

# Children Behind Closed Doors Due to COVID-19 Isolation: Abuse, Neglect and Domestic Violence

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**Abstract** - Abuse and neglect of children is a public health issue at a global, European, and Croatian level, with significant rates of morbidity and mortality. Actual circumstances of a health crisis generate and aggravate a series of risk factors for child abuse and neglect at the level of the child and parent characteristics, family dynamics and the wider social environment. Isolation and quarantine possibly leading to social exclusion, represent a serious risk for child abuse and neglect, possibly also being the reason for fewer reports. This paper reviews clinical and empirical studies related to the rates of abuse and neglect of children during health and other crises in other countries. It also analyses trends of recent data of the Ministry of Interior with practical guidelines for improved child protection in this period.

**Key words:** abuse, neglect, COVID-19, social exclusion, child protection

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## Child abuse and neglect

Child abuse is a public health issue both globally [1], and in Croatia [2]. According to the World Health Organisation [3], child abuse includes all forms of physical and/or emotional inappropriate treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or careless treatment, various forms of exploitation resulting in real or possible harm to the child's life, health, development or dignity in the context of the relationships of responsibility, trust or power. Definitions of abuse and neglect vary de-

pending on scientific and professional discipline, culture and development of a country. However, there is a consensus that it is a public health and social issue with significant morbidity and mortality [4].

Studies systematically show that children who have experienced abuse, even if it was only a corporal punishment, present with more aggressive and antisocial behaviours, as well as a whole spectrum of mental health problems [5,6], with long-term, even trans-generational consequences [7-9]. Consequences of having been abused in childhood reflect on the economic prosperity of the individual, the family and the wider community. Thus, studies report lower levels of education, lower employability and average income

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in adult population abused in childhood, who then represent a much higher financial burden on the social and health systems than general population [9,10].

One in five to one in two children in the world suffers some form of abuse. However, estimates are difficult to make due to a small number of reports and methodologically different approaches [11]. Studies in 28 countries from different parts of the world [12] show that most children experienced abuse in African countries (83.2% experienced some form of psychological abuse, 64% experienced some form of moderate physical abuse, 43% experienced some form of serious physical abuse, while children in countries in transition experienced less, but still significantly much abuse (56% of them experienced some form of psychological abuse, 46% experienced some form of moderate physical abuse, while 9% experienced some form of severe physical abuse). The results of the “BECAN — Balkans Epidemiological Study on Child Abuse and Neglect” [13], children in Croatia (N = 3644) are in their families most often exposed to psychological abuse (V grade 59.0%; VII grade 77.1%; II grade of high school 82.5%), then to corporal punishment (V grade 56.1 %; VII grade 68.4%; II grade of high school 72.3%), to physical abuse (V grade 26.2%; VII grade 34.0%; II grade of high school 40.7%) and to psychological abuse (V grade 22.8%; VII grade 26.8%; II grade of high school 34.8%); measured by the revised scale ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool — Children’s Version (ICAST-C). National survey conducted by the Child and Youth Protection Centre of the City of Zagreb and the Brave Phone among the students of II grade high school (total of 4191 children) and similar studies conducted on smaller samples in Croatia [14],

but also the Council of Europe database [15] show that one in five children has been sexually abused.

#### Risk factors for abuse and neglect of children

A number of studies have tried to detect which children are at higher risk of being abused and neglected. Results indicate risk factors at the level of child and parent characteristics, at the level of family dynamics and at the level of wider community, all summarised in Table 1 [16-28].

#### Child abuse and neglect during the current health crisis

The spread of the corona virus (COVID-19) started in December 2019 in China. Due to population migrations it has spread globally. Consequently, the World Health organisation declared a global pandemic. During the past few months, due to the risk of fatal consequences and the virus spread, strict measures of the protection of citizens, most visible in the strict limitations of social contacts have been introduced [29]. Some citizens are in quarantine, which is defined as social isolation and restrictive measures for citizens who have potentially been exposed to infection before their health status is identified. The aim of all this has been controlling the risk of infecting others [30]. Quarantine is different from isolation which refers to separating citizens with confirmed diagnosis of infection from the citizens who have not been infected [30], although these words are often used as synonyms. Quarantine and isolation, as public health preventative methods have their roots in the 12 Century leprosy infections [31], and they are not new and unknown to humanity. In newer history, a wider application of quarantine was recorded in

