Children’s Welfare in the Context of Social and Economic Changes in Croatia

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Introduction

The Republic of Croatia is located at the crossroads of routes between Central Europe and the Mediterranean, along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea and its hinterland. It has a total area of 56,538 square kilometres of land surface and 31,067 square kilometres of the territorial sea. Along the coast there are 1,185 islands, cliffs and reefs, 47 of the islands being inhabited. One part of the country occupies the Adriatic coast, and the other the fertile Slavonian low-lands. The seafaring tradition, tourism, and the production of food are hence its natural orientations. In the northern areas of the country the Central European way of life prevails and in the southern the Mediterranean one. Croatia has 4,437,460 inhabitants (census 2001), 89.6% of them being Croats, 4.5% Serbs, while the share of other ethnic groups in the total population is less than one per cent. Religious affiliation follows similar patterns: 87.8% inhabitants declared themselves as Roman Catholic, 4.4% Orthodox, 1.3% Muslim, and the share of other religions is less than one per cent. With 78.5 inhabitants per square kilometre, Croatia is among the European countries that have a medium population density (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003a). Approximately 42% of the population is rural population.¹

Historical and political context

Croatia is one of the youngest European countries. After the end of the Second World War until 1990s, Croatia was a part of post-war communist Yugoslavia, a socialist federation of six republics. Its political system was known as self-management socialism that was based on a set of ideological values, such as the supreme authority of the Communist Party, brotherhood and unity of the

constitutional nations and ethnic groups, social ownership, workers’ self-management, class conflict-free society, etc. The integration of the state was assured through a communist party apparatus and ideology. Contrary to political and civil rights, which were rather limited during that time, citizens were guaranteed a relatively high minimum of social rights (employment, solid health care and retirement insurance, equal chances in education, the right to public housing, etc.). In the last century, Croats experienced two waves of mass economic and political exodus, at the end of the Second World War and after 1971, resulting in a great number of emigrants between these periods. The number of Croats living in Diaspora was thus enlarged to over two million (Spajić-Vrkaš, 2001). With the collapse of communism in Europe, Slovenia and Croatia, the most developed republics in the former state, opted for more dynamic democratic changes. In spring 1990, both countries decided to independently organise multi-party elections. In December 1990, a new Croatian Constitution was proclaimed and a May 1991 referendum voted in favour of independence. Soon afterwards the country experienced violent aggression and was exposed to war. More than half of the territory of Croatia was directly affected by war events, and a quarter of the country was not under control of the Croatian Government. Although Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991, it took four years of sporadic, but often bitter, fighting before occupying armies withdrew from most of the Croatian territory in 1995 when two major police and military operations were successfully launched. Under UN supervision, the whole territory was liberated in 1998 with the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia (the Croatian Danubian Region).

**Economic and social situation**

The economic and social situation during the last decade was marked by the negative consequences of war and relatively ineffective post-socialist transition. Total direct material war damage alone is estimated at about 30.4 billion US$, while estimates of the amount of indirect damage are around twice as much (Crnković-Pozaić, 1997). Besides the visible physical damage, the Croatian economy also suffered indirect war damage. For example, prior to 1991, tourism was Croatia’s most important source of foreign currency. By 1993, tourism revenues dropped to ten per cent of pre-war levels (World Bank, 2001). Between 1990 and 1993 the real gross domestic product fell by 27% (Ott, 2002). The position of families in need was additionally aggravated by high inflation (e.g. 135.6% in 1990, 249.5% in 1991 and 1.516% in 1993). In October 1993, a long-term Stabilisation Programme was introduced (it was in effect an anti-inflationary programme) which was a success in so far as it created a stable macro economic environment. After four years of decline, by 1994 the
first positive growth rate was observed (Crnković-Pozaić, 1997). Macroeconomic stability, coupled with the resumption of peace in 1995, contributed to a strong revival of economic activity. Inflation on average remained around four per cent thereafter. Since the end of the 1990s, the country has made extensive progress in transforming its economy and achieving economic growth. Driven by private consumption and some recovery in exports, the economy pulled through the recession in 2000. Tourism revenues surged as a result of improved political stability in the region. The banking sector recovered from its crisis and confidence in the banking system strengthened considerably (Anušić et al., 2003). Approximately 75% of GDP is created in the services sector (with tourism generating the most income and employment), 17% in manufacturing and eight per cent in agriculture. The GDP has increased since 2000 and in 2002 GDP per capita was 5,056 US$ (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003a). However, it was only at 97.3% of its 1990 level. Although Croatia actually has a relatively low GDP per capita, the improvement in economic trends was substantial. In the period from January to December 2003, the average monthly gross earning was 5,623 Kuna (€743) and the average monthly net pay was 3,940 Kuna or €520 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004a; 2004b).

Despite positive economic growth, the net change in employment has been persistently negative: many old jobs have been lost and few new ones have been created. Growth has benefited primarily those who have kept their jobs. The number of unemployed persons has steadily increased to 389,741 persons who were registered in 2002 by the Employment Service, when the official unemployment rate was 22.3% of the labour force. According to International Labour Organisation standards, the unemployment rate was 14.8% in the same year (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003a). The considerable difference between the rate of registered unemployed and the unemployment rate obtained from the Labour Force Survey suggests that work in the informal or underground economy is widespread. According to some estimates, this underground economy accounts for a quarter of the economy as a whole (Balaband et al., 2002). The largest employment categories in the shadow economy are pensioners followed by unpaid family workers (Crnković-Pozaić, 1997). The average age of the unemployed population has increased from 25 years of age in the 1980s to 31 years of age at the end of the 1990s, suggesting that the families with children and adolescents are much more affected (Babić and Bauer, 1999). The unemployment rate is highest among young people. Between November 1996 and the first half of 1999, the youth unemployment rate rose from 26.9% to 33.7% (World Bank, 2001).

It was commonly said among Croatian people that the negative economic consequences of the war would be easier to endure and repair than the ‘human

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costs’ of war, the most serious ones being loss of lives, massive population displacement and torn social fabric in local communities. The war forced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and inflicted severe physical destruction on infrastructure and housing. During the war, Croatia had to provide for an enormous number of internally displaced people from various parts of the country. The peak of the wave was in 1992, when 755,627 people had to be cared for in only about two-thirds of the country that was under government control. The number of children who had to leave their homes and move to another, safer, part of the country is estimated at 185,000 during this period (Ajduković et al., 2001). Other official war statistics on children as victims of war speak for themselves: 303 killed children, 1,280 wounded and 298 disabled, 35 children abducted, interned and missing, 4,455 with one killed parent and 131 with both parents killed and another 935 children with missing parents (Babić and Bauer 1999; Maleš et al., 1999). In late 1992, refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina also started to flee to Croatia, and their number amounted to 600,000. Croatia also hosted about 6,000 refugees from Kosovo during 1999. A further 180,000 Croatian Serbs fled the country in 1995, seeking refuge mostly in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Governments of Croatia and FRY agreed on facilitating organised returns. Yet the ‘two-way return’ remains a sensitive issue (UNICEF, 2000). Peace has brought new challenges, particularly with the return of families to newly liberated areas. This process can be almost as traumatising as the experiences of war and exile. After years of waiting, many people found that their home villages had changed considerably. Many of the basic services were shattered and old social networks were destroyed. The situation is especially difficult in ethnically mixed areas. Support for the reconciliation process at the local level is absolutely crucial, to overcome and heal the trauma of the war years. Until August 2001, the number of people that returned to their original communities increased to 279,731. At the same time, there were still 52,433 persons with refugee, displacement or returnee status who were eligible for governmental support, among them 11,951 children (Ajduković et al., 2001). Children still have to cope with the long-term damage inflicted on their physical and psychological well-being. UNICEF estimated that 400,000 children lived in especially difficult circumstances as a result of the war and 50,000 children were directly exposed to the horrors of war (UNICEF, 2000). Many refugee and returnee children still express symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and mental health professionals have reported an increase in behavioural problems such as aggression, delinquency and substance abuse. Other children may not have been immediately touched by the war, but have had to cope with lower living standards, changing family relations and broken social networks.

The war period was marked by a significant upsurge of supportive energy in many parts of Croatian society. Family and kinship played a crucial role in
providing care for displaced persons and refugees. Approximately 80% of them lived in the families of their relatives and friends, and only 20% were housed in state and other institutions, collective centres, and camps (Crnković-Pozaić, 1997). However, the post-war period was marked by apathy, high social differentiation and increased poverty. Most dissatisfaction can be found among those that are considered to be the greatest ‘losers’ due to war and transition: war victims, the unemployed and retired persons. The geographical diversity of the country was compounded by the varying experience of war in different regions, which have produced uneven patterns of economic development in recent years. The war contributed to a polarisation between the ‘two Croatias’. One, visible in some of the larger urban centres, exudes an air of relative prosperity. The other, including most of the war-affected areas, resembles a classic ‘zone of exclusion’ in which high levels of need co-exist with few material resources and low levels of human and social capital (Bošnjak et al., 2002).

Demographic situation and trends

Population natural change

Demographic changes show a number of negative trends: a decrease in total population during the last century, natural depopulation as well as generational depopulation, i.e., smaller age cohorts of children compared to their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. A rapidly declining birth rate in Croatia connected with demographic aging is accelerated through factors of instability, which disrupted normal population development trends – emigration to overseas countries, wars, inadequate regional economic policy which caused inhabitants to concentrate in a small number of towns as well as depopulation of islands and rural areas, leaving for ‘temporary work abroad’ and demographic losses in the Homeland War 1991-1995. It is estimated that the country lost about 1,680,000 inhabitants from 1890 to 1991, as a result of three emigration ‘waves’ due to world wars as well as economic and social instability (Gelo, 2003). The war for independence from 1991 to 1995 further aggravated the demographic picture by causing direct and indirect demographic losses. The war caused massive forced migrations of the population, including children and young people. According to data from the Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees, among the persons registered as displaced persons or returnees to their place of permanent residence in Croatia in 1996 every fourth person was a child aged 0-19 (53,554 children). Demographers estimate that approximately 10,000 children were born while their families were in exile, about 14,000 were forced to migrate when they were less than four years of age and some 15,000 when they were between five and nine years old. The war influenced the process of natural depopulation through direct demographic losses (higher mortality) as
well as through a faster decrease in the birth rate. It is estimated that 10 to 15 thousand more children could have been born if there had been peace at this time (Živić, 2002). Once more, as a result of the negative consequences of war and transition, migrations abroad intensified. Demographic losses have partly been replaced by a positive migration balance with foreign countries for the whole period from 1993 to 2002. The average annual net migration of the population amounted to 27,856 persons. The highest net migration for the mentioned period was recorded in 1993 (48,533 persons), and the lowest one (8,598 persons) in 2002 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003b). Most of the immigrants were refugees of Croatian origin from other countries affected by the war; a great majority came from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Croatia can be classified as a country with a low birth rate. The crude live birth rate decreased from 15.2 per 1000 in 1979 to 11.6 per 1000 in 1990, and the natural increase rate also fell every year from 1985, when it was 2.3, to a barely positive one in 1990. In 1991, a negative natural growth rate was registered – for the third time in the last century, and always as a consequence of war. Table 1 shows that the natural growth rate was positive after the war, in 1996 and 1997, but from 1998 it has been consistently negative. This trend could be attributed to methodology changes and not to the positive effects of the post-war period. Namely, the Croatian population was divided into two constituent parts from the 1971 census until the end of 1997 – the inhabitants of the country itself and its citizens engaged in ‘temporary work abroad’. Children of Croatian citizens who were born abroad were also registered in crude birth rate. Closer analysis of data shows that the natural birth rate in 1996 and 1997 was negative in Croatia, i.e., not counting children born abroad. When the country’s population is taken into account, it can be concluded that there has been an ongoing process of negative population growth for 12 years (1991-2002), mostly due to a rapidly decreasing birth rate (Akrap, 1999; Gelo, 2003).

The natural growth rate in 2002 was negative at -2.4 (-10,475), which is also confirmed by the vital index (live births per 100 deaths) which was 79.3. While in 1990 the number of live born children was 55,409, this number decreased by 27.6% in the year 2002, when only 40,094 children were born. In the same period, the number of deaths showed oscillations and in 2002 it was 3.1% lower than in 1990. Infant mortality rate decreased from 10.7 in 1990 to 7.0 in 2002. Almost all births in 2002 (99.9%) were medically assisted.

Life expectancy at birth in Croatia has also increased from 65.6 years for males and 72.3 years for females in 1971 to 68.6 years for men and 76.5 years for women in 1997, but it is still below the EU level (World Health Organisation, 2000).
Table 1. Natural change of population, 1990-2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Live births</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
<th>Natural increase</th>
<th>Births and deaths per 1000 inhabitants</th>
<th>Infant deaths per 1000 live births</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Live births</td>
<td>Deaths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>55 409</td>
<td>52 192</td>
<td>3 217</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>51 829</td>
<td>54 832</td>
<td>-3 003</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>46 970</td>
<td>51 800</td>
<td>-4 830</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>48 535</td>
<td>50 846</td>
<td>-2 311</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>48 584</td>
<td>49 482</td>
<td>-902</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>50 182</td>
<td>50 536</td>
<td>-354</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>53 811</td>
<td>50 636</td>
<td>3 157</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>55 501</td>
<td>51 964</td>
<td>3 537</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>47 068</td>
<td>52 311</td>
<td>-5 243</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>45 179</td>
<td>51 953</td>
<td>-6 774</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>43 746</td>
<td>50 246</td>
<td>-6 500</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>40 993</td>
<td>49 552</td>
<td>-8 559</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>40 094</td>
<td>50 569</td>
<td>-10 475</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Aging of population

The total population of Croatia during the last decade declined from 4,786,000 in 1991 to 4,437,000 in 2001 (Table 2). However, data from the 2001 census are not completely comparable to previous ones due to changes in methodology, because the 2001 census counted usually resident population of Croatia excluding persons who have been absent from the country for a year or longer. When persons that were ‘temporarily absent’ abroad are also excluded from the 1991 census data, the decrease is less significant: from 4,449,000 in 1991 to 4,437,000 in 2001 (Puljiz and Zrinščak, 2002). Besides the natural decrease registered in the 1990s, the population of Croatia is affected by the process of demographic aging. The share of younger age cohorts in the total population is decreasing due to the fact that Croatia is also losing those parts of population that create new generations. For example, the share of women in reproductive age (15 to 49 years) in the total female population decreased from 51.4% in 1971 to 46.9% in 2001 (Živić, 2002). Croatia was the first European country to experience the fall of total fertility under the replacement level in 1968 (Gelo, 2003) and in 2002 the total fertility rate was only at 1.34. The general fertility rate for the same year shows that only 37 children were born per 1000 women of fertile age (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003a). An accelerated decrease in fertility during the 1990s could be observed in almost all transition countries.
With levels of income insufficient to secure families with an appropriate standard of living and in such a turbulent period many couples did not decide to have children. Unlike many other post-socialist countries, the fall in the rate of fertility in the 1990s in Croatia was just a continuation of long-lasting negative demographic trends – though transition and war have undoubtedly speeded up the process (Stropnik, 2003).

