

Children's Worlds National Report

Croatia



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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and population

Geographically, the Republic of Croatia has 56,594m² of land area and is divided in 21 counties (including the City of Zagreb), 127 towns, 429 municipalities and 6,756 settlements. According to Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022) and the last census of population, households and dwellings in 2021, the Republic of Croatia has 3,937,024 inhabitants, more specifically 1,874,566 men (47.6%) and 2,013,963 women (51.2%). When compared to 2011, there are about 200,000 inhabitants less. The age-sex structure shows a disproportion in the number of men and women in certain age groups, where the proportion of men is higher in younger age groups and the proportion of women in older age groups. There is a trend of population ageing as a long-term process. In 2011, the population of the Republic of Croatia was 41.7 years old on average (men 39.9, women 43.4), which places it among the oldest nations in Europe (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). During the past 50 years, the average age increased by almost 10 years (from 32.5 in 1961 to 43.6 in 2021), which was caused by a long-term fertility decrease on one side and the life expectancy increase on the other. In 2021 there was 743,556 children in Croatia (0 to 19 years of age), with 195,987 children in the age group 10 – 14 (5% of the whole population).

Regarding ethnicity, 90.42% (4,096,305) of population are Croats, 4.36% are Serbs and other nations are represented by less than 1% (Bosnians, Roma, Italians, Albanians...). As for religion, 86.28% (3,697,143) of residents are Catholics, 4.44% are Orthodox, 3.81% are atheists, 2.17% did not declare, 1.47% are Muslims and other religions are present by less than 1%.

According to the last published Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Croatia (2018), GDP in EUR per capita for 2017 was 12.101 and at that time it was the largest in a ten-year period. In 2019 GDP was 13.678, so it continued to grow before the period of COVID-19 pandemic. Though the growth rates in GDP were positive since 2015 (when the economic crisis ended), in 2020 we had a drop of 8.4% (GDP in EUR per capita was 12.408). Still, after the pandemic restrictions, Croatia is again in the positive trend and in 2021 GDP was 14.718.

Context of COVID-19 in individual country contexts

In Croatia, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded on February 25, 2020. The Minister of Health of the Republic of Croatia declared an epidemic of COVID-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus on the same day (March 11, 2020) when the World Health Organization declared the pandemic. A lockdown with strict measures to limit social gatherings was introduced on March 19, 2020.

The Decision on the suspension of classes in universities, secondary and primary schools and regular work of preschool education institutions was adopted two days later, on March 13, 2020 and distance learning was introduced. In line with this, all educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia were closed on March 16, 2020. Students from fifth to eighth grade of elementary school and all secondary school students had classes online, and a program was provided on public television for students of lower grades. This difference was due to the assessment that students in lower grades were not ready to use digital tools independently. Thus, the Ministry of Science and Education, in cooperation with public television (HRT), established distance learning for the youngest students (School on the Third TV Program), and 15-minute video lessons were created for older students (from the 5th grade of elementary school onwards) and broadcasted on TV. In that period, on March 22, 2020, a major earthquake (5.5 on Richter scale) hit Zagreb, the capital of the Republic of Croatia, which was a traumatic event for children in the affected area.

The basic principle of distance learning was that content and schooling should be accessible to all students. For the implementation of distance learning to work, every student had to have access to the Internet and a device at home. Given that many students did not have access to the Internet at home due to their socioeconomic disadvantages, teleoperators stepped in and provided SIM cards and free access to digital educational content. More than 90,000 tablets were distributed to students, and 26,000 computers were purchased for teachers.

After the epidemiological situation improved, on May 7, 2020, the Government of the Republic of Croatia decided that classes were to be conducted partly at school and partly as distance learning for students from first to fourth grade of primary school. On the other hand, classes continued to be organized as distance learning for students from fifth to eighth grade of elementary school and for secondary school students. Since the beginning of school year 2020/2021 teaching was organized according to three different models - in school, mixed form (partly in school and partly at a distance) and distance learning - depending on the national, regional and local epidemiological situation.

