

Baseline Study to Map Child Protection Practices and Related Workforce Needs in Southeast Europe – CROATIA





BASELINE STUDY to Map Child Protection Practices and Related Workforce Needs in Southeast Europe

CROATIA

Final Report

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Table of Contents

	I. In	troduction	5
	1.	Background of the Study	5
	2.	Statement of the problem	5
	3.	Research questions	5
II. I	itera	ature review	6
	1.	Introduction	6
		1.1. Overview of Croatia	6
		1.2. General framework of the child protection system	6
	2.	The main bodies for the child protection in Croatia	6
		2.1. The Ministry of Social Policy and Youth	6
		2.2. The Office of the Ombudsman for Children	8
		2.3. Centers for social care	8
		2.4. Child protection center of Zagreb	9
		2.5. UNICEF for Croatia	10
		2.6. The non-governmental sector	10
	3.	Legal regulation of child protection	10
		3.1. Croatian constitution	10
		3.2. Family act	10
		3.3. Social welfare act	11
		3.4. Act on the Social Work Activity	13
		3.5. Criminal code	13
		3.6. Juvenile courts act	13
		3.7. Act on the Protection against Family Violence	14
		3.8. Rules of procedure in cases of violence	14
	4.	Statistical data on the child protection system	15
		4.1. Data from the governmental institutions	15
		4.2. Scientific data	17
	5.	Education and training of social workers	19
		5.1. Basic education	19
		5.2. Education of professionals	20
	6.	Contemporary issues in child protection system	21
	7.	Conclusion	22
III.	Met	hods	23
	1.	Sample	23
	2.	Data collection methods	23
	3.	Data Analysis	23



IV.	Results		24	
	 2. 	How do people involved in child protection perceive the reputation of social work in Croatia? What are the key competencies gained from the formal education	24	
	3. 4. 5.	from the perspective of child protection workers and students of social work? How do child protection workers evaluate their research competencies? How do child protection workers perceive their policy making competencies? What are the key competencies for child protection from the perspective	24 26 27	
V	6.	of child protection workers? What are the key areas of education that participants need?	28 29	
۷.	Cond	clusions	30	
	1. 2. 3.	Implications of the study Limitations of the study Recommendations	30 30 31	
VI.	I. References			

I. INTODUCTION

1. Background of the Study

Protection of children is one of the most discussed topics in Croatia due to the work of both the professional and scientific communities who are dedicated to raising awareness about this topic. Epidemiological studies conducted so far in Croatia show that although violence against children has been prohibited by law since 1999, a large number of children are still exposed to violence. The most comprehensive study on the epidemiology of child abuse and neglect was the Balkan Epidemiological study on Child Abuse and Neglect (BECAN) in 2011. The results from this study show that 82,5% of children aged 16 had been exposed to psychological violence, 72,3% to corporal punishment, 40,7% to psychical abuse and 34,8% to psychological abuse at least once during their lifetime (Ajduković, Rimac, Rajter & Sušac, 2013). The data on sexual abuse show that 16,5% of children experienced some form of sexual violence at least once. and 11,1% experienced it within one year prior to the study (Ajduković, Sušac & Rajter, 2013).

On the other hand, the system for child protection in Croatia is diversified among various sectors and all experts are obliged by law to report any form of violence against children. One of the most important sectors within the child protection system are Centres for Social Care that are governmental institutions that are involved in every case of violence against children, regardless of the source of the report on violence. This issue puts a lot of pressure on social workers, who have to be highly skilled in various fields (e.g. law, counselling, administration etc.) and are also continuously exposed to work related stress. Another issue present in Croatia is the geographic dispersion of services for social workers. Most of the services for social workers are located in Zagreb. as the capital of Croatia, or in other large cities, and there is a lack of accessible services for social workers who live and work outside the large cities. This is especially important in very remote locations, such as islands. Continuous education of all social workers is an important subject, which is also prescribed by law; however, practical limitations are less discussed and they hinder the availability of resources for social workers, sometimes even for those who are not geographically far from the large cities. The need for

continuous education is even more important considering the challenges that social workers face, such as new forms of violence (on the internet etc.) and a significant number of challenges that are consequence of Europeanization of countries in the region, such as the increased mobility of parents.

So far, the studies on the education needs of social workers working in child protection have been scarce. The purpose of this study is to provide a framework for building education programs for social workers working in child protection. The study is divided into two parts – a review of legislature and education practice and a qualitative study on the educational needs of social workers.

2. Statement of the problem

This study aims to address the issue of the formal and informal education, working conditions and future training needs of social workers involved in child protection. The main purpose of this study is to map the existing educational framework of social workers and to provide insights into their educational needs.

3. Research questions

The study aims to provide an overview of the existing professional, paraprofessional and community-level child protection practice in the region. More specifically, findings from the study aim to:

- Provide a basic overview of the education and training context in which child protection practices are delivered in the region (i.e., systems in place for delivery of child protection services, related policies and frameworks, child protection education, and resource management)
- Identify needs and opportunities for further professional development, training, and/or capacity building to strengthen the child protection workforce in the region.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of Croatia

Croatia covers a territory of 56 538 km² and has a population of 4.28 million people, out of which 797 855 (18.6%) are under the age of 18 (according to census data for 2011). Its geographical location makes it a part of South-East Europe, Central Europe, the Danube and Mediterranean countries. Modern Croatian history has been influenced by several high-impact events, beginning with its independence from former Yugoslavia in 1991, the homeland war that resulted in enormous human and material losses due to the aggression against Croatia, the transition to a marketoriented economy and democratic political system, as well as the current financial crisis and Croatia joining the European Union in 2013. All of the circumstances, with the exception of the last, have had adverse effects on the Croatian economy and have directly influenced the wellbeing and quality of life of families in Croatia.

This document provides only basic information on the child protection system in Croatia. The list of resources and information shown here is not exhaustive, but selected to provide a good overview of the legislation, organization, scope of services, education and training of experts, and current issues in this field. Along with the information and stakeholders mentioned here, there are many others whose contributions are significant for the protection of children and who continuously work to improve their wellbeing and the services provided to children and families.

1.2. General framework of the child protection system

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia states that "it is the duty of everyone to protect children and those who cannot help themselves" (Article 65, paragraph 1). Pursuant to this constitutional provision, children in Croatia enjoy special protection. Constitutional provisions also state that "no one shall be subjected to any form of abuse..." (Article 23), and a constitutional right to a life without violence is elaborated upon by special regulations.

The development of legal regulations for the protection of children's wellbeing was highly influenced by Croatia signing the Convention of the Rights of the

Child in 1991. Since then, Croatia also ratified the facultative protocols that govern child trafficking, children in armed conflict, and the processes of individual complaints towards offences against the Convention. Some of the examples of the legislation that will be more thoroughly discussed are the Family Act (Official Gazette, 116/03, 17/04, 107/7), the Act on the Protection against Family Violence (Official Gazette 116/3, 137/09) and Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette 73/97, 27/01, 59/01, 82/01, 103/03), Juvenile Courts Act (Official Gazette 111/98, 27/98, 12/02).

The Croatian Government has also adopted a series of strategies and operational documents. These include the National Strategy for the Rights of the Child for the period of 2014-2020, and the National Strategy for the Protection from Family Violence for the period of 2011-2016. These strategies emphasize important protocols such as the Rules of Procedure in Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect, Rules of Procedure in Cases of Violence among Children and Youth, and Rules of Procedure in Cases of Sexual Violence.

The Republic of Croatia was also among the countries that banned physical punishment of children for any purpose in 1999. A national campaign was launched against physical punishment of children in 2009, the aim of which was to promote the upbringing of children without physical abuse and degrading treatment, as well as to encourage parents to use appropriate educational and non-violent upbringing methods. A series of other campaigns were also implemented by government and non-government organizations designed to prevent violence against children.

The Croatian government established two separate bodies for monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The first body is the National Council for Children, established in 1998. It monitors the fulfilment of core national strategic documents in respect to the protection of children, coordinates governmental and other bodies in the implementation of measures and activities, and monitors the adherence of the Convention on Rights on the Child, as well as other national and international regulations for the protection and promotion of children's interests (Decision on the formation of

Council for Children, 2012). The members of the national council are representatives from: the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and Pension System, the Ministry of Justice, the Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities, the State Attorney's Office, the Croatian Education and Teacher Training Agency, the Social Work Study Centre, the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, two representatives from health institutions for children, two representatives from social care institutions for children, three representatives from non-governmental organizations for children, one representative from the Croatian Journalists' Association involved in child protection, one representative from the National Students' Council, and one representative of children. The second body is the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, established in 2003. It protects, monitors, and promotes the rights and interests of children according to the Croatian Constitution, and international contracts and laws.

The National Strategy for the Rights of the Child in Croatia for the Period of 2014-2020 states that the key (strategical) problems and challenges in child protection and the promotion of their rights are the following:

- There is no system for monitoring the distribution of finances or the yearly assessment of finances spent for the fulfilment of needs and the rights of children by the delegated ministry.
- The "vertical and horizontal" coordination of the implementation of legislation, protocols and national strategic documents for the children protection and rights fulfilment is inefficient.
- The availability of services for children and families in the different parts of Croatia guaranteed by the law or strategic documents is unequal.
- There is a lack of reliable information and operationalized indicators for children's wellbeing and life quality.
- The quality of prevention programs, legally guaranteed programs and strategically foreseen services and programs is unequal or unknown.
- The approach to the continuous education of child protection workers is traditional and the evaluation of programs is based on the content of the programs and participants' satisfaction. There is

- a lack of the evaluation system based on the outcome competencies, i.e. the concrete knowledge and skills that the experts will be able to implement with children and families in their immediate surroundings.
- Awareness of key children's rights issues must be increased, including awareness of the role of children in society and awareness that society must prioritise the rights of children relative to the rights of adults.

