

ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



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ACRONYMS

IEA – Inclusive Education Assistant

BTD – Balkan Trust for Democracy

COVID-19 – COronaVirus Disease-19, the disease caused by the novel virus SARS-CoV-2

CSW – Centre for Social Work

IEP – Individual education plan

LGU – Local Government Unit

PCA – Personal child attendant

PI – Preschool institution

SILC – Survey on Income and Living Conditions

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

THE STATUS OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all segments of society. It has jeopardized the lives, health and economic subsistence of people, while dramatically changing their daily routines. The initial impact of the crisis in early 2020 brought isolation, fear and uncertainty. The status of families with children in the following overview was analyzed based on the available data and the surveys conducted in Serbia in 2020 and 2021, which looked into their economic status, as well as the impacts in the fields of education, health care and social protection. Special emphasis was placed on the state of play and the crisis response measures undertaken in the field of social protection, as well as on the examples of innovative practices at the local level, which enabled better functioning of such services as day care for children with disabilities and personal child attendant (PCA). A survey and peer review events were also instrumental in the collection of information on the outcome of certain innovations and initiatives after the state of emergency was lifted.

CHANGE OF THE ECONOMIC STATUS OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Change of the economic status of families with children was examined based on the SILC (2020) data, the longitudinal study on the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families with children in Serbia, conducted by UNICEF in three waves in 2020 and 2021¹, and the Child Rights Centre's survey on change in living standard as perceived by children and youth in 2021.²

The SILC (2020) data enable the analysis of how the status of families with children changed in 2020 compared to 2019, according to the indicators **of material deprivation and subjective poverty**. The assessment of income poverty in 2020 will only be possible after SILC (2021), considering that the SILC data on income always refer to the previous calendar year. The Household Budget Survey, as the source of data on absolute poverty based on household consumption, was cut short in 2020 due to the pandemic.

According to the subjective poverty indicator³, **the share of individuals living in households with children⁴ that had difficulty making ends meet continued a decreasing trend in 2020**, while the **share of those who felt that they were facing great difficulty increased slightly** compared to 2019 (from 13.3% to 13.8%). Individuals living in households with children assessed their economic status as more favorable than that of the overall population on average (Annex, Chart 1). Broken down by household types, the share of those who felt they were facing great difficulty increased only for individuals living in households with three adults and dependent children (from 12.1% to 14.9%), which constituted the largest chunk of the overall population (Annex, Chart 2), as well as for those whose income in the previous year had been above the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.

¹ UNICEF (2021). Istraživanje o uticaju pandemije kovida-19 na porodice sa decom u Srbiji. Beograd. <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/publikacije/istrazivanje-o-uticaju-pandemije-kovida-19-na-porodice-sa-decom-u-srbiji>

² Centar za prava deteta (2021). Prava deteta tokom pandemije iz ugla dece i mladih. <https://cpd.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Prava-deteta-tokom-pandemije.pdf>

³ Subjective poverty is defined as respondents' assessment of the ability of their households to make ends meet. Individuals are considered as poor if they can only make ends meet "with difficulty" or "with great difficulty".

⁴ According to SILC, these are dependent children aged 0-17 years and youth aged 18-24 years if economically inactive and living with at least one parent. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Dependent_children

Chart 1. Ability of the household to make ends meet – individuals living in households with children, 2013–2020

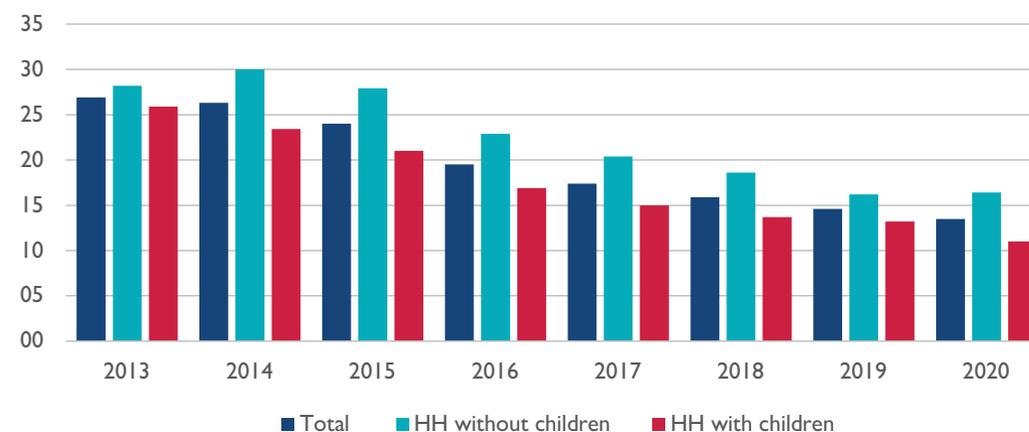


Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mdes09]

The severe material deprivation rate⁵ decreased in 2020 compared to the previous year by a couple of percentage points for individuals living in households with children (from 13.2% to 11.0%), which was consistent with the multiannual downward trend that was not interrupted even during the crisis (Chart 2). The decrease was registered in all quintiles (Annex, Chart 3). According to this indicator, households with children were less disadvantaged than those without children, whose relevant rate stagnated in relation to 2019.

⁵ The severe material deprivation rate is the share of individuals living in households that are unable to afford at least four items from the following list: 1. to keep home adequately warm; 2. unexpected financial expenses in the amount of RSD 16,600; 3. a meal with meat or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent) every second day; 4. one week's holiday away from home; 5. regular mortgage or rent payments, utility bills, hire purchase installments or other loan payments; 6. a colour television (TV); 7. a washing machine; 8. a car; and 9. a telephone.

Chart 2. Severe material deprivation, total, individuals living in households without children and households with children, 2013–2020



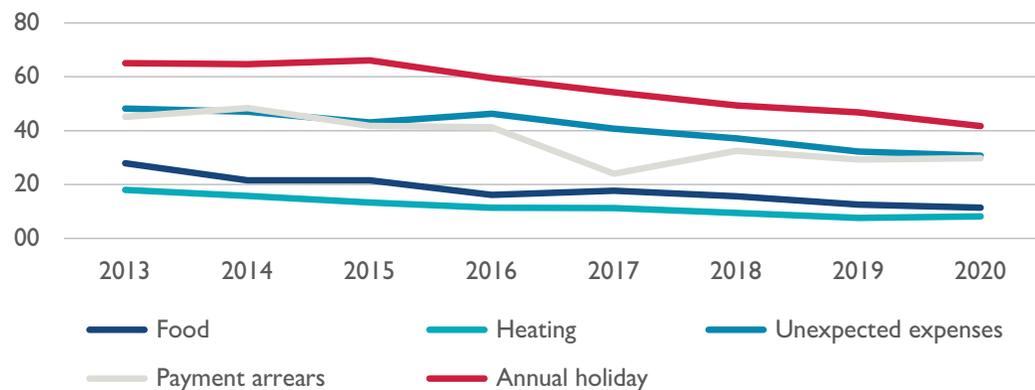
Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mddd13]

Considered by individual items of the economic strain dimension of material deprivation⁶, the status of individuals living in households with children and the findings regarding the impact of the crisis were not significantly different from the severe material deprivation indicator.