The peak of the epidemic was in December 2020, when the highest number of both new infections (4,620) and deaths in one day (92) was recorded, as well as the highest total number of active cases (25,270), persons undergoing hospital treatment (2,976) and people on ventilators (306). In that period, on December 29, 2020, a second major earthquake hit the poorest, central part of Croatia (6.4 on Richter scale) causing severe infrastructural

damage, including damaging many schools, and severe traumatization of children and adult population.

Unlike the measures that were in force in most EU countries in the period from September 1, 2020 to January 31, 2021, Croatia did not introduce a measure of restricted movement (lockdown) or so-called police hour. In that period, classes were held remotely.

Measures referring to the return of elementary school students to classrooms and allowing training and recreation in open spaces were the first to be relaxed at the end of January 2021. Only on February 15, 2021, due to the good epidemiological situation, a general relaxation of measures occurred which, among other things, included foreign language schools, children's playrooms and workshops opening. During the entire pandemic, the primary goal was the continuity of classes, whereby the priority was given to face-to-face teaching, considering that this form of work is the most appropriate because it provides students with better opportunities to preserve mental health and continue with their full development. This especially applies to younger students in primary school who need support in many aspects, including emotional and social skills, development of writing, reading, arithmetic skills, etc.

The experiences of school psychologists in Croatia (Bogdan, 2020) showed that, during lockdown and online classes, children of all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds expressed: feelings of social isolation, loneliness, frustration, confusion and anxiety, missing the routine of going to school and being with friends, taking on family stress, lack of privacy needed to confide their personal concerns, either online or over the phone. Thus, psychologists continuously pointed out the increased children's needs to parents and teachers. However, children come from different families that were differently affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and some were also previously at risk due to, for example, domestic violence, irregular contact with one of the parents, or parental illness. For those children their connection with the school is even more important in a time of a large-scale crisis. Starting from this, in cooperation with the UNICEF Office for Croatia, trainings were organized for professional associates in schools on how to facilitate the everyday lives of children who were at an increased risk during the pandemic (Ajduković, 2020).

It is important to have in mind that over the past two years Croatian children have been exposed to a double set of high intensity stressors: the COVID-19 pandemic and the major earthquakes in March and December 2020, and the expected long-term impact of earthquakes was indeed documented. For example, adolescents whose families have suffered considerable damage from the earthquake in March 2020 reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, a higher incidence of self-harm behaviors, lower life satisfaction and subjective well-being even 20 months after the earthquake. Among them, females and adolescents from families with lower socio-economic status reported the highest levels of depression and anxiety symptoms and self-harm behaviors (Ajduković, Kožljan, Rajhvajn Bulat, Rezo Bagarić & Sušac, 2022).

1.2 Sampling: Strategy and outcome

In Children's Worlds 3rd wave we used a representative sample of Croatian 8, 10 and 12-year-olds. Sampling was planned as a two-stage cluster sample. The sampling strategy covered all schools in Croatia, except for the schools with special education programs (children with autism, intellectual disabilities, etc.). PSS cumulative size method was used to select schools that would participate in the study and in the second stage simple random cluster method was used to select two classes per school. The final sample consisted of children from 41 schools and 237 classes.

In this wave we included the same schools, but not those from City of Zagreb and Zagreb County because they participated in a very similar study a year before, so the final number of schools was 30. We included the same classes that participated in 2018 and the children were still in elementary school, meaning children who were in 2nd and 4th grade in 2018 and were now in 5th and 7th grade. Those who were in 6th grade in 2018 were now in secondary school so they couldn't be included. In 2021 we approached all children in the chosen classes, which also included those pupils who may not have participated in 2018. It should be noted that some classes in certain schools had a different composition in 2021 compared to 2018, because some schools restructure classes (mix children from different classes) after the 4th grade. Active parental consent was used, as this is the standard procedure for children under 14 in Croatia, due to our Ethical Code for studies involving children. The data were collected using a web survey, but the children were together in their classrooms with the researchers during the questionnaire completion.