Table 2. Population by age groups, according to censuses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census</th>
<th>Population by age, 000</th>
<th>Population by age groups, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total 0-14 years</td>
<td>15-64 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>4 160</td>
<td>1 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>4 426</td>
<td>1 008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>4 601</td>
<td>971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>4 784</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>4 437</td>
<td>758</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to 2001 census data, there are 931,927 children aged 0-17 years in Croatia (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003a). Their share in the total population is 21%. When this number is compared to their number in 1989, it becomes obvious that the percentage of children declined during that period by 12% (Stropnik, 2003). In 1961, children aged 0-14 constituted 27.2% of the population and their share in the total population decreased to 17.1% in 2001 (Table 2). At the same time, the share of elderly persons (65+) in the total population increased from 7.5% in 1961 to 15.7% in 2001. If this trend continues in the future and no affirmative measures are implemented, today’s youth will have to deal with the problem of supporting an ever-increasing number of non-active and retired populations. Data for Europe (including the Russian federation) in 1996 show a more favourable share of younger age population group (19.2%) compared to the elderly population (13.8%) while the share of adult population aged 15-64 (67%) was the same as in Croatia (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002a). In demographic theory, we can refer to an old population if the aging index, i.e., the ratio of the older age group (60+) to the younger age group (0-19) is 40 or over. The share of the elderly age group (60+) in 2001 was 21.5% and the share of the younger population aged 0-19 was 23.7%. In the last three decades, the aging index almost doubled, from 49 in 1971 to 91 elderly persons per 100 young persons in 2001. The average age increased from 29.5 years in 1953 to 39.3 years in 2001 (Živić, 2002).
Demographic changes and family

From a demographic point of view, marriage and family are the basis of Croatian society: 90% of the children born in 2002 were legitimate born to married parents. Without doubt, falling nuptiality and a rising divorce rate also contribute to the aging of population. A declining birth-rate, as a long tendency, is directly related to a smaller number of marriages, along with other factors of modern life-style. Nowadays, a significant number of young people attend secondary schools and universities and marry at a later age. However, it is more likely that there are less marriages because young people have difficulties solving their housing problems. The average number of marriages contracted between 1991 and 2001 decreased by 35% compared to the period from 1961 to 1971. The rate of marriages per thousand inhabitants has been consistently decreasing from 8.3 in 1967 to 5.0 in 2001. The divorce rate in the period 1987-2001 demonstrates considerable oscillations, which are due to the economic, political and social situation. In 2001, there were 211.5 divorces per thousand marriages. The divorce rate is still lower than in most other European countries, which may be the consequence of economic and social circumstances so that many couples choose to remain married due to existential problems. According to 2001 census data, of the total number of marriages about 90% are first marriages for both bride and groom. The average age at first marriage increased compared to census data ten years ago: from 23.3 to 25.4 for the bride and from 27.1 to 28.6 for the groom (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003a). In comparison to economically more developed countries, citizens in Croatia marry at an earlier age. The average age of a mother at the birth of her first child has been slightly increasing from 23.9 years in 1989 to 25.5 years in 2001 (Stropnik, 2003). The rate of giving birth out of wedlock was 9.6% in 2002, lower than in many of the Western European countries and post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The number of legal abortions per 1000 live births has decreased continually: from 697 in 1990 to 172 in 2000 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002a). It could be argued that the deinstitutionalisation of the family is slowly in progress, although this process is not noticeable as in other countries. The family as the basic unit of the social community is still relatively stable in Croatia today.

Economic and social welfare of children

Monetary income distribution and redistribution

Poverty in Croatia was a completely unexplored problem until a few years ago. Croatia has developed a strategy for combating poverty but has not yet established an official poverty line. Instead of a poverty line, the category of the
so-called social minimum (which is thought to be significantly below a reasonable poverty line) is used, on the basis of which state assistance is distributed to socially indigent population. Poverty has become an issue of political consideration; evident in the reform of the social welfare system, the need of improved targeting of social help and improvement and rationalisation of the social safety network.

The World Bank (2001) published a crucial study on poverty in Croatia based on data from the 1998 Croatian Household Budget Survey. Using an internationally comparable standard across transition economies, i.e., US$4.30 a day per person according to purchasing power parity (ppp) and calculation of per capita consumption, this study finds that the incidence of absolute poverty in Croatia is a very low four per cent.\(^3\) The report also estimated absolute poverty in Croatia based on the national poverty line. The national line was based on equivalent consumption and the level of total household expenditure in which families, after paying for essential non-food expenditures, just attain minimal nutritional needs.\(^4\) Using this methodology, the absolute poverty rate is 8.4%. Since some war-affected regions were not included in this survey, it was estimated that the inclusion of this population would raise the national poverty rate to 10%. The national poverty line reflects a higher standard of socially acceptable minimum, so the number of poor persons in this case is higher. The analysis of poverty showed that poverty was shallow. On average, a poor household’s consumption was 20.7% below the poverty line. However, due to the limited capacities of poor persons and limited nature of economic opportunities, poverty in Croatia already has many permanent features.

**Children’s position in the monetary income distribution and redistribution**

It is essential to identify how many children, and which children, live in households that are unable to purchase or consume a fixed minimum amount of goods and services. However, child poverty is not at the centre of the national policy debate. UNICEF (2001a) published a report that gives estimates of the child

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3 To compare absolute poverty in different transition countries, the World Bank used a threshold of US$4.30 a day per person. To convert the dollar poverty lines into national currencies, differences in the cost of goods were taken into account. Since estimates of these differences in purchasing power are taken into account, the international poverty line reflects ‘purchasing power parity’ dollars rather than actual dollars.

4 The national poverty line is estimated using the Food-Energy-Intake method and the old OECD scale in which the first adult has a weight of 1, while subsequent adults have a weight of 0.7 and children have a weight of 0.5.
poverty rate in Croatia and compares it with other transition countries. A line of US$2.15 a day per person (ppp) was taken as a low threshold of absolute poverty. A higher threshold of US$4.30 (ppp) was also used, recognizing that ‘subsistence needs’ inevitably vary with the level of country’s development. Children (aged 0-15) are classified as poor on the basis of their household’s per capita expenditures. Using the lower US$2.15-a-day line as a threshold for absolute deprivation, there are virtually no poor children in the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Croatia, while the average absolute poverty rate in 22 transition countries is 18.6%. When the higher US$4.30-a-day line is taken, only the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Croatia have child poverty rate lower than five per cent (4.9% for Croatia), while the average rate in 22 countries is 51.2%. A relative poverty line makes more sense in countries where absolute deprivation of children is rare. The relative concept is pertinent to the assessment of social cohesion. Therefore, it is important to know how many children live in households with resources so limited as to exclude them from enjoying a lifestyle that at least approaches that of the rest of society. A UNICEF (2001a) study also estimated the percentage of children (aged 0-15) living below the relative poverty line in 22 countries at the end of the 1990s. Poverty rates were calculated by ranking all individuals according to equivalised household expenditure, with the poverty line taken as 50% of the median of this distribution. The poverty line was calculated with moderate adjustment for economies of scale (A=0.75) as well as without adjustment (A=1.0). The ranking of countries remained similar, with the lowest rates in Croatia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. In Croatia, the poverty rate was 11.8% without adjustment (average rate for 22 countries was 18.4%) and 5.4% with the assumption of moderate economies of scale in the household (average rate was 13.2%). The latter one was the lowest among the 22 countries that were compared. A study in Croatia (Šućur, 2001) analysed characteristics of a specific subgroup of the poor – recipients of general social assistance (support allowance).  

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5 This report is based on expenditure data drawn from household surveys used in the 2000 World Bank report *Making Transition Work for Everyone* (1988 data for Croatia). Poverty lines reflect ‘purchasing power parity’ dollars.  
6 Given the differences in the level of national income, the report suggests that the US$2.15 line may be more appropriate for countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, while the US$4.30 line may be more relevant in Central and Eastern Europe.  
7 Total expenditure was adjusted for differences in household size using an adjustment factor of A=0.75 as follows: Adjusted expenditure = Total expenditure / Household size<sup>2</sup>. In this case, the four-person household has needs that are 2.8 times those of the one-person household (corresponding to the old OECD scale), whereas with the per capita adjustment (A=1.0) their needs would be four times those of the one-person household.
The results showed that welfare recipients could be categorized into two dominant groups: the unemployed and the incapacitated. More than half of the unemployed were without a job for more than five years. More than one third of recipients had at least one minor in their family.

As in other transition countries, most income inequality in Croatia originates in the labour market due to high unemployment rates. In addition, Croatia is characterized by marked inequality with regard to the distribution of incomes.

### Inequalities and the risk of poverty for children and other social groups

Studies of inequality in income distribution among households and individuals are relatively rare in literature on the Croatian economy. During socialism, this issue was rather unpleasant to the political and economic establishment. A World Bank study, based on the Household Budget Survey data for 1998, indicates that with a Gini (income) coefficient of 0.35, Croatia has inequality far in excess of most Central and Eastern European countries. The study provides no information on the level of inequality during the pre-transition period. However, other sources report that the Gini coefficient was 0.36 between 1987 and 1990 (UNICEF, 2001a). Differences in income between households in transition countries in the communist period were small compared to those in market economies. Income inequality in Croatia, unlike other post-socialist countries, was already high at the end of the 1980s and remained high in the 1990s. This trend challenges the general perception that inequality increased considerably during the transition period.

The Central Bureau of Statistics (2004c) recently released the first data on poverty indicators in Croatia, using Eurostat methodology (Table 3). Poverty indicators are calculated on the basis of data on the total net income of a household and all household members, which was defined by the Household Budget Survey for the years 2001 and 2002. Two definitions of net income were applied, depending on whether the income includes only cash and earnings or cash, earnings and benefits in kind. In the calculation of poverty indicators the modified OECD scale was used, in which the household head is given coefficient 1, every other adult aged 14 and over is given coefficient 0.5, and every child under 14 years is given coefficient 0.3. The at-risk-of-poverty threshold is defined as 60% of the median net income of all households. When the at-risk-of-poverty rate for Croatia is calculated by using total net income including cash and benefits in kind, equivalised net income is below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold for 18% of the population. The poverty rate calculated without income in kind is at 22%. Both indicators are higher than comparable indicators in 15 EU countries as well as acceding and candidate countries in 1999. The at-risk-of-poverty rate is much higher before social transfers. The poverty line for one-person households as well as for households consisting of
two adults and two children is higher than average in acceding and candidate countries. Inequality of income distribution is somewhat higher than in other countries. Indicators calculated without income in kind show that Gini coefficient amounted to 0.31 in 2002 and equivalised income median of poor persons was 29% lower than at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Another way of looking at income differences is to consider the ratio of a relatively rich person’s income to that of a poor person. Household incomes for one fifth of the population with the highest incomes are 5.4 times higher than the incomes of persons in the lowest income quintile.

Table 3. Poverty indicators, comparison of Croatia with EU member states and ACC countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With income in kind</td>
<td>Without income in kind</td>
<td>EU 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk-of-poverty rate, %</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers, %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social transfers excluded from income</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensions and social transfers excluded from income</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispersion around the poverty threshold</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk-of-poverty threshold</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For one-person household: HRK</td>
<td>19 254</td>
<td>16 810</td>
<td>7 342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€ (2)</td>
<td>2 600</td>
<td>2 269</td>
<td>3 124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For households consisting of two adults and two children: HRK</td>
<td>40 433</td>
<td>35 300</td>
<td>15 418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€</td>
<td>5 459</td>
<td>4 766</td>
<td>15 418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini coefficient</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Inequality of income distribution:
| quintile share ratio (S80/S20) | 4.5 | 5.4 | 4.6 | 4.2 |
| Relative at-risk-of-poverty gap, % | 23  | 29  | 22  | 19  |

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004c.

1) The abbreviation ACC (Acceding and Candidate Countries) designates countries in the process of association and EU candidate countries. Data on ACC countries include income in kind, while data on 15 EU member states do not include it.

2) In re-calculating of at-risk-of-poverty threshold indicators from Kuna to Euro, the medium annual currency rate of the Croatian National Bank was used, according to which in 2002, 1 EUR=7.406773 Kuna.
Analysis of personal consumption according to the socio-economic status of the household head showed that the largest total personal consumption in 1998 was found in households in which the household head was self-employed. In 1999, this was in households where the household head was a non-manual worker in the public sector. On the other hand, the lowest personal consumption for both years was found in households in which the household head was unable to work and, from the economically active categories, in households in which the household head was unemployed and in agricultural households. It seems that unemployment and differences in wages are main source of inequalities (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002b). Similarly, the World Bank (2001) study on poverty in Croatia finds that poor persons receive a much smaller share of their income from self-employment, entrepreneurial activities and informal sector jobs. They derive almost a third of their income from state transfers, which is not surprising given that the elderly are over-represented among the poor. Work in agriculture and subsistence farming is also a survival strategy of the poor – they rely more on in-kind income, such as vegetables grown in a family’s garden or small plot of land. This ‘own means of production’ is the only source of income for one fifth of poor households in rural areas.

An intergenerational comparative analysis of poverty in this study showed that children face an average poverty risk, working age individuals face a below-average poverty risk, and the elderly face a higher poverty risk. Analysis of the poor persons’ profile showed that the unemployed, inactive persons and elderly without pensions are three times more likely to be poor than the population as a whole. The likelihood of poverty is even greater for unemployed persons with small children. Poorly educated persons and those living in the rural parts of two regions (Slavonia and Central Croatia) face approximately twice the average risk of poverty. Differences in educational attainment are a major determinant of differences in poverty risk by region. The same study also suggests that persons who are currently locked out of employment due to low levels of education are also likely to envisage limited opportunities for their children. Children of the poor are very likely to drop out of the schooling system early and differences in access to higher education are very stark. In this study, none of the poor children attended college or university, and only ten per cent attended advanced vocational schools. This lack of access to levels of education that are highly valued on the market tends to perpetuate existing inequalities in earning prospects between the poor and the non-poor.

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8 A group with a high poverty risk need not necessarily account for a large fraction of the poor. For example, only 2.9% of the population live in households with an unemployed household head and only 5.4% live in a household with a head that is inactive.
According to a UNICEF (2001a) study, when child poverty rates are calculated relative to the rates among the population as a whole, the conclusion whether children face a higher risk of being in poor households than do other people depends on the choice of an equivalence scale. With no economies of scale, children have higher rates than the population as a whole in all 22 transition countries observed. In Croatia, the poverty rate for children in this case is 1.23 times higher than that for all persons. With an assumption of moderate economies of scale (with the adjustment factor of A=0.75), children in three countries only are under-represented among the poor. The lowest poverty risk for children relative to the population as a whole was in Croatia (0.77), while in Ukraine (0.95) and Slovenia (0.99) the ratio was somewhat less than one. In both cases, children in Central Europe (Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary) are more at risk of poverty compared to the average.