2. The main bodies for the child protection in Croatia

2.1. The Ministry of Social Policy and Youth

The Ministry of Social Policy and Youth (hereinafter referred to as MSPY) was founded in 2003 and took over the responsibilities of the former Ministry of Family Veterans' Affairs and Intergenerational Solidarity. MSPY coordinates and governs the bodies that implement child protection policies and procedures, and provides financial assistance for projects designed to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of children and families.

Within the MSPY there is an Office for Children that specifically promotes their rights based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It takes measures to fulfil the rights of children and family members, plans, monitors, and encourages initiatives on the local and national level, and fosters prevention of risks for children and families.

The Department for Social Policy Implementation, Organisation and Supervision of Institutions is, among others, responsible for:

- organisational, infrastructural and organizational support for the institutions within the social care system,
- quality standards for the services within the social care system
- educations for the uniform application of legal regulations within the MSPY scope of work,
- administrative and expert supervisions of social service providers,
- handling of complaints by citizens regarding the work of institutions within the social care system.

The Department for Social Policy Implementation, Organization and Supervision of Institutions also includes the Office for Quality Management and Expert Education that is responsible for conducting the analysis on the educational needs of experts and for the design of the yearly plan for the education of experts based on the input from the expert councils within the Centres for Social Care, national strategies and reports from monitoring services.

The other two main departments of the MSPY are the Department for Social Policy, Strategy and Youth and the Department for Finances, Budget and Contracts with Social Services Providers.

2.2. The Office of the Ombudsman for Children

The Office of the Ombudsman for Children monitors the implementation of the fundamental documents of Croatia and its adopted international agreements and regulations pertaining to the rights of children. It works independently and has a good reputation in Croatian society due to its continuous work on the promotion of children's wellbeing. Specifically the Office:

- Monitors the compatibility of laws and other regulations in the Republic of Croatia regarding the rights and interests of children, with the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other international documents pertaining to the rights and interests of children. It supervises the execution of the obligations of Croatia arising from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international agreements, and the application of all regulations related to the protection of the rights and interests of children.
- Monitors the violations of individual children's rights and studies the occurrence and types of violations of children's rights in general.
- Facilitates the protection and promotion of the rights and interests of children with special needs by proposing measures for building a coherent system of protection and promotion of children's rights and prevention of adverse effects that endanger their interests.
- Informs the public about the state of children's rights, informs and advises children on how to achieve and protect their rights and interests, encourages children to speak out and encourages adults to respect the children's opinions, initiates and participates in public activities aimed at improving the condition of children and pro-

- poses measures to increase their influence in society.
- Participates upon request in the proceedings that involve passing bills pertaining to children's rights or governing issues of importance to children, and encourages the introduction of new laws and amendments of current laws and other regulations regarding the rights and protection of children

2.3. Centres for social care

As reflected in the Croatian Constitution (articles 3, 56-59, 63-65), social care is a priority for Croatia as it provides and performs services directed towards families and children at risk, which includes prevention, help, and support in achieving their basic needs and improving their quality of life.

Most of the activities directed towards the protection of children and families involves the support and cooperation of other providers of social care, and are coordinated through a network of social care centres. Currently, there are 80 Centres for Social Care with 38 subsidiaries that provide family and criminal legal protection in accordance with the Social Care Act, the Family Act and Juvenile Courts Act. A centre for social care that is in a county centre also performs advisory and preventative functions which include family mediation, educational activities, and work programs in the community designed to support children and families.

- 1. The National Strategy for the Rights of the Child in Croatia for the period of 2014-2020 states that the priorities in this field are:
- To promote children's position in the social care system by ensuring the consistent application of legal regulations, cooperation between various departments and coordination of activities of various systems on the local and national level.
- 3. To advocate and promote family surroundings as the best environment for the complete and successful development of children.
- 4. To continuously develop the social service system for children and families by improving their availability and accessibility.

5. To develop mechanisms which strengthen the participation of children in intervention planning, as well as improving measurements for evaluation in regards to these mechanisms.

The strategy operationalizes these priorities through five specific goals:

- 1. To ensure the requirements for the safe and beneficial growth and development of children in family surroundings.
- 2. To ensure well-adjusted, high-quality, and available services for children and families who are users of the social care system.
- 3. To provide inclusive and participatory conditions for children using social care programs that aim to develop their potential and improve the evaluation of treatment outcomes, and which are catered to the individual needs of every child.
- 4. To define the roles and tasks of individual social care systems responsible for the protection of children and their interests.
- To ensure the continuous education and professional support of all employees who provide social services to children and families within the social care system.

The last goal is, within the context of this document, the most important and has two specific measures:

- To create a plan and program for the education of experts based on clearly defined competencies, knowledge, skills, and values necessary for work with families with children, and which are evaluated by an official chamber of experts.
- To provide professional support for experts working with children and families through supervision.

2.4. Child protection centre of Zagreb

One of the most important services available to children and families is provided by the Child Protection Centre of Zagreb (hereinafter: Protection Centre). The Protection Centre was founded in 2012 by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the City of Zagreb. Its primary purpose is to provide psychological,

social, psychiatric, special education, and paediatric help to children that have experienced a variety of traumatic events. This service is also provided to their parents to help them effectively deal with the consequences of such experiences.

Primarily this involves sexually, physically, and emotionally abused and neglected children who are also at risk from trauma. In addition to providing diagnostic and therapeutic treatment, the experts at the Protection Centre offer individual and group counselling support to children and parents. Within its areas of activity, the Protection Centre also organizes and conducts educational seminars, as well as provides supervision and training for professionals working in institutions directly involved with issues of abuse (www.poliklinika-djeca.hr). The main areas of diagnostic and therapeutic work conducted by professionals at the Protection Centre include:

- Carrying out extensive individual diagnostics of problems of children that have been in treatment. The treatments are carried out by a multidisciplinary team of psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians, special educators, and social workers for all children that may have been abused or neglected.
- Planning optimal treatments for every child and parent, which will help the child with all of his/ her issues; a process in which all members of the multidisciplinary team participate, as well as the child's parent.
- Collaboration with other institutions for the benefit of the child (school, day care, social care centres, police, child care homes, etc.)
- Provision of psychological, psychiatric, and/or pedagogical individual treatments specifically designed to a child's needs.
- Organization and carrying out group work with children and their parents, and to provide partner and family psychotherapy.

It should be noted that up until recently the Child Protection Centre of Zagreb was the only institution of its kind in Croatia, which has consequently limited the availability of services for children and families throughout Croatia. Currently, the Child Protection Centre in Osijek is being developed which will make the services more accessible for the children and families in the Slavonia region. However, there is still

a high demand for such institutions and services in other parts of Croatia.

2.5. UNICEF for Croatia

UNICEF for Croatia is one of the most important supporters for the development of child protection services and helps to facilitate prevention campaigns and research projects. Some of its most important projects have included the campaign for prevention against bullying in schools in 2003, which resulted in the program 'For Safe and Inspiring Environment in Schools'. In 2008, UNICEF partnered with Brave Phone to design the campaign 'Stop the Chain', with the aim of preventing violence and abuse committed through electronic media. The website www.pre-kinilanac.org was subsequently launched and contains campaign material available for use for teachers, parents and children.

Among others, there have been campaigns which have advocated for the best interests of children in institutional and foster care which include: 'Every Child needs a Family' in 2005, 'The First Three are Most Important' in 2006, and 'The First Three are Even More Important' in 2009. UNICEF has also conducted several large research studies such as 'The Poverty and Material Wellbeing of Children' in 2014. The efforts of UNICEF are designed with the cooperation of public bodies so as to achieve sustainability of activities in these campaigns.

2.6. The non-governmental sector

The non-governmental sector in Croatia is highly developed and the number of local and national organizations is relatively large. The organizations cover all areas of child protection including legislation (e.g. Association of Youth and Family Judges and Specialists), prevention (e.g. Parents' Association 'Step by Step'), support (e.g. Brave Phone), and treatment (e.g. Association for the Family Protection Rijeka). A more detailed description of this sector would be beyond the scope of this document. However, the Coordination of the Croatian Associations for Children should be mentioned as a collective of 25 NGOs dedicated to the promotion of children's rights and their wellbeing, and which monitors the implementation and enforcement of child protection plans decisions of the Croatian government. This collective for child protection creates an alternative and independent report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There are other important stakeholders that significantly influence and benefit the child protection system such as private companies, media, and educational and health services among many others. Their contribution is considerable and cannot be understated. However, due to the purpose of this document, which is to describe the factors that influence the work of child protection specialists, they will not be described in detail.

3. Legal regulation of child protection

The regulation of child protection is described by national laws and international contracts that Croatia has signed.

3.1. Croatian constitution

As mentioned before, the rights of children are protected by the constitution (Official Gazette 56/1990; 135/1997; 8/1998; 113/2000; 28/2001; 41/2001; 55/2001; 76/2010; 85/2010; 5/2014). Article 23 prescribes that no one can be subjugated to any form of abuse. Furthermore, Article 35 prescribes that everyone is guaranteed respect and legal protection of their personal life, family life, and honour. Article 65 declares that the state protects...children and youth, and creates social, cultural, educational material and other conditions that promote the right to a decent life. Article 65 also obliges everyone to protect children. These articles provide the necessary framework for the development of a child protection system. It should be noted that after July 2013, Croatia became part of the EU and adopted all the regulations of the acquis communautaire.

3.2. Family act

The Family Act is the law that describes the roles and duties of parents and provides a framework for child protection workers. The latest Family Act (Official Gazette 75/2014; 85/2014) is currently suspended by the constitutional court and the former Family Act (Official Gazette 116/2003; 17/2004; 136/2004; 107/2007; 57/2011; 61/2011) is in use. Both acts have a strong focus on the protection of children and their wellbeing. The articles that should be mentioned here are Article 108 which states that everyone is bound to inform a centre for social care about the violation of a child's rights, and in particular about all forms of physical and psychological violence, sexual abuse, neglect or negligence, abuse and/or exploitation of the child. The Centre for Social Care is obliged to immediately in-

vestigate the case and take measures to protect the child. If the notice of the maltreatment was received from another body or institution, the Centre is obligated to inform the other body or institution of the steps that have been undertaken.

