

CROATIA

Key contextual data

Compiled by

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The authors would like to thank **Dejana Bouillet** (Zagreb) for reviewing this synopsis and contributing supplementary information.

Citation suggestion:

Schreyer, I., and P. Oberhuemer. 2024. "Croatia – Key contextual data." In *Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe. 33 country reports with key contextual data*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer. Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy.
www.seeepro.eu/English/Country-Reports.htm

Funded by:



Federal Ministry for
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,
Women and Youth



State Institute for Early Childhood
Research and Media Literacy



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Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the term chosen in this report for the main form of centre-based ECEC settings is **kindergarten** (*dječji vrtić*, 0–6/7)¹, sometimes referred to as **ECEC centre**. Any additional forms of provision are described where appropriate.

Historical milestones in ECEC in Croatia

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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, but is not a legal entitlement to a place in kindergarten beyond the compulsory hours.
1993	The regional and local communities are responsible for financing the ECEC.
1997	First Croatian Early Childhood Education Act adopted.
2005	Colleges for the education/training of ECEC Teachers become part of universities (Bachelor degree).

¹ **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds. In the case of Croatia, the relevant format is **0–5**, since children start school when they are 6 years old.

2007	Amendments to the Act on Early Childhood Education adopted.
2008	National standards for ECEC adopted.
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Further amendments on the Early Childhood Education Act adopted. – Preschool education one year before entering primary education becomes obligatory (250 hours). – First generation of students of Bachelor and Master university programmes for ECEC Teachers begin their studies.
2015	National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care adopted
2019	Amendments to the Act on Early Childhood Education adopted
2021	National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 adopted, including goals to increase the accessibility of a high-quality ECEC system and to secure related quality standards
2022	Further amendments to the Act on Early Childhood Education adopted
2023	The occupational standard for ECEC Teachers was entered in the register of the Croatian Qualifications Framework on 15 May 2023

Sources: Baran, Dobrotić, and Matković 2011; Strugar 2011; Bacalya, Zrilić, and Kisovar-Ivanda 2014

ECEC system type and auspices²

Since 1997, early childhood education and care in the Republic of Croatia is an integral part of the education system, providing services for children from 6 months to school entry at 6/7 years. It is a unitary system and comes under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Science and Education (*Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja*). The ministry sets the objectives at the national level and provides a framework for accreditation and monitoring of educational institutions. The ECEC system is decentralised, and the financing and management of early childhood provision are the responsibility of municipalities.

Only a small number of children are cared for in home-based settings, which are the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Pension System, Family and Social Policy.

General objectives and legislative framework

The system of early childhood education and care in Croatia, which includes 250 hours of compulsory early education in the year before school entry, is governed by the Early Childhood Education Act (*Zakon o predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju*) of 1997, amended in 2007, 2013, 2019, 2022, and 2023. The compulsory requirement was prescribed by the ECE Act in 2013.

Principles of the ECEC system include: high quality education for all; equal educational opportunities for all; compulsory general education and acquisition of key competencies; horizontal and vertical mobility between educational institutions; inclusion of all; scientific foundations; respect for human rights and children's rights; implementation of educational activities with a high level of expertise; democratic decision-making, involvement of all stakeholders; independence of institutions in the application of programmes and materials: pedagogical pluralism; education in the European context (EASNIE 2021).

In 2008, the National Early Childhood Education and Care Standard was introduced. It is the steering instrument for the minimum infrastructure requirements for both public and private

² The Eurydice country report on ECEC in Croatia provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are clearly indicated within the text and in the references section.

ECEC services, including financial, material and human resources. Steering measures relate to opening hours, the education and care of children from ethnic minorities, criteria for group size and number of professionals, and basic equipment. The content, duration and implementation of the compulsory preschool year were legally regulated in 2014 by the Ordinance on the content and duration of the preschool programme (Official Gazette 2014, No. 107).