The final sample consisted of children from 30 schools and 100 classes. In total, 1,233 children participated in the study, 656 11-year-olds and 562 13-year-olds (15 children didn't mark their class). Several questionnaires had to be excluded from the data bases due to systematic responding. The final data set used to present the results included 655 11-year-olds, 558 13-year-olds and 15 children who didn't mark their class, that is 1,228 children in total.

2. Results

2.1 About you

The age and gender distributions of the sample are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Genders were evenly represented and the age range of children is 10-14, with 11 and 13-year-olds being the largest groups, as expected in 5th and 7th grade of primary school in Croatia.

Table 1: Participants' age¹

	f	%
10	155	12.6
11	497	40.5
12	161	13.1
13	407	33.2
14	6	0.5

Table 2: Participants' gender²

	f	%
girl	622	50.7
boy	605	49.3

The majority of children know someone who got infected with Coronavirus, while 40% got infected themselves or somebody in their home got infected (Table 3). Almost half of the children had somebody in their family not living with them who got infected and a similar percentage had to stay at home and couldn't attend school for many days.

Table 3: Please describe your situation during the Coronavirus pandemic (%)

Item	Yes	No	Not sure
Me or somebody in my home got infected with Coronavirus	40.3	52.3	7.4
Somebody in my family (not living with me) got infected with Coronavirus	48.1	42.1	9.7
Somebody I know got infected with Coronavirus (e.g.: from my neighborhood or in a friend's family)	83.1	10.3	6.6
At home we had to be very careful because somebody was considered at high risk of getting very ill if they got infected with the Coronavirus	33.4	50.2	16.3

2 missing answers¹

1 missing answer²

I had to stay at home for many days	45.0	47.2	7.7
I could not attend school for many days	46.0	47.4	6.6

Almost two thirds of the sample had to be in quarantine once, while one third had to do it more than once (Table 4). At times, half of the children had to be at home all day and a third was only allowed to leave their home for a few hours.

Table 4: Do the following statements describe your situation during the Coronavirus? (%)

Item	Yes	No	Not sure
I had to be in quarantine once	62.6	35.4	2.0
I had to be in quarantine more than once	34.8	61.3	3.9
There were times where I had to be in my home all day (including the garden, yard or balcony, if you have) because of the Coronavirus	51.6	41.5	6.9
There were times where I was only allowed to leave my home for a few hours during the day because of the Coronavirus	33.5	51.7	14.8

As can be seen in Table 5, most children felt safe at home and with friends and they didn't feel alone, but more than half of them missed their friends and relatives.

Table 5: How much do you agree with each of the following sentences? (%)

Item	I do not agree	Agree a little bit	Agree somewhat	Agree a lot	Totally agree
I feel safe at home	1.9	2.2	5.3	24.8	65.8
I feel safe at school	9.1	9.3	24.3	35.6	21.7
I feel safe when I walk around in the area I live in	6.6	8.8	20.6	34.6	29.4
I feel safe with my friends	2.5	5.7	12.4	35.1	44.3
I feel alone	62.2	16.4	11.1	5.9	4.4
I feel protected from the Coronavirus	16.6	14.9	25.9	24.1	18.6
I feel bored	31.0	20.0	17.3	14.9	16.9
I miss my friends	26.7	9.4	12.4	23.5	28.1

I miss my relatives (e.g. grandparents, a parent living or working far from home)	18.3	5.9	11.6	24.4	39.8
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More than 10% of children reported not having their own room or pocket money, while 9% didn't have the equipment needed for video-classes (Table 6). Also, 10% of children said that they didn't always have enough food to eat during lockdown (Table 7).

Table 6: Which of the following do you have at home? (%)

Item	Have	Don't have
Own room	87.8	12.2
Clothes in good condition	99.6	0.4
Enough money for school trips and activities	98.4	1.6
Access to the internet at home	99.0	1.0
The equipment/things you need for sports and hobbies	95.7	4.3
Pocket money / money to spend on yourself	86.4	13.6
Two pairs of shoes in good condition	98.5	1.5
A mobile phone	98.5	1.5
The equipment/things you need for school	99.7	0.3
Access to computer or a tablet when needed	98.0	2.0
Devices (e.g. microphone and camera) for video-classes	90.8	9.2
A place in your home where you can study	98.0	2.0

Table 7: During the lockdown did you have enough food to eat each day? (%)

Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1.0	2.0	7.0	90.1

2.2 Your life during the Coronavirus

Most children got their information about the Coronavirus through the news, followed by family members, teachers and social media (Table 8). However, only about 55% considered that they had enough information about the Coronavirus.