Recent analysis of data related to poverty by the Central Bureau of Statistics (2004c) also suggests which social groups are at a higher risk of poverty in our society. The relative poverty rate is above average among elderly persons (32%), at an average level for children aged 0-15 (22%) and below an average level for the active population (18%), i.e., age group 25-49. Unemployment is one of the most powerful generators of inequality – more than one third of unemployed persons (38%) have incomes below the 60% median of the average household income, compared to 24% retired persons and only seven per cent employed persons. Analysis by household type shows that one-person households face greater risks of being poor (38%) compared to households composed of two adults without dependent children (21%). Similar to one-person households, single-parent households with one or more dependent children face higher risks of being poor (37%).

Without adequate safety networks, children are at a higher risk of being poor if their parents are less educated, disabled, unemployed or only have low-paid temporary jobs. Children of single parents who do not have adequate incomes are also at a higher risk of poverty.

**Children’s position in distribution of cash transfer incomes over public budget**

**Social welfare policy and the position of children**

The Constitution defines the Republic of Croatia as a welfare state. This means that the state assumed the role of guarantor of its citizens’ social or welfare rights for the basic necessities. One of the basic features of the Welfare Law is stress on the necessity for the personal responsibility of the individual for his or her own social security and that of members of his or her own family, the dimension of family solidarity being emphasised (Balaband et al., 2002).
Public expenditure is undertaken by the national government and by local authorities at county, city and municipal levels. The national government is responsible for most expenditure linked to social security and welfare. Social spending at the level of the central government (pension, health care and social care in a wider sense) amounted to 26% of GDP in 2000 (Puljiz, 2003). An analysis of fiscal spending showed that current transfers grew by as much as 135% in real terms between 1994 and 2001. The expansion of current transfers has mostly been driven by the pension and health sectors. In 2001, current transfers on an accrual basis stood at 18.8% of the GDP. The structure of current transfers of consolidated general government showed that pensions absorbed 72.5% of current transfers, sick and maternity pay 10.4%, child benefits 4.5%, unemployment benefits 2.4%, Local Government current transfers 5.5% and other Central Government current transfers 4.6% (Anušić et al., 2003). Pension expenditures, which account for the bulk of social transfers, are rising rapidly leading to a deficit in the pension system covered from general Government revenues. The primary cause of expansion in pension expenditures was the use of pensions as a ‘social cushion for layoffs’, and the entry of new categories of soldiers from the 1991-1995 war. The Government has relied excessively on early retirement to ease pressures on the labour market. This policy created a gap between the falling number of contributors to the pension system, and to the state transfer system in general, and the growing number of beneficiaries. During the last decade (1990-2000), the ratio of employed people to pensioners declined from 3:1 to 1.36:1 (Puljiz, 2001). Pension reform from a paygo system to a three pillar system created some relief from pressures on pension spending.9

A huge difference in the allocation of funds to elderly people and children point to the fact that children are not visible as a distinct social group, neither do they have power to demand their rights. Moreover, elderly persons for the first time got more political representation during recent elections in November 2003, when three representatives of the Croatian Pensioners’ Party became members of Parliament and formed a coalition with the leading party to promote their interests and raise their living standards. There are also other poor groups in need of social assistance, but they are socially excluded and therefore not able to advocate their interests in public. Among them, the most vulnerable groups are refugees and displaced persons who lost all of their property as well

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9 The first pillar of intergenerational solidarity (14.5% of 19.5% contributions) is the continuation of the pension system to date. The second pillar of personal savings was introduced, i.e., a fully-funded pension plan (5% of contributions) to complement the first one, and it is compulsory for insurance beneficiaries younger than 40, and optional for those aged between 40 and 50. The third pillar of voluntary pension savings was also established, in which beneficiaries can optionally accumulate additional pensions.
as farmers and young people who have never been included into official employment system and therefore have no rights for unemployment benefits.

Social assistance and social care reform seem to be directed to decentralisation and deinstitutionalisation as well as towards rationalisation and control of social costs. The aim is to reduce state intervention and to increase the responsibilities of individuals, families and civil society organisations (Puljiz, 2003). The social reform package, which was approved by Parliament in late 2001, has led to a substantial reduction in social transfers. It reduced the social benefits of the general population by decreasing amounts and duration of child benefits, making sick and maternity leave less generous, and increasing patients’ burden of co-payments for medicines. Therefore, it can be expected that children and their families will be less protected from poverty in the future.

The social insurance and social assistance component of the social welfare policy consists of three, or possibly four, components. First, there are cash transfers intended to alleviate poverty, or programmes designed to provide help for individuals or families facing particular risks or encountering an additional burden, such as unemployment compensation and child benefit. Second, there are benefits in kind, but these are neither extensive nor substantial. Third, social welfare policy includes a more or less extensive provision of foster-care or residential care for vulnerable groups. To this list, one should add what are often known as personal social services – counselling and assistance in resolving difficulties experienced by vulnerable individuals, families or whole social groups (Bejaković and McAuley, 1999).

The basic assistance programme introduced by the new Law on Social Welfare is the so-called ‘assistance for maintenance’. Maintenance assistance is intended for individuals and families who have no resources or have insufficient resources to reach the so-called subsistence minimum, and includes payments to indigent households to bring their net income up to the social minimum. Therefore, the level of the subsistence minimum suggests what the official idea of poverty might be. The social minimum, i.e. disposable monthly pre-assistance income was raised in 2001 from 350 Kuna (€47) to 400 Kuna (€54) a month. This is equivalent to only 12% of the average monthly salary (Puljiz, 2003). Child benefits and some other forms of assistance are not included in household income when determining whether users can apply for assistance maintenance. The level of help depends on the number of family members, their age, capacities for work and some other characteristics. The amount allowed depends upon age, such that children between 15 and 18 years of age receive the same as the first adult, those younger than seven years of age receive 0.8 – the same as the second (and subsequent) adults – and children aged 7-15 receive

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10 Average exchange rate of the Croatian National Bank in 2001 HRK/EUR = 7,468966.
0.9 of the single person’s allowance. Some categories of beneficiaries are entitled to increased benefits. Pregnant women after 12 weeks of pregnancy and women who have given birth up to two months after the delivery as well adults living alone and entirely incapable of work are entitled to the benefit which is 50% higher than the basic level. Children of single parents and adults living in family and entirely incapable of work are entitled to the benefit which is 25% higher than the basic one. In 2001, there were 111,207 beneficiaries of the maintenance assistance program. Among them, there were 37,284 children or one third of all beneficiaries (Balaband et al., 2002). The share of poor children, i.e., children who are beneficiaries of the maintenance assistance program, in the total child population 0-17 is four per cent. It is also interesting to see how many people are estimated to be below the subsistence minimum. When judged against this standard, 2.5% of the population survives on a low income, much lower than the estimated national absolute poverty rate (10%). Studies show that the maintenance assistance programme is well targeted, but sufficient only to relieve poverty, not to eliminate it (Šućur, 2001; World Bank, 2001).

Children and their family members who are beneficiaries of maintenance assistance are also entitled to other forms of assistance aimed at relieving poverty, such as assistance in meeting housing costs (funded by the local government), one-time financial assistance and others, mostly one-time forms of assistance, such as covering costs of fuel and free textbooks. Social assistance is complemented by other programs, the most important being child allowances and unemployment compensations, which provide added protection against poverty. Child allowance also reflects a society’s recognition of the costs of raising children and is not aimed primarily at alleviating poverty. Therefore, changes in expenditure on child allowance and in the coverage of child allowance schemes are of considerable interest, because they reflect changes in family policy.

**Basic family policy measures**

**Child allowance**

Before 1999, child allowance was determined by parents’ employment status and was financed from the contributions of employed persons. The right to child allowance was based on their parents’ income. Some children, such as children of soldiers disabled in the war, children without one or both parents and children with developmental difficulties, had a right to a higher category of entitlement, regardless of family income. The Law on Child Allowance from July 1999 extended the right of child allowance to children of unemployed parents, farmers and craft persons, financed by the State Budget. However, amount of overall expenses for child allowance could not be paid from the state budget since the number of beneficiaries greatly increased, so changes to this
law soon followed. The new Law on Child Allowance came into force in January 2002 and it has stricter criteria with regard to income per family member and the age limit. Special categories of child allowance beneficiaries were abolished. The Law acknowledges two income bands for entitlement to child allowance. This is 20% and 40% of the basic budgetary salary per family member, which is determined by the Government every year. Children have a right to the allowance up to the age of 15, or up to 19 if they attend a regular secondary school. This is extended to 21 for school-attending children with damaged health, and up to 27 for children with severely damaged health (Bouillet et al., 2002). These restrictions reduced the number of child allowance beneficiaries in 2002. The average number of children who received child allowance was 546,200 in 2001 and it dropped to 494,371 in 2002. In the same period, the average child allowance dropped from 369 Kuna (€49) in 2001 to 285 Kuna (€38) in 2002 (Znaor, 2003). The relatively low amount of child allowance does not significantly compensate for child-related expenses. Hence, this family policy measure should primarily be regarded as an instrument in the fight against poverty. Child allowance as a right of every child will, it seems, have to wait for better times (Bošnjak et al., 2002).

Tax benefits
In addition to child allowances, the Croatian taxation system recognises tax benefits for dependent family members, including children. These benefits are realised in the form of reduction of the tax base on which citizens pay taxes. According to the current Law on Income Tax, which has been in operation since the beginning of 2001, every tax payer has the right to a non-taxable allowance of 1,250 Kuna (€167) per month, and the tax-exempt amount is increased based on the number of family members supported. For supporting a spouse, another family member and the first child the additional tax-exempt is 50% of the basic allowance. For the second child, the additional tax-exempt amount is 70% of the basic deduction; for the third child 100%; for the fourth 140%; for the fifth 190%; for every subsequent child the tax deduction factor is progressively increased. In the case of disabled persons, the basic tax-exempt income is increased by another 30% (Bouillet et al., 2002). The level of tax benefits depends on tax rates and on the number of children. Higher income earning parents have the opportunity to utilise larger tax rebates based on their children, whilst those with smaller incomes realise smaller tax rebates. That means that such tax benefits are, in a certain sense, contradictory to other measures of social and family policy, the main aim of which is to support poorer families with children.

Maternity leave and benefits

Maternity leave and benefits are governed by the Labour Law passed in 1995 and its subsequent changes, by the Maternity Leave of Unemployed and Self-Employed Mothers Act and by the Health Insurance Act. During pregnancy, childbirth and the period of care for the child, an employed woman is entitled to maternity leave which may start 45 days before the expected date of delivery until the child is one year old. For twins or more children of the same age, employed mothers are entitled to maternity leave until their children are two years old. Maternity leave for employed mothers is compulsory 28 days before the expected date of delivery until the baby is six months old. A woman can start work earlier if this is her choice, but only after 42 days following childbirth. The Labour Law determined a series of other rights for employed mothers, i.e., employed parents. After compulsory maternity leave expires, a woman can work part-time until the child is one year old (or father, if mother has full-time employment during that period). After the child turns one, one of the parents has the right to work part-time until the child turns three if the child, due to health or developmental problems, needs additional care. In cases where children have severe physical or mental disabilities, the right to leave in order to take care of the child can be used until the child turns seven, or one of the parents can work part-time. The right to shorter working hours can be realised after the child turns seven if the child is disabled. After one year and up to three years of life, one of the parents has the right to receive unpaid parental leave, during which their places of employment are reserved.

Self-employed mothers are basically entitled to the same maternity leave and benefit rights, which is regulated by the Maternity Leave of Unemployed and Self-Employed Mothers Act. Unemployed mothers are entitled to a compulsory six month maternity leave and benefit rights. The rights for maternity leave are also accessible to an adoptive parent or a person in whose custody the child has been placed by social welfare, under the same conditions as biological parents. Since the child and adoptive parent need to get used to each other, the legislator provides an adoption leave lasting 270 continuous days from the day of the adoption.

It was also considered necessary to regulate through the Labour Law the prohibition of dismissal. Hence, the employer is prohibited to dismiss a woman during pregnancy, maternity or adoption leave, or if a parent or adoptive parent choose to reduce their working hours, or if a parent or adoptive parent take leave to take care of a child with severe developmental disorders. The Labour Act has also regulated a special form of protection to employed mothers who breastfeed babies following compulsory maternity leave – the right to two breaks during work hours until the child is one year old. Finally, one-off help for equipment for a newborn child should be mentioned as another maternity
right. This assistance amounted to 1,360 Kuna (€182) in 2001 (Bouillet et al., 2002).

Long parental leave does not mean that parents really use it fully. At the end of 2001, the amount of parental benefit was decreased by approximately one-third (Stropnik, 2003). The new level is quite low, so that many women opt to return to their jobs when their maternity leave expires. A second influencing factor is the fear of job loss, because of the uncertain labour market situation and the discrimination of mothers with children by some employers.

Services for children and families

While maternity rights, i.e., the right to be absent from work to take care of a child, has made the employment of women easier, family and child services have not been sufficiently developed to ensure quality care when mothers return back to the workforce. The poor development of services could be explained by two basic factors: financial (public services are expensive), and value-oriented (the traditional structure of Croatian society relied on the family, especially with regards to the upbringing and taking care of children).

Day care

Out-of-family day care is a part of the pre-school educational system organized for children aged from six months until they reach school age (six or seven years). Parents co-finance the care of their children in nurseries and kindergartens, while local municipalities determine the level of parental contributions. Reduced participation fees are available to children of parents who are social welfare beneficiaries and to children of single parents.

Characteristically, a small number of children participate in pre-school programs in Croatia. In a study that compared kindergarten enrolment rates in 15 transition countries, Croatia, following FYR Macedonia, had the second lowest enrolment rate in 2000 with only 36.3% children enrolled aged between three and six years. In the former socialist countries, public pre-school child care was both widespread and highly subsidised from central and local government budgets. Transition caused a rapid fall in kindergarten enrolment rates in other countries but in Croatia the kindergarten enrolment rate was already low before the war and transition – it was 29.4% in 1989 (Stropnik, 2003). The enrolment rate of children aged one to three years is only 15%. A lack of public provision for small children is further substantiated by the fact that in June 2000, following enrolments, 5,400 children of pre-school age were put on waiting lists. These were mainly children of nursery age, from one to three years, whose parents were employed (Bouillet et al., 2002). Since there
are not enough pre-school institutions, children with employed parents, or with a single parent or from a poor family are given priority.

Quantitative data on the implementation of so-called part-time programs are not recorded in the official documents of the Central Bureau of Statistics, since a network for supporting and supervising these programs is absent. According to some estimates, approximately 20% of children who are enrolled in kindergartens in larger communities attend part-time programmes (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2002).