**Table 1.** Risk factors for child abuse and neglect

Child characteristics	Parent characteristics	Characteristics of family dynamic	Characteristics of wider community
Difficult temperament	Early trauma	Dysfunctional relationships	Conflicts in the community
Loser self-confidence and self-efficacy	Some mental disorders and diseases	Violence or history of violence	Violence, wars, refugees
Absence of at least one adequate relationship	Significantly reduced cognitive capacities	High parental conflict	Terrorism
Externalised difficulties in a broad sense	Addictive substances abuse	Parental divorce / single parent families	Culture of violence
Passivity and shyness	Low socio-economic status	inclusion/exclusion of new family members (e.g. parent's new partner)	Big and abrupt societal changes / transitions
Experience of other victimisation	Existential problems, unemployment	Inadequate communication and coping patterns	Poverty
Intellectual and other neurodevelopmental difficulties	Some somatic symptoms	Problematic child-rearing practices (e.g. corporal punishment)	Social exclusion
More severe somatic symptoms	High levels of stress	Lack of adequate parental supervision	Crises, uncertainty

China and Canada (2003) during the spread of SARS<sup>1</sup> and in West African countries in 2014, when whole villages with Ebola virus infected people were kept in quarantine [29].

Despite being effective in the prevention of infectious diseases spread, rigorous measures which include social distancing, followed by a series of related consequences (the growth of unemployment, economic downturn, lowering of the standard of liv-

ing and the quality of life), all impact mental health. In a short review of 24 published studies into this issue, from the beginning of the current pandemic till March 2020 there are data about negative psychological effects, including signs of posttraumatic stress, confusion and anger. Incidence and intensity of negative mental health indicators are caused by the duration of isolation/quarantine, fear of infection, the feelings of frustration, bore-

1 SARS – Severe acute respiratory syndrome, hrv. teški akutni respiratorni sindrom

dom, insufficient or inadequate amounts of supplies, inadequate information, material losses and stigma (in cases of disease or suspected disease), and some studies indicate a possibility of lasting difficulties mentioned here [32].

It is apparent that the current situation underscores the prevalence and intensity of at least some of the previously mentioned risk factors for child abuse and neglect, consistent with the findings of recent studies, empirical and clinical observations. Some of the risks for health and welfare of children and youth have been well known from previous epidemics of infectious diseases and other situations with characteristics of a crisis. According to the UNICEF report [33], closing schools during the Ebola virus epidemic in West Africa from 2014 to 2016 resulted in elevated rates of neglect and sexual abuse of children, and in Sierra Leone the number of teen pregnancies doubled during the Ebola virus epidemic in comparison to the period before that. During the economic crisis 2007 to 2009, trauma of the head known as “shaken baby syndrome” in young children increased by 65% in the USA [34]. Due to the economic crisis, negative impact on the mental health of children was caused exactly by changed parental behaviour, in particular by negative parenting practices [35]. Longitudinal studies find long-term effects of economic crises on the family child abuse rates [36].

Studies suggest that social exclusion of the family is an especially pronounced risk factor [37] which might be observed at the level of the wider community because it relates numerous other risk factors to child abuse and neglect. Eurostat Task Force on Social Exclusion [38] defines social exclusion as a dynamic process, best described as de-

scending levels, some disadvantages lead to some exclusion, which in turn leads to more disadvantages and more social exclusion and ends up with persistent multiple deprivation disadvantages. Individuals, households and spatial units can be excluded from access to valuable resources like employment, health, education, social or political life.

It is exactly this definition referring to the build-up of the effects of social exclusion. Such exclusion can contribute to the development of risk factors for child abuse and neglect at the time of the current health crisis. These risk factors are presented in Table 1, e.g. (a) characteristics of the child – lower self-confidence and self-efficacy [39] development of somatic symptoms [40] and internalised and externalised difficulties [39,40]; (b) parent characteristics – development and/or intensifying of the psychological symptoms and increased misuse of addictive substances [41], lower socio-economic status, unemployment and existential problems [42], high levels of stress [43] and some somatic diseases; (c) characteristics of the family – emphasising all negative patterns without the possibility of buffering by other persons and/or institutions [45].

