

CROATIA

Key Contextual Data

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Sources are outlined at the end of each section. Full details of all sources are to be found in the references section at the end of the key contextual data profile. Individual statistical data used in tables are indicated by an asterisk*, both in the table and in the sources.

Early childhood education and care

ECEC system type and auspices

ECEC in Croatia functions as a unitary system and comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Science and Education (*Ministartstvo znanosti i obrazovanja*). The MSES provides national guidance, and a framework for the accreditation and monitoring of educational provision. From an operational perspective, the system is highly decentralised, and the funding and management of provision is the responsibility of local authorities.

Sources: Bouillet 2017.
Eurydice 2014.

General objectives and legislative framework

Early childhood education and care in the Republic of Croatia has been an integral part of the education system since 1997. It is provided for children from the age of 6 months up to school age at 6 (7) years. General objectives and principles across all sectors of the education system include: children's right to high quality education; equality of educational opportunities; acquisition of key competencies as a right and obligation; inclusion; democracy; and pluralism in institutional forms and pedagogical programmes.

The ECEC system, including 250 hours of compulsory pre-primary education in the year preceding formal schooling, is regulated by the 1997 Preschool Education Act (*Zakon o predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju*), which was amended in 2007 and 2013. In 2008, the Croatian National Educational Standard (CNES) for Preschool Education was adopted. This Standard regulates the minimum infrastructure for both public and private ECEC provision, including financial, material and human resources. Regulatory measures cover the opening hours; the education and care of children belonging to national minorities; criteria for the number of children per group; criteria for the number of educators; and basic equipment. The content, duration and implementation of the compulsory preschool programme were regulated in 2014*.

Sources: Eurydice 2014.
Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MSES) 2011.
*Official Gazette, No.107/2014.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory enrolment age

Children do not have a basic right to a place in ECEC provision. However, since 2014, in the year immediately preceding school entry they are guaranteed a place for 250 hours per year and also obliged to attend for this minimum length of time (see *Statutory enrolment age* above).

Since 2014/15, kindergarten attendance has been obligatory and free of charge for a minimum of 250 hours per year during the year preceding school entry. This includes all children who have turned 5 years 6 months by 1 September 2015 (or who will have turned 6 years of age by 31 March 2016). The so-called 'preschool programme' is generally located in a kindergarten, but

sometimes also (mostly in rural areas) in a school. It is co-financed by the State, the regions and the municipalities. The programme may be offered for three consecutive months or be distributed over the kindergarten year.

Compulsory schooling starts in the September following the child's sixth birthday. However, a fairly large number of children do not start school until they are 7 years old. In 2011, only 20.8%* of 6-year olds were enrolled in the first class of primary school. This is in line with the national regulation that defines the age at which children should start their primary education. According to the Croatian Primary and Secondary School Education Act**, this includes all children who are at least 6 years and 5 months old. Younger children begin their primary education based on their parent's request and based on the special conditions prescribed by the Ordinance of the procedure of determining the physical and psychological condition of the child***.

Sources: Dobrotić, I. 2014.
 *European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
 European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice 2016.
 **Official Gazette, No. 87/2008, with amendments.
 ***Official Gazette, No. 47/2014.
 SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Types of provision

In the Republic of Croatia, in 2015/16 there were 1,602 facilities implementing early childhood education and care programmes: 1,432 kindergartens and 170 other kinds of accredited provision operated by legal entities other than the state.* 288 were self-contained kindergartens and 266 were kindergartens with affiliated units, also in different places (altogether 878 units). Compared with the previous year, the overall number of kindergarten units rose by 0.75% and the number of children enrolled by 0.6%. *Table 1* shows the range of provision that provides early childhood programmes.