According to most of the individual items, the status of individuals living in households with children continued to improve in 2020, despite the crisis. **Deterioration was registered in respect of the indicators referring to the ability of households to keep their homes adequately warm and to regularly pay mortgage or loan payments and utility bills.** Overall, the changes were minor, less pronounced than in the overall population, while individuals in households with children achieved a better living standard according to almost all reference items.

⁶ These include the first 5 items on the list, whereas others refer to the ability of a household to afford durable consumer goods. The new *material and social deprivation* indicator, which has been in use in the EU since 2021 for monitoring the Europe 2020 Strategy, has left out three out of the four deprivation items from the 'Durables' dimension (all except the ability to afford a car), which is why they have been excluded from this analysis.

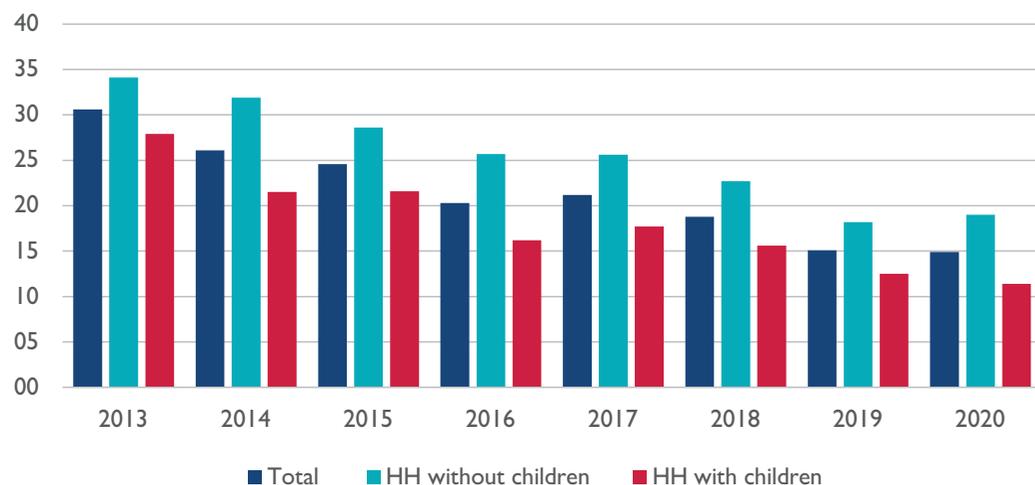
Chart 3. Items of the economic strain dimension of material deprivation, individuals living in households with children, 2013–2020



Source: Eurostat database, same as for Charts 3–6

The share of individuals living in households with children that are unable to afford a meal with meat or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent) every second day decreased slightly in 2020 (from 12.5% to 11.4%), whereas that of individuals living in households without children increased marginally. The changes relative to 2019 are minor and it would be more fitting to label them as stagnation and interruption of a declining trend (Chart 4). This indicator, too, showed that individuals living in households with children were less disadvantaged than those in households without children.

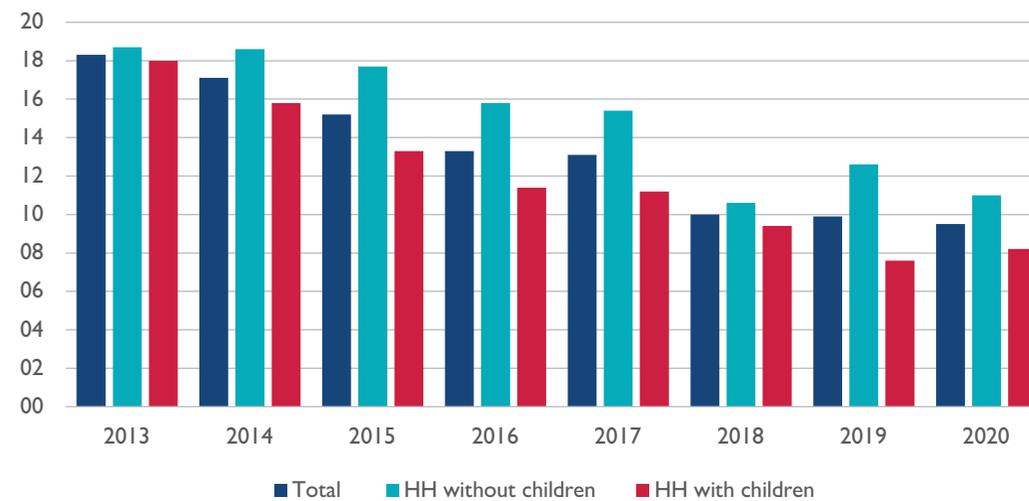
Chart 4. The share of individuals who are unable to afford a meal with meat or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent) every second day, total, individuals living in households without children and those in households with children, 2013–2020



Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mdcs03]

The share of individuals living in households with children that cannot afford to keep their homes adequately warm increased slightly in 2020 compared to 2019 (from 7.6% to 8.2%), contrary to the multi-annual trend and the trend observed for the overall population (Chart 5). This indicator, too, showed a better status of the families with children.

