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FAKULTET ZA SPECIJALNU  
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UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE  
FACULTY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION  
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SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION

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## CHANGES IN CHILD SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION DURING PANDEMICS IN CROATIA\*

Irma Kovčo Vukadin\*\*

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Croatia

**Introduction:** *All countries around the world have experienced many changes due to COVID-19 pandemic and many of them affected children, directly or indirectly. Schools were closed in many countries and children were transferred to virtual learning environments, confined to their homes with restricted opportunities for usual ways of socializing with friends. Those circumstances increased time children spend online, both for educational and social purposes. Many organizations, both governmental and non-governmental expressed concerns regarding possible impact of COVID-19 isolation measures on sex crimes against children, online as well as offline. Obtaining epidemiological data on child sexual abuse is connected with many methodological and ethical issues, especially in pandemic times. In times when the governmental anti-pandemic measures are still in force, we can rely only on official statistics, bearing in mind all limitations of this source of data.*

**Aim:** *The aim of this paper is to analyse child sexual abuse reported to the Croatian police in 2019 and 2020 in order to observe any changes that might be understood as a consequence of governmental isolation measures.*

**Method:** *Official police statistics for sex crime against children in 2019 and 2020 (on a monthly basis) were obtained from Department for juvenile delinquency and child protection.*

**Results:** *A decrease of 20% in total number of sex crimes against children is observed.*

**Conclusion:** *Changes in specific criminal offences on a monthly basis are elaborated in the paper, as well as possible measures for better protection of children from child sexual abuse in pandemic times.*

**Keywords:** *child sexual abuse, COVID-19 pandemic, police statistics*

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\*\* irma.kovco.vukadin@erf.unizg.hr

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will go down in history as a major health crisis. It brought many deaths and significant changes in everyday life. Many countries implemented lockdowns as governmental measures to suppress the spread of the virus, which in turn had many social consequences. Many international and national organizations warned governments and populations about certain groups in society that deserved special attention, especially victims of domestic violence (adults and children), for whom these measures could pose an even greater risk of victimization. It is obvious that all countries around the world have experienced many changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and many of them affected children, directly or indirectly. In many countries, schools were closed and children were moved to virtual learning environments, confined to their homes, and had limited opportunities to socialize with their friends. These circumstances increased the amount of time children spent online, both for educational and social purposes. Many organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, raised concerns about the possible impact of COVID-19 isolation measures on sex crimes against children, both online and offline (ECPAT, 2020; Europol, 2020a; UNICEF, 2020a). Data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child sexual victimization is sparse and mostly based on official data and reports from agencies providing help and support to victims. Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, Ms. Singateh, published one of the first reports with a preliminary analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the increased risk of sale and sexual exploitation of children\*.

In order to understand possible expectations of trend changes, it is important to understand the complexity of child sexual abuse. The term child sexual abuse can mean a different phenomenon to different professionals, which presents a challenge for policy development and overall response to the problem. WHO (1999) gives a broad definition of child sexual abuse as “involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos in society”. The term “child” refers to persons below 18.

In order to set some common understanding, Interagency Working Group\*\* adopted Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, or “Luxembourg Guidelines” (Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016). The term sexual violence against children is proposed as an umbrella term with two broad categories: child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. The main difference between the two is the element of exchange that exists within child sexual exploitation.

Researchers use some additional categories to describe child sexual abuse, for example, child sexual abuse with and without contact. For a full understanding of the complexity of this problem, it is also important to know that possible

\* <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/46/31>

\*\* 18 international partners gathered to harmonise terms and definitions related to child protection

perpetrators range from family members (intrafamilial or domestic child sexual abuse\*) to strangers: both individuals and criminal organizations (extra-familial child sexual abuse), and that children are usually victimized by someone they know.

### **Child sexual abuse in Croatia: legal definitions**

Croatian Penal code (in force since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2013) brought some changes in the area of protection of sexual integrity of children. A new chapter of the Penal code includes sexual offenses against children and follows the recommendations of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (so-called Lanzarote Convention). A new offense was added (Allurement of children for the purpose of satisfying own sexual demands – known as grooming), the age of sexual consent was raised from 14 to 15 years, and sexual acts between peers (age difference of 3 years) were decriminalized and the punishable acts were expanded\*\* (Turković et al., 2013).

