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NATIONAL ASSESSMENT REPORT – CROATIA

The Croatian Constitution ensures children special protection and in 1992 Croatia adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which increased the state's commitment to children's rights. The main laws and legislation that stipulate measures and services aimed at preventing the separation of children from their families and that regulate alternative care are: the Family Act, Social Welfare Act, Foster Care Act and Juvenile Courts Act.

Croatia has many strategic documents that define its policy framework and reform guidelines, including social inclusion policies that are aimed at better protecting children's rights, promoting deinstitutionalisation, improving alternative care, developing preventative services and increasing the quality of social services and the family and social protection system.

The Social Welfare Act defined the obligation of providing services in accordance with the Social Services Quality Standards. This meant to increase the quality of services, with an emphasis on preventing institutionalisation, increasing focus on the holistic needs of beneficiaries and providing social service provision within children's areas of residency. The Standards define the complaints and appeals procedures, including the obligation of providers to respond to complaints. They also provide procedures for preventing abuse and exploitation and ensuring children's rights. The Social Welfare Act only recently prescribed the obligation that centres for social welfare create an individual care plan based on an assessment of needs and outcomes for beneficiaries. In principle this means that children and parents participate in decision-making and are kept informed about their rights, but in practice these rights are not always enforceable.

National program for Youth and National Strategy for Children bring the measures that improve the situation of youth and children at risk of social exclusion.

The provision of child care in 'family homes' was only enabled in 2007 by the Social Welfare and the Foster Family acts, which limited the number of children in foster families to three. Foster families that care for a larger number of children are now registered as a 'family home', a noninstitutional type of care that allows placement of four to 10 children. The Social Welfare Act does not prohibit the placement of children under seven years old in institutional care. It also has a broad definition of the circumstances under which children can be removed from their families, which includes, in some cases, the possibility to place children in alternative care due to family poverty, contrary to a fundamental principle of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.



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National Plan of Deinstitutionalization and Transformation of Social Welfare Institutions 2011–2016 (2018) and its annex Plan of Deinstitutionalization, Transformation and Prevention of Institutionalization 2018-2020 defines the targets for reducing the proportion of children in institutional care in favour of family-based care (foster care); for children without parental care (80:20). According to the data from Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy from September 2018 there are currently 2 259 children in 1 202 foster families, while 841 children are accommodated in the homes for children without adequate parental care, of which 169 children live in housing communities in an organized housing program with support of educators. Also, 90 children under the age of three are placed in institutional care although our national strategies and plans do not support that.

Several public reports highlight numerous challenges related to the availability, under-development and quality of services. They also point to the over-reliance on institutional care, disconnectedness and inconsistencies in the execution of policies, deficiencies in the vertical and horizontal coordination of different bodies, delays in implementing measures, overlapping measures and significant gaps and shortcomings in monitoring and evaluation. There is a need to coordinate the provision of a wide range of services to ensure adequate solutions tailored to families facing difficulties. Services in local communities are uncoordinated or unavailable and it remains questionable how truly tailored services are to meet the needs of families (A snapshot of alternative care arrangements in Croatia - Based on SOS Children's Village's assessment of a state's implementation of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, 2012).

Although many governmental and non-governmental organisations have recognised the needs of young people preparing to leave alternative care such as employment support, housing, continued education, as well as support in emergency and crisis situations, the existing support services are not sufficiently developed

Lack of know-how in provision of community-based services by the state providers in combination with insufficient training and support of employees of the services, as well as foster parents, delay further development of the much-needed services.

In the last decade Croatia has started to develop advanced forms of preparing young people for leaving care - semi-independent living in a group home. This type of care can also be considered an after-care service, since youngsters who must leave a home because of their age but who are not continuing their schooling and have no accommodation may use this service until they are 21. If they attend university, they may use the service until they are 26. Most of the group homes were established by the children's homes themselves (both state and non-state) or by the local community and NGOs. There are over 30 residential youth homes for organized housing supported with a total of 95 places. Unfortunately, the capacity is not completely filled since young people can be placed there if they have a job and income to pay for some living expenses. For youth from alternative care, finding a job and keeping a job is especially big problem.



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Residential youth homes are mostly apartments, and, in some cities, local government is paying some bills and some personal support is provided by homes for children, centres for social service support (ex homes for children) or NGOs. In Zagreb, for example, there are apartments for the use of young people who previously lived in children's homes, where the rent is paid, and groceries are delivered. They might be visited once a week by support staff, but they are not always prepared in advance to be independent. Some religious organizations also have halfway houses for young people who leave care. SOS CV has a semi-independent living programme where the apartment rent is paid for six months, and then payments taper off if and when the young person is employed. The idea is that young people learn to manage over time. They can stay for up to three years but if there is no progress towards employment and self-managing goals after a year, they will be discharged from the programme. In nearly all cases, the programme works. Some organisations are providing professionally supported organized living for mentally disabled young person, also.