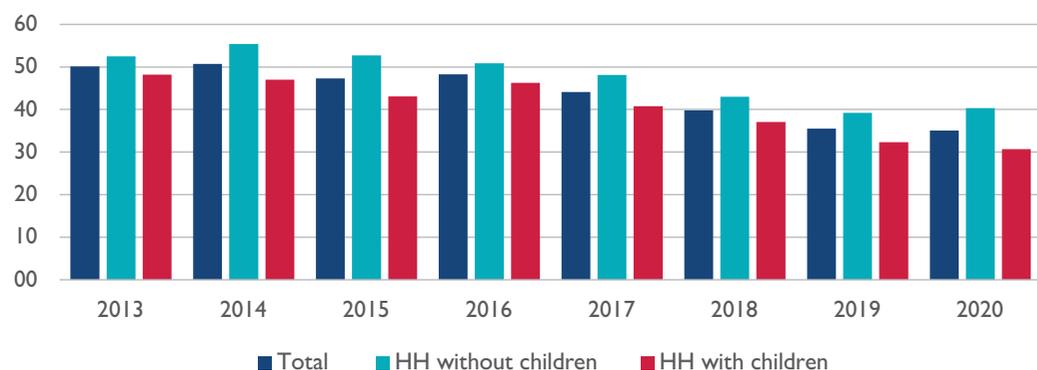
Chart 5. The share of individuals who cannot afford to keep homes adequately warm, total, individuals living in households without children and those in households with children, 2013–2020



Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mdcs01]

The share of individuals living in households with children that are unable to afford unexpected expenses decreased in 2020 relative to 2019 (from 32.2% to 30.7%), by a somewhat smaller margin than in the previous years (Chart 6). At the level of the overall population, this share was in stagnation considering that, according to this indicator, the status of households without children deteriorated only slightly. In the long term, affording unexpected expenses was also somewhat easier for households with children.

Chart 6. The share of individuals who are unable to afford unexpected expenses, total, individuals living in households without children and those in households with children, 2013–2020

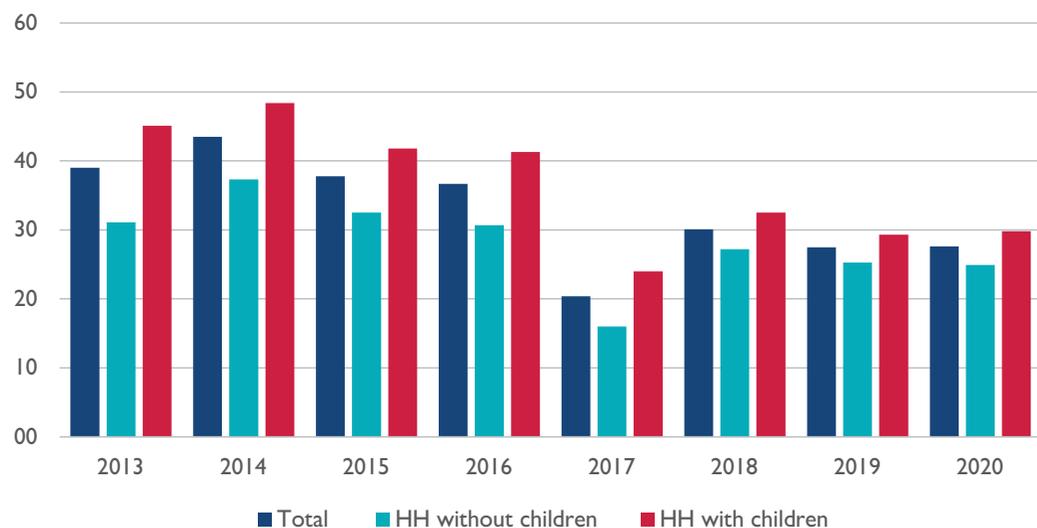


Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mdcs04]]

The share of individuals living in households with children that are unable to afford regular mortgage or rent payments and utility bills increased slightly in 2020 (from 29.3% to 29.8%), which was also the case with the overall population, although to an even smaller degree (Chart 7).

This was also the only indicator since the first survey in 2013 according to which the individuals living in households with children were disadvantaged to an above-average extent. In recent years, however, this gap has been narrowing, which actually means that, according to this indicator, the deprivation of families with children has been decreasing at a faster rate than that of families without children.

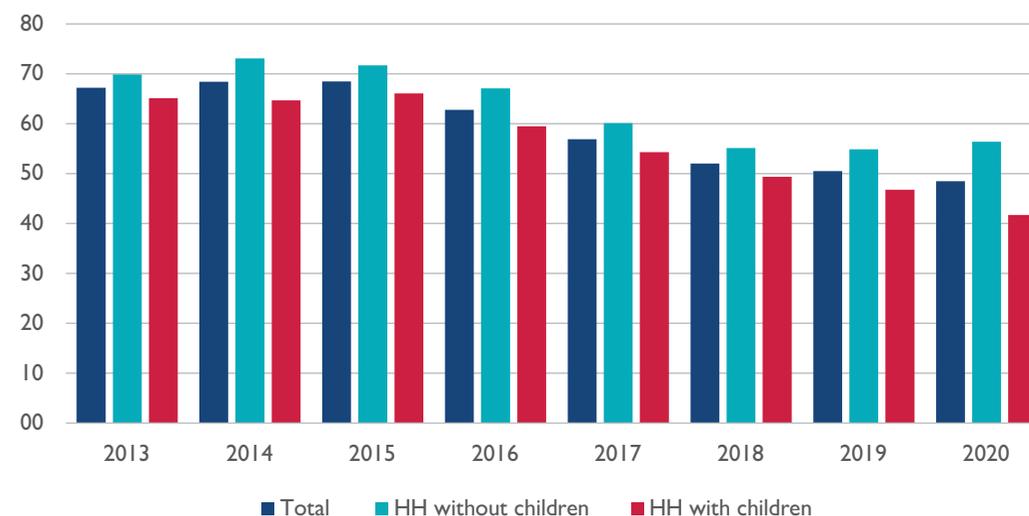
Chart 7. The share of individuals who are unable to afford regular mortgage or rent payments and utility bills, total, individuals living in households without children and those in households with children, 2013–2020



Source: Eurostat database, [[ilc_mdcs05]]

The share of individuals living in households with children that are unable to afford a week's holiday away from home for all members at least once per year decreased compared to 2019 (from 46.8% to 41.7%). The relevant share increased for individuals living in households without children, which were more disadvantaged than average according to this indicator.

Chart 8. The share of individuals who are unable to afford a week's holiday away from home for all members at least once per year, total, individuals living in households without children and those in households with children, 2013–2020



Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mdcs02]

The UNICEF survey that addressed families with children (aged 0–17) and covered the years 2020 and early 2021 also provides insight into changes in income. The first wave of this survey was conducted in April 2020, the second one in July 2020, and the third and final wave – in March 2021.⁷

The survey found that the pandemic did not considerably affect the income of almost half of the families with children,⁸ but also that a rather large proportion of parents felt that their income decreased in some periods (44% in the first, 28% in the second and 24% in the third wave), which clearly indicated that the initial months of the crisis were the most difficult ones. Among the families that experienced a loss of income during at least one wave, the dominant impression was that their income decreased by more than 10%. This group typically included low-income families and those that were unable to face unexpected expenses.⁹ **Loss of income during all three survey waves was reported by 11% households.**

⁷ UNICEF (2021). Istraživanje o uticaju pandemije kovida-19 na porodice sa decom u Srbiji. Beograd

⁸ Income remained at the same level or decreased/increased by 10%.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 19-20.