The relevant authorities may impose one of the measures to protect the personal interests of the child, which range from preventive measures to the act of removing the child from the family and revoking parental rights in the most extreme cases.

The implementation of preventive measures is given to the Centres for Social Care, and by law they are obliged to take action in the best interest of the child. Specifically, these measures are:

- 1. Issuing a warning to the parents about their neglect regarding proper care and upbringing of a child (Article 109)
- 2. Supervision of parental care (Article 110)

Both of these measures are designed to assist parents in taking proper care of their children by providing support while the child remains with the family (Korac Graovac, 2008). The centre for social care enacts these measures when the transgressions the parents have committed are not particularly severe, or when the parent's undesirable behaviour can be averted through: providing advice, supervision, issuing warnings to avoid repetition of mistakes, monitoring behaviour, and assisting parents with situations they don't know how to respond to.

Should a parent neglect properly raising their child or pose a danger to their child's development, the courts will take away the child through a non-litigation procedure and take away the parent's right to live with and continue raising their child. The courts will also entrust the care and upbringing of the child to either another person, an institution, or any other legal entity that carries out the activity of social care. (Article 111).

In a non-litigation procedure, a parent is deprived of their right to parental care in cases where they have abused or severely violated their responsibilities and duties. The criteria for abuse and/or violations of parental responsibilities, duties, and rights, include: (1) exerting physical or psychological violence against a child, including exposing them to violence among

adult members of the family, (2) taking sexual advantage of the child, (3) exploiting the child by forcing them to work too hard, or to perform work unsuitable for their age, (4) allowing the child to consume alcohol, drugs, or other narcotic substances, (5) encouraging socially unacceptable behaviour, (6) abandoning the child, (7) not caring for a child with whom he or she does not reside for a period of more than three months, (8) if in a period of one year, does not create suitable conditions for living together with the child with whom they do not reside, without having a justifiable reason, (9) not caring for the basic life necessities of a child with whom he or she lives, or does not comply with measures that have been previously imposed by a competent body for the sake of protecting the child's rights and wellbeing, (10) in some other way severely abuses a child's rights. The right to exercise parental care may be restored by a court decision should the reasons for which the rights were taken away, cease or be rectified.

3.3. Social welfare act

The Social Welfare Act (Official gazette 157/2013; 152/2014) provides the framework for the provision of social services and for the work of social care centres. The Act defines what type of people are in need of social services and provides the descriptions needed for the implementation of associated measures. Under Article 6, it defines a child as a person under the age of 18. Article 12 states a person fully incapable for work is...a child under the age of 15. Additionally, Article 17 states that in proceedings where a child's rights or interests are being decided, the child has a right to have the information on the circumstances of the case, to get advice, to express their opinion, and to be informed about the consequences of the possible outcomes.

Article 115 regulates that the services related to social care are financed from the national budget, regional administration budget, local administration budget, profits gathered by provision of social services to participants (participant contribution), own income of social service providers and the donations, help and other incomes. Article 116 states that the Republic of Croatia will ensure finance within the budget for the financial remunerations within the social care system, the social services prescribed by this act, the functioning of the Centres for Social Care, the functioning of homes for social care and infrastructural activities within the social care system.

Relevant social welfare services are provided by institutions such as Centres for Social Care, social welfare homes, community centres, centres for in-house help, non-governmental organizations, religious communities, other legal persons, professionals, and foster families (Articles 123-124). The structure and requirements for these institutions are highly regulated, especially for foster parents and other providers of temporary or permanent care of children.

Articles 126-144 describe the organization and functioning of Centres for Social Care. The highest authority within the centre is the management board. The members of this board are three representatives from among the founders (named by the minister for social care), one representative from the local administration (named by the minister for social care) and one representative of workers within the centre (named by the workers council). The management board is responsible, among others, for the Statute of the centre that defines in detail the internal structure of the centre, methods of decision-making and other issues that are important for the functioning of the centre. Each centre has an expert council. The members of this council are all expert workers within the centre. The council is, among other obligations, responsible for giving suggestions and opinions on the needs for education and internal systematization of work to the headmaster.

Article 208 states that the expert work within the centre is done by social workers, lawyers, psychologists, social pedagogues and educational rehabilitators. All expert workers need to pass the national exam. Exceptionally, depending on the scope of work of the centre for social care, expert work can be done by other experts with the appropriate education and academic title. It should be noted that the requirements and the obligations of social workers are described in the Act on the Social Work Activity, which will be presented in the next chapter.

The Act also outlines the roles and obligations of institutions involved in social care and defines the requirements of workers within the social care system. Articles 215-217 define the process of enabling professionals for independent work. After the university education (see article 208) experts have to go through an apprenticeship for 12 months. After this period they have to pass the national exam. The minister for social care is responsible for the rules and

the contents of the national exams. The Guidelines for the Apprenticeship and National Exams within the Social Care (Official gazette 66/2015) describe the specific obligations within the apprenticeship and the contents of national exams. For social workers, the plan for apprenticeship includes 5 days of basic administrative work and 5 days for introduction to the organization of the centre for social work, responsibilities and legal regulations. Social workers will then work in each department of the centre, participate in the individual work with clients and do professional administration in a limited scope. After the apprenticeship, social workers will go through the national exam. This exam has two parts: the general part on the organization of public administration and legal regulations related to social work, and the second part are exams in five specific topics:

- Public administration, administrative disputes and office administration
- Social care and the social policy system
- Legal protection of the family
- Protection of the children with behavioural disorders
- Protection of children with developmental disorders and people with disabilities

Under Article 218 of the Social Welfare Act, it is stated that experts in the field of social welfare have a right and duty to continuously educate themselves in the areas of law, social pedagogy, social work, psychology, speech therapy, educational rehabilitation, work therapy, education, consultation services, management, social policy, and other fields necessary for efficient performance in tasks of social welfare.

Article 219 prescribes that experts in the field of social care have a right to supportive supervision designed to improve the quality of their work with clients. Articles 220-247 regulate the monitoring of social service providers. The monitoring encompasses internal monitoring, inspections and administrative monitoring. Internal monitoring is done within the social service institution, and it is defined by the institution's internal acts. It includes the monitoring of the legality of work, expert work and the quality of services. The inspections include monitoring of the application of laws, other acts and expert work. The inspections are done by inspectors or by professional chambers, such as the Chamber of Social Workers. The inspection methodology and its contents are prescribed by

the Minister for Social Care. The administrative monitoring includes the monitoring of legal procedures; efficiency, rationality and purposefulness of work within the social services institution; purposefulness of internal organization and the competences of employees; and the professionalism of relationships with clients. The administrative monitoring is done by public officials using methodology determined by the Minister for Social Care.

Other important issues covered by the Act regulate the measures regarding the help provided to individuals and families that are financially struggling, or deprived in some form or other which directly influences the quality of life of children.

3.4. Act on the Social Work Activity

The Act on Social Work Activity (Official Gazette 124/2011; 120/2012) defines the roles and obligations of workers involved in the activities of social care. It prescribes the necessary education for social workers, defines the role of the Chamber of Social Workers, and outlines the conditions for obtaining and revoking a license to perform activities in social care. Article 3 of the Act states that the general goal of social work is to provide help and support to individuals, groups, and communities by realizing their strengths and potentials, and by providing protection and care for the improvement of their quality of life.

Article 4 states that the right to perform the duties of social workers belong to individuals with a master's degree in social work, a master's degree in social policy or a bachelor's degree in social work. The scope of responsibilities according to degree is further defined by this act. They also need to pass the national exam, possess Croatian citizenship, have written and oral knowledge of the Croatian language, be members of the Chamber of Social Workers, and have the approval for independent work issued by the Chamber of Social Workers.

Article 8 states that social workers have a right and an obligation to pursue professional development through continuous education and acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

Social workers renew their licence every six years by acquiring 120 points prescribed by the Chamber of Social Workers. The points are acquired by the participation in specialist educations, educations in

psychotherapy or psychosocial treatments, mentorships and supervisions, articles in expert or scientific journals or books, study visits, participations in congresses and workshops, scientific degree advancements and e-learning (for example, an article with up to three authors is worth 20 points and participation in an international congress for one day as a passive participant is worth 12 points). The Chamber has the right to revoke the licence to perform activities in social care in cases where a person loses Croatian citizenship, loses professional ability, becomes permanently unable to perform social care activities due to the health reasons, is issued a security measure of ban to perform social work activities, or loses a right to perform social work activities by a discipline measure of the Chamber.

3.5. Criminal code

The Criminal Code (Official Gazette 125/2011; 144/2012) provides special protection for children and regulates any severe transgressions against the rights of children such as slavery (Article 105), trafficking (Article 106), genital mutilation (Article 116), sexual crimes (Articles 152, 154, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166.), and illegal marriages to children (Article 170).

Chapter 18 of the Criminal Code is dedicated to the protection of children and families. Article 117 of the Code specifically describes transgressions against the rights of children which include violations in child rearing duties, forced labour, begging, corruption and several other breaches; all of which may carry a penalty of a prison sentence of up to 5 years.

The Criminal Code also states it is a criminal offence to not report a crime against a child, regardless of whether it was attempted (Article 301) or committed (Article 302).

3.6. Juvenile courts act

The Juvenile Courts Act (Official Gazette 84/2011, 143/2012, 148/2013) regulates material criminal law, criminal procedures, sanctions when the perpetrators are juveniles and young adults, and cases of criminal law enforcement protection of children and juveniles. Specifically, Article 113 regulates the jurisdiction of juvenile courts in regards to transgressions against children stated in the Criminal Code. These violations include criminal acts against sexual freedoms and morality, acts against marriage, family

and youth, manslaughter, infanticide, participation in suicide, kidnapping, abuse committed while performing official duties, trafficking and slavery, international prostitution, transmitting sexual diseases, and violent behaviour. The same article also states that when multiple criminal acts are committed, including the aforementioned, in addition to other criminal acts, the Juvenile Courts have jurisdiction over the proceedings.

