Alternative Recommendations

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government should ensure consistent and timely measures for schooling during the COVID-19 outbreak, including the possibility of after school activities for children with working parents.
- The government should ensure the availability of mental health protection services and psychological support for children, adolescents and family members.

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- The government should ensure widespread high-speed internet access to rural and underdeveloped regions, IT equipment for all public services (education, social welfare,

health) and investments in the digital skills of child care professionals.

- The government should ensure flexible working hours for parents.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- The government should guarantee adequate child and social protection for the groups of its population in the most vulnerable situations, including young people who have left state institutional care. There is an utmost need for safety nets, including financial and personal support for care leavers.
- The government should establish a network of social services for families in vulnerable situations.
- The government should make more efficient use of EU funds to finance the above mentioned priorities.



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:



Child Poverty

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Government support

Healthcare

The government abolished any kind of visits or physical contact for children in hospitals and their parents during and after the lockdown. The measure was somewhat relaxed thanks to the work of NGOs and child care professionals; the Ministry of Health, in cooperation with the National Public Health Department, allowed daily visits lasting for 15 minutes.

Social Protection assistance

We registered very limited access to social services during the lockdown. The Ministry of the Interior did not report an increase in family violence but child care professionals reported that there was an increase that was not investigated by the police, who dedicated all its capacity to the implementation of anti-epidemic measures.

Online schooling

Online schooling was implemented during the national lockdown (March – May 2020) and organised on two key principles: (a) access to education for all students, with an appropriate level of digitalisation according to age, (b) the possibility of monitoring distance learning. The Ministry established cooperation with national public and private television channels (HRT, RTL) that broadcasted school contents for children up to 11 years (lower school grades) while older children used different digital tools and platforms.

Nutrition

Due to the lockdown, schools stopped providing meals for students; this heavily affected children living in poverty.

Negative developments¹

Mental health

We witnessed increased anxiety, fear, insecurity and depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic compounded by the earthquake in Zagreb and two surrounding counties (March 2020).

Difficulties due to online schooling

Teachers, parents and children often did not have the digital skills required and there were serious problems with internet connectivity in all areas of the country, especially the underdeveloped and rural areas. Free school meals for disadvantaged and poor children were stopped.

Lack of family support measures

There were insufficient measures in place to help children and families cope with COVID-19.

Difficulties experienced by NGOs

Civil society organisations were not included in the government measures to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquake in Zagreb. Moreover, pre-financing of the approved projects funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) was reduced from the contracted 40% to 20%. NGOs were also faced with a lack of digital skills and the financial means to purchase digital tools and IT equipment.

¹ More info on Kako smo? Život u Hrvatskoj u doba korone

Good practice

- Online psychosocial support on a volunteer basis²
- A media campaign to enable parents to visit/stay with children in hospitals³

- Free online education for online psychological support for child care professionals⁴

Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children

During the lockdown, NGOs were engaged in providing online support for child care professionals and were faced with a number of difficulties, the majority of which were

connected to outdated IT equipment and the lack of digital skills among professionals. Particularly in small communities and rural areas without internet access, teachers used to go once a week from door to door leaving bags with homework for children, and collecting them in the same fashion the following week.

Policies for Investing in Children

National strategy to tackle child poverty

Croatia has a national strategy against poverty and social exclusion for 2014 - 2020 in which children and young people are identified as one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

A national strategy is fundamental to efficiently addressing child poverty and the risk of exacerbating it as the result of limited access to public services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the years before the COVID-19 crisis, the government did not make significant progress in the protection of children's rights. In particular:

During 2019 and until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, large investments were made in expanding the network of preschool institutions, mostly thanks to European funds, aiming to increase the number of children in pre-school education.

- Social protection – in spite of the long-lasting reform of the national social protection system, there is still a large number of children in institutions, and too little is being invested in the development of a foster care network.

- Justice – the risk that children's rights are violated during divorce proceedings and endangered by the long and complicated trials and court procedures. The Minister of Justice announced that there will be no Family Courts in the forthcoming justice reform.

be obliged to address children's issues in the national recovery and resilience plans when applying for future EU funds.

The 2020 Country Specific Recommendations mentioned the limited internet connectivity, especially in rural areas that prevent telework and distance learning and amongst vulnerable groups, such as students from disadvantaged families or those with disabilities. Yet, generally speaking, the Recommendations were judged as unsatisfactory.