What about pre-school aged children who do not attend a regular pre-school programme? Nobody knows exactly what kind of care, upbringing and education they are getting, since there are no systematic studies on this issue. It can be assumed that some of these children attend part-time programs. A recent study on early child development and care included a survey with 1,471 families with at least one pre-school child not enrolled in nursery school (Milanović et al., 2000). The obtained data showed that 67% of fathers and 39% of mothers spend more than eight hours at work, while only 8% of fathers and 28% of mothers spend less than eight hours at work, the rest are at work seven to eight hours a day. This research showed that a significant number of parents live in multigenerational families. Thus, it can be assumed that grandparents look after children at home. Nearly all interviewed families think that nursery schools or some other type of pre-school programme are useful for child development. Reasons, most frequently stated by parents for enrolling children into pre-school programmes, included: ‘socialising and playing with other children’, ‘opportunity to become independent’, and ‘safety while parents are at work’. Reasons for not enrolling the child into nursery school included: ‘looking after the child is ensured at home or elsewhere’ (39%), ‘no vacancies in the institution’ (15%), ‘high costs’ (10%) or ‘no adequate institution in the place of residence’ (7%). In another research with 812 parents from one- and two-parent families conducted in 2002, 45% of single parents and 34% of parents from two-parent families stated that the price of nursery or kindergarten care was ‘high’ or ‘too high’ for their family. A relatively small fraction of all parents (13%) stated that they hired someone who is not a family member to do babysitting (Raboteg-Šarić and Josipović, 2003). Babysitting in most cases is a grey economy activity. The State Institute for the Protection of Family, Motherhood and Youth has introduced a program for training childcare workers in an attempt to offer babysitting services to parents. There is also a growing number of private initiatives, playhouses and babysitting services for afternoon or late night hours. However, due to their expensiveness they are available to only a smaller number of families.

Low enrolment rates in pre-school institutions can be an indicator of the marginal position of children in state policies as well as the expense of childcare that many families cannot afford. On the other side, this could also be explained
by the high value Croatian citizens place on the family, informal support networks of relatives and friends in childcare, and by beliefs among many parents that it is best for the child to be with his/her family for as long as possible during the early years of life.

**Other services for children**

Access to health care is nearly all-inclusive in Croatia. Legally employed persons are entitled to health insurance through their employers’ contributions to the health fund and minimal co-payments. Children are exempt from co-payments. Their parents, if unemployed and registered at an employment office, are also covered by health insurance, as well as their grandparents who have in their lifetime contributed to the health fund. Self-employed parents and farmers are also covered by health insurance through contributions. The current Health Care Reform is financed by three sources: contribution from employees’ gross salary (decreased from 16% to 10% in order to reduce current high labour costs), state budget (the health care of socially vulnerable groups as well as public health measures are financed from the budget) and additional medical insurance paid for by the citizens (on a voluntary basis for higher levels of care). Some negative consequences of this measure are anticipated, i.e., increased differences and health care inequalities between citizens (Bošnjak et al., 2002).

Care for child victims of war, in addition to the other mentioned measures and services for children, is provided by special forms of protection for specific groups based on The Book of Rules for civil and military sufferers (material care), a governmental programme of psychosocial help for sufferers of war through county advice centres and mobile teams (psychosocial help) and a series of smaller projects supported by various humanitarian organizations (Vojnović, 1998). Children whose parents were killed during the war either as civilians or in the army and children who are war invalids are entitled to special rights in cash and in kind. If they are left with a small pension after their parent’s death, children are entitled to 332 Kuna (€44) a month during their regular schooling in primary and secondary school. In addition, they are entitled to a stipend, free textbooks, professional rehabilitation, and if they are disabled, they have priority when they apply for a job, at students’ homes, etc. (Znaor, 2003).

Public services become the institutional parents of children and youth for whom their families cannot care, and these institutions have the responsibility of supporting children until they become independent. Social welfare homes for children and youth are homes that provide accommodation, food, care, upbringing, health care, schooling, training and adequate forms of professional support to children and adolescents deprived of parental care, mentally and
physically disabled children and adolescents with behavioural disorders. Currently, 6,109 children live in 70 homes for children and youth: 25% of them live in homes for children without adequate parental care, 53% of them are in homes for children with physical or mental disabilities and 22% of these children live in homes for children with behavioural disorders (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003c). Analysis of data according to children’s age shows that the total number of children aged 0-17 in social welfare homes for children and youth was 4,109 in 2002 or 0.4% of all the children in Croatia. The reform of the social welfare system has aimed at deinstitutionalisation and higher provision of alternative forms of care. In 2001, 2,463 children were placed into foster care families (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002a).

**Quality of children’s housing**

According to Household Budget Survey data, almost two-thirds of Croatian citizens (65%) live in a house and one third lives in a flat. A majority of citizens are the owners of their dwellings, without outstanding mortgage or housing loans (73.5%), 11.7% of dwellings are owner occupied, with mortgage or loan, 6.7% are rented and 8% are rent free (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002b). This does not apply to persons under 30 years of age who for the most part live in rented accommodation. Most of the dwellings are old, some 60% of them were built between 1946 and 1980, and only 20% between 1981 and 1999. Nuclear families composed of couples with children have a better housing status than younger single persons. Some 65-80% of couples with children are owners of their dwelling, and among those that live in a rented dwelling there are many who do not pay rent. Since other data points to their relatively good socio-economic status, it could be concluded that many live in their parents’ flats. In all probability, their parents had better opportunities to buy a cheaper second flat or to get a loan for building a house during the former system. Families with one child live in somewhat older dwellings than families with more children. This difference could be attributed to the difference in their socioeconomic status and age. Among families with one child there are more young couples who have not earned and saved enough to afford better accommodation. Young families in Croatia usually can only afford smaller and older flats as their first dwelling. Two-thirds of all the households, as well as households composed of couples with children, live in dwellings with two rooms or less, most of the others just have one room more. Unlike other families, single parents and their children live in older dwellings with less space and they are less frequently owners of their dwellings. Data on the average number of selected durable goods per thousand households for 2001 show that there were 979 TV sets, 398 video recorders, 135 personal computers, 1,195 registered passenger cars and
The reconstruction of homes and infrastructure has intensified, particularly the reconstruction of damaged and destroyed infrastructure in war-affected areas. During the war, a total of 590 settlements were ruined, one of them, Vukovar, a medium-sized town, was completely destroyed. It is estimated that over 145,000 houses, 1,820 cultural monuments and 247 religious buildings were damaged or destroyed, as well as 30% of the economic infrastructure. The extent of home destruction in fact means that about 280,000 children have at some point been homeless (Ajduković et al., 2001). In the period after the end of the war, enormous resources were invested for the renovation of family houses in formerly occupied areas, but the process was slow. At that time it was estimated that 35,000 families needed housing. Many were crammed into what should have been temporary accommodation during the war or were paying exorbitant rents in the cities (UNICEF, 1998). According to data from the Ministry for Public Works, Reconstruction and Construction (2003), 28,400 housing units and supporting utilities were reconstructed in places of return in the period 2000-2003, which facilitated the return of 85,000 persons with returnee status. A total of 123,020 houses and apartments either damaged or destroyed in the war have been reconstructed since the beginning of the program of reconstruction. However, many families are still in need of permanent accommodation. Currently, in Croatia a total of 4,271 housing units are still occupied by temporary occupants, mostly refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, among them many families with young children. Owners are either returning or have already returned to Croatia and they are waiting for repossession of their property. Therefore, provision of alternative housing is under way for occupants who do not have any other habitable property either in Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as for owners who have returned to war-affected areas. In the period 2000-2003 some 15,000 properties were repossessed. This situation has been difficult for all parties, especially for families with children.

Policies regarding utilities present serious equity problems. Electricity, communication and gas companies dominate this sector and enjoy quasi-monopolies. Tariffs, at the end of 1990s, were twice as high when compared to comparable economies in Central and Eastern European countries (World Bank, 2001). There is no coherent assistance program for the poorest segments of the population that lack income to pay utility bills. Thus, children in poor families may be deprived of electricity and heating in their homes. Elderly persons usually pay the bills first, sometimes at the expense of basic nutritional necessities. However, poor parents with dependent children often delay paying these bills, instead of cutting down on food or other necessities for their children. Municipalities run special assistance programs to help the poor with
payments of debt to utilities, but different criteria are used in different parts of the country.

Household Budget Survey data shows that many dwellings in Croatia are relatively old and their maintenance is also expensive. During socialism, many citizens got state owned apartments that could be privatized at the beginning of transition for a relatively small sum of money or through favourable loans. At that time the short supply of housing especially in large cities was already a problem. Today, the problem has worsened. High interest rates and stringent mortgage requirements are preventing even the non-poor from purchasing their own home or apartment. Due to improved social and economic conditions and heightened interest from domestic and foreign investors the real estate market is blooming and prices have been constantly increasing. Young people are in the worst position, so housing problems are one of the main reasons for postponing marriage and children. As a solution, the Government started a program that aims to offer more affordable loans to young persons and their families to solve their housing problems. Rents are also high, especially in bigger towns, and mostly regulated by the black market, which is an important source of inequity. In order to be able to afford these costs, people are sometimes compelled to accept sub-standard living conditions or to re-group into three-generation households.

Quality of children’s institutions

Since pre-school education is financed locally and funding is not secured in all regions, services are allocated unequally. A lack of services and the inadequacy of services are burning problems in war-affected areas. Current capacities are not sufficient while the provision of additional groups and services is restricted due to limited finances. There are also substantial differences in the quality of primary and secondary school education between highly urbanised areas with better facilities and professional staff and depopulated rural areas. Currently, there is a general move towards a new education system that is flexible and adaptable and, above all, child-centred. There have been lots of discussions recently about educational and school pluralism, the opening up of different schools and application of different curricula, throughout the entire educational system from pre-school to university level. Despite these positive ideas, the quality of education continues to be undermined by major problems. A high proportion of funds is spent on the building, reconstruction, equipment and maintenance of school buildings, and less money is available to facilitate quality teaching. Schools in war affected areas have to cope with additional problems, since reconstruction of infrastructure and objects, as well as the revitalisation of social life, is a slow process. During the war, 128 kindergartens
COST A19: Croatia

(32% of the total), 347 primary schools (39% of the total) and 88 secondary schools (26% of the total) were either destroyed or damaged. The reconstruction of preschool and school buildings in liberated areas commenced when the war ended. However, many schools are still in a poor condition. A number of schools (1,022 primary and 149 secondary) were built before 1940 and urgently require attention since these buildings do not last for more than 66 years (UNICEF, 1998). Other problems relate to the ‘overuse’ of space by primary and secondary schools. Due to the limited number of schools many schools have two or three shifts a day. School meals are not provided for all children, despite the proclaimed intention of providing full nutritional care for pupils. Sport halls are another problem since many schools do not have halls for sport activities (Vojnović, 1998). There have been some improvements in the material status of schools although these are not yet satisfactory.

Secondary school students and regular students at institutions of higher education (provided that they meet the academic prerequisites) do not have to pay tuition fees, which contributes considerably to the equalisation of educational opportunities for impoverished families. However, the cost of textbooks and school supplies overburdens their family budget. Access to education is also limited for secondary school and university students who do not have suitable secondary or advanced schools in their place of residence. In addition, student-commuters face many problems due to inaccessibility of transportation and expensive transportation costs. A lack of accommodation for secondary school and university students also presents a problem and limits access to education and students’ participation in informal education, sports, cultural and other activities.

Students who continue their education after completing three-year professional training programmes in secondary school face the problem of horizontal and vertical movement within the educational system. They are no longer secondary school students yet cannot continue tertiary education, which means that they are no longer a part of school system after getting qualifications. Students from poorer families are more apt to take this path. World Bank (2001) analysis shows that public expenditure in education is poverty-neutral at the primary level, biased against the poorest quintile at the secondary level and strongly biased against the poor at the tertiary level. At the secondary level the wealthiest quintile has enrolment rates 17 percentage points higher than the poorest quintile. At the tertiary level the wealthiest quintile has six times the enrolment rate of the poorest quintile.

Studies on the characteristics of living conditions in social welfare homes for children, based on the evaluations of professionals in these institutions, have pointed to inadequate spatial and material conditions. These institutions are usually big, with many residents, and children lack space – there are five or more children in one room in more than half of the homes. There are also
children who apart from accommodation need special treatments which are not available in some children’s homes. Children spend on average three years at these institutions, and many of them between five and seven years, so there is a need for more programs that aim to integrate children in their families or some other type of accommodation (Žižak, 2001).

Agency of children

Subjective experience of poverty

Subjective poverty is an important complementary source of data on deprivation. Some indirect information on poverty is available from results of surveys conducted from time to time on samples of 1,000 households by the Market Research Centre in Zagreb on the actual and necessary incomes of households. According to the results of the 1998 survey, some 80% of Croats considered themselves poor, which reflected a fall in their average standard of living and deep discontent about growing inequality (Šučur, 2001). This contrasts with the previously stated figures from the same period suggesting that only 10% of the population were below the so-called absolute poverty line. The World Bank (2001) study on poverty in Croatia also aimed to establish what people in Croatia identify as poor based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with various respondents. For Croats, basic needs include: food (a varied diet which includes, meat, milk, fruit and vegetables), clothes, housing utilities (electricity, water, heat, phone) and basic appliances (refrigerator, gas or wooden stove, heating stove, TV), school supplies and textbooks, health costs, and resources that are in line with cultural and social norms such as reciprocity in social networks. Generally, the higher a person is up on the social ladder, the less knowledge there is about the situation of the poor. Poverty is mostly experienced behind closed doors, among home owners and working families who generally seek help from their immediate surroundings. Extreme poverty is rare and such poverty as it exists is a matter of social exclusion rather than physical deprivation. Being poor in Croatia means an inadequate and monotonous diet, lower consumption (where anything beyond strict necessities is a luxury), no savings to rely on, indebtedness, poor housing and often cold living conditions. For the poor the causes of poverty are often out of their control. They primarily mention non-employment and low education, and in the formerly occupied zones people especially blame the war for the decline in living standards. For young people ‘poverty is boredom’. Rural youth explained that without money they can’t socialize with other young people, they are stuck with their family because of transport costs and because they cannot afford coffee in a café or any other form of entertainment. City youth explained that being poor means no goal, ‘only mindless sitting around with friends’.
Our research carried out in 1999 with a representative sample of 1,106 secondary school students (aged 17-18) who live in war-affected areas shows that concern about the standard of living within their own family and the feeling of insecurity which stems from this are part of these students’ everyday lives. Some 30% of students frequently worry about whether their family will have enough income to cover basic costs of living. In addition, 35% did not have enough pocket money in the previous year, 37% stated that their family did not have enough money to pay bills, 20% stated that they could not buy clothes, while going on holidays was impossible for 61% of the students that participated in the research. Approximately three-quarters of young people evaluate the standard of living within their own family worse than before the war (Raboteg-Šarić and Rogić, 2002). Children’s subjective experience of poverty reveals that poverty touches more children during their childhood than is shown by statistical data on poverty.