Article 38 of the Act states that judges presiding over district and county courts, as well as state attorneys acting on behalf of juveniles, must remain sensitive to the upbringing, needs, and achievements of young people, as well as have basic knowledge in Criminology, Social Pedagogy, Youth Psychology, and social care for young people.

The Juvenile Courts Act also states that only police officers and investigators specializing in youths may participate in the proceedings for acts committed against the rights of children. An exception for regular officers is made only when such specialized officers are not available.

Article 115 describes the methods for examining children under the age of 16 as witnesses. These examinations must always be conducted in accordance with the Act on criminal proceedings. Article 292 states these examinations must be conducted without the judge and involved parties, and in a special room with assistance from a psychologist, pedagogue, or other expert. Repeated examinations must also be conducted in the same manner.

3.7. Act on the Protection against Family Violence

The Act on the Protection against Family Violence (Official Gazette 137/2009; 14/2010; 60/2010) is a part of the misdemeanour legislation and regulates matters of family violence. Additionally, it outlines the various types and purposes of criminal sanctions that range from protective measures, to prison sentences, to fines, among others.

Article 4 defines violence in the family as any form of physical, psychological, sexual, or economical violence. Of particular importance in this article is the prohibition of the use of corporal punishment and other demeaning acts for the purpose of rearing and education. The purpose of the Act is to prevent, suppress, and sanction all forms of violence in the fam-

ily by applying its measures against the offender, and through mitigating the consequences of already committed acts of violence by providing protection and assistance to victims. The regulation, imposition, and application of criminal sanctions is meant to protect family members who are endangered and exposed to violence, in compliance with the rules of the legal system, as well as to prevent any further violence from occurring within the family.

In addition to the sanctions, the Act provides a range of safeguards to prevent family violence and to provide the necessary protection for persons exposed to violence. Protective measures are applied in order to eliminate threats and defend individuals from further abuse.

In regards to the obligation to report any offences committed, under Article 8, the Act states that all health care workers, social care workers, professionals employed by religious institutions, humanitarian organizations, and civil society organizations dealing with children and families, are required to report any committed acts of family violence that they come to know about during the performance of their duties to the police or the State Attorney's Office.

3.8. Rules of procedure in cases of violence

Among others, the Croatian Government has issued several protocols enumerating the obligations and guidelines of all services involved in child protection such as educational institutions, healthcare institutions, police, justice institutions, and social care centres. In particular, there are three protocols commonly used and cited by professionals which are: Rules of Procedure in Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect (formerly Rules of Procedure in Cases of Family Violence), Rules of Procedure in Cases of Sexual Violence, and Rules of Procedure in Cases of Violence among Children and Youth. These protocols have clear regulations on the obligations of institutions and professionals in cases of violence. The central places for providing support and protection to children are social care centres. Of particular importance is that all institutions involved are obliged to handle cases promptly and to cooperate and provide feedback regarding the case proceedings. Ajdukovic (2010) states that the purpose of the Rules of the Procedure in Cases of Family Violence is to provide the necessary conditions for effective, integrative, and harmonized functioning of relevant authorities, in order to improve the protection and assistance available to victims of family violence. Furthermore, its goal is to help offenders cease their violent behaviour by changing their value system so as to encourage non-violent conflict resolution, to develop respect for gender equality, and to increase the safety of family members. Therefore, the Rules of the Procedures in Cases of Family Violence highlight the importance of establishing cooperation between relevant authorities. This is achieved through monitoring and reporting on said rules, exchanging information among local self-administrative units, and collaborating with other authorities and institutions that deal with issues of family violence. These general guidelines are applicable to all protocols.

4. Statistical data on the child protection system

The statistical data on the child protection system is collected by government institutions such as ministries, the Central Bureau for Statistics, the scientific community, and a growing number of NGOs. In the following, only the most descriptive sources have been analysed and presented.

4.1. Data from the governmental institutions Ministry of Social Policy and Youth

The Ministry of Social Policy and Youth provides the data on a yearly basis with Annual reports. The currently available reports show the data for 2013.

Table 1 shows data regarding the number of staff in the Centres for Social Care according to the annual report on Employees in Centres for Social Care and other Institutions for 2013¹.

The Annual Report on Institutions and Users of Social Care² for 2013 states that the total number of children placed in children's homes (governmental and non-governmental) was 8.328, which includes children without proper parental care (1.096), children and youth with behavioural disorders (1.030) and

Table 1. Number of employees in Centres for Social Care in 2013

EXPERT STAFF	Total	Females	% Females	
Social Worker (MA)	807,5*	742,5	92%	
Social Worker (BA)	217	192	88%	
Lawyer	261	211	81%	
Administrative lawyer	32	27	84%	
Psychologist	163	141	87%	
Special education teacher	26	22	85%	
Social pedagogue	45,5	39,5	87%	
Sociologist	4	4	100%	
Others	10	7	70%	
Total expert staff	1566	1386	89%	
Headmasters	114,5	97,5	85%	
OTHER STAFF				
Administrative staff	206	185,5	90%	
Financial/accounting staff	223	201,5	90%	
Technical staff	108	73,5	68%	
Total other staff	537	460,5	86%	
TOTAL	2217,5	1944	88%	

^{*} Employees with part-time contracts are counted based on the percentage of their working time

children with developmental disorders and disabilities (6.202).

Aggregated data according to the Annual report on applicable rights in social care for 2013³ is presented in Table 2. Table shows the data for the selected categories.

The same source of data provides interesting information on reports to Centres for Social Care on transgressions against children's rights (see Table 3)

These data show that the highest number of reports comes from the police, and the lowest number of reports comes from health institutions. These results are in accordance with previous studies that show the need for interventions that would increase the awareness of health professionals about their roles and obligations for the protection of children's rights.

¹ http://www.mspm.hr/content/download/11454/90089/file/ Godi%C5%A1nje%20statisti%C4%8Dko%20izvje%C5%A1%C4%87e%20 o%20zaposlenicima%20u%20centrima%20i%20ustanovama%20soc.%20 skrbi%20u%20%202013.xls

² http://www.mspm.hr/content/download/11452/90083/file/ Godi%C5%A1nje%20statisti%C4%8Dko%20izvje%C5%A1%C4%87e%20 o%20domovima%20i%20korisnicima%20socijalne%20skrbi%20u%20%20 2013.xls

³ http://www.mspm.hr/contLent/download/11824/91841/file/Godi%C5%A1nje%20statisti%C4%8Dko%20%20izvje%C5%A1%C4%87e%20o%20primjenjivim%20pravima%20socijalne%20skrbi%20%20u%20%202013%20godini.xlsx

Table 2. Official statistics of the Ministry for social care and youth on applicable rights in social care (selected data)

Number of juvenile mothers	220
Decisions of a centre to put a child into the custody of other person without parental approval	182
Decisions of a centre to remove a child	60
Number of reports about transgressions against children's rights	4.330
Number of warnings issued to parents about omissions and mistakes in the child care	5.965
Number of supervisions on parents handled by a centre for social care during 2013	4.112
Number of decisions to issue a supervision on parents during 2013	2.384
Number of supervisors on parental care	2.402
Number of reported cases of severe neglect of parental duties and rights	3.107
Number of reported cases of the abuse of parental duties and rights	2.097
Number of reported cases of child abuse	3.499
Number of children involved in begging	57
Number of recorded cases of violence in the family	11.836
Number of children placed in children's homes	1.323
Number of children placed in children's homes during 2013	593
Number of children whose placement in children's homes was terminated during 2013	365
Number of children placed in foster families	2.146
Number of children placed during 2013 in foster families	876
Number of children whose placement in foster families was terminated during 2013	298
Number of children with prerequisites for adoption	289
Number of adopted children during 2013	107
Number of interventions of Centres for Social Care in visitations of parents to children with whom they do not live and in cases of other manipulative behaviours of one or both parents	3.957
Number of warnings issued to parents for not respecting child's right to see the parent with whom he/she does not live including manipulative behaviour that resulted in the exclusion of other parent and diminishing of the role of other parent in the life of a child	1.693
Number of decisions to issue a supervision to parents to protect a child's right to continuously develop relationship with both parents and protection from manipulative behaviours form both parents	711
Number of cases reported to competent courts in cases of manipulation with the rights of a child	147
Number of families who received expert assistance related to marriage, family and children's rights protection	17.467

Table 3. Number of reported cases of severe neglect of parental duties and rights in 2013 according to the source of the report

Kindergarten	79
School	494
Health institution	197
Police	1.093
Citizens	504
Other subjects	273
Centres for social care during interventions regarding social care or family protection	467
Total	3.107

Ministry of Internal Affairs

The Ministry of Internal Affairs provides the data on an annual and quarterly basis. The latest available data is for 2014⁴ and selected parts will be shown.

Table 4. Number of reported criminal acts against children in 2014 according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs data

Manslaughter	2
Physical injury	716
Severe physical injury	122
Threat	993
Intrusive behaviour	105
Illegal use of private data	2
Sexual intercourse without consent	33
Rape	27
Lewd acts in front of children under the age of 15	24
Sexual harassment	5
Sexual abuse of a child younger than 15	258
Lewd acts in front of children under the age of 15	83
Enticement of children for lewd acts	11
Exploitation of children for prostitution	7
Exploitation of children for pornography	141
Exposing children to pornography	19
Enabling extramarital life with children	35
Transgressions of duties to support children	948
Refusal to implement a decision to protect child wellbeing	43
Transgressions against the rights of a child	939
Transgressions against child privacy	35

The largest number of criminal acts is in the general category of transgressions against the rights of a child, physical injuries and transgressions of duties to support children. However, number of cases of sexual abuse of children younger than 15 is large, especially in the context of all sexual crimes against children.