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

There is no universal entitlement to a place in ECEC. However, since 2014, a free place is guaranteed for obligatory attendance for 250 hours during the year before school enrolment. In areas where the full programme cannot be offered for organisational reasons, a reduced programme of 150 hours may be provided (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 48). The compulsory programme is usually located in the kindergarten, sometimes (mostly in rural areas) in a primary school. It is funded by the state, regions, and municipalities.

Children born in January-March start school in the calendar year in which they turn 6; all others, in the year in which they turn 7 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 177).

Main types of provision

In 2022/23, there were 1,727 kindergarten units offering early childhood education and care in Croatia. These included 384 self-contained kindergartens and 289 multi-unit kindergartens in different locations as well as 144 units in accredited institutions such as primary schools, play rooms in libraries or other organisations (see *Table 1*). Compared to the previous year, the number of children enrolled increased by 3.8% (CBS 2023a, 100ff). Table 1 shows the facilities implementing early childhood education programmes.

Table 1

Croatia: Kindergarten units and other kinds of accredited ECEC provision, 2022/23

Kindergartens (6 months – 6 years)			Other accredited forms of provision			Total number of kindergarten units
Self-contained kindergartens	Kindergartens with several units	Total number of units	Primary schools	Play rooms in libraries	Other	
384	289	910	101	6	37	1,727
1,583			144			

Source: CBS 2023a, 102

Kindergarten: According to the Early Childhood Education Act (1997), a kindergarten (*dječji vrtić*) is an institution that provides an organised type of non-familial education and care for children between 6 months and school age.

Kindergartens provide both half-day (4 to 6 hours) and full-day programmes (7 to 10 hours). They are usually open from Monday to Friday from 7:00 to 17:00, although opening hours can also be adapted to the needs of parents. It is expected that children will not attend kindergarten for more than 10 hours a day. They are usually divided into three age groups: 6 months to 1 year, 1 to 3 years, and 3 years to school entry. They consist of at least one group with a maximum of 25 children; usually there are about 200 children in any one setting. In larger cities, such as Zagreb, there are settings which admit up to 500 children, employ up to 50 professionals and

are housed in more than one building. The distance to the children's homes should not be more than one kilometre.

Five kindergartens work exclusively according to the Montessori approach, eleven others work partly with this approach. Some private kindergartens work according to Steiner education (Waldorf) or follow the approach of the Agazzi sisters. The Ministry of Education supports these alternative approaches, as well as cooperation with non-governmental initiatives such as the international organisation Step by Step (ISSA).

In addition, children can also attend a **playgroup** (*igraonica*). These are run by cultural organisations such as libraries and must be approved by the Ministry of Science and Education.

In 2013, the Act on Childminders attempted to address the shortage of places in institutions and the grey market of childcare. A **home-based childcare** worker must be registered and can care for a maximum of six children up to the age of 14. As a rule, they are paid through parental contributions; in some cases, the municipality also finances such care. The Ministry of Demography, Families, Youth and Social Welfare) is responsible for the supervision (ILO 2021).

Provider structures

In 2022/23, more than three quarters (76%) of early childhood education and care services were operated by public providers. Of the privately-run kindergartens (24%), which must be accredited by the Ministry of Education, 86% were managed by individuals/legal entities and 14% by religious communities (CBS 2023a, 102, own calculations).

Table 2

Croatia: Number of kindergartens (0-6) and other kinds of accredited ECEC provision by provider type, 2022/23

Service provider	Total	Kindergartens (6 months – 6 years)			Other accredited forms of provision		
		Self-contained	Multi-unit	Total number of units	Primary schools	Play rooms in libraries	Other
State	5	1	0	0	2	1	1
		1					
Local authority and self-governed	1,308	205	219	770	95	5	14
		1308					
Other legal entities ³	356	163	56	111	4	0	22
		356					
Religious communities	58	15	14	29	0	0	0
		58					
Total number of kindergarten units	1,727	384	289	910	101	6	37
		1,583					

Source: CBS 2023a, 102

In 2022/23, the majority of children of all age groups (more than 80%) attending ECEC settings) were enrolled in public facilities (see Table 3).