A half of the families with children faced **unplanned expenditures** during at least one of the periods as a result of the pandemic – mostly for hygiene products and food during the first wave, and for health care services in the third wave.¹⁰

Saving was an important part of the coping strategy for families with children, too. **Approximately one in four households was compelled to cut down on their food expenditures at least once during the crisis, and about 30% of them had to reduce their heating and electricity bills. However, the share of households who continually made savings by cutting the costs for these goods and services was negligible.** The families also saved on toys and books for children and decreased their expenditures for school tuition fees and their children's education. Savings by cutting down on these items were made at least at one point by between 30% (school tuition fees) and 54% (toys) of the families. Apart from saving, the families also resorted to spending their savings and borrowing, as well as to looking for jobs for their unemployed members.

The survey conducted by the Child Rights Centre in the second half of 2021 on a sample of more than 500 children and youth conveyed their impressions on how their living standard changed during the pandemic.¹¹ **Between 6% and 8% of children and youth assessed that their families' economic status had deteriorated during the crisis,** either based on their perception of the availability of food, water and electricity, or the stability of adult household members' income and employment (6%), or based on the family's overall financial situation (8%). **The share of Roma children and youth who thought that their families' financial status had been more favorable before the COVID-19 pandemic was several times larger (over 40%).**¹²

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 23.

¹¹ Centar za prava deteta (2021). Prava deteta tokom pandemije iz ugla dece i mladih. <https://cpd.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Prava-deteta-tokom-pandemije.pdf>

¹² Ibid, p. 20–21. The survey includes a caveat that the comparison of these two samples (the overall population of children and the Roma children and youth) should be made cautiously, given their difference in size.

EDUCATION, HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Beyond the economic sphere, it is especially important to consider the changes in the accessibility of health care and social care services, as well as the issues related to children's education.

According to the third wave of the UNICEF survey, **approximately half of the children needed health care services and, of those who did, 87% actually accessed them,** which marked an increase compared to the first and second waves of the survey, when the respective figures were 72% and 70%. Most often, the least satisfactory was the accessibility of specialist medical services. The services that were most often lacking were those for the youngest children (0–6 years).¹³

According to the survey by the Child Rights Centre (2021), a number of children and youth assessed that they had poorer access to medications, vitamins and other immunity boosters (17%), as well as to health services (12%) compared to the period before the crisis. The situation deteriorated even more dramatically according to the views of Roma youth, since more than two thirds of them felt that the accessibility of health services was "lower than before".¹⁴

When the state of emergency was lifted, **social care services became more accessible** and, as a result, in the third wave of the UNICEF survey, of the 17% of children who benefited from these services, **88% were able to access all services.** Above-average accessibility was observed for the youngest children (0-6).¹⁵

Most parents (66%) felt that distance learning caused their children to become less motivated to learn and stated that **the pandemic would have a negative effect on their child's education** (60%). The greatest problems they associated with online learning were the lack of motivation/mood and a stimulating learning environment at home, teachers' high expectations and the inconsistency of their demands, as well as technical internet connectivity issues. Almost half of the parents thought that distance learning had not improved compared to the time when it was introduced during the state of emergency.¹⁶

Most of the children returned to preschool institutions (PI), while their parents' views regarding the quality of these institutions' work were somewhat more positive, considering their predominant perception (57%) that the quality was not affected by the pandemic. However, a number of children (approx. one in five) did not return, while some of them (24%) attended preschool less regularly.¹⁷

¹³ UNICEF (2021), p. 38 and 39.

¹⁴ Centar za prava deteta (2021). Prava deteta tokom pandemije iz ugla dece i mladih, p. 22 and 23.

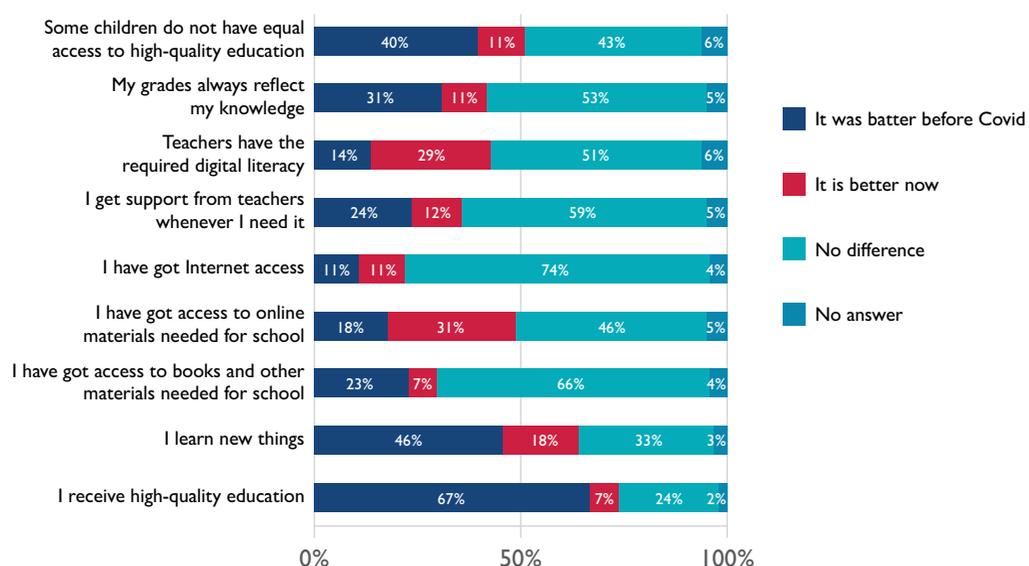
¹⁵ UNICEF (2021), p. 39 and 40.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 51 and 52

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 56

According to the findings of the Child Rights Centre, it was in the field of education that the greatest changes occurred, compared to the pre-crisis period. **Two out of three children and youth believed that the quality of their education was currently lower than before the pandemic**, while almost half of them thought that they had fewer opportunities for learning new contents. The proportion of children and youth who thought that “some children did not have equal access to high-quality education” was also rather large (40%).¹⁸ A greater share of Roma children and youth assessed the change in education accessibility as unfavorable (54%); however, the share of those who thought that the pandemic had affected the quality of their education was smaller than in the overall population (54%).¹⁹

Chart 9. Assessment of education accessibility and quality during the pandemic (general population)



Source: Child Rights Centre (2021)

SITUATION IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL PROTECTION DURING THE PANDEMIC AND THE MEASURES TAKEN

Most of the measures during the initial wave of the pandemic were aimed at preventing the loss of jobs and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, which certainly reflected positively on the efforts to maintain the income of families with children. The measures included the deferral of tax liabilities, the provision of financial assistance in the amount of the minimum wage or in the form of subsidies for larger enterprises, loans for preserving liquidity and maintaining the working capital, or the introduction of loan guarantee schemes. In the latter part of 2020, further support was provided in the form of minimum wage allowances and the deferred payment of taxes and contributions, while a number of the measures specifically targeted businesses in the tourism industry.^{20 21}

As a social protection measure, in 2020, immediately after lifting the state of emergency, the government granted a one-off cash benefit amounting to €100 to all adult citizens of Serbia, followed by another €80 in three instalments in 2021. Additionally, a one-off benefit amounting to €60 was granted to unemployed persons, whereas pensioners received financial assistance several times.