**Division of resources within the household**

We do not know very much about the division of resources within the household – about whether children are put first or not. Impoverished families cope with their predicament in various ways: spending less, trying to generate more income, usually in the informal economy, by doing poorly paid jobs or cutting expenses by only spending on the basic necessities. Moreover, many families share their income with other family members outside the household, such as children’s grandparents. A survey with 812 parents showed that more than half of the one-parent families could hardly make ends meet from one month to the next, and a little over a quarter of two-parent families stated the same. These were families from the four biggest cities in Croatia, with a higher level of education than the total population. Parents were offered a list of eleven statements regarding different indicators of financial difficulties and they marked all those they had experienced in the last twelve months. The rank-list of difficulties is similar in both samples (one-parent and two-parent families), all difficulties being more profound in the one-parent family sample. The most common difficulties, stated by more than a half of the single parents were: postponing shopping for themselves in order to buy something for their child, being late in paying bills and giving up going to some other place on vacation. A little less than a half of the single parents stated that they had to reduce consumption of overhead expenses due to a lack of money and that they did not have enough money to pay for their children’s extracurricular activities. More than one third of them could not afford to buy better clothes for their children, and they had to borrow money to pay the bills or they had to save on transport expenses. A third of these parents stated that they could not give their child an allowance or buy them candies. Every fourth parent (compared to every tenth
parent from two-parent families) could not afford to buy their children enough fruit (Raboteg-Šarić, 2003). This research, in accordance with other studies in Croatia, shows that many families experience poverty at a subjective level although the economic situation in the country has improved considerably. It also shows that parents would first cut down on their own expenses and they would deny their children some things only in the most difficult situation.

It seems that parents are reluctant to use children’s pocket money or any funds a child might have. A study on parenting practices, carried out with a representative sample of 2,823 Croatian secondary school students, shows that parents do not know very much about the spending patterns of their children. According to children’s answers, 21% of fathers and 10% of mothers do not know how children spend their own money at all and 39% of fathers and 38% of mothers know a little about it (Raboteg-Šarić et al., 2002). In another study, 32% of children aged 12-13 stated that their parents knew nothing or knew very little about how they spend their own money (Raboteg-Šarić and Brajša-Žganec, 2000).

**Access to space and use of time**

**Family**

**Family and household composition**

Like in most European countries, children in Croatia are not the unit of statistical analysis, which is a direct consequence of their marginalization in social sciences and in public life. Knowledge of children and childhood is mostly inferred from data and variables on adults, on children’s households and families. For example, in statistics on divorce rate for adults, there is nothing about a ‘divorce rate’ for children who are greatly influenced by divorce (Jensen and Saporiti, 1992). The following statistics show the number of divorces and number of dependent children respectively (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003d). In 2001, 4,670 marriages ended in divorce: 1,673 (35.8%) had one dependent child, 1,059 (22.7%) two children and 224 (4.8%) had three or more children. Other divorces included couples without children (1,118 or 23.9%) or couples with non-dependent children (596 or 12.8%). From these statistics, we can only conclude that divorces are less likely to occur in marriages with more dependent children, but we do not know how many children are affected by their parents’ divorce. The social context of children’s upbringing in Croatia can be further described by statistics on households and families.

According to 2001 census data, Croatia has 1,474,377 private households, 77.5% of them being family households and 22.5% non-family households (20.8% one-person and 1.7% multi-person households). Households and nuclear
families are becoming smaller. The average number of persons per household was 3.1 in 1991 and 3.0 in 2001. Similarly, the average number of family members decreased from 3.2 in 1991 to 3.1 in 2001 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003a). This trend is a result of two processes: a) continuous decrease in multi-person households and parallel increase in one-, two- and three-person households; b) the decrease in the number of children, especially those children that are born as the third or further child in a family (Gelo, 2003).

Table 4. Family structure, according to censuses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Couples without children</th>
<th>Couples with children</th>
<th>Mothers with children</th>
<th>Fathers with children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1 203 240</td>
<td>298 492</td>
<td>767 245</td>
<td>112 645</td>
<td>24 858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>1 307 423</td>
<td>350 997</td>
<td>815 777</td>
<td>119 615</td>
<td>21 034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1 367 106</td>
<td>370 166</td>
<td>827 281</td>
<td>140 134</td>
<td>29 525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1 252 025</td>
<td>338 025</td>
<td>725 999</td>
<td>156 036</td>
<td>31 965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/1971</td>
<td>104.1</td>
<td>113.2</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>138.5</td>
<td>128.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The share of families with children in the total number of families is 73%. A nuclear family consisting of a married couple and their child or children is predominant in the structure of Croatian families (58%), followed by married couples without children (27%) and single-parent families (15%) that are predominantly female-headed (Table 4). During the last three decades (1971-2001) the total number of families slightly increased by 4.1%. However, at the same time a diversification of family types can be noted, i.e., families composed of married couples without children increased by 13.2%, mothers with children by 38.5%, fathers with children by 28.6%, while the share of married couples with children decreased by 5.4%.

12 Statistical classification of families includes married couples with or without children and single parents (unmarried, divorced or widowed). Consensual unions are not counted.
Table 5. Families with children by type and number of children (2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Family type</th>
<th>Total families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two-parent families</td>
<td>One-parent families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>288 481</td>
<td>132 581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>327 463</td>
<td>44 630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+</td>
<td>110 055</td>
<td>10 790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>725 999</td>
<td>188 001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The analysis of families with children by family type and number of children (Table 5) shows that a majority of one-parent families have one child (70.5%). Among the two-parent families those with two children outnumber (45.1%) families with one child (39.7%). The share of families with lone children in the total number of families is 46.1% and the share of those with three or more children is 13.2%. If we calculate the share of one-parent families in the total number of families with children, we can conclude that children in every fifth family in Croatia (20.6%) live with only one parent.

Table 6. Children according to number of siblings in the family, by family type (2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of siblings</th>
<th>Family type</th>
<th>Total children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two-parent families</td>
<td>One-parent families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>286 898</td>
<td>131 567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>652 618</td>
<td>88 690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2+</td>
<td>365 994</td>
<td>35 510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 305 497</td>
<td>255 767</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 6 illustrates how information obtained from statistics on the family differs from data obtained when the child is taken as a unit of observation. If children are used as a unit of observation, the number of lone children decreases and the number of children with one or two and more siblings is higher. These tables demonstrate that statistical analyses which focus on children yield completely different results from official statistics which often takes for granted that

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13 Tables 5 and 6 include all families with children, irrespective of the child’s age. Data on the number of children are calculated based on the distribution of families by family type and number of children attending or not attending school.
children and families with children are more or less the same unit. The Central Bureau of Statistics has recently released data on the distribution of families by family type, number of children and age of children. These data further enable a better understanding of children’s living arrangements because it can be calculated how many children aged 0-17 have siblings and how many of them live with both parents or with only one parent (Table 7).

Table 7. Children aged 0-17 according to number of siblings in the family and family type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of siblings</th>
<th>Family type</th>
<th>Total children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two-parent families</td>
<td>One-parent families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>130 610</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>422 711</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2+</td>
<td>280 683</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>834 004</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to data presented in Table 6, approximately every sixth child (16.4%) lives in one-parent families. Table 7 shows that a great majority of children aged 0-17 (90.3%) lives with both parents who are married and every tenth child (9.7%) lives with only one parent. These data also show lower share of lone children (17.9%), while every second child has one sibling and every third child has two or more siblings.

Table 8. Newborn\(^1\) children according to birth order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth order</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>19 008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15 627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7 835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4+</td>
<td>3 853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total(^2)</td>
<td>47 068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^1\) Live births

\(^2\) Percentages slightly differ from 100 due to rounding

\(^{14}\) http://www.dzs.hr/Eng/Census/Popis/E04_03_01/E04_03_01_RH.html.
The number of newborn children by birth order in different time periods shows that the share of first born children was raised in 2002 compared to 1998, while the share of children that were born as the third, fourth or later child in a family decreased (Table 8). Although firstborn children may get siblings in the future, and the observed period is relatively short, taking into account the falling birth rate in Croatia, it could be hypothesised that future generations of children will have less siblings and that there will be more lone children in the family. This will in turn affect patterns of child socialization within family and peer groups, the quantity and quality of children’s interaction with their peers and siblings as well as their patterns of play and spare time.

Family values and relationships between children and parents

In comparison with family structure changes in most European countries, changes in Croatian families have been less dramatic and slower. Despite changes in the traditional family structure, having children and the institution of the family are highly valued in our society. In a survey carried out in 1999 with a representative sample of Croatian citizens, 98% of the respondents considered family as ‘important’ or ‘most important’ in their life, and among other basic values (job, friends and acquaintances, free time, politics, religion), family was ranked first; 95% of the respondents perceived having children as either being ‘important’ or ‘very important’ for having a successful marriage. At the same time, 70% of respondents approved of women becoming single mothers if they were not in a stable relationship and wanted to have children (Matulić, 2002). More than 70% of interviewed persons (both males and females) agree with the statement that people need to have children in order to have a meaningful life. With regard to the importance of children to a woman’s fulfilment, there is an extreme polarisation of opinions in which younger interviewees believe children are not an important factor in determining a woman’s sense of fulfilment. There is a large gap between the positive attitude towards having children and the actual number of births. Parents interviewed in this research had on average 1.28 children but their ideal average number of children was 2.70 (Črpić and Koračević, 2000). In a survey carried out with children aged 11 to 15, more than 90% of children stated that starting their own family and living peacefully among their family members was an important goal in their life (Radin, 2001). According to the Croatian data of a UNICEF (2001b) opinion survey with children aged 9-17, children have strong family ties – the majority of children state that they have ‘very good’ or a ‘good’ relationship with their mother (95%) and father (87%).

15 Source of data for Croatia: UNICEF Office Zagreb, GfK polling company results.
Research on children’s perceptions of parental child-rearing practices show that both younger and older adolescents think that they receive a lot of parental support, i.e., parents are sensitive to their needs, show them affection and use incentives and rewards for their proper behaviour rather than punishment for inappropriate behaviour. A majority of children give high estimates of their family cohesion (mutual understanding, the sense of belonging to a family, helping each other). However, both younger and older adolescents think that their parents do not consult them enough when they make decisions about children. Further, they do not include them enough when they make decisions about family matters and they do not explain to children the reasons for their decisions. In addition, a significant share of parents does not know much about their children’s whereabouts, i.e., who their friends are, how they spend their money, where they go after school or in the evening or what they do during their free time. Similar studies also show that mothers are more involved in child-rearing than fathers (Raboteg-Šarić and Brajša-Žganec, 2000; Raboteg-Šarić et al., 2002).

Children brought up in one-parent families have very little opportunity to spend time with their other parent who does not live with them. According to the statements of single parents (which in most cases were from single mothers), most of these parents that do not live with their children do not contact them often either. Every fourth parent has not seen their children in the last year and roughly only every fourth parent sees their children at least once a week or on a daily basis. Parents of out-of-wedlock children have less frequent contacts with their children than divorced parents. Despite the fact that more than half of the fathers live in the same town and many of them live in nearby counties, every other father of out-of-wedlock children has not seen his child in the last year, while the same is true for every fifth divorced father (Raboteg-Šarić, 2003).

Parents’ working arrangements

According to the Labour Force Survey data, in the second half-year of 2000 there were 45.5% employed women and 54.6% men in the working age population. The activity rate of women is approximately equal to their share in working age population in other European countries (Kerovec, 2003). Full-time employees work on average 44 hours a week and part-time employees work 22 hours a week. Approximately one fifth of all employed persons usually work in shifts, while one-fifth usually work Saturdays, every tenth person usually works on Sundays, five per cent work evenings and two per cent work night shifts. The work hours and time schedules of women and men do not differ substantially (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002c). Flexible working arrangements are considerably underdeveloped. The vast majority of employees work full-
time, while only about three per cent work part-time, which is substantially lower than in the European Union (almost 18%). The difference is particularly great for female workers. In the EU countries, 33% of female employees work on a part-time basis – the comparable figure for Croatia is only four per cent (World Bank, 2001).

There is no exact statistical data on the working patterns of parents, especially parents with small children. Survey data clearly shows that childcare in a situation when the opening hours of kindergartens and schools significantly differ from parents’ work obligations presents a great problem for both children and parents. Single parents face problems more often in the balancing of their work and parental role. Research shows that approximately half of the full-time employed parents from one-parent and two-parent families work, either occasionally or usually, in the afternoon hours. Compared to parents from two-parent families, more single parents (a little less than half) have to work Saturdays, while a quarter of single parents have to work Sundays and holidays. A quarter of single parents, more often than other full-time employed parents, also have an additional job, usually a low paid and unappealing one. Therefore, every fourth single parent of preschoolers and a smaller number of parents from two-parent families (13%) stated kindergarden opening hours, taking other daily duties into consideration, do not cover their needs. The care of younger children is also a crucial problem when unexpected circumstances arise, such as when a sick parent has to go to the doctors or hospital or when they have to leave home for a few days due to work obligations. Parents state that similar problems are most acute when children are young. With older children, financial problems and costs of raising children become more important (Raboteg-Šarić and Josipović, 2003).

**Formal institutions**

**Day care**

Pre-school education is professionally controlled by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, which applies specific pedagogical standards. There are different kinds of pre-school programmes. The basic programme is conducted in the form of kindergarten activities in which younger children (up to three years of age) participate in infant nurseries while children from three to six or seven years of age attend kindergarten programmes. Kindergartens are open from Monday to Friday and usually offer a full-day programme, including meals. A significant part of pre-school education is the ‘Preparation for School Programme’ for children prior to their first year of school. This programme is free of charge since it aims to give all children at least a minimal amount of pre-school education (usually 150 hours of programme a year) before they enter...
primary school, and is intended for children who do not attend kindergarten. Approximately 95% of all preschool children attended the ‘Preparation for School Programme’ in 2002 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2002). There are also various part-time programs that usually last an hour or two every day or a few times a week. They are implemented in kindergartens, in the afternoon, or in other institutions, like children’s libraries, community centres, sport centres, etc.

According to figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of pre-school institutions and the number of children in basic pre-school education has increased, compared to the war years. In the school year 2002/2003, overall 89,107 children enrolled in pre-school programmes in 1,067 institutions. On average, the ratio of children to childcare workers was 13:1. A great majority of children (92%) were enrolled in state owned institutions, while other children attended private and religious institutions. Three-quarters of children (75%) stay at pre-school institutions for eight hours or more, 22% from five to eight hours and 3 per cent for less than five hours a day. These data are related to the employment status of children’s parents – 74% of children have parents who are both employed, 22% of children have one employed parent, and 3 per cent of children have parents who are both unemployed (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003e).

