

Serbia

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

Contributors:

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35.9%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2018

Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

| | Total number of institutions/ SGHs | Number of children |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| Total number of children in alternative care | 21 | 5,997 ¹ |
| Institutional care (in total) in 2018 | 21 | 647 ² |
| Institutions for children with disabilities in 2019 | 6 | 478 ³ (number of residents of institutions for children with disabilities - 1455) |
| Institutions for children 0 - 3 | 1 | 40 |
| Children with disabilities in SGH in 2019 | 5 | 35 (in total 61 residents: children and adults) |
| Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2017 | | 5,350 ⁴ |
| Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019 | | 823 ⁵ |
| Small Group Homes (SGHs) | 5 | 35 (61 children and adults in these 5 SGHs) |

1. ДЕЦА У СИСТЕМУ СОЦИЈАЛНЕ ЗАШТИТЕ 2019.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Asylum Information Database - Country Report: Serbia.

Alternative Recommendations

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

- Ensure internet access for every child.
- Ensure that every child can use adequate technological devices, such as telephones, tablets or laptops, to learn.
- Provide free face masks for every child attending school and provide free sanitary products for families in need.

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

- Provide social cash benefits for families in need.
- Ensure that all children live in good housing conditions.
- Invest more in education and welfare benefits.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- Serbia should speed up deinstitutionalisation as part of prevention and response to any future epidemic.
- Serbia should pay special attention to the rights of children in residential care when imposing restrictions affecting residential institutions where children live.



Summary of Ratings

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



Child Poverty

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Negative developments ⁶

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was insufficient.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) had to face a period of uncertainty over how to organise activities with children and families. For example, they still do not know how many children do not have access to the internet, have a computer or a smartphone. Moreover, funds are mainly directed to COVID-19 emergency activities, causing cuts and delays in the financing of social activities.

Restrictive measures introduced during the state of emergency significantly affected children: kindergartens and schools have stopped working; their mobility has been heavily restricted; their ability to see their peers is limited

and not recommended; teaching is conducted online through various applications and over the RTS (Radio Television Serbia) public broadcast service.

Children continually experience fear of being infected with the coronavirus. Most children have learned about the coronavirus on TV or online, with only a fifth of them learning about it from their parents. However, in most cases their parents are the main sources of information on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children report that they mostly miss social activities (companionship, socialising, friends, going out) and the freedom of movement.

The prolonged restrictive measures, the state of emergency, and the continued fear of COVID-19 are exacerbated by the high level of uncertainty on many important issues. For example, how long the state of emergency and the COVID-19 outbreak will last, how it will progress, how they will be graded, how they will enrol in high

school, and so on. They primarily worry about the health of loved ones, family members and other people, including worrying that one of them may die.

Children appear to recognise the potential stigmatisation of people with COVID-19; they are afraid of transmitting the virus to loved ones, because then they will be "guilty" if one of them becomes ill.

Good practice

- The members of the Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia (MODS) helped families and children to understand how to cope with the lockdown and COVID-19 crisis by creating some background documents and sharing them online.
- MODS members are offering free webinars for parents and children.
- MODS members are urging the government to support the most vulnerable children and families in this critical period.

⁶ More info at [Being a child during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Policies for Investing in Children

National strategy to tackle child poverty

Serbia does not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty.

Addressing child poverty is not perceived by the political establishment as a priority. As a consequence, funds are redirected towards other issues.

Even considering the years before the COVID outbreak, the protection of children's rights in Serbia has worsened: there seems to be no social protection development strategy, no strategy for the rights of the child, no strategy to tackle poverty, no law on the rights of the child, no intention to remove the time limit for receiving financial social assistance.

The National Organisation for Rare Diseases of Serbia, the Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia and the Association of Patients of Serbia and Association Hrabriša are

the signatories of an initiative for assessing the constitutionality of Article 12, paragraph 7 of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children.

The controversial provision of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children places the parents of children younger than five with special and serious psychophysical disabilities in the difficult position of having to choose between being absent from work in order to take care of the child (and the corresponding salary compensation due to that absence) and the right to an allowance for help and care from another person.