Soup kitchens, organized by the Red Cross of Serbia, continued to operate in all communities, albeit with the necessary adjustments. Humanitarian aid packages were distributed in many cities and municipalities, while assistance was also provided to a number of Roma settlements through donor support. Almost all municipalities and cities established crisis helplines, usually operated by the Emergency Response Team, the municipal/city authorities or the Red Cross.

As part of the soup kitchen program, the Red Cross continued its practice of delivering meals to the doorstep for old persons with reduced mobility and persons with disabilities even after the state of emergency was lifted.

The Red Cross in Loznica continued the Programme of Support to Families Living in Roma Settlements in cooperation with the Roma Inclusion Mobile Team, and plans were made to intensify the provision of scholarship support to students.

¹⁸ Centar za prava deteta (2021), p. 25.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 26.

²⁰ Institut za razvoj i inovacije (2020). Efekti ekonomskih mera za ublažavanje negativnih posledica COVID-19 na privredu. Beograd: NALED. https://naled.rs/htdocs/Files/06839/Analiza_efekata_ekonomskih_mera_za_ublazavanje_negativnih_posledica_COVID-19_na_privredu.pdf

²¹ Vlada Republike Srbije (2020). Program ekonomskih mera za podršku privredi Srbije pogođenoj posledicama epidemije (korona virus – COVID-19). <https://www.propisi.net/program-mera-za-pomoc-privredi-srbije-pogodjenoj-posledicama-epidemije-korona-virus-covid-19/>

During the state of emergency, the entitlements of social benefit recipients were automatically renewed, and the possibility to apply for them via telephone and e-mail was also introduced. In some LGUs, the procedures for awarding one-off cash benefits were simplified.²²

Particularly challenging for all municipalities and cities was to organize the provision of supplies to the elderly, identify the most vulnerable persons and organize psychological support. In the early stages, most LGUs also faced difficulties in organizing the issuing of travel permits, especially for informal caregivers and parents of children with disabilities.

At a peer review event, the representatives of the Municipality of Arandjelovac and the City of Novi Sad stated that the activities undertaken during the state of emergency had significantly contributed to improving cooperation, both among different sectors, and with civil society organisations.

The City of Novi Sad made especially great efforts to launch outreach activities during the initial months of the pandemic, and a project for further improvement of the operational mechanisms and methods enabling outreach to “invisible” vulnerable individuals and groups also started recently. The project is funded from the local budget and implemented through collaboration of non-governmental organizations and the CSW.

Social care services were made only partially available during the state of emergency. The measures targeting residential or community services were primarily restrictive (ban on visits, suspended operation). While the availability decreased, the demand for the services dramatically increased, especially during lockdown.

The greatest effort was made towards protecting the beneficiaries of residential care institutions and a large number of measures addressed the functioning of care homes.²³ Local governments were required to ensure the functioning of home care services.²⁴ Day care centres for children with disabilities were closed, while some communities also experienced problems in the functioning of the PCA service. With strong support from the Centre for Independent Living of Persons with Disabilities, the provision of the personal assistance service continued in all LGUs in which it had been available before the pandemic-related crisis.

Since schools, day care and personal attendants suspended their activities, children with disabilities were left with no support outside of their family circle. There are also indications that the number of domestic violence victims increased, and that support to homeless people, as well as to children who had used drop-in centres before the crisis, was missing altogether.

²² Centar za socijalnu politiku (2020). Inovativne prakse u oblasti socijalne zaštite na lokalnom nivou u Republici Srbiji - odgovor na vanredno stanje usled pandemije COVID-19, Tim za socijalno uključivanje i smanjenje siromaštva Vlade Republike Srbije, Beograd.
http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Inovativne_prakse_u_oblasti_socijalne_zastite_na_lokalnom_nivou_Odgovor_na_vanredno_stanje_usled_pandemije_Covid-19.pdf

²³ Available at:
<https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/vanredno-stanje/Pregled%20akata%20minrzs%20o%20delovanju%20V2.pdf>

²⁴ Available at:
<https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sr/aktuelnosti/vesti/usluga-pomoc-u-kuci-tokom-vanrednog-stanja>

EXAMPLES OF INNOVATIVE LOCAL-LEVEL PRACTICES IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL CARE SERVICES FOR CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The examples of innovative practices during the state of emergency were taken from a publication of the Centre for Social Policy (2020).²⁵ This section also includes examples presented at peer review events, as well as information on the outcomes of certain innovations and initiatives undertaken after the state of emergency, collected through a survey conducted in 2021. Special attention was given to initiatives launched by non-state service providers.²⁶

Day care institutions for children and youth with disabilities were closed during the state of emergency. Service provision was also suspended by day care centres for children from families at risk and day care centres for children and youth with behavioral problems. Some local governments reported that psychological support was provided to beneficiaries and their parents or guardians during the state of emergency, as well as that communication was maintained with them, usually by telephone, but also via Viber chat groups, video calls, Facebook page... A notable example of good practice are communities in which learning materials, assignments or motor ability tests were delivered to beneficiaries' doorstep. There are also examples where 24-hour support, including the provision of food and medications, was expanded to all children and persons with disabilities during the state of emergency.

There were very few day care centres that organized activities outdoors. Immediately

after the state of emergency was declared, the “Otvorena vrata” Day Care Centre in Ivanjica organized many activities in the open air, outside the institution's premises. In the mornings, four days in a week, the center staff took beneficiaries for walks in parks or other green areas. The beneficiaries and their parents/guardians expressed great satisfaction with this kind of support, while the practice of “daily outdoor activities” continued even after the state of emergency was lifted.²⁷ The staff of the “Sunce” Day Care Centre in Prokuplje also often supported their beneficiaries individually in their backyards, took them for walks when their parents were in lockdown, or when they were too old or too ill to take them.²⁸

The “Sunce” Day Care Centre continued its work with a larger number of outdoor activities that were introduced during the state of emergency. For beneficiaries who did not regularly come to the center, materials and online support were delivered in accordance with their needs. The telephone helpline for psycho-social support to parents and children attending day care centres is still functional as one of the regular activities. As soon as the state of emergency was lifted, workshops were organized for parents and foster parents on how children's time can be better organized in a home setting.