The data on criminal acts of children in 2014 are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Criminal acts of children in 2014 according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs data

-		
	Child's age	
	Under 14	14-18
Criminal acts against humanity and human dignity	0	2
Criminal acts against life and body	79	193
Criminal acts against personal freedom	7	95
Criminal acts against privacy	0	31
Criminal acts against sexual freedom	2	11
Criminal acts against sexual exploitation	15	112
Criminal acts against mar- riage, family and children	2	20
Criminal acts against human health	5	260
Criminal acts against environment	2	6
Criminal acts against general security	3	9
Criminal acts against traffic security	0	13
Criminal acts against property	165	1.591
Criminal acts against economy	1	6
Criminal acts against computer systems	0	160
Criminal acts of forgery	1	20
Criminal acts against judicial system	0	13
Criminal acts against public order	8	50
Other	0	2
Total	290	2.599

The largest number of criminal acts in this category is for crimes against property, which mostly include theft and the damage of property.

4.2. Scientific data

During the last couple of years there is a growing number of scientific studies dealing with child protection. These studies are performed both by the scientific community and by non-governmental organizations. Especially important is the growing number of doctoral candidates with specializations in the field of child protection.

⁴ http://www.mup.hr/UserDocsImages/statistika/2015/Statisticki_pregled_2014.pdf

The data shown here is taken from several recent larger studies.

Balkan Epidemiological Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (BECAN)

The Project BECAN was an international FP7 research project of 8 countries from South-East Europe designed to map child abuse and neglect (CAN) in the general population of 11 to 16 year old children that attend school, and those that have dropped out of school, in order to identify the number of reported/ detected cases of CAN being recorded by official institutions (www.becan.eu). The Croatian part of this project was conducted at the Social Work Study Centre from 2010-2013. The project generated a number of publications regarding the epidemiology of child abuse and neglect, and the child protection system. The most important of these are: the Report on Family Abuse and Neglect of Children - Overview of the situation in Croatia (Ajdukovic, Rajter, Ogresta & Sušac, 2010); What Can We Learn from the Analysis of Works and Research on Violence Against Children In Families, published in Croatia from 1985 to 2009. (Ajduković & Ogresta, 2010); Analysis of Characteristics of Incidents of Child Abuse Cases Registered in Social Care Centres (Ogresta, Rimac, Ajduković & Skokandić, 2012); Epidemiological research of prevalence and incidents of family violence on children in Croatia (Ajduković, Rimac, Raiter & Sušac, 2012); Gender and age differences in prevalence and incidents of child sexual abuse in Croatia (Ajduković, Rajter & Sušac, 2013); and Family stressors and family factors as predictors of parental violence against children (Rajter, 2013).

The analysis of epidemiological data shows that between 59-82.5% of children were exposed to psychological aggression; between 56.2-72.3% to corporal punishment; between 26.2-40.7% to physical abuse, between 22.8-34.8% to psychological abuse; and between 4.8-16.5% to sexual abuse.

Studies from Child Protection Centre of Zagreb

The Child Protection Centre of Zagreb performs therapeutic and diagnostic work, and continuously publishes studies on various topics regarding child protection. One of the most recent studies by the Child Protection Centre of Zagreb and Brave Phone involves the habits and exposures to violence of children on the internet. The results show that 68% of

children had Facebook profiles opened before the age of 13, of which 50% accept friendship requests from unknown persons, and 12.1% had experienced violence over Facebook (Buljan Flander, 2013; Buljan Flander, Štimac, Selak Bagarić & Vinšćak, 2014). Some of the other important studies coming from the Centre are: Study on the Attitudes and Knowledge of Medical Doctors in Croatia on Child Abuse and Neglect (Buljan Flander, Čorić & Štimac, 2008), Exposure of children to bullying (Bilić, Buljan Flander & Rafajec, 2014) and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect in Croatia (Bilić, Buljan Flander & Hrpka, 2012).

Project "Enhance the right of children to be safe"

The project 'Enhance the Right Children to be Safe' was conducted from 2003-2015 by the Parents Association Step by Step in partnership with Association FENIKS, Association of Alfa Albona, Association Portal Alfa and Association U.Z.O.R. The project aimed to address several problems regarding the child protection system, including:

- Lack of capacities of NGOs for monitoring political and process policies, and advocacy in the area of promotion and protection of children's rights.
- Collecting missing data about implementation of measures foreseen in the National Plan on the local and regional level
- Lack of coordination and implementation of measures in these units
- Slow and inconsistent intervention in cases of violence, as well as inefficient collaboration of institutions in the protection of children (police, courts, schools, social welfare)
- Lack of long term strategies, plans, and action programs on the regional level and lack of National Strategies for the promotion and protection of children against all forms of violence on a national level

The quantitative part of the study was conducted on 2239 high school students and 2215 parents of preschool and primary school children. The main conclusions of the study were (Trbus, Rajčić & Rajter, 2015):

 Young people and parents feel a lack of support from the system regarding prevention, early interventions, and treatment for violence against or among children

- Violence against and among children is widely spread; 34% of students believe that all or almost all girls experience some form of physical violence in the family; and 42% of students believe the same happens to boys
- Although there are legal regulations, corporal punishment is still accepted as an educational rearing method, and particularly worrying is that 17% of students stated they will use corporal punishment when they will be parents
- Only 55% of participants in the study are aware of the legal obligation to report any form of transgression against children's rights
- 62% of parents and 44% of students have never attended any form of education regarding violence

5. Education and training of social workers

5.1. Basic education

The curricular education of social workers is currently performed only at the Social Work Study Centre, the Faculty of Law, and the University of Zagreb. The education of social workers in Croatia dates back to 1952 as a two-year program, and since 1985 the program was exclusively a 4-year university study program. After the implementation of the Bologna system⁵ in 2005, the new study program consists of a 4-year year undergraduate program and a 1-year graduate program. Study opportunities also include specialist postgraduate studies and doctoral studies. The total enrolment of undergraduate students for the academic year 2014/2015 was 161 students (UNIZG, 2014).

The Social Work Study Centre has two study institutions: the Institute for Social Work and the Institute for Social Policy. The Chairs of the Centre are: Theory and Methods of Social Work; Social Work Areas; Social Gerontology; Social Policy; Methodology of Research in Social Work, Social Policy, and Psychology.

The overview of the study program provided at the Social Work Study Centre is shown in Table 6.

Within the undergraduate and graduate study programs, students gain knowledge and specific skills in the following areas:

5 Education reform that divided the higher education process into three stages – bachelor/master/doctorate. See more at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm

- theory and methodology of social work (ecological model, critical theory, non-directive approach, gender approach, psychodynamic model, etc.)
- work with individuals, families, groups, and communities in social need (e.g. children without adequate parental care, young people in conflict with the law, elderly persons, people with disabilities, individuals and families faced with different social problems such as poverty, unemployment, and addiction, etc.)
- communication, assessment, counselling, guidance, negotiation and partnership skills with the purpose of providing professional help and empowering clients
- social policy measures that contribute to solving local and national social problems (in the areas of social welfare, health care, employment, the pension system, family policy, civil society, and housing)
- specific areas in the study of legal science (e.g. introduction to the general theory of law and the state, family law, labour law and social security, administrative law and others)
- related fields (e.g. psychology, sociology, psychiatry, economics, management, etc.)

Fieldwork is organized within the specific courses. During their undergraduate studies, fieldwork is organized within the Social Work with Families (60 hours, of which 40 hours are in direct contact with the client), Social Gerontology (30 hours in the institutions for elderly or non-governmental organizations or public services), Social Work with Individuals (60 hours in special institutions or non-governmental organizations), Social Work and Youth with Socially Unacceptable Behaviour (90 hours in Centres for Social Care, institutions for youth or non-governmental organizations), Community Social Work (90 hours in Centres for Social Care or non-governmental institutions), Social Work with People with Disabilities (25 hours in special institutions of non-governmental organizations)

The Centre also publishes two scientific journals: the annual Report of Social Work (http://hrcak.srce.hr/ljeto-pis) and the Croatian Journal of Social Policy (www.rsp.hr)

Table 6. Overview of study programs provided at the Social work Study Centre at University of Zagreb¹

Levels of study program	Brief desc	cription of study program	Degree
Undergraduate university study of social work Four years of undergraduate university study of social work (240 ECTS)	 32 mandatory one-sem 32 offered elective cour English and German for Seminars in most of the Workshops in small gro Field work The undergraduate studinal paper, for which stin the 8th semester 	Bachelor of social work	
Graduate study of social work/ social policy One year of graduate study of social work/social policy (60 ECTS)	ate study of social work and - The graduate study progra	Social policy - 4 mandatory courses - 5 elective courses - Workshops in small groups - 1 seminar ve courses in the 1st semester of the gradusocial policy m ends with the preparation of a thesis, for dithrough tutorial work in the 2nd semester	Master of social work/social policy
Specialist postgraduate study of social work/social policy Two years of specialist postgraduate study of social work/social policy (120 ECTS)	5 different specialisations adapted to the needs of students and practice: - Psychosocial perspective in social work - Social policy - Supervision in psychosocial work - Family mediation - Social work and community development Preparation of a final specialist paper		University specialist
Doctoral study of social work/ social policy Three years of doctoral study of social work /social policy (180 ECTS)	- Doctoral degree in social w	Doctor of science	

¹ Retrieved from http://www.pravo.unizg.hr/scsr/erassmus/international_students?_v1=111b3aMKBd4lMBOKLjdV0R-X8afxCbxLc08q6oTwljgPSZGB3sARZ-wvmh0FdqxtnVtYGLhGtGBL1iqU4D2doKQDtd_ewJRuXQTtGBvyCj7LoXDOy&_lid=24507

5.2. Education of professionals

As mentioned before, the continuous education of professionals in the field of social care is established in the Social Welfare Act (Article 218). The same article mandates that the Minister for Social Care and Youth will issue a yearly plan for professional education of experts in the institutions for social care (hereinafter:

the Plan). The Plan for 2015⁶ is designed according to obligations from the last year and the needs for 2015. The obligations from 2014 include:

- · Specialist postgraduate study of Family Media-
- 6 http://www.mspm.hr/content/download/12488/95034/version/1/file/Godi %C5%A1nji+program+stru%C4%8Dnog+usavr%C5%A1avanja+2015..pdf

tion, Family Law and Supervision in Psychosocial Work

 Mediation in parental and other proceedings about children

The educational plan based on needs for 2015 includes:

- Specialist postgraduate study of Children's Rights
- Education for providers of services of organized habitation
- Education of professionals in children's homes in the field of support to families
- Prevention of trafficking
- Prevention of burn-out of experts working in children's homes
- Crisis interventions with children in children's homes
- Contemporary approaches to mental disabilities of children and youth
- Education of experts in Centres for Social Care on working with "difficult" clients
- Education on standards of quality of social services
- Education on the application of Regulations on the minimal conditions for social services provision in the proceedings of the recognition of the right to social services.
- Education of experts involved in the process of deinstitutionalization to improve their competencies for the process implementation
- Education of experts on designing individual plans for clients

As it can be seen, the Plan is mostly designed to provide the education in the field of child protection, which shows that the government recognizes the priority of children. The MSPY is also responsible for the selection of providers of the education. The providers are selected from the academic community, non-governmental organizations (such as UNICEF or UNHCR) or from within the MSPY.