³ Private organisations, social and health care settings

Table 3

Croatia: Number of children in ECEC settings by provider type and age-group, 2022/23

Provider type	Under 3 years	3 to 5 years	Over 5 years	Total
Public (state, local authority and self-governed)	26,146	44,615	49,276	120,037
Private	5,756	9,087	9,306	24,149
Church-affiliated	676	1,548	1,478	3,702
Total	32,578	55,250	60,060	147,888

Source: CBS 2023a, 108

Participation rates in regulated provision

From 2010 to 2022, the proportion of children under 3 years of age not enrolled in an ECEC setting fell from 89% to 72.5%. In the group of 3 to 6 year-olds, almost 20% more children were enrolled in ECEC settings in 2022 than in 2010.

Table 4

Croatia: Enrolment rates in centre-based settings by age-group distribution and duration of attendance, 2010-2022

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years, in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2010	1 to 29 hours	0	14
	Over 30 hours	10	34
	No enrolment in ECEC	89	53
2015	1 to 29 hours	2.3	6.5
	Over 30 hours	9.5	46.4
	No enrolment in ECEC	88.2	47.1
2022	1 to 29 hours	1.8	12.1
	Over 30 hours	25.7	54.1
	No enrolment in ECEC	72.5	33.9

Source: Eurostat 2023b, differences in the sums due to rounding

According to national statistics, in 2022/23 over three-quarters of children (118,918, 80.4%) attended a full-day setting (over eight hours), with only 9.7% (14,348) attending a half-day setting for less than five hours a week and about the same proportion (9.8%, 14,622) were in an ECEC setting between five and eight hours a day. Of the 147,888 children enrolled, most (135,252, 91.5%) attended a regular programme, 8,487 (5.7%) the compulsory programme and 4,149 (2.8%) a short-term programme (CBS 2023a, 102f, own calculations).

According to national statistics, 27.5% of all children under 3 years of age attended an ECEC setting in 2022/23. Whereas the enrolment rate of 2 to 3 year-olds was 46.5%, that of under 2 year-olds was only about 18.1%. In contrast, more than three quarters of 3 to 5 year-olds and more than 84.5% of 5 to 7 year-olds are enrolled in kindergartens (see Table 5).



Table 5

Croatia: Enrolment rates in kindergartens by age, 2022/23

Age	Number of children in total population (estimated data)*	Number of children in kindergartens	Calculated enrolment rate, in %**
0 to 1 year	35,441	164	0.5
1 to 2 years	35,268	12,656	35.9
Total under 2 year-olds	70,709	12,820	18.1
2 to 3 years	35,123	16,321	46.5
Total under 3 year-olds	105,832	29,141	27.5
3 to 4 years	35,384		
4 to 5 years	35,190		
Total 3 to under 5 year-olds	70,574	55,250	78.3
5 to 6 years	35,246		
6 to 7 years	34,439		
Total 5 to under 7 year-olds	69,685	58,670	84.2

Source: CBS 2023a, 103, 107; *CBS 2023c, own calculations, **calculated enrolment rates approximate values

According to national statistics, the age distribution in kindergarten nursery groups (Table 6) and kindergartens (Table 7) is as follows:

Table 6

Croatia: Children in kindergarten nursery groups by age-group, 2022/23

Under 1 year	1 to 2 years	2 to 3 years	Over 3 years	Total
164	12,656	16,321	3,069	32,210

Source: CBS 2023a, 107

Table 7

Croatia: Children in kindergartens by age group, 2018/19–2022/23

	Under 3 years	3–5 years	5–7 years	Over 7 years	Total
2018/19	26,422	50,934	61,140	882	139,378
2022/23	32,578	55,250	58,670	1,390	147,888

Source: CBS 2023a, 100

In nursery groups in kindergartens, slightly more than half (50.7%) of children between 2 and 3 years old, very few under 1 year-olds attend such groups and most of the over 3 year-olds are enrolled in kindergartens.