²⁵ Centar za socijalnu politiku (2020)

²⁶ See the section on *Methodology*

²⁷ Ibid, p. 15.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 26.

In late August 2020, the competent Ministry issued a recommendation to local government units to re-launch day care services. Based on the recommendations given by local public health institutes, some institutions decided to pursue a phased introduction of the service, where the number of beneficiary children would be limited in the first phase, and the priority was given to the children whose parents were employed. The Municipality of Bojnik adopted the *Plan of Necessary Measures and Activities for Prevention of and Protection against COVID-19*.²⁹

At a peer review event, it was stated that children from the Bojnik Municipal Day Care Centre were spending much more time in the open air after the re-launch of the service, which strongly contributed to an increase in the beneficiaries' satisfaction. Cooperation with the parents was also considerably improved and they became more involved in the center's activities.

The challenges faced by PCA service providers were successfully overcome in only a few local communities. Since the schools were closed, the professionals who provided these services in a number of municipalities and cities were reassigned to other duties, while in some of them the communication was shifted to the online sphere.

The personal child attendant service remained functional in the local communities where it was provided by the "Children's Heart" Humanitarian Organization, i.e. in the cities of Belgrade, Šabac, Smederevo and Pančevo, as well as in the municipalities of Bač, Kovačica and Babušnica. Personal attendants usually stayed at the children's homes, helped them with learning materials and school assignments, but they would also become actively involved in resolving various problems the families faced. A point that was especially emphasized was that the service providers, the schools and the CSW intensified cross-sector cooperation in adapting the individual educational plans (IEPs), as well as in monitoring the children's progress and achievements outside the school environment.³⁰

The innovative practice proposed by the organization "Children's Heart" entailed the establishment of a single *info center*, providing support for both the beneficiaries of the service and the service provision staff in all municipalities and cities. It allowed the parents to call the personal attendant via a video chat app when their child was upset, as well as to calm their own fears, primarily with regard to the presence of any risks to their children's health.

Through the info center, professionals also provided support to the personal child attendants who were also facing numerous dilemmas resulting from the lack of a uniform set of system rules, as well as caused by the emergency circumstances. The info center continued to operate even after the state of emergency was lifted.³¹

²⁹ Ibid, p. 18.

³⁰ Ibid, 19.

³¹ Ibid, 19.

The adapted activities within the PCA service provided by the organization "Children's Heart" continued into the next school year. Based on the experiences gained during the state of emergency, new procedures were adopted defining the course of action of the PCA and the beneficiaries of this service (including the parents) in the implementation of the prescribed epidemiological measures. The total number of beneficiaries significantly increased compared to the period before the state of emergency (from 420 to more than 765 children with disabilities).

The *Info center* is still operational, while the PCA operating procedures are adapted in accordance with the current circumstances.

In the Municipality of Ivanjica, as soon as the state of emergency was declared, the Management Board of the Association for Cerebral Palsy and Polio adopted the *Rulebook on the Conduct of Employees and Persons Hired under Other Contractual Modalities Providing the Personal Child Attendant Service during the State of Emergency in the Republic of Serbia*. The Association also formulated a detailed plan of communication activities during the state of emergency, which was put into effect using Viber chat and video calls. The Ivanjica Association for Cerebral Palsy and Polio provided the PCA service in several municipalities.³²

After the state of emergency was lifted, the Association continued to provide the PCA service and expanded its territorial coverage to new municipalities. The day care center for children and youth with disabilities also resumed its activities. New communication and support models, which were developed during the state of emergency, continued to be used on a needs basis and were integrated in individual service plans. At a peer review event, it was noted that communication with the parents and guardians had improved in all municipalities and that cooperation with CSWs, intersectoral committees (ISC) and LGUs had been raised to a higher level. The plans of future action include the development of new procedures and protocols of cooperation with the relevant institutions in the crisis/emergency situations.

In cooperation with the "Srna" Association of Persons with Disabilities and the organization EHO, the Municipality of Raška developed an innovative service model for providing additional support to pupils/students.³³ The service is intended for primary-school-age children with disabilities, or with difficulties in learning and following the curriculum. Children receive support from professionals in two-hour sessions twice per week, while a number of children are also supported by their peers who have received special training. During the state of emergency, certain elements of this model were incorporated in the program of the PCA service. The new *Decision on Social Protection Entitlements and Services* was adopted in mid-2020, recognizing additional support as a service.

³² Ibid, p. 20.

³³ Read more about this initiative at:

<http://sociojalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/srllip2-rahka-razvoj-inovativnog-modela-dod/>

In the 2021/2022 school year, 40 primary-school-age children in the Municipality of Raška used additional educational support, an innovative service that combined the elements of PCA and pedagogical assistance services. Inclusive education assistants (IEA) directly supported pupils/students in learning, as well as in following online classes, using Google Classroom and Viber. Students who lacked the technical facilities or skills, and could not get support from their parents either, received printed materials on a daily basis to learn from with the help of IEA. This service switched entirely to funding from the municipal budget. Improvement in cross-sector cooperation was especially highlighted at a peer review event.

The development of additional educational support instigated the mapping of needs for other services. In consequence, this led to the introduction of the SOS helpline for domestic violence victims, and the decision was made to pilot the developmental counselling unit. An early childhood development program was also launched with donor support, thus contributing to a significant overall improvement in the support available for families with children.

During the lockdown, many people also needed psychological support, which posed a specific challenge to the local governments in which these services had previously been unavailable. In collaboration with the Serbian Psychological Society, the Red Cross organized the provision of psycho-social support to the general public, volunteers and employed persons via telephone, an SMS service and the “Razgovarajmo” (Let’s Talk) online platform.

The Red Cross continued the provision of psycho-social support to the public in 2021, and the program was still active at the time of the survey (May 2022). The activities of the “Razgovarajmo” online platform were implemented in Belgrade (two centres), Niš, Kragujevac and Subotica. Trained volunteers provided relevant information and psycho-social support, as well as helped clients to connect with the public institutions whose services they required.

At a peer review event, the City of Zrenjanin representatives stressed that support to parents and guardians, which had been introduced during the state of emergency, was still provided, and was evaluated by the clients as highly useful.