Continuous education is also mandated by the Act on Social work Activity and by the Chamber of Social Workers and social workers are obliged to renew their professional license by continuously educate themselves. This includes participation in formal educations, participation in scientific events and scientific production.

6. Contemporary issues in child protection system

Contemporary issues with the child protection system were previously enumerated and analysed in the section regarding the project 'Enhance the Right of Children to be Safe', which utilised quantitative data on child protection and risks. Within this project, a qualitative study was also conducted regarding issues on legislation, the implementation of services, and inter-institutional cooperation. The focus groups were conducted with the help of 161 experts from social care centres, police, judicial system, local administration, health ministry, NGOs, alternative care bodies, and the media. The main conclusions of these focus groups are (Trbus, Rajčić & Rajter, 2015):

- It is necessary to develop and implement local strategies for children and youth based on the needs assessments of specific communities
- It is necessary to implement national and local prevention activities to increase awareness on positive parenting, and for the elimination of all forms of violence against children, especially psychological and internet violence
- Laws and regulations change too often, which prevents successful implementation of interventions and diminishes trust in the system
- There are cases of contradictions between laws, which leads to legal insecurity
- Regulations in certain areas are insufficient (post-penal monitoring, internet abuse, violence among children, psychotherapy, etc.)
- There is a need for further education and specialization of experts
- There is a need to improve the efficiency of administration, and to clarify its roles and responsibilities; as well as stricter sanctions and methods for monitoring implemented measures
- Experts are sometimes more focused on fulfilling their prescribed duties than on protecting children
- The complexities of the system and a lack of supervision lead to feelings of inadequacy and a loss of motivation
- There is a need for better regulations in respect to cooperation between institutions

7. Conclusion

The child protection system in Croatia is developed and incorporates good legislation and regulation of services. However, the results from various studies and information from official data records show there is still significant room for improvement in all areas of the system. The data on the prevalence of various forms of violence and transgressions against children's rights, as well as the data on attitudes and perceptions of children's rights, shows there's a strong need for prevention campaigns. Furthermore, experts in the field of child protection would benefit from more education and the ability to design and implement prevention activities for the general population. The data from studies on the effectiveness

of the system shows a need for improvement in the coordination of services between various institutions involved in child protection. Building on this, as mentioned in the National Strategy for the Rights of the Child in Croatia for the period of 2014-2020, one of its five priorities is to continuously develop and improve the social service system for children and families through superior availability and accessibility.

Therefore, the child protection system in Croatia needs cooperation between its various sectors. It needs to improve the quality of interventions that are oriented towards the needs of stakeholders, and which are designed to achieve measurable results for the wellbeing of children and families.

III. METHODS

1. Sample

Within this study a qualitative approach was used including focus groups and individual interviews. To ensure heterogeneity of information, it was ensured that the participants were selected from different groups. Those groups included practitioners, students of social work, professors from the Social work study centre and managers of centres for social work. The participants were selected purposely to ensure individuals who have enough knowledge about the subject.

For the participation of practitioners in focus groups and interviews, a special permit from the headmasters of centres was asked, which also served as an additional motivation for participants to take part in the study.

Table 7. Structure of participants within focus groups and interviews

Group	Focus groups		Interview
	No	Np	
Practitioners	3	11	2
Students	1	5	0
Academics	1	5	0
Managers	0	0	2
Total	5	21	4

No – number of focus group; Np – number of participants

Among the participants, only two were male, one among students and one among academics, which roughly represents the population ratio of social workers (see table 1.). Regarding their experience, most of the professionals had under 10 years of experience and the most experienced professional had 35 years of experience.

2. Data collection methods

The qualitative study was done using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted from May to September 2015 in Zagreb, Rijeka and Osijek. In total, three focus groups were conducted with practitioners, one focus group with academics and one with students of social work. The interviews were conducted with two headmasters of Centres for Social Care and two practitioners. Prior to interviews and focus groups, permission for participation of practitioners was requested from the designated Centres for Social Care, and in the case

of Zagreb, which has 11 subsidiaries, the permission was requested from the head of the central office.

The participants from the Centres for Social Care were selected using the information from their superiors, who identified these participants as ones with the experience and direct work assignments related to child protection. Students were selected using recommendations from professors as ones who are cooperative, involved and have diverse experiences. Academics were selected to be from various fields of social work and as ones who have direct experiences with students of social work.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted at the convenience of participants in the Centres for Social Care and at the Social Work Study Centre. Two focus groups with practitioners from Zagreb and focus group with students were conducted at the premises of Child Protection Centre of Zagreb.

For all focus groups and interviews the procedure was as follows. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and general questions they will be asked. They were informed about the confidentiality of their responses and that their answers will be coded in a manner such that it will be impossible to detect who they are. They were asked to give their permission to be recorded by digital voice recorder device. The focus groups lasted from 60 to 120 minutes, and the interviews 30 to 60 minutes. After the focus groups and interviews took place, the participants were given a contact e-mail and telephone number in case they had any additional questions. All of the focus groups and interviews were conducted by the same researcher.

3. Data Analysis

After the data collection, the materials were transcribed and analysed with RQDA software (Huang, 2014) within the R programming language (R Core Team, 2015). Thematic content analysis was used to aggregate specific statements into codes and categories for each research question. Codes were generated by similarity using all of the available data from focus groups and interviews. The statements were shortened, if necessary, to reduce redundant data and to provide enough information. Both coding and analyses were conducted by the same researcher.

IV. RESULTS

1. How do people involved in child protection perceive the reputation of social work in Croatia?

The first research question in this study aimed to address the perception of social work and child protection from general public and from the users of services. Within focus groups and interviews this question was asked in a general and open form.

The general impression from participants were that the perception of social work and child protection varied from extremely negative to moderately positive (e.g. "Everything worst", "I have made peace with myself a long time ago that I am not appreciated", "on the other hand, I think that the perception is actually quite positive, and especially positive perception comes from the users who are satisfied with social workers").

However, when specifics were asked, the participants were mostly oriented on the sources of negative perception. In almost every group and interview participants mentioned the media as a source of negative perception (e.g. "Due to the media influence, social workers are often perceived as incompetent public bureaucrats, and there are probably some social workers who are like that, but the media capitalize on that and generate a picture where out of all national institutions, whenever there is a problem with some child, the centre for social care is called out."). The participants feel that the negative perception can also be attributed to the lack of direct contacts with child protection workers where people rely only on media images to generate their own impressions (e.g. "We are really doing a bunch of things. People just cannot comprehend that and, of course, journalists follow the sensation, and they create our image", "I believe that people who had experience with us can make a better evaluation than people who get the perception through media."). It should be noted that one of the reasons for this negative media image is due to the inability of social workers to comment in the media because of the data protection (e.g. "there is no pretty things because of the confidentiality of information. They don't write nice things, they only write sensationalistic articles, and you cannot give the data about the case and then the people don't get the complete picture.")

The lack of direct experience with social workers is also mentioned by participants as a lack of knowledge about the scope of work they do (e.g. "most people believe that social work is just the Centre for social care, paper. You get some reimbursement and that is it, and when you start your studies you realize that this is just a segment of the entire system and I believe that the profession is not advocating for their people", "Somebody who has never been to a centre thinks that this is something from the American movies", "when you work in the centre, people automatically perceive you as a public official who comes to work, drinks coffee for three hours and then goes for a break, and then you do nothing, just wander around. They perceive our fieldwork as our free time and lollygagging"). One of the issues that was already mentioned is that when social workers are mentioned, people perceive only the scope of work of the Centres for Social Care, and ignore the work done by non-governmental organizations (e.g. "everybody perceives centres and homes for children, some especially never acknowledge informal sector.").

More specifically, participants mention the myth of social workers as people who "take away children". This myth is mentioned by students as the reaction of people in their surroundings when they announced that they will study social work, and by other participants as well as a part of their everyday life (e.g. "People perceive all of that negatively, as you are the one that steals children.", "We are often perceived as some sort of executors", "So...we take away children, we don't give people money...").

The lack of knowledge about the scope of work of social workers is directly connected to flawed expectations many people have about social workers that contribute to the feeling of disappointment (e.g. "most of them think that we can do much more than we really can and they perceive us as someone who holds a magic wand in our hand", "I have a feeling that I give too much of myself, that I am overly occupied with my work, but their expectations are larger than our possibilities.", "They want to switch their responsibility to us. They don't want to take their part of the responsibility.", "They don't want to realize that we don't give. It is not our personal judgment, like "I will give you" or "I will not give you". It is a matter of laws and it should be like that.").

The participants in this study were mostly focused on explaining the sources of negative reputation of social work within the context of child protection. Although when asked about general perception they tend to disagree, where some of them see the reputation as negative and some of them as positive, they mostly agree on the sources of the negative aspects of the reputation of social work. Based on their answers, these negative aspects can be summed up to mostly poor propaganda of social work where most people lack the experience with social work services, and the users have discrepant expectations from social workers compared to what is realistically possible.