Financing and costs for parents

Early childhood education and care is primarily financed through the budget of local and regional self-governments, which cover 99% of public expenditure on early childhood education. In 2016, public expenditure on early education in Croatia amounted to 0.61% of the gross domestic product, or 8.1 to 10.6% of the total budget of self-governing institutions. In 2015, public expenditure per child was (€2,218) (EASNIE 2021).

Programmes for children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities are co-financed by the state. For Roma children, ECEC enrolment is usually free of charge (EASNIE 2021). Local and regional self-governments determine the criteria according to which funding is provided. In coordination with the National Early Childhood Education and Care Standard, the providers determine the amount of the parents' fees. Overall, however, around 75% of the ECEC sector is financed by government funds (Eurydice 2023, 3).

Parents also have to pay for the year before school enrolment, despite compulsory attendance (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 56). However, parental fees are only a part of the total economic amount of (€200 to €333) – in most municipalities or cities not more than (€73). The amounts for Roma children's attendance are fully subsidised, and the Ministry of Education pays parental contributions for the two years before school enrolment. For children living in poverty, children with many siblings, children of single parents or children with disabilities, fees are reduced (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 61). Children who have not attended kindergarten spend the year before enrolment in a pre-primary unit at primary school, which is free of charge for parents. In 2017/18, this applied to approximately 12,000 children, about 30% of the age group (EACEA/ Eurydice 2019, 62, 177).

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 5% of net household income on childcare costs⁴ (OECD.Stat 2023).

Staff to child ratios and group size

As a rule, children are divided into three age-groups: (1) from 6 months to 1 year, (2) from 1 to 3 years and (3) from 3 years to school entry. A typical kindergarten consists of 17 to 20 educational groups (340 to 400 children) in the regular programme. The maximum number of children per group is 25. If there is a disabled child in the group, the total number of children is reduced by two. If this child has a severe disability, it is reduced by four. *Tables 8 and 9* show the maximum permitted number of children in same-age and mixed-age groups as required by the National Early Childhood Education and Care Standard.

In 2022/23, national statistics report an average of 10 children per kindergarten teacher in kindergartens (CBS 2023a, 101).

The maximum numbers per group presented in *Tables 8 and 9* are from the State Pedagogical Standards of Early Childhood Education and Care (2008). The reality is that only a fifth of educators work in groups that are within the size range required. With the exception of ECEC for children aged six, the average number of children enrolled in each group or class exceeds the limits set by the pedagogical standard. In nursery groups, the average size is higher than the limit allowed under that standard (between 4.1 and 8.0 children). This means that up to twice as many children are often enrolled in nursery groups as envisioned by the standard (Matković et al. 2020, cited in UNICEF 2021b, 20).

Table 8

Croatia: Maximum permitted number of children in same-age groups

Age	Max. number of children
6 to 12 months	5
13 to 18 months	8
19 to 24 months	12

⁴ The calculation is based on the following fictitious model: full-time working parents (average wage); two children aged 2 and 3 years in full-time childcare; childcare benefits included.

Age	Max. number of children
2 year-olds	14
3 year-olds	18
4 year-olds	20
5 year-olds	23
6 year-olds	25

Source: State Pedagogical Standards of Early Childhood Education and Care (2008), cited in Eurydice 2023, 4.2

Table 9

Croatia: Maximum permitted number of children in mixed-age groups

Age group	Max. number of children
1 to 2 year-olds	10
1 to 3 year-olds	12
3 to 6 year-olds	20
4 to 6 year-olds	22

Source: State Pedagogical Standards of Early Childhood Education and Care (2008), cited in Eurydice 2023, 4.2

The number of staff present at any one time depends on the duration of the programme: In programmes up to 6 hours, one qualified member of staff must be present, in those from 7 to 10 hours, two. If a child with a disability is in a group, an additional qualified teacher is required. The number of support staff such as pedagogues, psychologists, etc. depends on the number of groups and children: for up to 10 groups and 200 children, one full-time member of staff is required, for 11 to 20 groups and 400 children, two, and for 21 to 30 groups and 600 children, three (Eurydice 2022, 4.2 – no longer accessible). Kindergartens of optimal size have 17–20 educational groups in standard programmes or 340–400 children in total. Kindergartens comprising several local units may have 30 educational groups or 600 children.