Table 1

Croatia: Kindergartens and other kinds of accredited ECEC provision 2015/2016*

Service provider	Total	Kindergartens (6 months – 6 years)			Other accredited forms of provision		
		Self-contained	Kindergartens with several units/groups	Total number of units/groups	Primary schools	Play rooms in libraries	Other
State maintained	3	1	-	-	-	-	2
		1					
Local authority and self-governed	1.232	142	198	738	136	3	15
		1.078					
Other legal entities ¹	313	134	54	113	6	1	5
		301					
Religious communities	54	11	14	27	-	-	2
		52					
Total number of kindergarten units	1.602	288	266	878	142	4	24
		1.432					

According to the 1997 Preschool Education Act, a **kindergarten** (*dječji vrtić*) is an institution providing organised forms of non-familial education and care for children from 6 months up to school age. Kindergartens operate from Monday to Friday both on a full-day and half-day basis.

¹ Private Organisationen, soziale und Gesundheitseinrichtungen

Opening times are generally from 7:00 until 17:00, but can also be adjusted to parental needs. Children may attend for no more than 10 hours daily. The children are usually grouped in three age-bands: 6 months to 1 year; 1 year to 3 years; and 3 years to the start of primary school. Kindergartens comprise at least one group with a maximum of 25 children, but generally cater for around 200 children. Larger institutions, e.g. in cities such as Zagreb, may cater for up to 500 children, have up to 50 members of staff, and be located in more than one building. The distance from the child's home to the building should not exceed 1 km.

Alternative approaches: Five kindergartens work according to Montessori principles and five (privately owned) Waldorf kindergartens are based on Steiner pedagogy. One kindergarten, founded by Kiara Lubich, bases its work on the Agazzi sisters' approach. These alternative approaches are welcomed by the Ministry of Education, as is cooperation with NGO initiatives and organisations such as the International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA).

Children may also attend a **playgroup** (*igraonica*) run by institutions such as libraries or other cultural organisations. This kind of sessional provision must be accredited by MSES.

In 2013, legislation regulating **home-based provision** (family child care) was passed. The government introduced an *Act on Nannies* (2013)** to regulate the grey market and as a response to a shortage of places in the ECEC facilities. A family child carer (so called "nanny") has to be registered and is allowed to care for a maximum of six children in the age up to 14 years. Usually these services are financed by parents' fees, occasionally the municipality provides funding. This kind of service is supervised by the Ministry for Demography, Families, Youth and Social Welfare and is not part of the ECEC system.

Sources: Bouillet 2017.
*CBS 2017.
European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
MSES 2011.
**Official Gazette, No. 37/2013.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Provider structures

Whereas three quarters of ECEC institutions are run by public providers, a number of other providers, such as legal and natural persons and religious communities, also operate ECEC provision.

Table 2

Croatia: Providers of ECEC and number of children per provider agency, 2015/16*

Provider type	Number of settings	Number of children		Provider type in per cent
		under 3 years	3 to 5 years	
Public	1,079	19,637	40,984	75.4
Private	301	3,510	6,599	21.0
Church-affiliated	52	489	1,349	3.6
Total institutions/units	1,432	23,636	48,932	100.0

All providers of ECEC, regardless of their public or private status, are required to respect the Institutions Act (1993)** which regulated that profit made by the institution should be exclusively used for the further development of the institution.

Sources: *CBS 2017.
Eurydice 2014.
MSES 2011.
**Official Gazette, No. 76/1993, with amendments.

Participation rates in regulated provision

Between 2010 and 2015, the share of children under 3 years of age who did not attend a centre-based setting decreased only slightly. Likewise in 2015, only marginally more 3- to 6-year olds attended centre-based provision.