As the main sources of information about the social work, participants mention the users who had direct experience and the media. The users are sources of both good and bad reputation, based on their personal experiences, and the media is unambiguously mentioned as a source of negative information about social work. The information collected from participants in this study suggests that there is a need to improve the perception of general public by familiarizing the general public with social work, its scope of work and positive experiences and results of people involved in child protection.

2. What are the key competencies gained from the formal education from the perspective of child protection workers and students of social work?

Social workers in Croatia are currently educated at the Social Work Study Centre at the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb. Formal education is, as mentioned before, divided into a four-year undergraduate program and a one-year graduate program. After their university education, they are obliged by law to have a supervised internship after which they obtain the right to work as social workers given by the Chamber of Social Workers.

Within this study, participants were asked to talk about the competencies they were provided through their formal education related to child protection. The analysis of their answers shows that generally speaking the formal education is oriented on giving general knowledge about various aspects of social work without specific skills. They perceive that the purpose of formal education is to provide enough theoretical knowledge and information on social work to enable

students to decide on their future careers (e.g. "We first get some general knowledge so that we can choose what we would like to do", "To learn how to get around in the system and to know how we should work, but only generally. Later it is on each of us...").

However, when asked to talk specifically about the courses where they learn about child protection, the participants found various courses where they learned both theoretical knowledge and practical skills for direct work with children and families. Such courses are focused around intergenerational transfer of violence, children with developmental difficulties, juvenile delinquency, community social work, family social policy, social work with families, child abuse and neglect and social psychology. Along with that the participants were given an education on the legal documents such as the administrative law, family law, conventions etc.

All of the participants emphasise the importance of their field practice. During the field practice, they get the opportunity to acquire hands-on experience with mentors from Centres for Social Care and nongovernmental organizations (e.g. "a lot of our students during their field practice may not get some theoretical knowledge, but they get the opportunity to learn from experts themselves", "generally speaking, lectures are 'dry' theory, where I learned the most is the field practice."). However, it is recognized that the formal education does not provide a complete training of an expert and that practical working experience is needed for expertise (e.g. "You need to have this direct work with clients, that a young person doesn't know. It takes life experience to learn.").

When asked about the competencies and skills they learned during formal education both students and professionals talk firstly about the set of values. They feel that their formal education gave them a sense of empathy towards people and a tolerance towards all kinds of people. Participants find this a very important aspect of their professional life (e.g. "I remember our first year when they told us that this is not a profession, it is a calling", "I think that the purpose of these four years is to accept these values as your own personal values and to take them as a part of yourself", "I think that I personally learned how to approach people, not to judge them and I see that these are things I apply not only in my work but also in my everyday relationship with my partner, with parents, people around me..."). However,

some participants find this approach disconnected to the reality of work of social worker (e.g. "They teach them to love this work...that in a way gives them admiration for this work, but they don't prepare them for the reality, that we are transformed in bureaucrats.").

The participants agree that their skills related to legal foundations are well covered within the curriculum (e.g. "I really liked that variety, so you can know where everything is.", "Concerning laws, I think that the most important is that they teach us that the laws exist, and the other thing is, that is most important, that the purpose is not to learn the laws by heart, but how to read the important things. However, this part is often ignored").

The negative aspects of the formal education are mostly connected to the lack of applicable skills to work with people and the lack of connection to the actual work of social worker (e.g. "I think that the faculty had no connection with what I do", "I think it is extremely bad. A lot of techniques taught here are applicable only with preschool and early school children", "I think that many techniques taught here would provoke aggression if applied to teenagers and older", "I sometimes feel that this is experimenting with projective quasi psychotherapeutic techniques").

To conclude, the participants see their formal university education as a source of both concrete knowledge that includes practical skills of working with people and legal foundations for their future work; and a source of values and attitudes that constitute their professional integrity. Although both of these areas provide good competencies based approach, the participants feel that there is a strong need for the implementation of these skills through practical work with clients. It can be discussed whether this is something that is needed during the university education; however we can hypothesise that professional self-esteem should be developed among young professionals who finish university education. Some of the participants think that there is a problem of discrepancy of the university curriculum and their actual work because their work is overly bureaucratized. This issue is more important for the managers of the Centres for Social Care and policy makers, as it is disputed whether some aspects of social work should be outsourced to non-governmental organisations and stakeholders or if the Centres for Social Care should provide more integrative services to their users.

3. How do child protection workers evaluate their research competencies?

During their formal education, social workers are required to take courses to develop their research competencies. These courses cover basic research methodology concepts, research design, qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods and scientific writing. Within this study, participants were asked to evaluate their research competencies and to assess the need and opportunities to apply these competencies in their work.

As far as knowledge is concerned, participants are satisfied with their skills and believe that they acquire enough knowledge during their formal education (e.g. "I think they cover the basis, i.e. the understanding of the research process and we have a lot of methods on our disposal", "I feel that there is a positive shift through generations...I think they have greater competencies", "I believe that we cover that well enough and everything more would be too much", "we get qualitative and quantitative methods, action research methodology, evaluation studies...a palette of tools for research.").

On the other hand some participants find the methods lacking the depth and positive approach (e.g. "We should have more courses. It is not realistic to put everything in one course.", "most of the generations go through courses by repression. They need to satisfy requirements and that is it. Motivation is zero, they don't have adequate space, they don't have computers, and they cannot turn on SPSS", "I am not satisfied with the knowledge they get because they get confused in the end. They don't learn enough about mixed methods and they wrongly find qualitative approach easier to do").

The other set of participants' answers was focused on the motivation to do research studies and to participate in them. During focus groups and interviews, there was a noticeable lack of motivation for any kind of research. Most of the participants feel that this is out of their scope of work (e.g. "Our workload is large, and when a research comes, they feel sick", "I don't think they need research methods for this kind of work", "For us, it is really not that important. I don't think that this is a part of work we should do. I must confess that when young people come to work in my centre, I don't even ask them about it", "We are here to provide data for you!").

The lack of motivation cannot be entirely attributed to the extensive workload of social workers. The participants say that they feel exploited by researchers because they never get any feedback about the results of studies they participate in (e.g. "When I say research, I mean graduate theses...they come for various things, but we don't get the feedback.", "I would rather do something else, something that helps people").

They also feel a general lack of motivation for research (e.g. "I always have to beg people in my centre to participants and nobody wants to do it", "when they send us these questionnaires, a lot of people feel exploited for other people's research. We have to waste our time by filling out somebody's questionnaires", "Our time also has a value...I mean we get paid, but it is not our duty!").

However, there are some positive examples and thoughts about the possibilities of research in their practice (e.g. "It has a purpose, as much as for psychologists, sociologists and other professions, on equal level", "if there is enough motivation you can find the time and we have a big opportunity because we have a lot of data.", "It makes sense, especially in this time of crisis. I think that a lot of foreign and national calls for projects are focused on topics that are in our domain such as social cohesion, social development and poverty. These are popular topics now and if we don't recognize this as an area where we can contribute, it would really be a missed opportunity").

As it can be seen, when asked about their research competencies, the participants feel they have developed their knowledge to understand and conduct scientific studies. Although there is a need for further development of their competencies, their lack of motivation to participate in research studies, and especially to design and to conduct them themselves is more concerning. Most of them find research studies out of their scope of work and don't feel adequately remunerated for participation. Based on their answers, in can be concluded that research designs should include a plan for dissemination of the research that would include social workers who have participated in this studies. Although this is considered customary etiquette of scientific work, it can be seen that researchers don't fulfil their obligations to report on results to all stakeholders. This is connected both to direct motivation of participants to participate in studies, but also to their sense of the importance and applicability of the results of research studies.

4. How do child protection workers perceive their policy making competencies?

The education of social workers who work in the field of child protection regarding policy making is included in their formal curriculum both through legal and social policy courses and through practical courses such as Community Social Work. Most participants see this education as adequate and comprehensive (e.g. "we have a lot of knowledge about social policy through many courses, a good foundation. When I see people from other professions, they don't understand that or they learn it from their personal experience and they take a lot of time compared to somebody who is a social worker, who will understand a document when he reads it.", "We learn national and European social policy. They try to develop critical thinking.", "they have this opportunity to advocate on various questions, although we rarely have projects where we include students.").

On the other hand, some participants feel that there is a discrepancy between the formal curriculum and practical work in this area as well (e.g. "Our faculty lives in one world and they are all theorists, people with expertise, but far away from it...nobody of them ever did any fieldwork.").

Some participants see policy making out of the scope of their work and as a job of legal professionals ("I don't see the logic in that. When you have a problem with something, you ask legal advisor and it is his job to tell you"), which is connected to a somewhat sarcastic comment from one participant: "We, as social workers, have servant's mentality, to serve other professions. We get a lot of knowledge, but they don't use this because they don't believe they can.").

However, participants do strongly believe that their work is important for the community and that a community approach is necessary for their work (e.g. "There is no social work without the community. If I went to another city, I would be at the starting point because I don't know the doctors, patronage nurses schools and other resources.", "Essence of social work is to work with everybody", "Social worker without the community is nothing!").

There are some informal methods that are used within the Centres for Social Care to influence policy making that depend on their own initiatives (e.g. "we have a collegium, a council of experts where we read the laws one article at a time or we make teams.", "People are very interested. For some laws more than others. For example, Family act is our basic law, and this law is important not only for social work, but also for us as common people.", "We often send our comments to our central office or to the Ministry directly. Most often to both these addresses.")

Although social workers who work in child protection have a great potential to influence policy making, both because of their formal knowledge and because of their practical experience, it can be seen that they are reluctant to do so. Some of them attribute this to their workload, and some of them see these efforts as futile. They see their role in the community as important, but they lack the motivation to influence important stakeholders involved in policy making.

5. What are the key competencies for child protection from the perspective of child protection workers?

During interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to give their perspective on what they consider to be key competencies for child protection workers. Their answers can be divided into three categories or areas of skills.