However, these standards cannot always be met because the demand for places is greater than the number of available places, especially in larger towns. In large kindergartens, two professionals are assigned to a group in two shifts, but these shifts only overlap by one hour, i.e. for children aged 3 and above, there are 30 children per qualified professional.

Experts think that the large groups are partly compensated by the special programmes and the generous number of additional support staff working in and with the kindergarten. In Zagreb, 300 special education staff work daily with the 10,000 children who have special needs (disabilities, autism, allergies, diabetes, language problems, etc.) (SEEPRO research visit to Zagreb in 2015).

In separate specialised settings for children with disabilities, group size is regulated at up to three children between 1 and 2 years, up to five children between 2 and 4 years or between 3 and 7 years or up to seven children between 4 and 7 years. If the children have different disabilities or if the groups are mixed-age, the groups are usually smaller.

Curricular framework

The National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care came into force in 2014 after a long pilot phase (Official Gazette, Nr. 5/2015). It is part of a comprehensive curricular reform of the education system within the national *Strategy on Education, Science and Technology* (2014)



and forms the pedagogical framework both for regular ECEC programmes and the compulsory pre-primary year.

The National Curriculum places the child at the centre of the educational process and emphasis each child's individuality, which needs to be understood and respected. It is based on four guiding principles: (1) flexibility in the educational work in kindergarten; (2) partnership with parents and the broader community; (3) ensuring continuity in education; (4) openness for continuing learning and readiness to improve practices. Explicit core values are: knowledge; identity; humanism and tolerance; responsibility; autonomy; and creativity. On this basis, the following goals are to be achieved in early education: Ensuring the well-being of the child, stimulating the overall development of the child, developing competencies and ensuring equal opportunities for all – within the framework of democratic principles. Children should be accepted in their uniqueness, their rights should be implemented without any discrimination, their dignity should be respected at all times in the educational process and the development of their positive identity should be continuously developed.

Early childhood education institutions are expected to guarantee the realisation of equal rights for all. The educational approach is based on empathy, acceptance and mutual support, but also on children learning to understand their rights, obligations and responsibilities, as well as the rights, obligations and responsibilities of others.

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 and are reviewed annually by the administrative board of the kindergarten.

Everyday practices in the kindergarten include both teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities which take into account the individual needs of the children.

The contents of the compulsory programme in the year before school enrolment (250 hours, 10% of which are outdoor activities) are intended to lay the foundations for school readiness: Communication skills in the home language; elementary communication in a foreign language; mathematical competences; basic competences in science and technology; digital competences; learning to learn, social and civic competences; initiative and entrepreneurship; cultural awareness and expression; and motor skills appropriate to the child's age.

Many kindergartens integrate 'special programmes' into their curriculum at additional costs for the parents, e.g. learning a foreign language, music, drama, art, healthy eating, IT programmes, environment education and sustainable development.

Digital education

In Croatian kindergartens, digital media serve as a tool for planning, documenting, implementing and evaluating educational processes. However, not only adults, but also children should have access to digital media (MSES 2015). The National Curriculum for ECEC states that children develop digital competences by being introduced to diverse uses through various activities.

The acquisition of digital competencies as part of the mandatory preschool programme is regulated by the ordinance on the "Content and Duration of Preschool Educational Programmes" (MSES 2014).

Monitoring – evaluation

The framework for quality assurance in the Croatian education system provides for external evaluation, self-evaluation and evaluation of educational outcomes (EASNIE 2021).

Child-related assessment

Observations are the preferred method of assessing children. Staff can decide how to report the results. 'School readiness' is an entry criterion for primary schools, but the decision ultimately rests with the school, which makes its own assessment. To ensure the smoothest possible transition, the respective institutions discuss and familiarise themselves with each other's learning environments (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 22, 103, 106, 111).