Table 3

Croatia: Participation rates according to duration of attendance in centre-based settings 2005-2015*

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years in %	3 years up to school entry in % ⁺
2005	1 to 29 hours	n/a ²	n/a
	Over 30 hours	n/a	n/a
	No attendance	n/a	n/a
2010	1 to 29 hours	0	14
	Over 30 hours	10	34
	No attendance	89	53
2015	1 to 29 hours	2.3	6.5
	Over 30 hours	9.5	46.5
	No attendance	88.2	47.1

* deviation to 100% due to rounding errors

According to national statistics, the age distribution in 2015/16 was as follows:

Table 3

Croatia: Enrolment in ECEC provision according to age-groups, 2015/16**

Under 3 years in per cent	3 to 5 years in per cent	6 to 7 years in per cent
17.6	36.4	46.1

Table 5 shows an age-disaggregated breakdown of the number of children attending ECEC provision and the relevant enrolment ratio.

Table 5

Croatia: Number and enrolment in ECEC provision according to age-groups, 2015**

Age-groups	Number	Enrolment ratio, in %
Under 2 years	8,533	10.8
2 year olds	15,268	36.6
Under 3 year olds	23,801	19.7
3- year olds	22,796	55.6
4- year olds	25,723	59.6
5- year olds	28,134	64.0
3 to under 6 year olds	76,653	22.0
0 to under 6 year olds	100,454	40.3

* Own calculations based on Eurostat data from 2015.

In 2013/2014***, nearly 80% of children (126,625 children, 79.3%) attending early childhood provision were in regular full-day (8 to 10 hours) programmes, only 11.4% were in short programmes of up to three hours per week.

There appears to be a considerable discrepancy between the statistics on maternal employment (just above the EU average, see Employment rates of parents with children under age 6 below) and child participation in ECEC. However, no national statistics are kept on the whereabouts of children who are not attending ECEC provision. According to anecdotal evidence, quite a large informal ('grey') market exists for home-based day care. Regional disparities in participation rates are considerable. Whereas in the city of Zagreb, 85% of children aged 6 months to 6 years attend

² n/a = not available

kindergarten, participation rates in other parts of the country are much lower. In Zagreb, approximately 40.000 children attend public provision and 5000 attend private centres. The public kindergartens (60) tend to be much larger than the private and church-affiliated institutions (68 in all) institutions. There is a great need for expansion, but new buildings are very expensive and difficult to realise. However, bearing the Europe 2020 Strategy in mind, expansion is one of the greatest challenges for the ECEC system in Croatia.

Sources: *Eurostat 2017f.
**CBS 2017.
***Vidović, T. and D. Drviš. 2015, 4.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Financing and costs for parents

Since 1993, ECEC provision in Croatia is co-financed by the State, local authorities and parents. Kindergartens established by local and regional authorities have the right to charge parents for their services. Although fees are income-related, they differ considerably from municipality to municipality.* An 'economic price' is calculated for each kindergarten, which includes the staffing formula, facilities and equipment, meals, and the number of children in need of special support. Monthly costs per child range from 200€ to 800€. The parents contribute a maximum of 40% to this economic price; the remainder is covered by the local authorities. In the capital city of Zagreb, parents pay the lowest fees across the country (a minimum of 20€ and a maximum of 80€ monthly), although salaries are the highest. New buildings are currently mostly financed through EU funds. Kindergarten-specific funding is approved by a Managing Board (1 parent, 3 local politicians, 1 member of staff) and then forwarded to the local authority finance office.

Fees are usually set by the municipalities; the maximum rate is approximately 80€ per month, including food. The year before the start of compulsory school is free of charge, i.e. financed by the State.**

Sources: **European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice 2015.
Eurydice 2014.
*Šikić-Mičanović, L. et al. 2015.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Staff-child ratios

There are no regulations in Croatia regarding the maximum number of children per member of staff.* Specifications in the national preschool standard relate to the maximum number of children per group.

In the regular (same-age) kindergarten programmes** the group size requirements are:

- 5 children aged 6 to 12 months
- 8 children aged 13 to 18 months
- 12 children aged 19 to 24 months
- 14 3-year-old children
- 18 4-year-old children
- 20 5-year-old children
- 23 6-year-old children or
- 25 7-year-old children

Requirements for mixed-age groups** are:

- 10 children between 1 and 2 years
- 12 children from 1 to 3 years
- 20 children from 3 years to school-age or
- 22 children from 4 years to school-age.

