



New report on child poverty and household coping strategies in Croatia

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A new research study points to the extreme financial and related difficulties faced by parents with school-aged children who are in receipt of Guaranteed Minimum Income (social assistance) in Croatia and makes some policy recommendations.

Description

Recently completed research on poverty, funded by the Adris Foundation, and carried out from December 2015 to March 2017, reveals the extent and dynamics of child poverty in Croatia (Stubbs et al, 2017). It shows, in particular, problems households face in fulfilling children's needs. It complements earlier research on child poverty focusing on pre-school children (Šućur et al, 2015), work based on focus groups with families, children, professionals and policy advocates (Ajduković et al, 2016) and new work on an index of child deprivation (UNICEF, 2017).

The most interesting and novel part of the research was analyses of the coping strategies of poor households in which at least one child was of a school age. The survey of 207 households, recipients of Guaranteed Minimum Income Support ("zajamčena minimalna naknada", which is the Croatian name for social assistance), shows that these households live almost exclusively on state support (Guaranteed Minimum Income [GMI] and child benefits) but their overall disposable income covers just over half of their basic needs. Borrowing money from family, relatives and friends, as well as from banks, is the most common source of additional income. Two thirds of the 207 households interviewed report problems with bills including one quarter who have been cut off from at least one communal service. 4 parents

out of 10 report sometimes going hungry to ensure their children do not. Parents are not able to ensure that their children have things they at the same time evaluate as very important: one quarter are not able to ensure children their own bed, and one third a quiet place to work, fresh fruits or vegetables, and clothes. Between 40% and 75% of parents are not able to ensure some other items which they do not evaluate as very important, but which are important from the point of view of socialisation, such as: a small amount of pocket money (50 HRK or 6.5 € weekly), holidays outside home, child celebrations, etc. Other coping strategies included occasional work (almost half of all respondents had worked in the previous year), selling items from their homes (almost one third had done this), and producing their own food (over one third of respondents). Focus group discussions show in particular how hard it is for parents to make ends meet and how they have to prioritise those items which are urgent over all others. Living in such circumstances is related to the danger of children being isolated from their peers (such as in cases of not being able to pay for school trips), and to lower marks in schools because of a lack of books, or not having a computer.

While considerable research shows that kindergartens have very positive effects on children living in unfavourable conditions, this research reveals that

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only one third of households send all their children to kindergartens, with around one third of them stating this is because of the costs involved, another third because one of the parents is at home and one third citing other reasons (for instance: distance involved, no need for the child to go to kindergarten, no vacancies, etc.). Still, parents do have high aspirations for their children with respect to education, although their children's aspirations tend to be lower. The children surveyed tend to be rather resilient and to play down the problems they face.

Community and institutional support to such households is important, but the research shows that the local community and civil society play rather a marginal role. Parents rely mainly on family, relatives and friends, and among institutions the most important are Centres for Social Work.

Outlook & commentary

At least at the rhetorical level, there is much talk about children in Croatia. The main context for this conversation is the ageing population, very low birth rates, and emigration of young people which intensified particularly after Croatia joined the EU. The current Croatian government puts population growth among its political priorities and is working intensively on a comprehensive programme for demographic revitalisation. Although the draft programme is not yet available, it is reasonable to expect that demographic measures will help families and children in general. However, it is of the highest importance to not divert the policy focus entirely away from poor households and children. Given the low education level of people at risk-of-poverty and the high unemployment rate in Croatia, and in particular the high share of the low educated among the long-term unemployed, it is not to be expected that the economic

position of poor families will change in the near future.

This research shows that there are two broad groups of measures which should be further elaborated. As state transfers (GMI and child benefits) are almost the only source of income of poor families, any future measures should not lower (as was debated in different scenarios about introducing universal child benefit) but increase these benefits. Specifically, the Government should reconsider its decision from 2014 to lower the amount of GMI which large families can receive. At the very least, both GMI and child benefits should be indexed, perhaps to a mix of wages and prices, as are pensions currently. However, there are also several other measures which should be implemented at the state and local government level. These range from introducing more stipends based on income criteria which would allow poor children to complete education, much higher enrolment in kindergartens, after-school activities, help with learning, contribution to school trips costs, etc. The fact that child poverty is not higher up the political agenda reflects a lack of political will; in addition, some important policy domains, notably pre-school provision, are the responsibilities of local authorities making it hard to both increase and equalise provision nationally.

Local government and the civil society can play an important role in expanding such measures. Although Centres for Social Work have proved to be the most efficient institutions there is still room for improvement, in particular in helping families with paying for communal services (so as not to be cut off from services such as electricity), in meeting of unexpected costs (like paying for school trips), in providing information about available services in the local community, and so on.

Further reading

Ajduković, M. et al (2016), Indikatori dobrobiti i siromaštva djece u Hrvatskoj (Indicators of child well-being and child poverty in Croatia), Faculty of Law, Zagreb: University of Zagreb.

Stubbs, P., M. Ledić, I. Rubil and S. Žrinščak (2017), Child Poverty and Household Coping Strategies in Croatia, Zagreb: EIZG and ADRIS.

Šućur, Z. et al (2015), Siromaštvo i dobrobit djece predškolske dobi u Republici Hrvatskoj (Poverty and well-being of pre-school children in Croatia), Zagreb: UNICEF Office for Croatia.

UNICEF (2017), Child well-being indicators for Croatia, UNICEF Office for Croatia.

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