Centre-level self-evaluation

Since 2012/13, the National Centre for External Educational Evaluation (*Nacionalni centar za vanjsko vrednovanje obrazovanja*) has annually called for institutions to self-evaluate according to a standardised process in the Handbook for Self-Evaluation in Early Education. This includes a self-evaluation report and the implementation of a development plan prepared with the help of the Centre (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 127).

At the setting level, a 'quality team' consisting of management, professionals, but also parents, support professionals, board members and the community, is responsible for self-evaluation.

In daily practice, the institution makes long-term plans (throughout the year), structures the orientation programme into a three-month plan and works on development tasks according to developmental areas (motor skills, social and emotional development, cognition and communication). The three-month plan is evaluated in terms of the number of children in the groups, financial and organisational changes as well as the acceptance of the activities by the children and the cooperation with the parents.

External evaluation

The National Centre for External Educational Evaluation offers numerous support materials for the external and internal evaluation of educational institutions. It provides guidelines, methods and instruments for monitoring different quality areas (e.g. management, equipment, working conditions, safety, staff) of ECEC settings.

In settings for children under 3 years of age, structural and process quality are checked by an inspection team, which comes to the facility if there is a suspicion that the facility is not working according to the law or that the pedagogical standards are not being followed (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 124, 126). Health inspections are carried out by the health authority.

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

The Constitution of Croatia (Articles 3, 14, 65) states that all persons must have equal educational opportunities according to their abilities. Whenever possible, children with disabilities attend regular kindergartens in Croatia. Additional support staff with annual contracts are employed for this purpose. Inclusion measures are fully funded by the state at €100 per month per child.

Individual education plans for children with disabilities and for children from national minorities are drawn up within the framework of the National Curriculum according to the respective specific needs (EASNIE 2021). Separate facilities exist for children who cannot attend a regular kindergarten despite additional support.

The compulsory pre-primary programme for children with disabilities lasts two years instead of one. In addition, certain other programmes are offered – also for children from ethnic minorities – e.g. health care, religion, early language programmes.

Municipally subsidised kindergartens can apply for additional staff. These staff receive training from the Agency for Education and Teacher Training; their tasks are based on the respective disabilities of the children (European Commission 2021, 103).

The Ministry of Science and Education ensures additional funds if special ECEC programmes are organised for children with disabilities, gifted children, and children belonging to national minorities. Funding is calculated on a pro capita basis of the children involved, but staff salaries are not included.

Children with a migration background – Children from Roma communities

In 2022, only 0.9% of the total population had a non-Croatian citizenship, most of them (68.1%) came from non-EU27 countries. Similarly, 0.5% of children under the age of 5 are of a non-Croatian origin, of which 72.2% came from non-EU27 countries (Eurostat 2023g).

National statistics for 2021 report 800 children under 4 years of age as immigrants (CBS 2023b). In general, ECEC programmes exist for national minorities in the respective languages and in bilingual form to promote cultural identity and culture (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 115).

In 2022/23, 264 groups offered the preschool programme in a language other than Croatian: 2,640 children attended an English programme, 1,270 an Italian, 543 a Serbian, 224 a German, 196 a Czech, 117 a Hungarian and 6 a Hebrew programme (CBS 2023a, 104).

The “TOY for inclusion” project (European Commission 2021, 92) targets children from migrant families and ethnic minorities. Local action teams with representatives from Roma and non-Roma communities, municipalities and professionals run centres as meeting points that offer young children and their families new opportunities for exchange. In addition, the pilot programme “Testing the Child Guarantee” is being implemented in Croatia together with UNICEF, the Step by Step organisation and the EU, in which – also with the creation of new meeting places – social inequalities are to be compensated, especially for Roma children (UNICEF 2021a).

A fully subsidised 2-year integrated programme in mainstream institutions is offered for Roma children. The National Roma Inclusion Strategy (2013-2020) and the Action Plan for its implementation aim, among other things, to increase the attendance rate of Roma children in preschool institutions and to improve their quality (EASNIE 2021).