Table 8: How much do you agree with each of the following sentences? (%)

Item	I do not agree	Agree a little bit	Agree somewhat	Agree a lot	Totally agree
I have enough information about the Coronavirus	9.8	10.2	23.2	38.0	18.7
We speak together about the Coronavirus in my home	20.8	24.4	22.1	22.0	10.7
I received a lot of information about the Coronavirus from my family members or caregivers	11.3	14.1	21.0	33.4	20.2
I received a lot of information about the Coronavirus from other children	23.1	26.2	24.4	19.0	7.2
I received a lot of information about Coronavirus from teachers	10.3	15.5	25.0	28.6	20.5
I received a lot of information about Coronavirus through social media (Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.)	20.4	14.8	18.6	24.7	21.6
We watch news about the Coronavirus at my home	18.7	18.5	20.2	24.2	18.5
I received a lot of information about the Coronavirus through the news	10.6	11.2	16.3	29.9	32.0

When comparing their estimated satisfaction before and during the Coronavirus (Tables 9 and 10), it is evident that it shows a decline in all areas, which is most prominent in how they spend their time, followed by the things they learn at school.

Table 9: How satisfied were you with each of the following things in your life BEFORE the Coronavirus? M(SD)

Item	Total
With how I normally spent my time	8.6 (2.1)
With the things I used to learn at school	8.0 (2.3)
With the relationships I had with my friends	8.7 (2.2)

With the relationships I had with people I live with 9.2 (1.6)

Table 10: How satisfied are you with each of the following things in your life now DURING the Coronavirus? M(SD)

Item	Total
With how I normally spend my time	7.1 (2.6)
With the things I learn at school	7.0 (2.6)
With the relationships I have with my friends	8.3 (2.3)
With the relationships I have with people I live with	8.9 (1.9)

According to the results presented in Table 11, the participants' biggest concern in the past month was that the people they know might get infected with the Coronavirus, while the money they family had was the least of their worries. Since the answers were given on a scale 0-10, the average level of worries in the sample could be considered moderate.

Table 11: During the last month, how worried have you been about the following things in your life? M(SD)

Item	Total
By the Coronavirus situation	4.9 (3.2)
That I may get infected by the Coronavirus	4.0 (3.4)
That people I know may get infected by the Coronavirus	5.8 (3.3)
That I may infect other people with the Coronavirus	4.5 (3.5)
That I may get bad school marks because of the Coronavirus situation	4.7 (3.7)
The money my family has during the Coronavirus period	3.8 (3.5)
The changes in my life as a student because of the Coronavirus situation	5.0 (3.1)

2.3 School and relationships

During the Coronavirus most children studied online with their teachers and 40% of them also studied with parents or other household members (Table 12). It should be noted that almost 40% of them didn't think that they really managed to continue learning from home while the schools were closed (Table 13).

Table 12: During the Coronavirus, when schools were closed, how did you learn at home?

	%
Online classes with teachers	77.8
Learning by searching the Internet	27.0
Learning with parents or people that are looking after you	40.1
Other ways	10.3
I did not study at home	4.2

Table 13: How much do you agree with the following sentence? (%)

Item	I do not agree	Agree a little bit	Agree somewhat	Agree a lot	Totally agree
During the Coronavirus, when schools were closed, I managed to continue with my learning from home	6.6	10.3	22.5	34.6	26.0

Most but not all children had a stable and continuous access to the Internet, with less than 40% never experiencing any problems with it during their classes (Table 14). While two thirds of the children missed their classmates often, only about half of them expressed a great desire to go back to school. They mostly felt very supported by their household members and about two thirds of the sample said the same about their friends and teachers, with the support from teachers being the lowest (Table 16). They mostly kept in touch with their friends using WhatsApp messages, different types of calls and audios (Table 15).