INNOVATIVE SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES PRESENTED AT PEER REVIEW EVENTS

Immediately after the state of emergency was lifted, as part of the project “Support for Social Cohesion of Roma Children”, the Social Integration Centre from Vranje organized 26 workshops for children aged 5 to 7 years from substandard Roma settlements, as a preparation for starting school. The children gained new knowledge and skills by playing games, and also received meals and hygiene products. A panel titled *Importance of Continuous Education* was also organized for parents in order to increase their motivation to enroll their children in schools. Considering the pandemic, the panel also covered the topics of health culture and hygiene habits. The platform *Dete za spas planete* (Children Saving the Planet) was launched and a manual for parents was prepared. A new cycle of support has also been launched.

The Niš-based organization *Indigo* implemented the project “Learning Support for Children”, considering that early in the COVID-19 crisis a large number of Roma families did not have access to computers, internet, a TV set or a learning space. To overcome this problem, volunteers from the Faculty of Philosophy, with support from education specialists as well as young Roma persons from the Roma settlement, provided learning support to children in Indigo’s social center. The project also included collaboration with pedagogical assistants. In addition, online support for some subjects and English language courses were organized for refugee children in their camps. Both projects are still ongoing, supported by donors.

During the state of emergency, the organization YUROM from Niš devoted its efforts to providing tanks with drinking water and distributing food parcels in substandard Roma settlements. The absence of a sewerage network in the settlements and the interruption of activities such as collection of recyclable materials threatened the basic subsistence of the Roma, while the local emergency response teams did not focus on these issues. Pressure was put on the Government to provide water tanks, and a large number of food parcels was distributed with assistance from international donors. Immediately after the state of emergency was lifted, tablet computers and school supplies were distributed to students.

During the pandemic, the “Caribrod” Civic Association from Dimitrovgrad provided additional support to parents of children with disabilities by setting up a *Counselling Centre for Children and Families*. The Counselling Centre was primarily focused on assisting children with disabilities who followed individual education plans (IEP). The parents received online support for assisting their children during lockdown.

In cooperation with the CSW, the Ternipe association and the Centre for Learning and Early Development of Children, the City of Pirot piloted the social mediator service during the state of emergency. A young female Roma student was hired as the service provider; she also helped to map the most vulnerable service beneficiaries and assisted in the distribution of humanitarian aid packages. Especially significant was the support provided by the social mediator to Roma families in exercising their rights, primarily in the areas of health, social and child protection, as well as in obtaining personal documents.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the severe material deprivation indicator and based on most items of the economic strain dimension of material deprivation, the status of individuals living in households with children continued to improve in 2020, too, despite the crisis. **The Deterioration was registered in respect of the indicators referring to the ability of households to keep their homes adequately warm and to regularly pay mortgage or loan payments and utility bills.** Overall, the changes were minor and individuals in households with children achieved a better living standard than the overall population, judging by almost all reference items.

The perception of the living standard also slightly deteriorated, given the increased share of individuals living in households with children who felt that they could only make ends meet with great difficulty.

According to the UNICEF survey, the pandemic **did not considerably affect the income of almost half of families with children**, whereas **loss of income during all three survey waves was reported by 11% households**. During the crisis, families were compelled to cut down on their costs, borrow money or spend their savings.

Between 6% and 8% of children and youth assessed that their families' economic status had deteriorated during the crisis. **More than 40% of Roma children and youth thought that their families' financial status had been more favorable before the pandemic.**

Government measures mostly targeted the general population, primarily with the objective of preserving jobs and stimulating demand, by awarding one-off cash benefits to all adults. Families with children thus received smaller benefit amounts compared to families without children, since only adults were entitled to universal cash assistance, while the only other assistance was awarded to pensioners. Unlike pensioners and FSA recipients, who received universal one-off cash benefits automatically, adult members of child allowance recipient families had to apply for it, although records on them were available in the information system and despite evidence of their vulnerability.

Many measures addressed the functioning of residential homes and the protection of their beneficiaries and staff members from the pandemic. Local governments were required to ensure the functioning of the home care services, while day care centres were closed, and the provision of the PCA service continued only in some local communities. The personal assistance service was mostly provided smoothly, although there were difficulties in the early stages of the crisis in obtaining travel permits for both formal and informal care givers.

During the state of emergency, **innovative practices** adopted by day care service providers primarily included communication with beneficiaries and parents/guardians in electronic format and via various platforms, distribution of learning materials and tests and organization of outdoor activities.

The adaptation of the PCA service entailed temporary service provision in the beneficiaries' homes, introduction of new contents, provision of information and psycho-social support to the beneficiaries and service provision staff (the single info center).

In collaboration with the Serbian Psychological Society, the Red Cross organized the provision of psycho-social support via telephone, an SMS service and the "Razgovarajmo" (Let's Talk) platform.

Numerous innovations were integrated in improved services for families with children, and the initiatives continued even after the state of emergency was lifted.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SOCIAL PROTECTION OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

The recommendations for improving the social protection of families with children in crisis situations are presented separately for the national and local levels. The formulation of the recommendations acknowledged the proposals made at peer review events.

General recommendations in the field of social and child protection

- > Develop a Strategy for Action in Crisis Situations, with special focus on specific groups such as homeless people and the population of Roma settlements;
- > Formulate local plans of action in crisis situations, specifying:
 - the role of additional local resources, such as youth offices, Roma inclusion teams and non-governmental organisations, health mediators, ISC;
 - efficient mechanisms for issuing travel permits, as relevant;
 - procedures and mechanisms for volunteer vetting and training;
 - measures to strengthen and develop the capacities of emergency response teams;
- > Improve water supply in Roma settlements to facilitate coping with the crisis;
- > Automatically use earmarked transfers for innovative services/programs in the accelerated procedure in times of crisis;
- > Regulate access to information at the national level by LGUs for the purpose of identification of vulnerable persons in times of crisis;
- > Improve cross-sector cooperation – develop protocols and, where relevant, standard operating procedures in order to clearly and accurately define the roles and competencies (who, what, when and how) at the national and local levels (e.g. through local government decisions);
- > Train professionals in the use of new technologies in their work, at all levels;
- > Devise a special modality of support for clients who are insufficiently financially literate and lack the capacity to use new technologies at all levels;
- > Enhance field and outreach activities to enable quick identification of vulnerable persons at the local level;
- > Improve the tools for mapping the needs and conduct regular mapping at the local level.