In all kinds of educational groups only one child with mild disabilities may be included. In such cases the group size is reduced by two children.

The standards cannot always be maintained since the demand for places in city regions exceeds the number of places available. In large kindergartens two members of staff may be divided between one group in two shifts, i.e. for children from age 3 upwards, 30 children per staff member, with one hour of overlapping working.

Experts consider that the larger groups are to a certain extent offset by the special programmes and generous staffing formula of associated experts who work in and with the kindergartens. In the city of Zagreb, 300 experts work on a daily basis with the 10.000 children with special needs (disabilities, autism, allergies, diabetes, language problems and so on).

Sources: **CBS 2017.
*European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
Eurydice 2014.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Curricular frameworks

The *National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education* came into force in 2015, having been piloted from 2010 onwards. The legislative framework is the 2013 Act on Amendments to the Preschool Education Act. It is part of a comprehensive curricular reform of the education system. The curricular framework for work with young children is structured according to three broad areas of learning and competence acquisition: (1) the child as an individual (e.g. self-image), (2) the child in interaction with others (family, other children, the immediate social community, kindergarten, local community), and (3) the child and the surrounding world (the natural and the wider social environment, cultural heritage, sustainable development). Within this framework, the aim of early childhood education and care is to foster a holistic and age-appropriate, humanist-developmental approach. Within the framework specifications, each kindergarten designs its own centre-specific programme according to the local context. These programmes, which include the goals for working with parents, have to be approved by the Ministry of Education. They are made public on the kindergarten webpage (see references for a sample webpage of a private Kindergarten in Zagreb in English: <http://www.djecja-igra.hr/default.aspx?id=56>)

The new National Curriculum builds on the former *Programme Orientation for Education and Care of Preschool Children* (1991), which aimed to enhance all developmental domains in accordance with each child's abilities, and also to take into account the varying social, cultural and religious needs of families. The document set out basic principles for work with children up to school entry. These include implementing a pluralistic spectrum of ECEC programmes and encouraging alternative and innovative pedagogical approaches. It also included requirements for the systematic monitoring and evaluation of achievements and changes in ECEC provision.

Many kindergartens integrate 'special programmes' into their curriculum at additional costs for the parents, e.g. learning a foreign language, music, theatre, art, healthy eating, sustainable development. Some kindergartens provide special tuition for gifted children. In 2014, 70% of children aged 4 to 6 years were learning a foreign language in 552 programmes validated by the Ministry of Education.

Sources: Eurydice 2014.
MSES 2010.
Vidović, T. and D. Drviš 2015.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

It is a requirement that children with disabilities should be included in regular kindergartens. Special education support staff are usually employed on a one-year contract. Inclusive measures are funded exclusively by the state (100€ per month for each child with special needs and disabilities). Educational programmes for children with disabilities and for children of national minorities are organised within the framework of the National Curriculum according to their specific needs. For children who cannot participate in the regular kindergarten programme despite additional support, five special education institutions exist across the country for groups of children with a similar disability. Group size increases with age: from 1 to 2 years up to 3 children; from 2 to 4 years or 3 to 7 years up to 5 children; and from 4 to 7 years up to 7 children. Settings catering for children with different disabilities or of mixed ages are generally smaller.

In 2013/14, 5.5% of preschool children were children with special needs, and 2,570 (2.1 %) were minority ethnic children**. In 2016, only 1% of the overall population had a non-Croatian background, 61.6% of whom came from non-EU28-countries. Regarding the group of the under-fives, these shares were 2.1% and 61.2% respectively.