There are several ways of protecting the sexual integrity of children as a particular age group through Croatian Penal Code. First, there are criminal offenses created to protect the sexual integrity of children under the age of 15\*\*\* (Sexual maltreatment of a child younger than 15 years of age, Satisfying lust in the presence of a child younger than 15 years of age, Allurement of children for the purpose of satisfying own sexual demands and Introducing pornography to children). One criminal offence is created to protect the sexual integrity of children aged 15 to 18 (Sexual maltreatment of a child older than 15 years of age) and several criminal offences are created to protect a child (persons younger than 18) (Pandering of a child, Abuse of children in pornography, Abuse of children for pornographic shows). These offenses are part of a special chapter of the Penal Code – Offenses against sexual maltreatment and sexual exploitation of child. In addition, there is special protection of the sexual integrity of children in “general” sexual offenses in such a way that the fact that the victim is a child constitutes a mitigating circumstance (e.g. rape and other offenses).

### **Current knowledge about child sexual abuse in Croatia**

Estimating the prevalence of child sexual abuse is a complex task, both in a methodological and ethical sense, as many researchers have noted (Kovčo Vukadin, 2019; UNICEF, 2020b). It is believed that only a minority of cases are officially

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\* Many scholars consider this as one of the most common forms of child sexual abuse (Tener et al., 2020)

\*\* For example, Penal code from 1997 within the criminal offence “Sexual intercourse with a child” criminalized “sexual intercourse or an equivalent sexual act” while new Penal Code additionally criminalize inducement of a child (<15) “to engage in sexual intercourse or an equivalent sexual act with a third party or to perform upon himself or herself a sexual act equated with sexual intercourse”.

\*\*\* For the overview of the criminal offences, translation from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics is used.

reported and that official statistics give us a very limited (and distorted) picture of the problem.

In general, two possible sources of information are often discussed: official data and research data. Official data on child sexual abuse (as a crime) in Croatia can be obtained through police statistics and Croatian Bureau of statistics. Croatian Ministry of the Interior publishes an annual overview of safety which includes crime statistics. There are two types of data – data on crimes reported by the police to Public Prosecutor’s office and data on victims. These data are non provided with additional explanations and some inconsistencies in the data are noticeable, which imposes additional caution when analysing these data.

The Croatian Bureau of Statistics publishes two crime publications annually – Adult Offenders of Crime: Reports, Accusations and Convictions and the same for juveniles. They bring together data from Public Prosecutor’s Office and courts and present data on offenders. Statistical data on child sexual abuse are partially visible in these crime statistics due to the statutory definitions of sexual offences against children (e.g. offences in the specific chapter – Criminal offences against sexual maltreatment and sexual exploitation of child are ‘visible’ while others in the ‘general’ sexual offences chapter are not).

Prevalence data on child sexual abuse in Croatia are sparse. In a systematic review of research on child sexual abuse in Croatia (for the period 1990 to 2016), Popović (2018) found that child sexual abuse in Croatia is lower than in other countries (8.5% to 13.7% in different studies with different methodologies). One of the general comments on international studies can also be applied to the Croatian context – existing research uses very different conceptualizations of the problem, different methodological approaches and different samples, which makes comparisons hardly possible.

## AIM

Obtaining epidemiological data on child sexual abuse involves many methodological and ethical issues, especially in times of pandemic. In times when governmental measures to combat the pandemic are still in place and constantly changing (due to the epidemiological situation), we can only rely on official statistics, taking into account all the limitations of this data source.

The aim of this paper is to analyse possible changes in reported sexual offences against children in 2019 and 2020, possibly reflecting pandemic conditions.

## METHOD

Monthly police statistics data for 2019 and 2020 were used to review changes in reported sexual offences against children. Units of observation in police statistics are crime reports. Data were collected for four ‘general’ sexual offences (non-consensual sex, rape, lewd acts and sexual harassment) and all offences in the chapter Offences against sexual maltreatment and sexual exploitation of children.

## RESULTS

To analyse possible changes in reported sex offences against children, monthly police data on sex offences for 2019 and 2020 were retrieved. Table 1 provides an overview of 2019 and 2020 offences in relation to different time periods: (1) full year, (2) March-December (lockdown began March 16), and (3) March-June (lockdown: closed schools, restricted movement, work, etc.). When comparing the number of crimes for the entire year, a 20% decrease is observed, and this decrease is higher when the time frame is narrowed – the largest decrease is observed when the “lockdown” period is compared to the same period in 2019.

