

Foster Care from Child Perspective



Antonija Žižak, Nivex Koller Trbović,
Ivana Jeđud Borić, Gabriјela Ratkajec Gašević,
Ivana Maurović i Anja Mirosavljević

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Content

of presentation includes two studies
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1. Foster care in Croatia from the professional perspective – situational analyses from 2000. to 2008.
2. Foster care in Croatia from child /service user perspective – current situation (2011.)



FOSTER CARE in CROATIA: state of art

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Aim: to present the situation analysis of the foster care for children in Croatia, based on all relevant and available data, and the evidence-based recommendations for further improvements

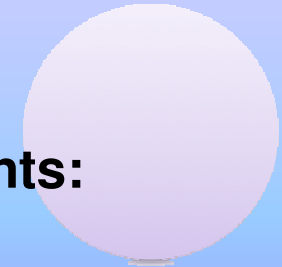
BACKGROUND FACTS:

- Long tradition – traditional approach
- New interest for foster care since 2000. resulted with new developments (several scientific projects, campaigns, conferences, round tables were conducted and professional papers/documents were written)
- Establishment of several foster parents associations
- Establishment of an Association of experts in area of foster care
- Law on foster care (2007.)
- National documents including policy principles

ANALYSES INCLUDED:

1. In-depth professional and contextual analysis of the extensive Foster Care Survey Report
2. The results from other researches regarding foster care situation in Croatia since 2000.
3. Documents on foster care (official statistics, law, regulations, professional papers, project reports...)
4. Situational analyses and satisfaction with the level of foster care development done by professionals (n=237)

Key findings



Regarding foster children:

- Reasons for separation from family of birth: neglect by parents, disturbed family relationships, poverty
- The average age of child in the moment of placement was 7,4 years
- The average duration of children's placement in out-of-home care was 10,5 years
- In most cases, the placements were urgent (54%)
- Advantages for children: good results in psychosocial functioning, self-image, self-respect, perception of social support, less stressful life
- Problems were connected to poor relations with birth parents, schooling and lack of skills for future independent living

Regarding foster parents:

- Foster parents are mainly women (92%)
- Age 52, married (74%), with a secondary school education (56%), housewives or retired, first foster care licence obtained age 42, rarely employed (23%) and being in foster parents on average 9,5 years
- Guided by altruistic and practical motives
- Predominance of informal support
- Mostly satisfied with family relationships, themselves and with the fact that they are foster parents

Regarding foster care:



- Foster family on average consist of 4,9 persons
- Average number of children in foster family is 1,8 (51% has one child in foster care)
- In 73% cases brothers and sisters were not placed together
- Majority of foster families are living in their own family house (74%)
- Half of foster children have their own room (55%)
- In cases of foster care in extended family the licence is obtained after the child is placed
- Foster parents estimate that foster care affects their family in a good way (91%)
- Foster parents are content with the cooperation with centers for social welfare (64%)
- Financial support is mainly mentioned as the most needed (54-83%)
- Foster parents recommendations: better cooperation, education, more financial and professional support, less paper work
- Foster parents support regulations in the new foster care legislation (57% - regarding decrease of the number of children in one foster family, 69% - regarding professionalization and financial compensation)

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS:

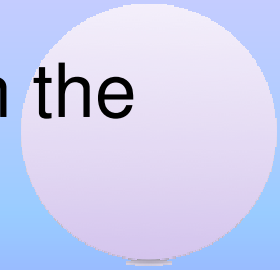


1. Since 2000. a lot have been done regarding improvement in the area of foster care, but there is as much to be done in the future
2. Research data provide insight into certain aspects of foster care
3. There is no data / evidence regarding several aspects of foster care (e.g.- child perspective unknown)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Public care for children and families need to be integrated, in order to meet the “child’s best interest”
2. The purpose and objectives of foster care need to be precisely defined
3. Promotion of positive image of foster care
4. Mechanisms to include children in the decision making process need to be improved
5. Mechanisms to involve birth parents in the decision making process need to be improved
6. Models of education and supervision for professionals need to be developed
7. Models of education and supervision for foster parents need to be developed
8. Creation of a flexible system of foster care professionalization
9. Quality standards need to be improved and specific monitoring mechanism determined

Social welfare professionals satisfaction with the level of foster care development