*Roma population**

In 2013, the Croatian government introduced a “National Roma Inclusion Strategy” which will operate until 2020. According to the 2011 census, 16,975 (0.41% of the total population) are of Roma origin – but this estimate is probably too low. Young Roma children aged 0-4 years make up 16% of the total Roma population. 1.3% of children aged 0-4 years are of Roma origin, and 1.2% of children aged 5-9 years. According to a study by UNDP, the World Bank and the European Commission in 2011, 21% of 3-6 year old Roma children participate in ECEC provision (compared with 45% of non-Roma children). The Roma population is very young, with an average age of 21.9 years compared to 41.7 years of the total population. Overall in 2013/2014, 769 Roma children were registered in ECEC provision, roughly half (379) in the (now compulsory) pre-primary programme. In the city of Zagreb, approximately 140 Roma children attend kindergartens for a special two-year, individualised programme (not just the compulsory preschool attendance) which is free of charge for the parents. A Roma assistant makes contact with Roma families and encourages them to send their children to kindergarten.

In general, preschool programmes for minority ethnic groups exist in different home languages and as bilingual programmes.

Sources: EPIC 2015.
Eurydice 2014.
Eurostat 2017g.
MSES 2015.
*Šikić-Mičanović, L. et al. 2015.
UNDP et al. 2011.
**Vidović, T. and D. Drviš 2015.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Monitoring– Evaluation – Research

All ECEC institutions are required to monitor the quality of their work. Annual reports are sent both to the Ministry of Education and the municipal authority. Quality assurance in ECEC is managed and monitored by the national Education and Teacher Training Agency (ETTA), which has a dual role of ‘enhancing’ and also ‘inspecting’ ECEC provision. ETTA is also responsible for the state examination which is taken at the end of new teachers’ first year in the profession. Passing this exam is a requirement for a permanent post and the kindergartens meet the examination fee (EUR 250). Both external assessment and self-evaluation procedures are required. External evaluations of the educational system are carried out in collaboration with the National Centre for Exter-

nal Evaluation of Education. The National Centre also provides support for self-evaluation, set out in a comprehensive handbook published in 2013. It recommends setting up a quality assurance team for ongoing centre-based evaluation comprising: the centre leader; at least two members of staff (one working with under-threes, one with 3 to 6 year-olds); at least one specialist (psychologist, special education); at least one member of the administrative staff; at least one parent representative; and at least one representative of the local community. Team self-evaluations are carried out on a weekly basis within the kindergartens, whereas longer-term evaluations take place six times a year. The larger municipalities such as the city of Zagreb have their own quality development approaches.

Child-related assessment is based on data collated by the educator at the beginning of the educational year and a report by the educator to the child's parents at the end of the year.

A government-funded National Foundation of Research supports research projects, but there is little relevant research undertaken in the ECEC field and no strong research tradition, since the professional requirements for entry into the profession were only raised to bachelor level in 2005, and the first master's programmes were not introduced until 2013.

The city of Zagreb funds projects which are generally conducted by NGOs – topics such as the inclusion of Roma children, or a popular project on 'children in nature' (a five-day programme for 6-year-olds).

A recent research study conducted by UNICEF's office in Croatia focused on the community-based services and support for parents of young children in Croatia (Pećnik 2013). Participants were 1,271 mothers and 350 fathers of children aged between 6 months and 6 years old. The sample is representative for all of Croatia. Participants were interviewed with pre-defined questions and filled out specific questionnaires constructed for the purpose of this research.

The findings showed that a significant number of children (mainly those living in families with a lower socio-economic status) enter the ECEC system at a later age (immediately before entering primary school). A smaller number of them do not attend any kind of ECEC programmes before entering primary school and preschool is often somewhat shorter than recommended by the State Pedagogical Standard. Half of the parents do not see ECEC programmes as affordable, which is one of the main barriers for their children's participation in ECEC. They also report on groups being too large and a lack of proper equipment, as well as problems with the opening hours of childcare facilities. UNICEF's research additionally indicated problems of availability and affordability of other community based services in Croatia (e.g. different services in the healthcare system, support groups for parents, counselling services etc.), particularly among parents with a lower socio-economic status and those living in rural areas.