In addition to group homes, there are other programmes to prepare young people for leaving care and independent life. These services—partly provided by children's homes, partly by non-governmental providers—seem under-developed and are not available to all young people.

Data from the research *Aging out of care (SOS – Children Villages - From care to adulthood in European and Central Asian societies, 2010)* based on the interviewed stakeholders showed that youth residential homes help young people to develop practical life skills, self-reliance, a sense of responsibility, values, quality relationships in the group, the ability to care for themselves, and an understanding of how to use their free time constructively. But also reveal an absence of fully developed programmes or universal standards regarding these services, with preparation for leaving care mostly carried out inconsistently or with difficulty. Also, it was mentioned that quite often educators do most of the chores instead of encouraging young people to do things themselves. They argue that young people should come to the group homes at the age of 15; in practice, many come only at 18, when they are about to leave the care system. In these cases, the preparation begins very late and the service as such becomes more of an after-care service, a transitory housing arrangement with some preparation for independent living.

Despite the growing number of youth's residential home in the last decade, data from shelters for homeless people shows that 20% to 40% of their residence are young people from alternative care. Some researchers have shown that the majority of them had unstable in-care experience and their transition to adulthood was not planned. Unemployment, insufficient financial resources, criminal record and alcohol dependence were key factors to enter homelessness. Among unemployment and insufficient financial resources, their everyday life in shelter is marked with deficient contacts with people outside the shelter. Youth believe that the most important factors for being able to leave homeless shelter are finding a job and stable and secure accommodation



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There is also a problem with lack of completion of higher education studies in Croatia among youth coming from alternative care. Student and college dormitories provide accommodation for young people who attend school outside their place of residence, and for those who do not have enough funds to afford their own housing. There is a system of scholarships for those young people who are studying, paid for by the Rotary Club, association called Vaša Pošta and some other private and state foundations. It is estimated that ten percent of young people who are care leavers enrol and two percent complete their programmes. One University in Croatia (Rijeka) also offers a possibility of half of tuition payment for young people leaving the alternative care. Problem is that income from scholarships and most often occasional work are below average. The experience of stigmatization and exclusion is strong, and most students hide the fact of growing up in alternative care because of fear of pity or unjust treatment. In situations where they need help and support many of them have no one to contact, and some of them are extremely lonely. Their social network is actually small and rarely associated with family or other long-lasting personal relationships.

In Croatia, after-care services for young people who have aged out of care are relatively informal, except for more structured residential youth homes (described above) and the still infrequent forms of housing care. Social welfare centres provide some informal after-care support for young people who cannot count on the support of their families after leaving care. Some after-care services are provided by NGOs. Most homes for children stay in contact with their former residents, as well as foster parents, helping them by using personal connections, by obtaining food for them, and in other informal ways, since by law no such services are provided.

Concerning the employment, Croatian Employment Service has a programme which was established in 2012. called Garancija za sve with measures such as: consultant for young people from alternative care, different measures for better employment.

Advisory support to young people is provided by community service centres and NGOs. The problem is with NGOs that are funded by the project and the services they offer to young people are not always available but stop with funding being stopped. Efforts should be made to promote more sustainable, longer-term financing of this type of social service.

Among other general services, free healthcare not dependent on employment status is guaranteed and medical services are mostly available to all, although young people from under-developed and rural regions are in a less favourable position.

The inadequacy of support for young people leaving care is also visible in the key strategic document for youth, such as already mentioned National Programme of Action for Youth (2014-2017) that emphasized that the children's homes do not provide young people with the life skills necessary for good social integration. Despite the efforts made by social welfare centres, care leavers find it very difficult to find lodgings and employment and to integrate into society. The programme has had certain measures aimed to a more systematic solution of numerous problems that these youngsters face. Since this Program had finished, Ministry



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for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy is making a new one, but already late with this task.

Resources:

1. Statistic data - , Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy
2. Izazovi studiranja mladih odraslih u alternativnoj skrbi u Hrvatskoj (The Challenges of Studying for Young Adults from Alternative Care in Croatia), Sladović, B., Branica V. I Urbanc K., 2017. ([file:///C:/Users/User1/Downloads/05_Sladovic%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/User1/Downloads/05_Sladovic%20(3).pdf))
3. From care to adulthood in European and Central Asian societies, SOS – Children Villages, 2010 (<https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/ageing.pdf>)
4. A snapshot of alternative care arrangements in Croatia - Based on SOS Children's Village's assessment of a state's implementation of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children
(<https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/aebb94ad-5ad8-4b94-adaa-6fed22e74063/Alt-Care-Croatia-EN.pdf?ext=.pdf>)
5. Iskustvo beskućništva mladih izašlih iz alternativne skrbi, Kasipović I., 2017
(<https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:199:566334>)