The first area is communication skills constituting of general communication skills and active listening (e.g. "child protection worker must be verbally strong, he⁷ has to know the basis of communication in all directions. The other thing is that he has to have maximally developed tools for listening.", "I think that the most important thing is that he knows how to make a good communication with clients. To respect them and to show emotions", "He has to know how to communicate on the client's level and also to keep the dignity of the profession."). Other communication skills include conflict management and general counselling (e.g. "to know about people relations, such as violence in the family, to know how to solve the conflict constructively, to know how to recommend to parents hoe to handle their child if it is very alive and protesting... to know how to understand why this is like that and where does this behaviour comes from so I can help them afterwards".) and critical thinking as well (e.g. "they should have a developed critical thinking. Here we try to develop that with students through writ-

7 The pronoun "he" is an approximation from Croatian language. In this context the term social worker is used in the original sentence in the gender neutral form.

ten assignments, but they are pretty bad in that by my experience").

The second area of skills is concerned with legal regulations and community work. Regarding the legal regulations, the participants see this as the basis of their work and suggest that it is used more often than their counselling skills (e.g. "You have to know their rights. I think that it is more likely that a client will come to you because they need something than because they need counselling or to talk to you", "Everything comes to that you need to know the law. You have to know the rights and services because the centre is oriented more on that and less on counselling".) The other set of skills is connected to community work and projects that are designed for general wellbeing (e.g. "I think they lack the skills about this project making - planning, organizing, teamwork and some sort of integration of their knowledge"). This is also related to more general policy making for the benefit of community (e.g. "Skills for the influencing and starting changes. Skills connected to projects, advocating and other things they will do besides their workplace", "Social marketing skills", "The promotion of social problems").

The final area of skills is personal integrity and development skills. The participants feel strongly about their personal protection and the protection of their personal space (e.g. "You have to know how to advocate for yourself. If you don't know how to do that, you will not know how to advocate for your clients.", "Where to draw the line. We all have problems with taking the responsibility from other people.", "She told me that I take things personally too much. That I will burn out. It is a shock to most people how to leave everything what has happened at work and to think on something else", "I would organize an education about how to protect yourself. Both privately and professionally for your health, integrity and everything else that comes with us as persons"). The participants also recognise the need for continuous education as a part of their basic system of values (e.g. "You have to be ready for lifelong learning - literally. You have to know how to balance", "You have to have education. You read something what interests you and read about it.")

The participants show a threefold set of skills necessary for child protection workers. Almost all of the practitioners are focused on the protection of their own personal space and integrity. This can be perceived as understandable because they are almost

daily confronted with emotionally difficult situations, often involving high levels of conflict. As it will be seen in the chapter on their needs for education, they are focused on the need for supervision and they often show the need to legally protect themselves from clients. These skills are most important for young social workers who are especially at risk due to their lack of experience, both personal and professional. This set of skills is directly connected to skills related to the rules and regulations of their profession. Those skills are ones their clients expect them to have, but they can also protect social workers from making mistakes. The third set of skills is communication skills. The participants find these skills as a necessity for their work due to their constant involvement with difficult situations and with a variety of people who need their help.

Although they find that a lot of the mentioned skills are not developed enough, this provides a good framework for the development of education programs that are focused on professionals in various stages of their careers.

6. What are the key areas of education that participants need?

The final question was about the education and trainings the participants need and want. The most saturated category of education was about the protection of self and about their own mental health and wellbeing. The practitioners in all focus groups and interviews continuously express the need for supervision and trainings about coping with professional stress (e.g. "I would give an education on self-protection. Both professionally and as a private person – your health, integrity and everything else that comes with us as people", "You should know how to handle your feelings and the feelings of other people. You need to know how to control them, wraith, fury and anger"). Among others,

the topic of personal responsibility is also mentioned (e.g. "Where to draw the line, because we also have a problem with taking other people's responsibility.", "We are in charge and I would like for all of us to have the same responsibility. I feel like I have the most responsibility and only my name is on the file").

Other trainings are related to direct work with clients. Those trainings include general communication skills, working with specific clients (e.g. "Something related to work with mental disorders", "Protection of rights of children with behavioural disorders"). The prevalent topics are psychotherapeutic work, and the participants mention cognitive-behavioural, gestalt and reality therapy. However, it was disputed whether this kind of work is possible within the job of social work or it can be applied only as a specific technique of working with clients.

The third group of education and trainings were related to general organisational skills and teamwork. This is directly related to the number of cases each social worker has and the number of specific task they do (e.g. "Your skills of handling space and time. You have to learn the system of work, rules of procedure and the organization of the system.", "When we were working on standards of work, we have numbered 170 different types of work").

The participants were also commenting on the trainings they have participated in so far. They mostly criticize the ex-cathedra type of presentations where they are exposed to lectures and not given the opportunity to apply the knowledge. The other negative comment is that they are often presented with superficial knowledge without the depth necessary for experts (e.g. "The method of teaching is also important. Whether somebody will come to us and recite the divisions of something. It is very important for us to work on a care, to make it practical and to get empowered.").



V. CONCLUSIONS

1. Implications of the study

Within this study we conducted a qualitative analysis of the professional background and educational needs of social workers who work in the child protection system. The results show that social workers operate in a highly complex system and that is necessary to provide an integrative and continuous support for them. Child protection highly relies on a combination of a large corpus of knowledge of social workers on laws and procedures and, on the other side, highly developed skills of working with people and counselling.

It is evident from the participants' answers that the perception of social work is negative. This can be to some extent attributed to the nature of social work as a profession that is involved when people are in difficult situations, however this is something that is not specific to social work. This study implies that there is a need to improve skills that are related to public perception, such as working with community, providing transparent communication and public relations.

The education of social workers in Croatia is uniform, provided through only one university. This provides a unified standard for professionals, but also prevents the knowledge transfer among professionals with various backgrounds. Most of the competencies taught within the university education are a combination of legal competencies and skills related to counselling work. Research competencies, although taught, are most often named as ones that are most rarely applied in the actual work. This is attributed to the scope of work and that the participants do not prioritise research as a part of their work. The topic about the scope of work is mentioned in various contexts. The participants feel overwhelmed with the number of clients and the scope of work they do. In regard to this, they mention skills related to protection of own mental health and personal integrity both as the key skills for social workers and as ones they need the most. These skills are most important for young social workers who, due to the lack of experience, are most exposed to stress and potential professional mistakes. Due to the scope of work and their lack of ability to cope with complex situations, social workers tend to be focused on the administration and the number of cases they have solved, instead of on the

depth and the quality of service they provide for their clients. For this reason it is especially important to provide them with enough trainings to increase their competencies and to provide them with the necessary knowledge on how to improve their work processes.

Limitations of the study

This study was conducted to provide an overview of the child protection system and to gain insight into educational needs of social workers. As mentioned before, the system of child protection in Croatia is highly complex. Due to the variety of services for children and families, the scope of this study was limited to social workers who work in Centres for Social Care. Although they represent key professionals, the system of child protection relies on many other professionals, such as non-governmental organisations, teachers, health professionals, psychologists, religious organisations and many others. It was beyond the scope of this study to include all of them, and additional studies have to be conducted to provide the information on specific needs for other professionals.

The sample in this study was, although customary for qualitative studies, relatively small. One of the most important limitations of this study is that it cannot be considered as geographically representative. The study was conducted in three large cities that provide services to almost one third of Croatian population. Social workers who do not live and work in large cities are faced with specific challenges, such as more problems with the separation of professional and private life and they also have more difficulties with the accessibility of education and trainings. We hope that one of the results will be the creation of on-line trainings that will be accessible regardless of the geographical location.

One of the limitations of this sample is that the triangulation of sources of information was done only from within the system (practitioners, managers, students and academics). It is recommended for future studies to include also the perspective of the clients of social workers, both parents and children, to gain insights into the educational needs of social workers. The insights of other professionals who rely on the work of social workers, such as police, judges, pub-

lic attorney etc. should also be collected to provide a complete picture.

This study was conducted using qualitative methods to gain basic insights on the educational needs. Qualitative methodology was used because this is relatively unknown area and it was necessary to have open-ended questions. It is recommended to conduct quantitative studies to gain insights into level of knowledge on specific topics and to analyse interests in participating in various trainings.

2. Recommendations

This study has provided an insight into complex nature of work of social workers who work in child protection. Based on the results of this study it can be recommended that the future educations of social workers should be concentrated into four areas:

- · Supportive skills for social workers
- Organisational skills
- Legal skills
- · Communication skills

The most prevalent topic for social workers is their own protection and the need for support. They are exposed to highly stressful situations in their everyday work. They express the need for continuous supervision and for trainings that would provide them with competencies related to stress prevention and management.

This is directly linked to a set of skills related to their own work and the organisation. Due to the high complexity of the child protection system and various situations, it is necessary to provide trainings on time management, professional organisation, teamwork and other skills.

The last two sets of skills are related to direct work with clients. Legal skills are related to the information on new laws and procedures and their application to real-life situations. There is a large number of laws and procedures in this field and continuous education is a necessary aspect of an efficient system of child protection. It is highly recommended that these trainings include examples and that enough time is allocated to practical work.

The communication skills here represent a large set of competencies for various situations. The social workers are exposed to children and adults with different problems and needs. Since these skills are directly connected with client satisfaction and the successful resolution of specific cases, it is recommended to provide a broad spectrum of applicable communication skills to social workers. The communication skills here also include the skills to enhance public relations. The public perception of social workers is directly related to the recruitment and retention of social workers, but also to the trust in the social welfare system, which is a necessary prerequisite for successful social work.

It is also necessary to increase the efforts related to policy making to increase the resources for child protection. This includes both increasing the number of experts, but also the number of services available for social workers, regardless of their geographical location. This can be achieved through trainings on policy making competencies for social workers to increase their capabilities for improving the system both by changing the structure of organisation and work, and also by influencing policy makers and the governmental institutions.

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