The state participates in funding children’s time in kindergarten up to ten hours a day, and it is considered that more than this is harmful to children and is, thus, avoided. If necessary, children are taken care of even after official closing hours, for an extra charge, but ordinarily this does not occur. Kindergarten hours are from 5:30 (6:00) a.m. to 5:00 (5:40) p.m., varying from kindergarten to kindergarten. In the past there was always a kindergarten in each city area that was opened on Saturdays, but now this is not the case anymore. Parents’ work hours are most often from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. or 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Parents that live on the city’s outskirt need an hour or more to travel from work to home, due to heavy traffic. While children are in infant nurseries, many of them are enrolled in nurseries closer to their parents’ place of work, and by the time children are three years old, they are usually enrolled in nurseries near their place of residence. Children do not like arriving first or staying last, i.e., until closing time, so most often their grandparents pick them up before parents arrive from work. Grandparents offer the largest support to parents in raising children, and their brothers, sisters, friends and neighbours also participate significantly. Parents, especially those who do not have close relatives, try to self-organise so that, if possible, they adjust their work shifts in a way that one of the parents is always available when their children arrive home.

Kindergartens have limited playgrounds with sand, seesaws and other ordinary items. Pre-school children who live in rural areas and smaller towns
have more opportunities for walking and exercise than children in urban environments. Therefore, there are more and more pre-school institutions in the cities that include physical exercise programs, recreational and sport activities. A growing trend of turning grassland into roads and children’s playgrounds into parking places leaves less space for children’s free movement and play outdoors.

**Schools**

Primary education is compulsory and free of charge for all children. According to official statistics in Croatia, virtually all children (98%) are enrolled in primary schools and 94% continue education at some secondary school (Babić and Bauer, 1999). The school year in primary and secondary schools starts in September and ends in June, and consists of 175 school days. It is divided into two terms. During the school year, students have three holidays: Christmas holidays, Easter holidays and long summer holidays.

Education in primary schools is divided into two stages: class-based teaching with one teacher until grade four and subject-based teaching with different teachers from grade five to grade eight. Most children attend primary school in two shifts, so one week they go to school in the morning and the next week in the afternoon. One class lasts 45 minutes, with five minute breaks between classes as well as a longer 15 minute break or two smaller ten minute breaks. Younger children, those that attend grade one to four, usually have four to five classes a day, while higher grades most often have six classes a day. Children are, thus, in school usually from 8:00 a.m. until 12:15 p.m. or 1:00 p.m. in the morning shift, or from 2:00 p.m. until 6:15 p.m. or 7:00 p.m. in the afternoon shift. In some urban schools in new neighbourhoods with more children school is organized in three shifts due to lack of space; younger kids most often go to school in the middle shift at 11:00 a.m. After-school care for lower-grade children is offered to working parents, but this is only offered in some more developed urban areas and even then not in all of the schools. Children are in after-school care until their parents come to pick them up after work. Usually, one teacher is assigned to all the children. The kids have lunch first, then they play a little and after that they do their homework at school.

In the 2001/2002 school year there were 397,246 pupils in 2,088 primary schools. The average number of pupils in each class was 22 and the pupil/teacher ratio was 15:1. More than three-quarters of teachers are women. There are only six private primary schools, and they offer better services in terms of the pupil/teacher ratio (5:1) or average class size (16 children). Approximately three per cent of all children who attend primary schools (11,721 children) also participate in primary arts education offered at 83 music and three dance and ballet schools (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003e).
Detailed analysis of school statistics points to the differential spatial arrangements of primary schools. Forty-one per cent of primary schools only have combined class units (more than one grade in one class), an additional 11% of schools have regular class units and combined ones and less than half of the schools (48%) include only regular, one-grade class units. In more than half of all the schools (55%) teaching is organised only up to grade four for 33,487 children or only eight per cent of all the children that attend primary school. These types of schools are usually located in less populated areas and they are administratively part of a central school, so children have to travel further to another village to attend higher grades of primary school (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003c). In 70% primary schools teaching is organised in two shifts, only a quarter of the schools (24%) organise teaching in one shift and in 6 per cent of the schools classes are taught in three shifts due to a lack of space (school buildings) and numerous children (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2002). Children have more space in their school environment in rural and less populated areas while children in big urban areas have to cope with less space in their schools. However, these children usually have access to better school facilities and equipment as well as to more extracurricular activities and more qualified teachers.

Secondary education is not compulsory. There are basically two types of secondary school education. The first one is a general education, i.e., college preparatory secondary school (grammar school or 'gymnasium') which lasts four years. It offers a general academic education according to high national curriculum standards but no professional qualifications. Therefore, those who intend to continue in higher education (mostly better students of higher socio-economic status) follow this path. The second type is vocational education. Secondary vocational schools, such as polytechnics, medical schools, economy schools and schools for applied arts last four years, and many students who complete these schools continue their schooling. There are also three-year vocational schools (craft schools, industrial school and various farming schools) and those who follow this track cannot continue tertiary education.

In most secondary schools, teaching is organised in two shifts due to a lack of school buildings. It is not infrequent that two administratively different schools share the same building and exchange morning and afternoon shifts. Secondary school students usually have six to seven classes a day.

Data on enrolment rates in secondary schools varies depending on the source. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Sports, approximately 95-97% of the primary school children enrol in secondary school and approximately 85-90% of these secondary school students graduate within a regular time period (Bouillet, 2003). Other sources state that gross enrolment rate in secondary education is somewhat more than 80% (Starc, 2001), while net enrolment rate is only about 66% (World Bank, 2001).
At the end of the school year 2001/2002, there were 190,744 students enrolled in 627 regular secondary schools: 26% of them attended grammar schools, 43% were enrolled in the four-year vocational schools, 29% in the three-year industrial and crafts vocational schools and 2 per cent of all the students attended secondary art schools (music, ballet, fine arts and design schools). The average number of students in each class was 27. The student/teacher ratio was 10:1 and 65% of all the teachers were women. It is possible to establish a private non-secular or secular secondary school, but so far only two per cent of students attend these schools (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003f).

Children with developmental difficulties are being increasingly included into educational programs at regular schools, which contributes greatly to their integration in the community. Nonetheless, a very small number of children with severe physical disabilities are included in regular educational institutions because town-planning and architecture remain totally unadjusted to the specific needs of disabled children. They also experience difficulties integrating into peer groups or participating in organised cultural, recreational and sport activities as well as excursions and trips.

Children’s experience of a school environment

Research on schools, children and parents showed that most parents consider their children overworked because of school. Parents identified the following problems: an overly broad educational program in all subjects, resulting in children becoming disinterested and studying by rote; that teachers do not dedicate enough of their attention to children as persons; that there are too many tests, that teachers are unrealistic in their grading; inappropriate school timetables, i.e., the impractical times for which extracurricular activities are scheduled and that schools are inadequately equipped with modern teaching tools. More than half of the parents state that they help their child daily with studying and doing homework and that they keep close tabs on their child’s progress in school. Children’s responses confirm these views. More than 40% of the children state that they receive most help with homework from their parents, approximately 10% mention their brothers and sisters and just a small number cite paid instructors or friends (Lebruć and Tomić-Koludrovic, 1998).

Available data on secondary school students’ school experiences clearly show that education is children’s work and school is their workplace. In a study carried out with 2,452 secondary school students who attend schools in one of Croatia’s most developed counties, students described their daily activities (Bezinović, 2003). Most of the grammar school students spend one to two hours or three to four hours daily at home studying for school, one to four hours relaxing and socialising with friends and seven to eight hours sleeping. Every
tenth student in grammar schools spends more than five hours a day on studying after school and less than one hour on relaxation and socialising. Grammar schools are selective and place high demands on students while three-year vocational schools are less demanding, so half the students study less than one hour a day and more than half spend five hours a day or more on relaxation and socialising. Students in this survey also rated their subjective experiences related to different aspects of their school environment. Half of them, regardless of school programme, state that they experience fear of school failure frequently or very frequently, while 39% of grammar school students and 24-30% of vocational school students consider their school programs too demanding.

The school system noted for its high scholastic standards still remains centralised and very academic. The orientation toward learning facts prevails, which is why many students feel overburdened (the amount and rudeness of scientific material in the school curricula are areas of concern). Students are mainly perceived as knowledge-receivers and teachers as knowledge-givers. Relations between teachers and students are still predominantly formal and authoritarian. Many schools operate in isolation from the community and lack partnership relations with parents and local actors. Most schools lack space and necessary facilities for active and team learning, project-work, workshops, etc. Classroom furniture and arrangement often supports frontal teaching, i.e. pupils still sit at desks for two lined up in rows, with the backs of their peers in front of them (Spajić-Vrkaš, 2001). Schooling is mostly understood as a right, but it is also an obligation and children invest substantial energy, intelligence and work in the education process. The role that school life plays in the child’s life and the considerable workload that schooling puts on children does not differ that much from an adult’s full-time job. Schools represent society’s systematic effort to normalize a child in accordance with the demands of society rather than compliance with ideas about children’s needs (Qvortrup, 1991).

Market

Children as producers

Youth unemployment is a major concern in Croatia and to young people themselves, who, as survey data show, identify it as their greatest problem (Štimac Radin, 2002a; Raboteg-Šarić and Rogić, 2002). Very little is known about the economic activity of children. According to the Labour Law, children under 15 are not allowed to work, except if the jobs are simple and easy, and a special procedure is required to accomplish this. Children under 18 are not allowed to work night shifts. Besides, minors are not allowed to perform jobs which may endanger their health, morals and development. Therefore, employment is prohibited at jobs that are categorized as jobs performed under special working
conditions, especially difficult jobs harmful to health, as well as jobs related to gambling saloons, night bars, night clubs, disco clubs and other similar jobs. The Labour Force Survey does not provide data for children younger than 15 years of age, and older children are treated as a part of the working age cohort 15-24. Some information on children’s work is available in census data. According to the 2001 census, there were 2,022 employed persons aged between 15-17 years or 1.1% of the total population of children of this age. At the same time, there were 4,623 unemployed children 15-17 years old or 2.6% of the total population of this age. The number of employed as well as unemployed youth is much higher after they finish secondary school (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003g).

In a UNICEF (2001b) survey, eight per cent of all the children polled in Croatia answered positively when asked whether they did any job for which they got money (12% of young people aged 14-17 and four per cent of children aged 9-13). As children become older, they more often seek paid work opportunities. The prevailing pattern of leisure time activities among young people includes: going to cafés, discos and socialising with friends, so many of them need at least some pocket money for their free time. Due to scarce employment opportunities they probably will be more exposed to unfavourable working conditions in jobs that are part of the grey economy. Some survey data indicate that a substantial number of young people work in the underground economy. In research with a representative sample of 1,700 young people aged 15 to 29, more than one third (39%) affirmatively answered the question: ‘Have you ever earned any money by moonlighting or working without being registered?’ What is especially disconcerting is the fact that almost a third of them (29%) moonlight as the only way of earning a living, while almost half (49%) make pocket money and money for their personal needs this way. Only five per cent of the young stated that they contribute to the family budget in this way. Research results also showed that about 20% of young people aged between 15-19 years participated in the unofficial economy (Štimac Radin, 2002b).

We do not know exactly how much children contribute to their own and family’s financial situation, through temporary jobs during their schooling. The change to a market economy has introduced more alternative forms of employment and there are more self-employed persons, and more children probably help in family businesses (for example, in restaurants, especially during summer holidays – at the peak of the tourist season) or by working in the underground economy. It is surprising that children are not the topic of public discourse when it comes to economic issues, although there has been much discussion about children’s participation. Rather, they are considered as dependent persons who need protection, even when they are legally capable of work. Some topics related to young people were of concern in public and political circles – mainly
the so-called ‘brain drain’ and unemployment. Policies for children in this context are mostly regarded as an investment in human capital, for the purpose of the country’s economic development. It is not recognised that children themselves have to invest (either voluntarily or not) more and more of their time and energy in order to be better educated and competitive in the labour market. Many children work and save the contributions and gifts of their relatives for their future education. They study hard to earn competitive scholarships, and when they find a job they help their families and younger siblings. Children also contribute by doing domestic work, and they are also a source of emotional and practical support to their parents in difficult times. Poor children are also entitled to benefits from the social welfare scheme and they contribute in this way to their families.

Some indirect data on children’s productive work are available from a survey about Croatian families in which 13% of parents (aged 38 years on average) stated that their children participated in some kind of paid work (Raboteg-Šarić and Josipović, 2003). Children’s work most frequently included some sort of physical labour and sales work, while other jobs included working at parking lots, car washing, administrative work, distribution of advertising materials, cleaning, giving instructions to school children and interview work for surveys. Parents also rated how much their children participated in domestic work. According to parents’ accounts, children, on average, help only ‘to a certain degree’ through doing the shopping, cleaning and taking care of younger siblings, while washing dishes and preparing meals were the least preferred activities. Parents often try to shield children and they do not want to distract children from doing homework and doing well in school by demanding their help in domestic work or paid work.

Children as consumers

Concerns are sometimes expressed in public discourse about the negative effects of the market economy and globalisation in terms of growing consumerism. Things that once were luxury are becoming necessities and children and their families, recognised as good consumers, are a ‘playground’ for money makers. Children are exposed to aggressive advertising and to pressures from their peers to have fashionable clothes, toys, candies and other items that have become status symbols in their peer group. Parents have to adapt to these new circumstances and they do not always know how to resist similar influences. They are concerned that their children might feel inferior compared to their friends because ‘everybody has that’ or ‘everybody does that’.

Young people are recognised as consumers with their own income by market oriented services. Sitting in cafés, partying, and going to discos are the popular leisure activities of young people, and they frequently consume alcohol in
public places or buy cigarettes. Although laws in Croatia prohibit the sale of alcohol and cigarettes to children under 18, they are not implemented in practice.

Nowadays, there is an increasing trend of integrating children with their parents in big shopping centres where there are also areas for children in which they can play while their parents do the shopping. Some popular retailers of children’s toys and clothes periodically organise gatherings and parties with children and parents. Such activities are especially intensive during holidays – at Christmas, New Year and Easter, but now there are parties around shopping centres, cafés and discos for days that have never been traditionally celebrated in Croatia, such as, for example, Halloween. Family errands, especially for those families with smaller children, are becoming a more and more common way in which families gather together on weekends, especially when they cannot go out into open spaces because of weather or similar conditions.

Birthdays are nowadays organized in private institutions, which provide the space, a birthday cake, and theme parties that a child can chose from. For extras you can pay for a clown, a magician or some other form of partying. This type of celebration is preferred among young parents that work and who often live in small apartments. However, this is very expensive for other parents, and many of them are against this commercialization of family festivities, arguing that children need the warmth of home that parents themselves had when they were children.

Numerous tour-operators compete in organizing school excursions because it is a good source of income. Trips and picnics are organized with children in mind as end spenders, for example, trips to a large amusement park in neighbouring Italy.

Children are obviously recognized as consumers of various services, and they are also recognized as spenders that have their own income or influence over their parents. Similar activities, although primarily market oriented, also offer some new opportunities to children. They fill a gap in the otherwise scarce offer of public and safe places for children’s activities, play, entertainment and family outings, while in smaller environments such services are a rarity.