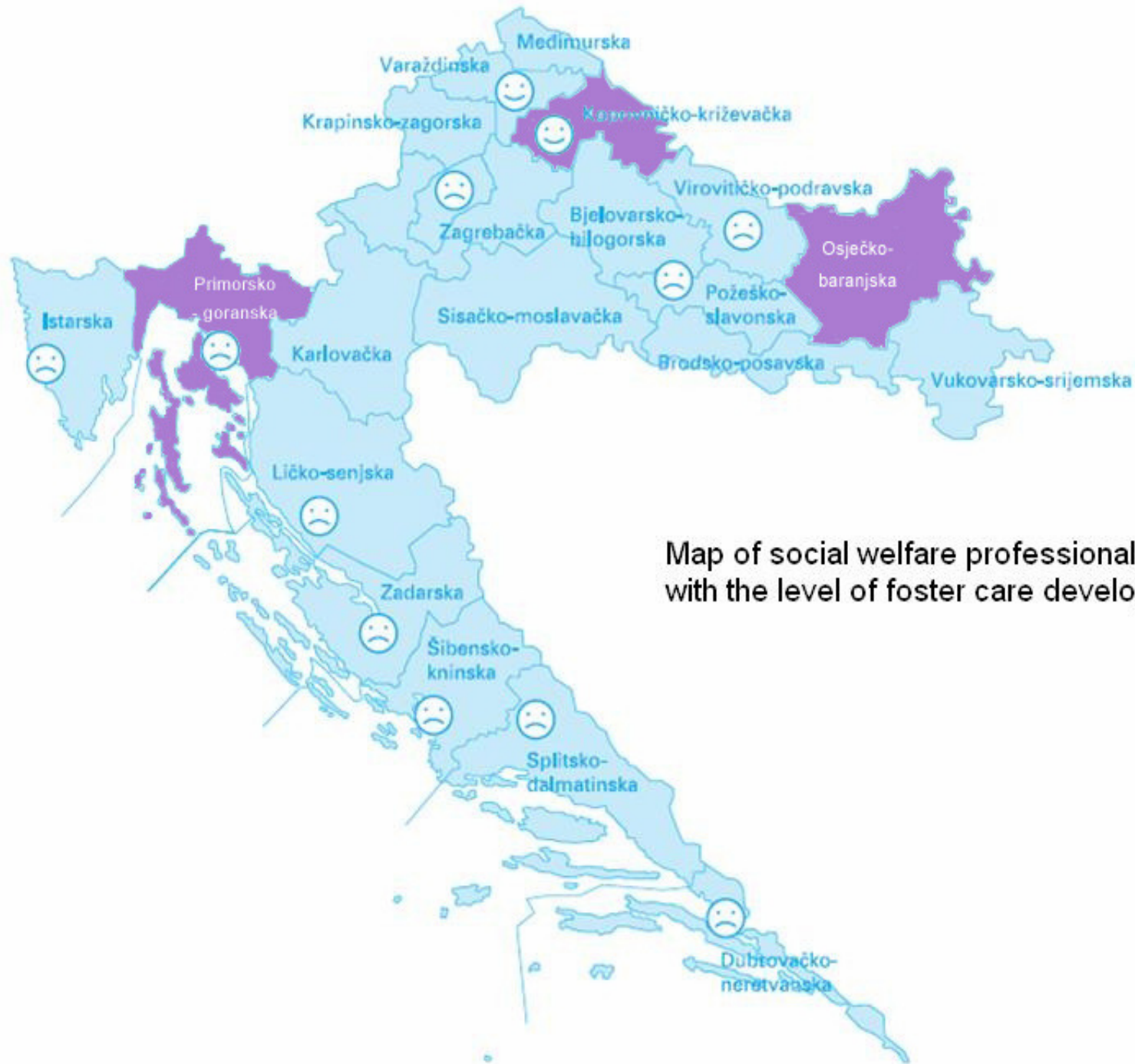


Content with:

- the tradition and continuity of foster care within particular counties
- possibility to satisfy the needs of children in the county for placement in foster family
- the number of foster families that matches the needs of county
- the improvement of care in this type of placement
- the improvement of the quality of new foster families
- standard of foster families
- cooperation between foster families and centres of social care

Not content with:

- the number of foster families in their county
- uneven development of foster care in their county
- insufficient number of foster families for specific groups of children (special needs, behaviour problems, ethnical minorities – Roma children especially)



Map of social welfare professionals un/satisfaction with the level of foster care development



FOSTER CARE **from** **CHILD PERSPECTIVE**

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General goal:

- Introduction and understanding of foster child care from the foster child's perspective and from the perspective of biological children of foster parents, as well as the adults who were in a foster care earlier in life.