Step by Step International Organisation in Croatia, in cooperation with UNICEF's Office for Croatia, implemented and evaluated the Programme "Step towards inclusion" in three Croatian counties (Sisak-Moslavina, Vukovar-Srijem and Šibenik-Knin) over a period of three years (2013-2015). The main goals of the programme were:

- (a) To support local preschools to better serve the children and their families by increasing the quality of the services;
- (b) To support ECEC Teachers in improving their everyday performance through the principles of learner-centred, interactive pedagogy and cooperation with colleagues/peers, families and communities;
- (c) To advocate an integrated approach to early childhood education; and
- (d) To inform different stakeholders about the need for quality early childhood education and engage them in dialogue about quality so that better systems are put in place.

The evaluation of the programme involved surveys of ECEC Teachers' attitudes and feelings towards competency, mentors' reports on quality issues, and focus groups*. Findings show that teachers made positive changes in their attitudes toward inclusion. For example, teachers began to feel more competent and confident in working with children belonging to vulnerable groups, especially with children with disabilities. They also demonstrated reduced misconceptions about

tolerance, lack of understanding of the effects of prejudice and discrimination on minority groups, etc.

UNICEF and the organisation 'Step by Step' are also sponsors of the Study Analysis on Equity Issues Regarding Access to Quality Preschool Education: Comparative Situation Analysis in Targeted Communities**. The main purpose of the analysis is to inform relevant stakeholders on the existing equity issues regarding the access to ECEC and provide evidence for UNICEF's advocacy efforts regarding this problem. The main objectives of this analysis are to:

- (a) Identify and provide evidence on present disparities regarding access to ECEC based on data/information from selected communities, with regards to four targeted groups of children from 3 years to preschool age: children living in poverty, Roma children, children with disabilities and children from rural (remote) areas;
- (b) Provide insights into barriers, bottlenecks and enabling factors which either constrain or support the access to quality preschool education of the targeted groups of children;
- (c) Provide policy recommendations for the harmonisation of legislation, budgeting and quality assurance mechanisms with regards to each of the four targeted groups of children.

The analysis shows that the Croatian ECEC system needs to change in terms of the ECEC setting conditions such as the admission criteria for parents and children and the programme content (which should be more diverse). Issues around quality assurance are also noted. The biggest problems regarding access to ECEC are regional discrepancies; not all communities are in a position to fulfil the needs of all children in their area and the absence of national standards and support that would ensure access to high level quality ECEC for all children, regardless of the place where they live.

Sources: **Bouillet 2017, in press.
Eurydice 2014.
*Milinović and Brajković 2016.
MSES 2011.
National Centre for External Evaluation of Education 2013.
SEEPRO-R research visit 18-22 January 2016.

Parental leave

Maternity leave (*rodiljni dopust*)

Full paid maternity leave (based on 100% of average earnings on which health care contributions were paid during the six months prior to birth) begins 28 days before the birth date and continues until the child turns 6 months. It is obligatory for the mother to take 98 uninterrupted days (28 before and 70 after birth) – the remaining days can be taken on a part-time basis or by the father.

There are no legal provisions for **paternity leave**.

Parental leave (*roditeljski dopust*)

Parental leave begins when the child is 6 months old and is granted for four months per parent for the first and second child. Two of these months can be transferred to the other parent. For the first six months payment equals 100% of previous average earnings, at the most 80% of a basic tariff, currently 448€. If both parents make use of the parental leave entitlement, payment is guaranteed for eight months.

Parental leave can be used either at the same time or consecutively and in various ways: (1) in one period; (2) partially (max. two times a year for no less than a month at a time); (3) part-time (with duration doubled and compensation at 50%). Parental leave can be taken until the child turns 8 years.