Public space

Children’s free time activities

Children’s free time is part of their everyday life marked as a space of relative freedom in which they are the most autonomous. In this part of their life, they are less exposed to the social control of adults than in other spheres of social life. Time-budget studies are practically non-existent, but some surveys suggest that children do not have a large amount of free time. A survey with 1,000
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children aged 11-15 who live in rural and urban areas showed that their daily
free time budget is distributed like this: 39% of children have more than four
hours a day, 36% of children have three to four hours a day, 22% of children
have up to two hours a day, and three per cent of children do not have any free
time. Children in cities and big towns have the least amount of free time. Time
spent alone is most often children’s free time. Slightly more than half of the
children are never at home alone, a quarter of them are alone for two hours a
day at the most, and the other quarter spends three hours or more alone. An
interesting finding of this survey shows that there is no difference in the amount
of free time available to children that are alone at home more or to children that
spend more time in the company of adults when they are at home. It can be
concluded that children use their free time quite rationally when they are alone,
not neglecting any of their duties (Ilišin, 2001).

According to data from the same study, children’s leisure time is dominantly
permeated by mass culture, as is the case with other population groups. Their
free time is primarily for fun and entertainment. Of all the activities during
leisure time, children most prefer hanging out with friends outside their homes,
rather than watching TV and listening to music. However, a general observation
is that children spend more time immersed in different media than socialising.
Of the four media analysed in this research, television is the most popular,
followed by the radio, children magazines and computers. Approximately every
third child watches television for more than three hours a day, every second
from one to three hours, while every fifth child spends less than an hour a day
watching TV. Playing a sport is the most popular extracurricular activity; almost half of the children play a sport. A fifth of the children study a foreign
language and a smaller group attend music school or are doing a music course.
Urban places of residence and the level of parents’ education significantly
influence children’s free time – children from better social backgrounds spend
their free time in a more structured way and are more engaged in organised
activities (Ilišin et al., 2001).

There is a plethora of extracurricular activities organised in schools, extra
classes for gifted children, as well as electives – one class a week after regular
school hours or in the opposite shift. Approximately 30% of primary school
pupils participate in extracurricular activities (Babić and Bauer, 1999). Children
are also engaged in various other activities during their leisure time that are
organized in other city areas, and some of them even attend two schools (i.e.,
ballet or music school). Many schools offer their spaces affordably in the
evening hours to organizations that offer recreation or other activities for
children. Besides the many extracurricular activities that are offered to children,
there is also an array of programs available to children free of charge during
summer and winter school holidays.
Research with secondary school students also shows that most of them spend their free time walking with friends, socialising with friends in cafés, going to discos or parties, reading newspapers, watching TV, etc. In other words, they prefer activities that are relaxing, fun and entertainment. Only a smaller number of young people, approximately one-fifth or less, are involved in cultural, artistic or creative activities, or book reading and hobbies. Active participation in different associations and clubs is relatively rare. Sport is the only exception; it is the most frequent and preferred organised activity. It seems that there are two broad types of children’s leisure time activities. The first one is characterized by unstructured activities whose primary function is fun and entertainment and the second one is involvement in cultural, creative and organised after-school activities that provide knowledge acquisition and personal development. This pattern is more frequent among children whose parents are more involved in child-rearing and is associated with higher scholastic competence, while excessive peer orientation and involvement in unstructured activities is associated with lower parental supervision of children’s activities and lower school success (Raboteg-Šarić et al., 2001; 2002). Involvement in organised outside school activities and after school extracurricular activities has undoubtedly positive socialization effects in terms of developing self-realising value orientation and conferring protection against risk behaviours. Therefore, similar activities are usually supported by parents since they have the function of protecting children against various social risks and of investing into the child’s competence for their future school and work lives. This is also a socially desirable socialization pattern in modern society, especially in urban environments particularly among the educated middle class. However, ‘preparation for the future’ is starting earlier and earlier, beginning at pre-school age and occupying more and more of children’s free time. Alternatively, children’s preferences indicate that many of them simply lack time to idle, relax, play or socialize with friends in informal surroundings, especially if we take into account their excessive workload at school. Therefore, we need to ask how ‘free’ is children’s free time.

Traffic hazards

In urban environments, children spend more time in various vehicles, travelling to and from school or moving from one part of town to another during their free time, while little children encounter many obstacles and heavy traffic as pedestrians on their way to school. Statistics on traffic accidents gives an insight into various risks children face in their surroundings. In 2001, 3,462 children aged 0-17 were injured in traffic accidents, as passengers in passengers cars (42%), as pedestrians (28%), as motor cyclist or moped riders (15%), as bicycle
Almost every suburb has a primary school, so children can usually walk to school on their own if there are no dangerous crossings. All first-grade children get a shiny cloth or a flag so that they are visible in traffic, and some cities have introduced raincoats for children in traffic. Various educational programs are also organized and police officers teach school children traffic rules, while the media raises awareness and warns drivers to look out for children in traffic. However, in newer larger areas children have to walk up to 25 minutes to school or they may have to cross big intersections so they are often accompanied by an adult. Communication between working parents and children when they come home from school is frequent and daily, by phone or cell phone.

Urban safety hazards and health risks have a significant effect on the play opportunities available to children. Spaces for recreation are often limited or, increasingly, involve financial costs, while motor vehicles make streets hazardous for play and open areas are used for parking. Parents’ working patterns, the distance between home and school and the growing use of the car mean that, outside school hours, many children are isolated in their homes and separated from their peers. This isolation may be heightened by parents’ concern for their children’s safety in urban areas (UNICEF, 2002). The provision of green spaces in urban areas is closely linked to the possibilities children have to realise their fundamental right to play. Children are losing spaces for their free play and are spending more time at home or in organised activities. In the Croatian capital, Zagreb, for example, public playgrounds in different parts of the city are popular places where adults and their children play, do sports, and socialise. There were several successful demonstrations organised by parents and children to save these places from being taken over by further building construction. These protests influenced the local government to change their plans and to leave children’s playgrounds alone.

Children in deprived physical and social surroundings

In war-affected deprived communities, children and young people describe settings as completely lacking appeal, with no recreational facilities, nor safe places to play or see friends. In a survey carried out in 1999, with the representative sample of 1,106 third and fourth year secondary school students who attend schools in war-affected areas, more than half of the students evaluated their place of residence as either mostly or totally unappealing for youth. Feelings of (in)security are a key aspect in the quality of their life. Approximately one third of students claim that it is not safe to walk the streets at night in their place of residence. Their feelings of insecurity are attributed to
the following: potential conflict on an ethnic basis when members of conflicting sides in war now live in the same place, fear of unknown people who immigrate to their areas, fear from psychologically disturbed and problematic people, the fact that the areas where they live have been exposed to more violence and anarchy, which creates the circumstances for various forms of criminal activity, fear of animals that wander around (e.g., dogs left without their owners), destroyed infrastructure (dark streets, ruined houses, low density of population), fear of threats and provocations and fear due to the fact that children themselves or someone they know have experienced violence (Raboteg-Šarić and Rogić, 2002). A UNICEF (2001b) opinion survey of children and young people in Europe and Central Asia stated that overall one in six children (17%) feel unsafe walking around their neighbourhood. The explanations these children give to an open-ended question about their feelings of insecurity are very similar to the ones that children in our study stated: frightening, threatening or other suspicious persons (in particular drunks, gangs and other aggressive people, drug addicts and dealers), violence in general (fights, quarrels, robbery), environmental issues (poor lighting, high level of traffic or big or dangerous dogs), knowing friends or family members who had been victims of violence. According to this study, the proportion of children in transition countries who feel unsafe in their communities is about double the share of Western European countries polled – 20% compared to 11%. Twice as many children feel unsafe in urban than rural areas (21% compared to 11%). The results of Croatian children who participated in the study show that 11% of them feel unsafe. Similar data, as well as other results of our study, indicate that the adverse circumstances children in war-affected areas are living in cannot be only attributed to the negative effects of armed conflicts. These dangerous and unfriendly environments are also typical of deprived communities in big cities or in areas that have experienced adverse economic circumstances.

The young people who participated in our study list a healthy and peaceful life, the tidiness of place, pretty nature, greater safety, better social networks, informal forms of support and a less stressful life as the advantages of their living environment. However, they describe more disadvantages, especially referring to the boredom of these places where there is little to do. Children do not have safe places where they can socialize, talk, and meet, such as youth clubs and cafés that are not occupied by adults and people who consume too much alcohol, discotheques they could go to on weekends. Rural youth feel isolated since they do not have any real place to go. These children enjoy going to school more, because this is the only place where they can meet their peers. During summer, these places are especially desolate. Young people have an abundance of free time, since there is no school and their parents cannot afford to go anywhere for the summer holidays. They cannot participate in some extracurricular activities that are school-related, nor go to larger towns for
partying because of the poor transport connections. They also have to travel to cities if they want to buy anything for themselves. It was previously mentioned that poverty means boredom due to a lack of activities during free time and places to go out for young people. This was also the prevailing experience for most of the children that participated in our study who live in villages, while children who live in towns are more concerned with safety issues (Raboteg-Šarić and Rogić, 2002).

Many young people’s attempts to organize themselves and to contribute their ideas to the local community fail after an initial period of enthusiasm, or they are suppressed due to a lack of funds and premises. Moreover, the community often lacks confidence in young people. When young persons initiate, form and begin to implement programmes themselves during their free time, the local self-management often fails to find a way to support them and does not provide a working space. Therefore, many initiatives and undertakings, confronted with high operational costs, rental costs, etc., gradually become commercialized and thereby, contrary to the basic idea, their accessibility is reduced (Bouillet, 2003).

**Virtual space**

All secondary schools are equipped with computer hardware and appropriate software support. Based upon a contract between the Ministry of Education and Sports and Croatian Telecom, all schools have received an ISDN connection to the Internet and Internet use for a determined number of hours free of charge. All schools have e-mail addresses and the majority of them have web-sites. However, school teachers have not been formally trained to work with computers and are not aware of the possibilities of modern technology that could be utilised for the preparation and presentation of their classes. Although the number of personal computers sold on the Croatian market has grown considerably, there is still a general problem that Internet is used by just a small part of the population, mostly young people. So-called Internet cafés, where one can use Internet for a fee, is a privilege available in several larger cities only. This is also influenced by the fact that Internet services are still very expensive due to the Croatian Telecom policy, which charges commercial (generally high) fees to the academic community (Bouillet, 2003).

According to data from a survey with a representative sample of young people aged 15-24, two-thirds of the young are computer users and more than half of them already have a computer at home. The use of computers correlates with residence (urban environment), family background (parents with a higher education and higher socio-economic status) and age (Spajić-Vrkaš and Ilišin, 2003). Research with primary school pupils in lower grades from Zagreb and
Children’s responses about their experiences with Internet indicate that children look for computer games, information on cars, fashion, favourite singers, jokes of the day, help in writing essays on books and chat sessions. Children, together with their parents, seek jobs, browse through TV programmes, look up information on their town and learn English. Many students, thus, have their own virtual classroom at home that complements their school environment and they learn about whatever they are interested in (Matijević et al., 2003). While the phenomenon of distance learning was once reserved for adult education, with the introduction of Internet this phenomenon is more and more associated with children. In a traditional educational system, teachers are ‘the guardians of knowledge’ that transfer their knowledge to students, who are mostly passive in that process. Internet enables students to switch from passive to active knowledge seekers and to take on the role of explorer and responsibility for their own learning process. Computers are an area in which children have a certain advantage over adults, because they adopt new technologies quickly and simply, without prejudice. A study carried out in high schools throughout Zagreb demonstrated that students use Internet more often than teachers. Forty-two per cent of students use Internet services; most spend nine hours a week online, while others spend just one hour and some of them as many as 30 hours online. Students mostly use Internet for browsing without a certain goal in mind. Communication with people ranks second, followed by fun and games, learning about topics that they are interested in, independently of their current classes in school and finally, ranking last, for learning more about topics covered in class (Rijavec and Matijević, 1999).

The Internet is referred to more and more in discussions about children’s and youth’s unrestricted access to information that is associated with a fear of child abuse through the Internet. Libraries, in particular, are areas where Internet is available to a large number of children. Specialized youth sections are being founded in libraries, where game-houses, workshops, visiting writers, book promotions and a slew of other activities are organized as well as access to the Internet. Thus, the implications of unrestricted access to information are receiving more attention. At a library with a youth section in Zagreb, a survey was carried out in 2001 with Internet users aged 12 to 19. In this study, 63% of children, girls more often than boys, thought that children and youth should be restricted from accessing certain content such as violence, pornography, Nazi-movements and similar materials. According to the young people, banning and controlling are ways of restricting Internet access, but that restrictions are for those younger than them, because they consider themselves to be adult enough not to need restrictions (this response was given by both 19 year olds and 13 year olds). Computer programs for Internet access-restriction are also mentioned along with controlling those who publish this type of material online.
Though more than half of these young people thought that they are personally responsible for their activity online, 70% believe that a librarian can investigate what they are doing online at any moment. Many children state that their parents have a positive opinion of Internet (Stričević, 2001).

Based on limited research data, it can be concluded that the children mostly use Internet responsibly. Internet opens up a variety of possibilities for communicating, learning about what they are interested in as well as learning about new places, people and traditions. In addition, Internet access is not a passive activity like watching TV, nor is it an activity that positions children as passive recipients of information as adults do. While using the Internet, children manage their time and they can do what they are interested in. Society often expresses fears that computer use will lead to the social isolation of children, yet such fears are not expressed as much with regard to TV viewing, an activity that is more common to adults than the new technologies. Surfing Internet, exchanging information, playing computer games and so forth are often activities that young people do with their friends. Taking into account the social isolation of children living in rural regions, their more restricted mobility and more difficult access to information, the use of new technologies would create new opportunities for them in the virtual world.

Mobility

As children begin to move further from home their range of activities and the number of risk factors (particularly related to traffic) that they face also increases. Children must be brought to a pre-school institution by an adult. They can only be picked up by an adult that the child knows. If the childcare worker does not know the person, s/he will not let him/her have the baby without verifying the identity of the person by talking to the parent on the phone. If a child comes to kindergarten on their own, the childcare worker reports child-neglect to the Centre for Social Care. Most often children are brought and picked up by their parents by car, or sometimes by older siblings or grandparents who bring them on foot. Parents in larger towns usually drive their children to school while they are in grades one to four, if the traffic in the area is dense and the school is not near home. Older primary school pupils walk to school, which is usually in the same neighbourhood. As they grow older, they also use public transport to attend various activities during their free time in different parts of the town or to meet friends. Secondary school students in large cities spend a significant part of their time using public transportation, either going to school far away from their neighbourhood or going out and socialising with friends in popular public places.
Mobility has different aspects and in some other parts of the country it is related to leading a quality life and entails social mainstream inclusion. For young people who live in regions distant from major centres (islands, villages and small towns) there are very few possibilities for education and employment. Accessibility of information or organised services adapted to the needs of young people are also reduced. Issues of return for displaced persons and refugees to their homes, the reconstruction and return of property, finding employment, reintegration into society and recovery of co-existence are the daily challenges for young people in war-affected regions.