Specific goals are referred to getting familiar with:

- experiences and understanding the reasons for separation from biological family and being accommodated in the foster family from the users (child's) point of view
- *experiences and understanding the foster child/young person status*
- *experiences and understanding the foster child status of the children and adolescents who have been placed in the institution after the accommodation in the foster family had been evaluated as inadequate*
- experiences and understanding the reasons for foster child care from the *perspective of foster parents' biological child*
- experiences and understanding the reasons for foster child care from the *perspective of adults who were in the foster child care*

Methods



Participants:

1. 10 foster children (age: 10 to 14)
2. 10 foster adolescents (age: 15 to 17)
3. 10 children/adolescents placed in children's homes after unsuccessful fostering
4. 10 biological children of foster parents (age: 10 to 17)
5. 10 adults with experiences of being in foster care during childhood

Method of data collecting – semi-structured interview

Methods of data processing – transcribing, participant reading and consent giving, reading and research team unifying on data processing, defining themes, qualitative analyses on two levels of interpretation in two phases

Key ethical questions: voluntary participation and consent; physical and psychological security of the participants, protection of privacy, access to research results

Key findings



The first level of interpretation

Foster care from the perspective of:

- foster children
- foster adolescents
- children/adolescents placed in children's homes after unsuccessful fostering
- birth children of foster parents
- adults with experiences of foster care during childhood

- this level of interpretation is very broad and so is not the subject of this presentation

The second level of interpretation

Thematic analyses

1. Understanding reasons for separation from birth family
2. Understanding the foster care
3. Status of foster child
4. Characteristics of personal experiences
5. Participation in decision making
6. Family of birth from child perspective
7. Foster family from child perspective
8. Participants recommendations
9. Special themes

1. Understanding reasons for separation from birth family



- Children understand reasons for separation from birth family and they can talk about them (the age of the child is important)
- They verbalize acceptance of the decision regarding separation
- Emotional tie towards separation events and circumstances
- Specific reasons for separation: abuse and neglect by parents, father's alcoholism, violence and other unacceptable parent behavior, poverty, illness or death of one or both parents

2. Understanding the foster care



On two levels:

1. **Conceptual level:** foster care and foster family is perceived as substitutional family for children without adequate parental care („children that don't have their own family, who are having hard time in their own family")
2. **Motivational level:** children recognize altruistic and material motives for foster care
 - Positive attitude towards foster care is predominant (based on own experience and experience of other children)
 - In relation to the age (adolescents) and experience (children in children's homes) understanding of foster care becomes more complex and multidimensional
 - Priority of foster care over children's homes

3. Status of foster child



1) Common features in perception of the foster child status:

- *Satisfaction with the status* (acceptance and engagement in family life and surroundings)
- *Parallelism of acceptance and diversity* (in relation to age and experience)
- *Conditioning of further stay in foster family* (*be good in school, behave appropriately, do chores*)

2) Specific features in perception of the foster child status:

- Foster care in extended family is perceived as more alike family member status
- Birth children of foster parents distinguish themselves as a family member from foster children
- More rigorous rules of conduct for foster adolescents in comparison to their peers
- Negative experience of adolescents who have been placed in institutional care after foster family care (unsatisfied needs, emotional distress, breach of their basic rights)

4. Characteristics of personal experience



- Continuum of experiences and emotions
- Positive experience and satisfaction with life in the present family
- Experience is illustrated through everyday life structure and the status in a foster family (a feeling of acceptance and engagement)
- Adaptation to life in a foster family – insufficient preparation, a feeling of importance
- Adults with foster care experience express more positive attitudes towards professionals

5. Participation in decision making



- Similarity between the groups of participants
- *Experience of nonparticipation* – lack of information, wrong information, waiting, being treated like an object, being persuaded by professionals
- *Specific position of biological children of foster parents* – informed, being asked for the opinion, involvement in family decision making process
- *Proactivity in self advocacy* – in relation to age and experience
- Involvement in decision making process related to everyday functioning – feeling of satisfaction and personal worth

6. Birth family from the child perspective



- Birth family is described through wide spectrum of problems and inadequate parents' behaviours
- Emotional paradox - they love and hate their parents at the same time
- Unclear and partial memories - protection of childhood memories
- Even if they don't have memories about birth family, they still talk about importance of it
- Brothers and sisters - synonyms for birth family

7. Foster families from child perspective



The most detailed topic as well as one of the most positive described topics

1) Positive experience of foster families has many different forms and expressions such as:

- foster family as their own family (family for the whole life)
- foster parents as real parents
- provides the sense of security, acceptance and belonging to the family
- provides the sense of continuous support and security in the future
- provides the sense of satisfaction for being in that exact family
- foster family is much better than birth family

2) Experiencing advantages for themselves because of being placed in foster family

- fulfilment of basic life needs
- profits in the fields of personal values development, personality characteristics, personal responsibility, quality of personal relationships, social network, and life style

3) Experience of foster family is connected to some unacceptable characteristics (violent behaviour of foster parents) which jeopardised, humiliated and/or reminded children on their own birth family

8. Children's recommendations



- **For the professionals:** preparing, informing and including children in the process, using child friendly communication, more help and control for foster parents, severe and faster interventions toward birth parents, building relationship with children
- **For the foster parents:** characteristics, behaviours and motivation
- **For the children:** to be open toward foster care

9. Special topics



- **Positive orientation:** activities and achievements; positive characteristics; independence; personal responsibility; work and family achievements; plans for the future
- **Uncertainty:** temporary accommodation, negative experiences of other children, decisions considering children are made by unknown people
- **Comparison of foster family and children's home:** if the experience in foster family is negative, then they prefer children's home
- **Experiences with professionals:** two completely opposite pictures (lack of contacts, no relationship, indifference vs. quality and continuous relationship with professional interested in child's welfare)

Comparison with results from literature



The results confirm foreign research and experience:

- Positive experience of foster care and foster families both for foster children and birth children of foster carers
- Although the general impression of fostering is positive, the research participants also highlight the negative experiences and emotions
- The importance of the relationship and contacts with the birth family
- Disadvantages in the intervention system: lack of adequate information in process of separation from birth family, negative experiences of separation (virtually no participation of children)



CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

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Conclusions and recommendations (1.)



- **Children are competent partners when it comes to their life experience**
- Results, conclusions and recommendations should be presented to research participants
- Children with foster care experience should be included in preparation of all documents and strategies related to alternative care as consultants (respectively to their age)
- Encourage the establishment of associations, forums or similar associations of beneficiaries in order to support, legitimate and continuing the presence of user (children's) perspective in the public care of children

Conclusions and recommendations (2.)



- **The importance of informing children about all the key characteristics of potential care forms and their inclusion as partners in decision making at all stages of care is documented.**
- To prepare a brief explanatory material in a language comprehensible to children
- To prepare instructions and standards for professional conversation with a child who is about to be replaced from his birth family
- To prepare a protocol and standards of conduct, in case of out – of – home placements, for professionals working in various systems
- To provide guidelines and standards for empowerment and self - advocacy of adolescents in out - of - home care

Conclusions and recommendations (3.)



Children were satisfied with the care they obtained in the foster family, at the time of the study

- The concept of deinstitutionalization should be extended with new possible services
- Intervention system should be based on systemic approach

Conclusions and recommendations (4.)



- **This research has confirmed professional quality standards for foster care from the participants perspective, which is both users and, mostly, children's perspective.**
- Preparation for inclusion in foster care requires active participation of children, families, professionals and foster parents over time
- To strengthen implementation of guidelines for alternative care of children in that part which relates to information and participation of children in all stages of care
- Brothers and sisters, should be jointly involved in decision-making process, whenever possible due to family circumstances and characteristics of children
- Existing models of selection, preparation, training, monitoring and supervision of foster parents should be upgraded with information related to the child's perspective
- Two or more forms of care or intervention could be combined at the same time if it is in the child's best interest
- To humanize and individualize the process of care completion

Conclusions and recommendations (5.)



- **Specific recommendations of participants for professionals, foster parents and foster children**
- The importance of relationship between children and professionals
- The need to overcome feelings of **uncertainty and insecurity** that arises due to lack of involvement and discussions of children during out – of – home placement
- Consideration of family circumstances and possible interventions **primarily from the perspective of the child and in the child's best interest**
- The need for **out – of – home care normalisation**. Children suggest that out – of – home placement can be considered good, despite some bad sides
- Need for greater **inclusion and cohesion** of children when it comes to decisions about interventions, life in the foster family, relationships with birth family, foster parents and professionals
- The need for **increasing the childrens trust in foster care** (children are sending message to other children that the foster care is for their own good)
- The need for discussion about the relationship between foster care and adoption
- The request that professionals, except for fulfilling formal procedures, must be able to demonstrate **substantial, human interest in the child** and his life.