EU influence on national developments

The EU's involvement in promoting children's rights in Croatia has been insufficient. In order to change this, each Member State should

² Telefonski brojevi za pružanje psihološke pomoći; Kako si?; Besplatno on-line psihološko savjetovanje za mlade

³ Zahtijevamo promjenu pristupa djeci na bolničkom liječenju; COVID-19 i pravo djeteta da roditelj boravi uz njega u bolnici; Peticija za osiguranje prava svakog djeteta na boravak uz roditelja tijekom bolničkog liječenja

⁴ Za stručnjake mentalnog zdravlja: Video snimke 6 webinara o telefonskom i e-savjetovanju i besplatni priručnik "Halo, pomozite!"; Edukacija za liniju psihološke podrške u COVID 19 krizi; Online stručni skup: „Pandemija COVID-19 i mentalno zdravlje djece i adolescenata: prijetnja i prilika“

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The pandemic accompanied by the earthquake in the city of Zagreb in March 2020 revealed the weaknesses of social protection in Croatia where the most vulnerable population including children in care and care leavers were the most affected. The most outstanding challenges have included: lack of material support for the organisations concerned e.g. personal protective equipment (PPE), medical supplies, a sudden cut in the funds to the NGOs in various fields, and a significant delay in announcing the results of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) open competitions.

During the lock-down, the main challenges for children living in institutions were the complete isolation from their biological families, friends and their wider social network. Children were facing mental health problems without

adequate support. Residential settings were not equipped to contain the virus because they lacked the necessary PPE as well as the extra space needed for infected children. Moreover, after the March earthquake in Zagreb, the alternative care institutions were closed down and a significant number of children were returned to their biological families, who could not provide suitable living conditions and support. In the chaos caused by the virus and underdeveloped support and services for families and children at risk, institutions provided at least a minimum standard of safety and security, following strict government protocols on COVID-19.

The main challenges for foster families and children in foster families were the complete lockdown and isolation within foster homes, which meant foster parents had to take over responsibilities they do not have in “normal” circumstances such as the online schooling of all children and dealing with the various psychological effects of complete lockdown, isolation from their friends

and family, and potential online abuse because children spent a lot more time online.

Moreover, FICE Croatia points out that there was no communication between the government and civil society organisations, which worsened the already very fragile working relationship that has been established. To respond to the emerging challenges, the government issued a recommendation for action in social welfare institutions including specific protection measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic for the work of social service providers, organisational measures in relation to medical and other services that are provided by the service providers and guidelines for the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic for non-institutional social services providers including foster families or organised housing.

Regrettably, FICE Croatia highlights that the crisis has completely stopped all child protection reforms and de-institutionalisation processes.

All alternative care providers strictly followed the lockdown restrictions and interaction with the outside world was interrupted. The Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy has responded to the most pressing crisis situations only.

Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

There were no gatekeeping mechanisms available to help families in vulnerable situations during the pandemic. FICE Croatia outlines that these mechanisms are not systematically provided by the social welfare sectors even in “normal” times.

More attention needs to be given to developing adequate policies and systematic monitoring of the reasons for separating children and young people from their families. The last data provided by the 2017 Report by the Children's Ombudsman in Croatia shows that poverty is the

main factor that separates children from their families.

Progress on child protection and care reform

The reforms process started in Croatia in 2011 when the government endorsed the deinstitutionalisation plan for the transformation of social welfare homes and other legal bodies providing social services in Croatia 2011-2016. The overall transition from institutional to family-based and community-based forms of care shows slow signs of progress. A total of 6,256 children, including 5,437 children with disabilities were still growing up in institutional care in 2018 in Croatia.

The long expected law on foster care came into force in January 2019 with the ambition to promote the development of family based-care including increasing a number of family-based care placements. In 2018 there were 2,276 children living in foster families compared to 2017

when 2,263 children were placed in foster care.

Care leavers

The situation has been particularly difficult for care leavers, since the pandemic has had a serious effect on the labour market, and caused many people to lose their jobs. In addition to the lockdown and isolation, care leavers could not get the proper psychological, expert or financial support they needed, except in some cases of alternative care providers like SOS Children's Villages, who organised online counselling and offered additional financial support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation was especially critical for those young people whose accommodation ended or who decided to leave their accommodation due to the deterioration of relations with care providers during isolation. In one period of time they could not find substitute accommodation at all – even homeless shelters.

Care leavers within the group of students without grants struggled

since without jobs they were not able to pay all their expenses. During the lockdown they were among the first who lost their jobs. As this group of care leavers does not have other sources of income their living conditions became very difficult. FICE Croatia points out there was no systematic support offered by the social welfare sector to care leavers or additional services organised to help them overcome the effects of the pandemic.

Children in migration

In April 2020, among the 380 asylum seekers accommodated in the reception centre in Zagreb, almost 40% were under the age of 18 (141), 40 children were aged 0 to 3 and there were ten pregnant women. At the beginning of May 2020, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Croatia took over the coordination of all activities to help children and families housed in the reception centre for unaccompanied minors and asylum seekers.

EU funds

Currently there are no funds allocated for the implementation of the legislative or policy framework related to families in vulnerable situations and children in care. There were calls for proposals directed at providing services to families in vulnerable situations and children in care, however no funds have been decided and allocated so far. For example, it took more than two years to get the results of the Call for Proposals within the ESF aimed at the further strengthening of social services supporting the deinstitutionalisation process. The NGO sector in Croatia calls for the process to be sped up and made more transparent. Furthermore, until now no funds have been allocated in response to COVID-19.

For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org and Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org.