These risks have been recognised by professionals and institutions working directly with families, both in Europe and globally. For example, The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action is warning that the current health crisis represents an objective risk for the increased rates of child abuse, witnessing family violence and neglect [46]. An increased risk for sexual exploitation of children and youth, in person or via modern technologies has also been emphasised. Prevent Child Abuse Virginia (USA) states that crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to disorganised emotions and parental be-

haviours significantly related to child abuse. Warnings are also issued by the judiciary. For Example, the Supreme Court of the Jefferson County (USA) predicts the higher incidence rates of child abuse and neglect [48]. Parents also report on the impact of the current situation on their parenting. Online research of the University of Michigan (562 parents) finds that 52% of parents believe that distancing and financial worries interfere with their parenting. As many as 61% of them state that since the onset of the pandemic they have shouted or screamed at their child, while 19% of them notice that they have shouted more than usually. One in six parents reports to have hit the child, and 11% of them hit their child several times [49].

At the same time, disclosure and identification of child abuse has been impeded. Family & Children's Place in Kentucky [50] reports that the closing of schools is a problem because it exposes children to higher risk of not being recognised as victims of abuse in the family, due to a reduced number of people in the child's everyday environment (friends, teachers, other professionals, etc.) who could recognise some of the signs of abuse and provide help and support, directing us back to the hypothesis of the social exclusion issue as being significant. For example, in the Santa Barbara and North County (USA), during the last week of March, a significant fall in the number of suspected abuse and neglect reports was recorded, mostly because most reports were previously submitted by educational institutions which were closed in March [51].

Federal state Maine (USA) has recorded a significant decrease of the number of reports by 32% since kindergartens and schools have been closed in that state [52]. In February, 22% of reports for suspected child abuse

and neglect were submitted by kindergarten and school teachers, while in March it fell to 7% because it has been difficult to communicate with pupils. The method of communication via electronic devices currently recommended by professionals can be very dangerous and unsafe for the victims, since it is almost impossible to ensure that the child communicates privately with a professional, which makes abuse more difficult to detect and report [53]. Numerous organisations and services for the prevention of abuse and violence in the family have been forced to limit their services following the instructions of institutions in charge of halting the COVID-19 spread [54]. Some authors interpret the "artificial fall" in the rates of abuse, which is in fact a reduced number of reporting child abuse and neglect [55]. Even so, some methods of reporting child abuse and neglect, like anonymous help lines, obviously successfully maintain the trust of children and adults in these new circumstances. For example, 30% more calls reporting domestic violence were recorded in Florida (USA) in March in comparison with February [56]. SOS helpline for domestic violence victims in Nikšić (Montenegro) recorded an increase by 20% in the last week of March [57].

Some data of other countries support the assumption that the rate of child abuse and neglect has already increased due to the global pandemic. Northern Ireland (UK) records a child abuse and neglect increase by 20%, in Paris (France) it is increased by 32%, in New South Wales (Australia) by 40% [58]. Children's Center for Prevention and Child Abuse and Neglect in Fort Worth in Texas (USA), in only one week, from 16 to 20 March 2020 recorded a significant increase of severe cases of child abuse, seven of them, while two out of these seven children died. For compari-

**Table 2.** Registered number of children victims of misdemeanour crime in the family

Period	No of children victims	Difference (%)
Jan – March 2019	502	35%
Jan – March 2020	324	

son, the same hospital averages seven cases of child abuse and six deaths from abuse a year [59].

#### Review of trends in Croatia

The data from the Ministry of Interior (data collected by the author of this paper), on child abuse classified as misdemeanour crimes show that in March 2020 there were 324, compared to the same period in 2019 when there were 502 children victims of family violence, which was higher by 35% (Table 2).