A survey with a representative sample of young people between 15-24 years of age carried out in 2002 showed that over two fifths of the young plan to leave their present place of residence so as to meet their professional and educational aspirations. Almost half of this group would prefer to move somewhere inside the country, most often to a bigger city, which is perceived as the place that offers better opportunities in terms of career and social positioning, while the other half are thinking of going abroad. By comparing different studies with young people, it is evident that plans to leave the country to finding better opportunities rose from 11% in 1986 and 18% in 1999 to 19% in 2002. Their migratory plans are connected to their place of living, i.e., to the conditions in the place or region where the young actually live. For example, young people from Zagreb are less willing to go somewhere else, while rural youth and youth from Eastern Croatia wish to migrate to another place inside Croatia more than any other group. Nevertheless, optimism prevails among young people and it may be linked to their strong motivation to succeed in life by relying on their own abilities despite the unfavourable social and economic context in which they live. Despite a high unemployment rate, especially among young people, approximately three quarters of them assess their own present and future life as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Their optimism is somewhat higher than was found among young people in similar research at the end of 1990s. When asked to imagine their life ten years into the future the majority see it as a success, either in general terms or in specific terms of their professional advancement or family happiness (Spajić-Vrkaš and Ilišin, 2003).

Migratory tendencies are especially pronounced among young people that live on islands. Many of the islands are depopulated, and a single child has not been born on some of them in the last few years. The islands are also deteriorating economically and traditional businesses are becoming extinct. The government offers subsidies for transportation expenses to youth attending schools in nearby shoreline towns and has paid an increasing amount of attention to the revitalization of island life. In a recent study, student-travellers from a few smaller islands that attend high school in nearby cities described the advantages and disadvantages of life on an island (Babić and Lajić, 2001). They assign ecological-aesthetical values to advantages, such as peace and beauty, a
preserved environment and nature. They also state that life on islands has more cons than pros: it is poor in terms of culture/entertainment, exodus of youth, lack of choice in stores, and distance from shoreline. The dilemma on whether to stay on the island or to move to the mainland is already present with the first school trips to mainland. Children’s group of peers, i.e., friends that have already left, are probably the most influential. Moreover, emigration as a habit and a family tradition affects children. In their responses one can recognize traditional forms of behaviour. Men’s decisions to stay at home is virtually expected, because men traditionally inherit land, while girls most often leave islands, a decision that is often influenced by various cultural or entertainment needs. For example, men in a traditional setting consider an inn to be a form of entertainment, while woman’s presence in such a setting would mean being exposed to the gossip of the local environment. The most frequent pull factor for leaving home is a better culture/entertainment life, followed by schooling and employment.

Youth cultural mobility has also been seriously reduced. The number of young persons from small places who attend and subscribe to cultural events and programmes is decreasing, so that institutional culture has become to a certain degree the privilege of urban youth. In secondary schools recreational excursions, graduation trips and other travels are non-compulsory extra-curricular activities. Such trips are generally not defined by the educational plan and programme, but rather are a part of the annual plan and programme of the school, and are completed according to trends and commercial criteria, without educational requirements. The consequence of such an attitude toward the role of organised travel is an unsatisfactory level of tourist culture among the young and their lower mobility (Bouillet, 2003).

**Children’s rights and discourses**

Croatia, as a legal successor to the former Yugoslavia, took over into its legal system the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the UN Convention) and the succession has been in effect since October 1991 when Croatia took over its international obligations. The constitutional provision places the multilateral international treaties above individual laws, so competent government agencies are authorised to apply the UN Convention directly, without waiting for the necessary changes in legislation, which in the meantime saw progressive changes with issues related to children. Croatia had to harmonise its legislation with the UN Convention. New laws, such as Family Law and Penal Code, were amended in order to include a number of provisions that improved legal framework for child protection. ‘The best interest of the child’ exists as the legal term in Croatian laws, and it is also taken into account.
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in court and in administrative procedures involving children. This provision has a special place in family legislation as an explicit provision and as the basic legal concept. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (1996) in its concluding remarks on the initial report of Croatia called for more coordination of Government bodies dealing with children’s rights, for special attention to those likely to feel the impact of transition to market economy and privatisation and recommended that consideration be given to actively encouraging a culture of tolerance.

During the past decade the international community has been helping children in Croatia in many ways. The early forms of humanitarian assistance were soon supplemented with a range of programmes that addressed the changing needs of children. The greatest support to transformation of child and family services and advocacy of child’s rights came from UNICEF, being the first major international organization to come to Croatia in 1991. A representative of the UNICEF Office in Zagreb gave a short overview of UNICEF’s ten years of work in Croatia at the meeting of experts ‘Children – Witnesses of War, Ten Years Later’ in 2001 (Radočaj, 2002). The first phase of work was predominantly an ‘emergency phase’ where material help dominated (immunisation, food for little babies, medicine, hygienic packages for babies, notebooks and school kits for school children, heating, etc.), although education and psychosocial help was also important. In 1993, UNICEF signed an agreement with the Croatian government. Most of the programme activities were performed and implemented by official institutions, ministries and state institutes as well as in partnership with, at that time, a relatively small number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Projects aimed at the protection of children’s health ranged from immunisation to education of paediatricians, health personnel and parents, various programmes promoting health and the health education of children and youth, improving the material situation in hospitals and systematic monitoring of children’s health. In recent years, the emphasis has been on reproductive health and youth risk behaviour. When programs related to nutrition are analysed, it can be observed that in the first half of the 1990s significant funds were provided for food and diet supplements, vitamins and minerals for babies and little children, while in the second half there was a shift of activities toward education and the promotion of breast feeding. Improvements in the area of education are also observed from the programmes that at first offered immediate material help towards developing different models of work with school children and in preschool institutions (e.g. education for development, quality school, active school, education for tolerance and non-violence). From 1993 to 1996, a huge expansion of psychosocial programs was observed and they were implemented in schools, libraries, refugee centres, through primary health care, and local communities. Special attention was given to children who were direct victims of war and
children who lived in front-line cities. A number of experts and volunteers were engaged in psychosocial programmes for children traumatised by the war. This helped building the network of NGOs and civil organisations.

**Advocacy of the child’s rights**

During the first half of the 1990s the topic of advocacy of the child’s rights was not given enough attention due to the emphasis on immediate war consequences. More intensive activities started with the establishment of Parliamentary Sub-Committee for the Rights of Child in 1993 and the foundation of the journals ‘The Child’ (*Dijete*) and ‘The Child and Society’ (*Dijete i društvo*). The main role of the Committee is to scrutinise bills to be passed by the Parliament from the point of view of their compliance with the UN Convention, including the articles in draft laws. Once the laws have been passed by Parliament, the role of the Committee is to initiate their implementation, pointing to various possible practical solutions (UNICEF, 1998). The NGO ‘Our children’ (*Naša djeca*) has contributed greatly to the advocacy of child’s rights through the work of children’s forums and the practice of their rights to participation.

The Government adopted the National Programme of Action for Children (the NPA for children) in 1998 and in the same year the National Council for Children was established as an advisory body to the Government, focusing on children’s well-being. It has the mandate to coordinate and monitor the work of governmental bodies in implementing the NPA for children. It also monitors the implementation of the UN Convention and proposes initiatives that would advance the protection of these rights. In 2003, as a result of a long term initiative, an ombudsperson for children was appointed.

Many citizens have accepted the UN Convention, individual researchers, governmental institutions and NGOs have done a lot in its promotion. There is awareness about the fact that child rights should be protected – good will is shaped in the Constitution, and other legislative texts. However, the more is being done, the more is discovered. Since 1997, there have been many activities aiming at increasing public awareness on child abuse and/or domestic violence in general. Awareness campaigns in some of the larger towns of Croatia were initiated by NGOs, the Croatian Association for the Protection of Children from Abuse and Neglect, and many others. Non-governmental organisations also provide valuable services in their own communities, such as: SOS-telephones, counselling, education for professionals and volunteers, shelters, individual and group therapy. In 2001, there was public campaign named ‘Say YES for Children’ aimed at stopping abuse and exploitation of children. There are also some pilot projects, usually called ‘schools for parents’, but they mostly remain on the local initiative levels and there is still lack of larger education campaigns.
that would teach parents and parents-to-be about methods of discipline that would be more respectful of children’s rights. Since 2003 the problem of bullying, i.e. peer violence at school, has been recognised as the main topic of UNICEF campaign aimed at raising awareness and fund raising for prevention programmes that will be implemented in co-operation with the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.

After the revision of the NPA for children, the National Council for Children defined priority activities for children’s well-being from 2003-2005 which were accepted by the Government in July 2003. These activities should be in the best interest of the child and should stimulate coordinated action at all the levels of society. During the revision of the NPA many focus groups were organised with children and professionals who work in various fields. Representatives of state institutions, scientists and civil society organisations participated in working groups. Measures for the implementation of the NPA for children are planned in these areas: education, health, nutrition, the role of the family in raising children, social welfare, children with behavioural problems, children with developmental disabilities, neglected and abused children, children affected by the war, free time, culture and media. It is also recognised that more attention should be devoted to empirical research that would be the base for further planning (Ajduković, 2003).

The Government entrusted the State Institute for the Protection of Family, Maternity and Youth with the preparation of the National Programme of Action for Youth. During 2001 a Working Group was established consisting of numerous ministries’ and public administration bodies’ representatives, scientists, experts, NGOs and youth representatives. A greater number of young people had been gradually included during the preparation of the programme, so the process itself contributed to the creation of meaningful communication between public administration bodies’ representatives and young people and offered a forum for the young people initiatives. The National Programme of Action for Youth was supported by Parliament in 2002, and the Government adopted it in 2003. The particular importance of social activities in the following areas are emphasised: education and informatisation, employment and entrepreneurship, social policy towards young people (young people who fail to graduate from secondary school, young persons with disabilities, young persons with behavioural disorders, the position of young Roma, young persons without family support), health care and reproductive health, active participation by youth in the society, building civil society and volunteer work (youth organisations, volunteer work, media activities), youth culture and free time, mobility, dissemination of information and counselling (Bouillet, 2003).

The NGO sector is an important factor in advocacy for the rights of the child, in increasing the quality, range and accessibility of services and in building awareness of the civil society. With the establishment of the Govern-
Protection of children in local communities and children’s participation

There are many reforms in the social protection, education and health systems in the direction of decentralisation so there is a need to find new answers for empowering local communities to care for children. In deprived urban areas and war-affected areas where local governance is ineffective, resources are scarce and poorly distributed, communities’ empowerment is undeveloped, participatory channels are nonexistent and support structures are weak. Therefore, local communities represent the frontline for effective action to overcome some of the most serious obstacles to children’s development and the enjoyment of their rights. With good local governance, cities can become ‘child-friendly’, and mayors and local leaders have a central role to play in the promotion of children’s interests in their local communities and in creating effective opportunities for children. Some good practice models are inherited from the war period such as the programme ‘Mayors – Defenders of Children’ which has been operating in Croatia since 1993. Focusing on the needs of children living in smaller towns along the former front-line, this program has helped to promote widespread social mobilisation. Experiences from specific local communities served as good models of work for other towns. For example, Dubrovnik was the first to produce its own Local Programme of Action for children and pioneered the Mine Awareness Education now found across Croatia. Vinkovci pioneered new approaches to children with disabilities, including nearby villages in its programmes. Slavonski Brod runs a month-long cultural festival for children each year, and its Local Plan of Action introduces a multi-agency approach to juvenile offenders, child abuse and domestic violence. Appreciating the importance of active participation of children in addressing their needs, the frontline cities encouraged children to draft the ‘Children’s Plan of Action for Children from War-Affected Areas of Croatia’ (Bošnjak et al., 2002).
The ‘Child Friendly Cities/Municipalities’ initiative, implemented by the NGO ‘Our children’ (Naša djeca) in 1999, is a sort of continuation of similar programs which enables active participation of children, children councils and the visibility of children and their needs in their communities. The content of this programme is partly different from similar UN and UNICEF programs which are focused primarily on urban, ecological and safety living conditions of children who live in large cities. The Croatian programme includes other local communities such as municipalities and is more focused on contents from the UN Convention. There are different criteria that cities/municipalities need to satisfy in order to get ‘child friendly’ status such as developing a plan for the realisation of children’s rights, allocating funds from the local budget for the development, protection and education of children, support to NGOs that implement programs for children, involvement of children into decision-making processes, support to parents in providing care for children and other topics such as safety of children, adequate social care, health care, cultural, sport and free time activities. Until the end of 2001, 51 cities/municipalities joined the program, while many others welcome the initiative but are reluctant to participate due to financial constraints. One of the aims of the program is to mobilise more resources for children in local communities, including fund raising activities, which would help redefine priorities at the level of local community, specifically in the current period of economic hardship (Gregorić, 2001).

Children and young people still have little impact in decision-making processes and scarce opportunities to express their opinion. They do talk about violence and abuse, when someone asks. They are able to say what kind of services would help them most, if listened to. However, policy makers, professionals and adults in general do not consult children when designing interventions and services meant to assist them. Children’s councils are now being established in some local communities, as well as student councils in secondary schools. Apart from Children’s Forums led by branches of the NGO ‘Our Children’ (Naša djeca), there is no developed systematic process of organising discussions and collecting children’s views. Children and youth priorities and policies lack implementation strategies and resources, as well as analytic and empirical basis for promoting and evaluating the changes. The ‘threat of rhetoric’ is possible if the implementation measures do not accompany national children and youth policies and standards, especially in those counties that lack necessary organisational and financial resources (Spajić-Vrkaš, 2001).

Satisfactory democratic transformation and stimulation of economic development in the country depends to a great extent on the degree of young people’s participation in the actual processes in the Croatian society. There are two reasons for this: young people are the least burdened by experiences from
the past which slow down the achievement of desired changes and, as the most vital and the most flexible segment of the population, they are potentially the most creative social force. It is therefore important to persist in changing public awareness about the importance of children’s active participation, in creating more social space for their activity, informing and educating children to participate, and improving cooperation between the governmental and non-governmental sectors active in this area. Conventional approaches to children are inappropriate because they are primarily interested in the ‘prevention of negativity’. This type of approach disregards the possibility that children can constitute themselves as actors and partners with an array of their positive characteristics and advantages. In every community it is necessary to promote a culture of valuing, supporting and social inclusion of children; this implies trust in their good side and talents as well as promoting opportunities that will facilitate their personal and social development. For changes in this direction it is not necessary to invest in extraordinary means or exceptional efforts. On the contrary, a new solidarity of Croatian society with its offspring is necessary.

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