In 2015, only 0.3% of eligible fathers made use of the transferable time from the mother's maternity leave. Parental leave is taken up mainly by mothers; in 2015, only 4.5% of eligible fathers chose to make use of their entitlement.

Sources: Dobrotić, I. 2017.
EPIC 2015.

Historical shifts and junctures

1432	First recorded institution for the care of abandoned and (later) illegitimate children opened in Dubrovnic.
1842	First custodial institution established in Karlovac for the children (3 to 7 years old) of factory workers – sometimes claimed to be the first kindergarten in Croatia.
1855	First pedagogically oriented institution for poor children opened in Zagreb.
1869	First institution with specifically educational aims established by Antonia Cvijić in Zagreb.
1880/81	First professional course for the training of pre-school teachers established in Zagreb.
1882	Opening of a kindergarten in Zagreb funded by the municipality - considered to be the start of public early childhood education and care in Croatia.
1945	In the post-war years, public parks and open spaces were considered to be the best places for the systematic education of young children. Up to 1955 no significant number of kindergarten-type centres for children. First regulation for the establishment of ECEC institutions for children aged from 3 to 7 years old.
1949	Ordinance on the organisation and work of kindergartens adopted.
1951	Regulation on the financing of preschool institutions adopted.
1958	Gradual expansion begins. Provision is mostly half-day and although kindergartens are officially seen as educational institutions, in reality they remain institutions for social care.
1962	According to the Law on financing education, parents should pay more for the ECEC of their children.
1967	Kindergartens regulated through further legislation. Local funds for preschool education are established.
1968	First university-level course of studies for prospective kindergarten teachers introduced, but not compulsory.
1974	ECEC is allocated from national to local/regional level and the municipalities start participating in the cost of ECEC. The first preschool programmes for children who have not participated in ECEC established.
1980	The tasks of ECEC are defined by law.
1990	The right to access ECEC from an early age is defined by law.
1993	The local funds for preschool education are closed. The regional and local communities are responsible for financing the ECEC.
1997	First Croatian Preschool Education Act adopted.
2005	Colleges for the education/training of ECEC teachers become part of universities (Bachelor degree).
2007	Amendments to the Preschool Education Act adopted.
2008	National pedagogical standards for ECEC adopted.
2013	Further amendments on the Preschool Education Act adopted. Preschool education one year before entering primary education becomes obligatory (250 hours).
2013	First generation of students of Bachelor and Master university programmes for ECEC teachers begin their studies.
2015	National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education adopted.

Sources: Bacalya, R., S. Zrilić, and T. Kisovar-Ivanda 2014.
Baran, J., Dobrotić, I., Matković, T. 2011.
Strugar, B. 2011.

Current challenges for the system of Early Childhood Education and Care in Croatia

Country expert assessment by Dejana Bouillet

Bearing in mind that all young children should have the right to access high quality ECEC, the main challenges of the system of ECEC in Croatia are to ensure that each child is able to do this, regardless of the financial and economic status of their family or any other characteristics of their biological, geographical or ethnic status. This means that ECEC legislation should be changed so that all local communities are able to provide ECEC for each child. This initiative would need to include financial support, as well as the regulation of quality standards for all ECEC programmes and institutions.

Even though the required qualification level for ECEC teachers is a positive feature of the ECEC system in Croatia, ECEC teachers still show a lack of confidence in working with children belonging to vulnerable groups. They also express dissatisfaction with the support in their professional environment (inside and outside of the institutions). It means that all participants in the education of ECEC teachers should evaluate existing educational programmes, highlight the core competencies for contemporary ECEC teachers, and develop programmes that will ensure the achievement of defined competencies, as well as a comparability of diplomas reached at different universities. The Education and Training Agency should ensure life-long learning programmes for ECEC staff, and stimulate the process of licensing of ECEC teachers, as well as professional supportive staff.