The overall attendance rate of Roma children in kindergartens was 32%, compared to 72% of non-Roma children (Roma Education Fund 2020). It is estimated that 69% of Roma children do not attend any ECEC setting at all. The Europe-wide Romani Early Years Network (REYN), an initiative of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), aims to improve access to early childhood services and attendance rates for Roma children. Among other things, they try to fight prejudice and discrimination through campaigns (REYN 2021).

Parental leave arrangements⁵

Maternity leave (*rodiljni dopust*): If health insurance contributions have been paid during the six months before the birth, the full salary (without upper limit) is paid starting 28 days before the birth until the child is 6 months old. A parent who does not meet the condition of insurance contributions receives 125% of the 'budgetary base rate' of €441.44 per month. 98 uninterrupted days (28 before and 70 after the birth) must be taken by the mother, the remaining days can also be taken part-time or by the father.

Paternity leave (*očinski dopust*) lasts ten working days, which can be taken until the child is six months old; they are remunerated under the same conditions as Maternity leave.

Parental leave (*roditeljski dopust*) begins after the child is 6 months old and lasts four months per parent for the first and second child, of which two months can be transferred to the other parent. For the first six months, 100% of average earnings are paid, up to a maximum of 225.5% of the 'budgetary base rate' per month. If both parents take Parental leave, eight months are paid.

Parental leave may be taken either by both parents simultaneously or consecutively: (1) in one block, (2) in several blocks (no more than twice a year and no less than one month at a time) or (3) part-time, in which case the length is doubled and 70% of the basic rate is paid. In total, parental leave can be taken until the child is 8 years old.

In 2022, only 4.05% of fathers made use of the Parental leave which is predominantly taken by mothers. Also, only 0.23% of fathers used the transferable Maternity leave period in 2022.

Current challenges for the ECEC system in Croatia

Country expert assessment by *Dejana Bouillet*

Taking into account the critical role that early childhood plays in the individual's lifelong development, well-being and success, universal and unbiased access to ECEC has been defined as a crucial strategic goal within contemporary education policies. Even though Croatia has adopted several important national strategies for improving the availability and quality of ECEC in recent years, problems remain. Among them, the most important challenges are:

- The lack in the number of ECEC institutions and available places, resulting in great regional disparities in the coverage and quality of child participation in ECEC
- The lack of ECEC Teachers, jeopardising the universal availability of high-quality ECEC programmes
- The lack of affordable ECEC programmes for children in disadvantaged situations, resulting in their low levels of enrolment in ECEC
- The decentralisation of ECEC, which has exacerbated regional differences in ECEC availability and is considered to be one of the main sources of educational inequality in Croatia
- The lack of an ECEC quality assurance system, contributing to suboptimal system performance.

The Croatian National Development Strategy 2030 (2021) states that its main development goal is to guarantee every child's access to quality ECEC as a way of ensuring every child's right to quality education. It is necessary to improve the determinants of structural and process quality to ensure greater accessibility, higher staff competence, an inclusive curriculum and a system of management and financing which will diminish regional disparities in terms of accessibility and

⁵ The brief overview in this section is based mainly on the country note for Croatia by Ivana Dobrotić in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see References).

quality of ECEC in Croatia. A complex process of this kind calls for decision-making at the national education policy level, but also entails a shift in pedagogical practices. This goal cannot be reached without huge political changes in the complete educational system, including financing, organisation and monitoring of ECEC. That is why the new Early Childhood Education Law needs to be adopted. Much needed innovations include the prescription of structural and process indicators of high-quality ECEC programmes, ensuring conditions for their fulfilment and widening possibilities for employment of different professionals in ECEC settings (specialised staff, assistants to ECEC Teachers, etc.). The adoption of the new Act must be followed by ensuring national-level conditions which will guarantee every child a place in high-quality ECEC, regardless of the level of development and population of the local community in which they live.

Demographic data

Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.

Total population

In 2022, the total population in Croatia was 3,862,305. A slight decrease in population numbers has been observed over the last 20 years (2000: 4,497,735; 2010: 4,302,847; 2020: 4,058,165) (Eurostat 2023a).