Table 14: Please, answer the following questions. During Coronavirus... (%)

Item	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
How often did you have access to the Internet?	0.4	3.3	23.4	72.9
How often did it happen that you could not access the Internet for an entire day?	55.6	35.7	5.1	3.5
How often did you have?	38.3	44.7	13.3	3.7
How often did you miss your classmates?	9.5	20.5	36.6	33.4
How often did you wish that you could go back to school?	19.7	30.1	30.4	19.8
How often did your parent or a sister/brother help you with schoolwork?	13.8	39.6	27.8	18.8

Table 15: How do you keep in touch with your friends during the Coronavirus lockdown?

	%
Calls	53.0
Video calls (Hangout, Skype...)	48.9
WhatsApp audios	49.7
WhatsApp messages	64.8
Social media (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or any other)	39.1
Meeting each other in person	30.6
Not at all	5.5
Other ways	5.9

Table 16: How much do you agree with each of the following sentences? During the Coronavirus, I felt well-supported by... (%)

Item	I do not agree	Agree a little bit	Agree somewhat	Agree a lot	Totally agree
some of my friends	5.8	8.2	16.4	35.6	33.9
some of my teachers	8.5	11.2	17.4	35.6	27.4
some people I live with	3.3	4.4	7.5	24.7	60.2

More than half of the participants felt that they had become closer with their family members and a quarter of them considered that they had made new friends during the Coronavirus (Table 17).

Table 17: How much do you agree with each of the following sentences? (%)

Item	I do not agree	Agree a little bit	Agree somewhat	Agree a lot	Totally agree
During the coronavirus, I became closer to some members of my family	14.1	10.4	18.3	28.8	28.4
My relationships with my friends was affected during the Coronavirus	30.6	18.4	17.8	19.7	13.5
I made new friends with other children online during the Coronavirus	48.6	14.2	10.6	13.4	13.2

2.4 How do you feel about life

When rating their lives on a scale 0-10, children's answers lay on the high side of the scale for all items (Table 18). On average they mostly agree that they have good lives, while they give the lowest ratings on items "The things that happen in my life are excellent" and "I am good at managing my daily responsibilities".

Table 18: How much do you agree with each of the following sentences about your life as a whole? M(SD)

Item	Total
I enjoy my life	8.4 (2.3)
My life is going well	8.6 (2.1)
I have a good life	8.9 (1.9)
The things that happen in my life are excellent	7.8 (2.4)
I am happy with my life	8.6 (2.3)
I like being the way I am	8.6 (2.4)
I am good at managing my daily responsibilities	7.8 (2.4)
People are generally friendly towards me	8.3 (2.2)
I have enough choice about how I spend my time	8.0 (2.3)
I feel that I am learning a lot at the moment	8.0 (2.6)

I feel positive about my future 8.2 (2.3)

Being happy is the most pronounced affect in the last two weeks, followed by feeling full of energy, but it should be noted that boredom and stress are also moderately present in the same period (Table 19).

Table 19: How much you have felt this way during the last two weeks? M(SD)

Item	Total
Happy	8.2 (2.2)
Sad	3.1 (2.9)
Calm	6.8 (2.9)
Stressed	4.3 (3.6)
Full of energy	8.0 (2.5)
Bored	4.9 (3.5)

Results in Table 20 show that fears and anxieties regarding the Coronavirus are not very widespread in the sample, but around a quarter of the children still say that they are at least somewhat afraid and uncomfortable when they think about the Coronavirus (Table 20).