Without any justification, this legal provision causes the interdependence and exclusivity of those two rights that exist separately and independently from each other. In relation to this Law, the issue of the current solution regarding the exercise of the right to leave from work to care for the child – maternity leave, has also been escalated. On 8 December 2018 the Constitutional

Court issued Decision No IUz-226/2017 to open a procedure to determine the unconstitutionality of the provision of Article 12, paragraph 7 of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children. We urge the government to completely abolish the controversial provision in order to stop the application of this measure that directly affects parents who fight for a dignified and good quality life for their children on a daily basis.

EU influence on national developments

- The EU involvement in promoting child rights at a national level was insufficient.
- The EU should support independent civil society organisations' advocacy and research work.
- While presenting Progress Reports about Serbia, the EU should put more emphasis on the

need to address children's rights issues.

Education

- Most children (83.3%) stated that they had no problems with online teaching.
- Almost half of the children have their own personal computer (48.3%), 37% share the computer with the household, and 14.7% of the children do not have access to a computer at all.
- Children are notably satisfied with the communication with their teachers, but somewhat less satisfied with the extent to which parents / guardians can explain to them parts of lessons they do not understand.
- Children who are less satisfied with communication with teachers have significantly greater problems with learning.

- Regarding distance learning, children reported having a problem with the internet (internet access, poor connection); with not having anyone to ask for clarifications about their lessons; with the quick succession of slides on TV so they cannot always read everything; with teachers who use different applications so they run out of memory space on their smartphones.
- The present-day education system in Serbia does not diminish the consequences of socio-economic inequalities and does not enable social mobility. The chances of a young person whose parents' education is only elementary to enrol in a high school or college and have the opportunity for a better-paid job and a decent salary are fairly limited.

Children's participation

Marginalised and vulnerable children are not listened to in Serbia. MODS members are trying to change this state of play through projects with the United Nations and the programme 'Dialogue for the Future', but much remains to be done.

MODS members are also implementing various projects to

help children from marginalised groups to be heard. Politicians should organise public hearings with children to listen to their opinions and ideas and set up meaningful consultation processes with children to involve them in the political process.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

In Serbia, residential institutions have been confining children and adults with disabilities since the outbreak of COVID-19, sometimes not even allowing them to go out in their institutions' yards for fresh air or to receive visitors. At the same time, external, independent monitoring of institutions is not allowed, leaving children without proper preventive mechanisms against abuse, violence, inhuman and degrading treatments and punishments. This

is the case especially for institutions that are locked down and short of staff.

Civil society actors have experienced significant challenges as a direct result of the crisis. Participation in decision-making on national and local levels significantly shrunk and all measures have therefore been taken without the involvement of civil society. All measures are decided by a small circle of people, without the involvement of NGOs. There has further been a lack of reliable and disaggregated data about the health situation of children in alternative care related to COVID-19. Finally,

there has been an overwhelming amount of information and challenges blurring the visibility of actions from civil society.

No plans for mitigating the long-term effects of COVID-19 have yet been released and it is suspected that none have been created.

Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Several studies have been published in recent years showing that the most prevalent reasons for putting children in institutions are of a social and economic nature, and especially that there is a lack of adequate community-based care and support. However, there are no estimates regarding the number of children at risk of separation from their parents. Additionally, the provision

of services to support vulnerable families was reduced during the lockdown, and some of the services halted. Only after the intervention of dozens of NGOs did the government re-establish and enable provision of some services.

The Ministry for Social Affairs has claimed that new placements of children in alternative care were stopped and that social care homes were instructed to place already institutionalised people in families where this was possible. However, there are no records that this was done in any institution for adults or children.

Progress on child protection and care reform

Child protection reforms do not seem to have been slower as a consequence of the crisis. In May 2020, right after the state of emergency was abolished, a Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence was adopted together with an action plan. It designated

EU funds (IPA III) of approximately €667,000 (activity 2.2.3. AP) for the improvement and development of specialist treatments for minors who committed crimes. This strategy contains some deinstitutionalisation related provisions. No processes seem to have been stalled because of the crisis. It is uncertain whether there are any EU funds allocated specifically to children in the context of COVID-19.

In Serbia, small group homes' (SGHs) have the same possibility to have a detrimental effect on children's wellbeing of bigger scale institutions. The children lack personalised care and attention, and stimulation, and are segregated from the community. The children who were taken out of large institutions a decade ago and were placed in SGHs are still there and some of them show significant regression in their health and wellbeing. Problems with the provision of healthcare and meaningful activities have been recorded, and the overall atmosphere and style of living is very similar to that in bigger scale institutions with somewhat better physical conditions.

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