Recommendations in the field of cash benefits

National level

- > Introduce digital payment instruments, such as prepaid cards, mobile transfers (mobile tokens, mobile vouchers and mobile money) and electronic vouchers.
- > Amend the Law on Social Protection and the Law on Financial Assistance to Families with Children to ensure the expansion of the relevant schemes in times of crisis, namely:
 - automatic renewal of entitlements for existing beneficiaries, with accurately defined procedures;
 - automatic increase of benefit amounts awarded to existing financial social assistance and child allowance recipients;
 - extended coverage by financial social assistance and/or child allowance to include new recipients during crisis periods without an additional means test (households having the status of vulnerable energy customers, FSA or CA applicants, multi-year recipients who became ineligible, families with children living in substandard Roma settlements (area-based targeting) through inclusion in the child allowance scheme without a means test...)³⁴.

Local level

- > Amend the local *decisions on social and child protection* to enable the expansion of the one-off cash benefit scheme, in accordance with the available budget, so as to also include the predetermined beneficiary groups (e.g. families with many children or children in substandard Roma settlements);
- > Prepare a simplified application procedure for one-off cash benefits;
- > Provide support for completing the application form and preparing the required documentation;
- > Establish or upgrade a mechanism for informing beneficiaries about their entitlements, with accurately defined procedures to be followed during crises and increased workload periods (including via social media or television and radio programs).

³⁴ See a broader list of examples in Matković, G. (2020) *Social Safety Nets in Times of the Covid-19 Crisis – Serbia*. Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. Available at: <http://sociojalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/en/social-safety-nets-in-times-of-the-covid-19-crisis-2/>

Recommendations in the field of social care services

National level

- > Review the standards applicable to social care services in order to ensure their greater flexibility in times of crisis (e.g. care staff working in shifts, organization of day care activities in the open air, integration of online components in counselling centers' work...);
- > Accelerate and simplify the licensing process under normal circumstances, so as to enable the smooth operation of service providers in times of crisis;
- > Evaluate the additional educational support service and, in particular, its practicability in times of crisis;
- > Evaluate the social mediator service and consider integrating it in the system;
- > Organize training in communication via web-based platforms and online.

Local level

- > Establish continuous cooperation in the identification of the most vulnerable potential beneficiaries of the services, in particular among CSW, the Red Cross, activists from local wards and non-governmental organisations engaged in the protection of vulnerable groups and the poor;
- > Prepare for introducing information provision and psycho-social support for beneficiaries and service provision staff in times of crisis (single info centres for certain services);
- > Introduce regular surveys of beneficiaries' needs in order to ensure the quick adaptation of local services in times of crisis;
- > Introduce communication with beneficiaries and parents/guardians via Viber, Skype, mobile phones, Facebook, e-mail etc. in all services;
- > Prepare for efficient care for homeless people in times of crisis (e.g. homeless shelters switching to 24-hour operation; identification of spaces that can be repurposed as shelters and so on).

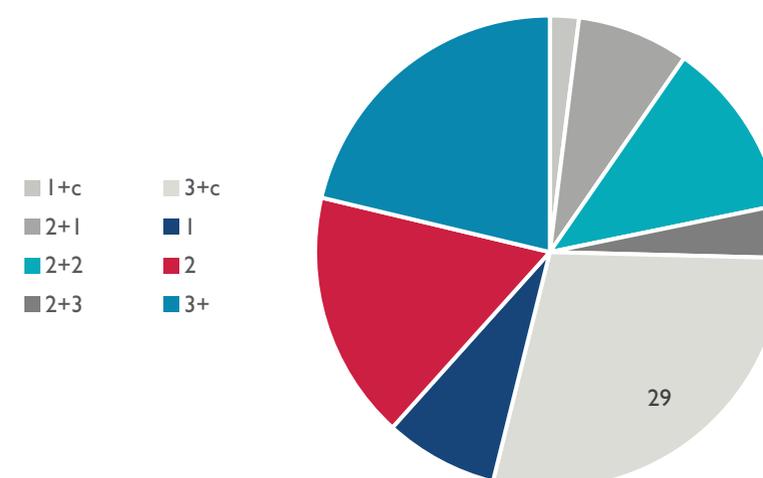
ANNEX

Chart 1. Ability of the household to make ends meet, 2013–2020



Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mdcs09]

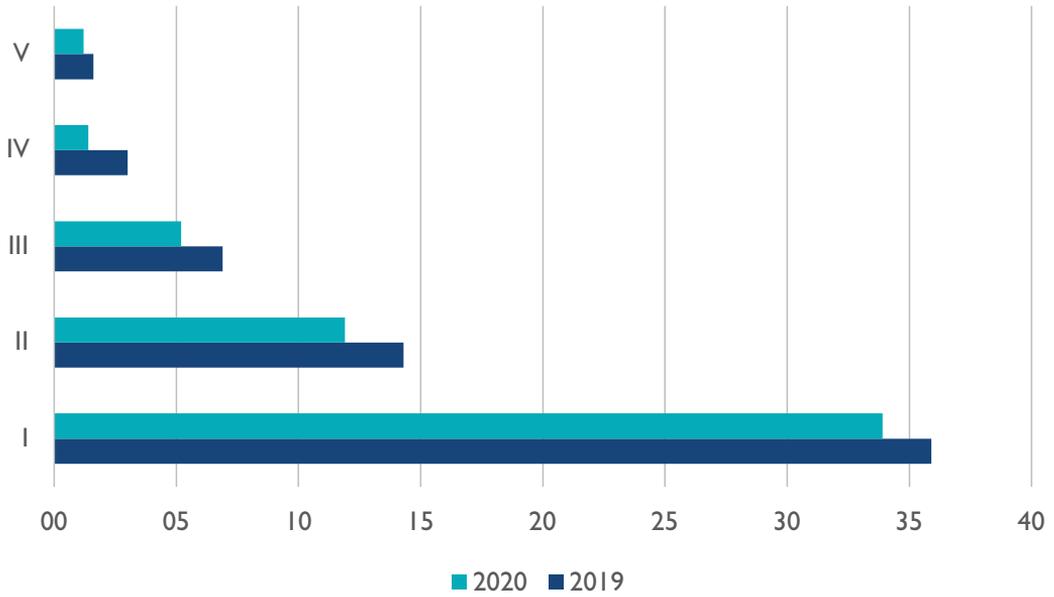
Chart 2. Distribution of population by household type, 2020



Source: Eurostat database [ilc_lvps02]

Note: The first digit in the legend indicates the number of adults, while the second denotes the number of children. The letter 'c' is used in cases where the number of children is unspecified.

Chart 3. Severe material deprivation rate by income quintile, individuals living in households with children, 2019 and 2020



Source: Eurostat database [ilc_mddd13]