Table 20: How much do you agree with each of the following sentences? (%)

Item	I do not agree	Agree a little bit	Agree somewhat	Agree a lot	Totally agree
I am very afraid of the Coronavirus	51.6	25.0	14.0	7.1	2.4
It makes me uncomfortable to think about the Coronavirus	53.0	21.6	12.1	9.4	3.9
My hands become sweaty when I think about the Coronavirus	83.7	7.2	4.4	3.2	1.4
I am afraid of losing my life because of the Coronavirus	73.8	12.7	6.3	3.5	3.8
When I watch news and stories about the Coronavirus on the TV and social media, I become nervous or anxious	65.0	18.2	8.2	5.3	3.4
I cannot sleep because I'm worrying about getting the Coronavirus	87.9	5.6	3.2	1.6	1.7
My heart races (beats very fast) when I think about getting the Coronavirus	79.0	11.8	4.1	2.6	2.4

Children’s responses on satisfaction using a scale 0-10 show that they are, on average, quite satisfied with different aspects of their lives, the most with their houses/flats and other belongings, people they live with, their health and their friends and the least with their appearance and how they are listened to by adults (Table 21).

Table 21: How satisfied are you with each of the following things in your life? M(SD)

Item	Total
The people you live with	9.2 (1.7)
The house you live in	9.3 (1.5)
The area where you live	8.4 (2.3)
About how safe you feel	8.9 (1.8)
Your friends	9.0 (1.8)
How you use your time	8.2 (2.2)
The way you look	7.8 (2.6)
The things you have	9.3 (1.3)
The freedom you have	8.9 (1.9)
What may happen later in your life	8.1 (2.3)
How you are listened to by adults in general	7.9 (2.6)
Your health	9.1 (1.7)
Your life as a whole	8.8 (2.0)

Comparing their lives before and during the Coronavirus, the children state that they were happier before than they are now (Table 22).

Table 22: Please, answer the following questions M(SD)

Item	Total
Thinking about how your life was before the Coronavirus, how happy were you with your life as whole?	8.9 (1.9)
Thinking about how your life now during the Coronavirus, how happy are you with your life as whole?	6.9 (2.8)

3. Conclusions

This report presents the findings of the initial descriptive analysis of Croatian Children's Worlds dataset. Results show that most children were in contact with the Coronavirus, whether they themselves became infected or had a close person infected. Since schools in Croatia were mostly open during the pandemic and a complete lockdown lasted shorter than in most other countries, only half of the sample perceived that "there were times where they had to be in their home all day because of the Coronavirus". For 10% who reported not having their own room and/or the equipment needed for video-classes and for over 15% who often had problems with the Internet connection while having an online class it could have been difficult to do schoolwork during the period of online schooling (almost 80% of children had online classes and that was the most prevalent way of learning at home). Moreover, only 60% agreed a lot or totally that they had managed to continue with learning from home. Since 5th and 7th grade of elementary school are often viewed as two hardest years in Croatian education system, these children are at risk of future problems in achieving their education goals.

More than 50% missed their friends, classmates and relatives and 10% felt alone. They mostly kept in touch with their friends using WhatsApp messages, different types of calls and audios. In that period, over 60% felt well-supported by their friends, teachers and people they live with. Also, more than half of the participants felt that they had become closer with their family members and a quarter of them considered that they had made new friends during the Coronavirus. On the other hand, for more than a third of the sample friendships were affected during the pandemic.

Although most children felt safe at home, a third of them didn't feel very protected from the Coronavirus and they were moderately worried about different aspects of the Coronavirus. Their biggest concern in the past month was that the people they knew might get infected with the Coronavirus and regarding changes in their lives as students. Although for more than 20% of children the Coronavirus was not the topic of conversation in their homes, the majority of them received information about it through the news (60% agree a lot or totally agree), from family members, teachers and social media (about 50%).

Finally, children's satisfaction with life, though high in general, dropped during the pandemic in all the measured aspects. When rating different aspects of their lives, items of managing daily responsibilities and excellent things happening in their lives had the lowest ratings. This is understandable since the changes in their lives and obligations from the start of the pandemic were enormous. The highest average ranking is for the item "I have a good life" and this is an important and optimistic result. Moreover, being happy is the most pronounced affect in the last two weeks (though they consider themselves as being happier with life before the pandemic). As for the negative affect, sadness was not very pronounced, but being stressed and bored were moderately present. The children were satisfied the most with their houses/flats and other belongings, people they live with, their health and their friends (all ratings at least 9 out of 10 on average).

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