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total birth rate in the EU27 (as of 2020) was 1.53. The highest total birth rate of the 33 SEEPro-3 countries was in France (1.84), and the lowest in Malta (1.13)⁶. At 1.58, Croatia is slightly above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023d).

Children under age 6

Table 10

Croatia: Number of children under age 6 in the total population by age, 2022

Age	Number of children
Under 1 year	35,717
1 year-olds	34,771
2 year-olds	34,953
3 year-olds	35,545
4 year-olds	34,779
5 year-olds	35,282
Total 0 to under 6 year-olds	211,047

Source: Eurostat 2023a

⁶ Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

In 2022, 2.7% of the total population were children under 3 years of age and 5.5% were children under 6 years of age. These shares increased slightly from 2005 to 2015; however, in 2022, they are – except for those of the under 3s – slightly below the respective EU averages. The proportion of the under 3s corresponded with the EU average.

Table 11

Croatia: Children under 6 years of age – share in total population compared with EU averages from 2000 to 2022, in %

Year	Comparison Croatia/EU	Under 3 year- olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Croatia	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Ø EU15 ⁷	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	Croatia	2.8	3.0	5.7
	Ø EU25	3.1	3,1	6.2
2015	Croatia	2.9	3.0	5.9
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Croatia	2.7	2.7	5.5
	Ø EU27	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, * Own calculations, deviations due to roundings

Single households with children under age 6

39.5% of all households with children under 6 were couple households in 2022. Single parent households accounted for only 0.79% – almost all were single mothers.

Table 12

Croatia: Households with children under age 6, 2022

Household type	Total households	Relative share of households, in %*
All households	365,500	
Couple households	144,200	39.5
Other household type	218,400	59.8
Single households, total	2,900	0.79
Single households, women	2,800	0.77
Single households, men	100**	0.03

Source: Eurostat 2023k; * own calculations; ** number calculated

Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In Croatia, in 2022, the overall employment rate (15–64 years) for men was 74.1% and for women 65.6% (Eurostat 2023j).

⁷ The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

In 2022, 64.7% of women and 80.7% of men (18–64 years) with children under 6 were employed. Among the 27 EU-countries (2020), the shares of employed fathers were below the EU (EU-average 87.2%) and those of mothers slightly above the EU-average (63.6%) (Eurostat 2023g).

Table 13a

Croatia: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010 and 2022

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Croatia	61.7	79.5
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁸	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7
	2022	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Croatia	64.7	80.7
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries ⁹	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023g

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in Table 13b

Table 13b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
⁺ Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023)	75.6	92.1	⁺⁺ 72.3	⁺⁺ 79.2
with dependent children	72.4	93.1	⁺⁺ 72.1 (2023)	⁺⁺ 79.4 (2023)
with children under 2 years	70.7	95.0		
with children 3–4 years				

*Eurostat 2023g, 2023j

**[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

***Rosstat. 2022. *Statistical annex SDG in Russia 2022*. <https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru/sdg/report/document/70355>;
BRICS. 2023. *Joint Statistical Publication 2023*. https://brics2023.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/BRICS-2023-JSP_Final_Web.pdf

⁸ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

⁹ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

⁺[SSSU] State Statistics Service of Ukraine. 2022. *Employed population in 2021, by age group, sex and place of residence*. <https://ukrstat.gov.ua/operativ/operativ2017/rp/eans/eanse/Archznmve.htm>

⁺⁺Statista. 2023. *Employment rate in the United Kingdom from June 1971 to January 2023, by gender*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280120/employment-rate-in-the-uk-by-gender/>

⁺⁺⁺Office for National Statistics. 2023. *Families and the labour market, UK: 2021*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021>

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹⁰

In 2022, 16.4 % of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was below the EU27 average (23.3%) for this age group. The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 19.9% (EU: 21.6%). In 2020, 6% of children under 6 and 5.1% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation (6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023h, i).

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¹⁰ '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. (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation)

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