The third challenge for the ECEC system in Croatia is the promotion of evidence-based practice and encouragement of the scientific work of practitioners, in collaboration with researchers. This could have multiple effects on the quality of ECEC programmes, because the results of scientific work could provoke changes in everyday educational practice, as well as in policy initiatives to improve the ECEC system in Croatia.

Demographic data

Total population

In 2016, the population in Croatia totalled 419,669. It decreased slightly over the last 20 years (1995: 4,658,893, 2005: 4,310,861).

Children under age six

In 2016, a total of 241,424 children under age 6 lived in Croatia, comprising 5.8% of the total population, while children under age 3 account for 2.8%. These proportions, while still under the EU average of the respective years, rose slightly from 2005 to 2016.

Table 6

Croatia: Children under 6 years of age, 2016

Age	Number of children
Under age 1	37,238
1-year olds	39,302
2-year olds	39,649
Under age 3 total	116,189
3-year olds	41,551
4-year olds	40,739
5-year olds	42,945

3 to under age 6 total	125,235
0- to under 6-year olds total	241,424

Table 7

Croatia: Children under 6 years of age, years from 1995 to 2016, in %*

	1995	Ø EU15 ³	2005	Ø EU25	2016	Ø EU28
Under 3-year olds	n/a	3.3	2.8	3.1	2.8	3.0
3- to under 6-year olds	n/a	3.5	3.0	3.1	3.0	3.1
0- to under 6-year olds	n/a	6.8	5.7	6.2	5.8	6.2

* own calculations, differences in the sums are caused by rounding errors

Source: Eurostat 2017a.

Single households with children under age six

In 2015, more than half the households with children under age 6 were couple households. Single households accounted for only 0.5% - almost all of them were single mother households.

Table 8

Croatia: Households with children under age 6, 2015

Household type	Total households	Total households in per cent*
All households	448,100	
Couple households	241,100	53.8
Other household type	204,400	45.6
Single households, total	2,500	0.6
Single households, women	2,100	0.5
Single households, men	400**	0.1

* own calculations, ** data computed

Sources: Eurostat 2017e.

Employment rates of parents with children under age six

In 2015, the overall employment rate for men was 60.1%, for women 51.5%.

Approximately 64% of mothers and 79.8% of fathers with a child under 6 years of age were in the employment market. The employment rate for mothers is thus slightly above the EU28 average, whereas the employment rate for fathers is the third lowest in the EU28.

³ The 1995 data relate to the EU15 countries (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK); by 2005 the countries CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK had joined the EU and the basis of the 2014 data are the EU28 and include BG, RO und HR.

Table 9

Croatia: Employment rates of parents with children under age 6 in Croatia and the EU

		Mothers in per cent	Fathers in per cent
Croatia	2005	61.2	83.2
	2010	61.7	79.5
	2015	63.3	79.8
European Union	EU15 - 2005	56.2	90.0
	EU27 - 2010	58.2	86.6
	EU28 - 2015	61.0	87.3
Country with highest employment rate	2005	Slovenia – 76.8	Cyprus – 95.3
	2010	Slovenia – 76.7	Netherlands – 93.5
	2015	Sweden – 78.9	Malta/Czech Republic – 93.0
Country with lowest employment rate	2005	Malta – 29.3	Bulgaria – 72.4
	2010	Hungary – 32.7	Latvia – 74.8
	2015	Hungary – 38.8	Bulgaria – 77.3

Sources: Eurostat 2017b.
Oberhuemer, P., I. Schreyer, and M.J. Neuman 2010.

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁴

In 2015, 22.6% of children under 6 years in Croatia were registered as being at risk of poverty or social exclusion (compared with 24.7% for the EU average of this age-group). The relative share of all persons in the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 29.1%.

Source: Eurostat 2017d.

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⁴ "At risk of poverty or social exclusion" refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_\(AROPE\)](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_(AROPE))

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