The number of registered perpetrators of family violence against children classified as misdemeanour crimes was 692 in February 2019 while it was 497 in February 2020 (28%

**Table 3.** Registered number of child abuse in the family

Year	Month	
	February	March
2019	692	878
2020	497	530
Difference (%)	28%	28%

lower). A similar trend presents comparing March 2019 (878) and March 2020 (530), or 40% lower (Table 3).

In the domain of the violation of children's rights, classified as criminal offence, there is a trend of an increase of reports compared to 2019 (Table 4). In the period including January, February and March 2019 there were 324 criminal charges, while there were 569 criminal charges in the same period 2020, which is an increase by 43%. Sexual abuse and exploitation in 2019 recorded 200 criminal charges, while in the same period in 2020 there was a decrease by 31% (138 criminal charges).

Data presented in this paper have been used for illustration. Differences can be ob-

**Table 4.** Number of criminal offences against children in the family

Criminal offence	Period		Difference (%)
	Jan – March 2019	Jan – March 2020	
Violations of child rights	324	569	43%*
Sexual abuse and exploitation of children	200	138	31%

\*increased number of reports in 2020



served as trends which, according to the information obtained from the Ministry of Interior, do not refer to other periods of time, asserting the purpose of this paper and the importance of quick access to the existing data for the professionals.

We propose conducting detailed cross-sequential analyses of statistical data, with a special emphasis on the characteristics of informants and methods of submitting criminal charges once the data are more available. We also propose conducting studies of children and youth based on the reports of abuse and neglect experience in this period, in order to make empirical conclusions. This immediate interpretation of trends seems to show that the number of misdemeanour crimes and criminal offences against children is larger. Reasons for such trends may be previously discussed social exclusion and relative unavailability of resources and individuals who would notice and adequately react in order to protect children. An exception is noticed regarding criminal offences against the rights of the child, which is, according to clinical practice experience, possible to attribute to an increased pressure on the system by parents engaged in conflict divorce related to personal contacts between the child and the non-custodial parent. The hypothesis should be verified by further research based on the annual reports and detailed specifications of each offence elaborated by the Ministries in charge.

## **Practical perspective**

With regard to theoretically and empirically expected increase of the rate of child abuse and neglect, which in usual circumstances represents a public health problem with far-reaching consequences, and parallel with that, expected decrease in the number of reports of suspected violations of the rights of the child in the family in these circumstances, it is especially important to draw attention of professionals to vulnerable children at risk. Despite high expectations of the health system for the maintenance of physical health of citizens and for halting the spread of the global pandemic, the protection of children as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the laws of the Republic of Croatia, must remain one of the priority tasks supported by close systematic intersectoral cooperation.

The Child and Youth Protection Centre of the City of Zagreb and the Ministry of Interior are initiating a public campaign executed by Degordian Agency to sensitise the public and raise public awareness about the timely reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect, such public and political activities being of critical importance.

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## **Conflicts of interest**

None to declare.

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## **Djeca iza zatvorenih vrata COVID-19 izolacije: zlostavljanje, zanemarivanje i nasilje u obitelji**

**Sažetak** - Zlostavljanje i zanemarivanje djece predstavlja javnozdravstveni problem na razini svijeta, Europe i Hrvatske sa značajnim stopama morbiditeta i mortaliteta. Aktualne okolnosti zdravstvene krize generiraju i potenciraju cijeli niz rizičnih čimbenika za zlostavljanje i zanemarivanje djece na razini karakteristika djeteta, roditelja, obiteljske dinamike i šire društvene zajednice. Za zlostavljanje i zanemarivanje djece posebno je rizična socijalna isključenost, do koje može doći uslijed mjera izolacije i karantene, a koja istovremeno može utjecati na smanjen broj prijavi. Ovaj rad predstavlja pregled dosadašnjih kliničkih i empirijskih iskustava drugih zemalja vezano za stope zlostavljanja i zanemarivanja djece u vrijeme zdravstvenih i drugih kriza, kao i analizu trendova recentnih podataka Ministarstva unutarnjih poslova, s praktičnim smjernicama za pojačanu zaštitu djece u ovom periodu.

**Ključne riječi:** zlostavljanje, zanemarivanje, COVID-19, socijalna isključenost, zaštita djece