**Table 1**

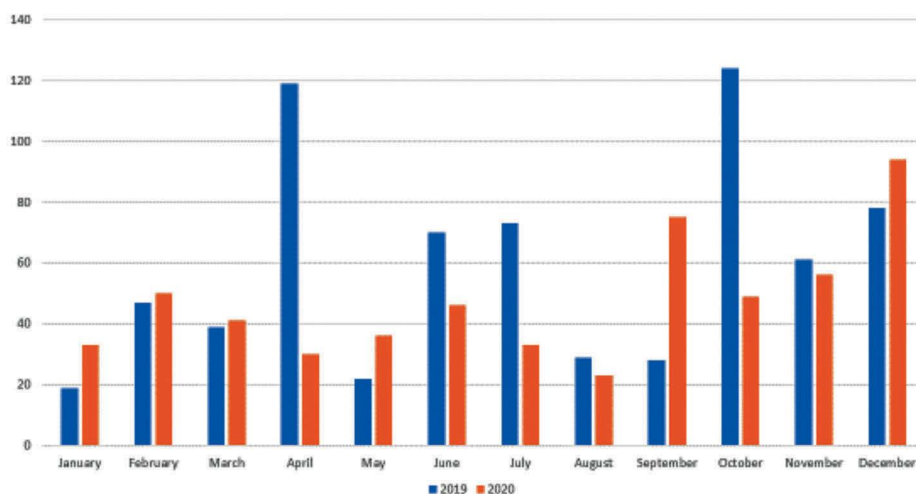
*Reported sex crimes against children by different timeframes in 2019 and 2020*

	January-December	March-December	March-June
2019	709	643	250
2020	566	483	153
Change (%)	-20.0	-24.9	-38.8

Data on the monthly distribution of sex crimes against children are shown in Figure 1. It can be seen that in some months the number of reported crimes was almost the same (e.g. February, March, August and November), in some months the number of reported crimes in 2020 was lower than in 2019 (April, June, July, August, October and November) and in some it was higher (January, May, September and December). The highest decrease in 2020 occurred in April and October, and the highest increase occurred in September.

**Figure 1**

*Reported sex crimes against children by month in 2019 and 2020*





Data on the types of sexual offences against children in three different time periods are presented in Table 2. Data on the proportion of individual offences to total child sexual victimisation show that the most common offence (regardless of time frame) is sexual maltreatment of a child younger than 15 years of age, followed by abuse of children in pornography and introducing pornography to children. Examination of the individual offences shows some decrease in rape and sexual maltreatment of a child younger than 15 years of age. Some increase is also seen in sexual harassment, allurement of children for the purpose of satisfying own sexual demands, abuse of children in pornography and introducing pornography to children.

**Table 2**

*Reported sex crimes against children by the type of crime in different timeframes*

	January-December		March-December		March-June	
	2019 f (%)	2020 f (%)	2019 f (%)	2020 f (%)	2019 f (%)	2020 f (%)
Rape*	45 (6.3)	20 (3.5)	45 (7.0)	18 (3.7)	12 (4.8)	6 (3.9)
Lewd acts	34 (4.8)	26 (4.6)	30 (4.7)	22 (4.5)	12 (4.8)	8 (5.2)
Sexual harassment	35 (4.9)	53 (9.4)	33 (5.1)	49 (10.1)	13 (5.2)	17 (11.1)
Sexual maltreatment of a child <15	389 (54.9)	248 (43.8)	355 (55.2)	200 (41.4)	161 (64.4)	65 (42.5)
Sexual maltreatment of a child >15	0	1 (0.2)	0	1 (0.2)	0	0
Allurement of children for the purpose of satisfying own sexual demands	13 (1.8)	15 (2.6)	11 (1.7)	15 (3.1)	2 (0.8)	4 (2.6)
Pandering of a child	5 (0.7)	4 (0.7)	4 (0.6)	3 (0.6)	1 (0.4)	0
Abuse of children in pornography	101 (14.2)	120 (21.2)	94 (14.6)	108 (22.4)	28 (11.2)	28 (18.3)
Abuse of children for pornographic shows	1 (0.1)	2 (0.3)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.4)	1 (0.4)	0
Introducing pornography to children	86 (12.1)	77 (13.6)	80 (10.9)	65 (13.4)	20 (8.0)	25 (16.3)
Total	709 (100.0)	566 (100.0)	643 (100.0)	483 (100.0)	250 (100.0)	153 (100.0)

\* On January 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 criminal offence Non-consensual sexual intercourse was deleted as a separate criminal offence and added to Rape so data for that offence were added in this table to rape data.

## DISCUSSION

Analysis of police data on sexual offenses against children in 2019 and 2020 shows an overall decrease in reported offenses (20%). Interpol (2020) found different trends (both increases and decreases) in police reports of child sexual abuse during the closure period COVID-19 compared to previous periods. The data show that school closures did not contribute to spikes in reported child sexual abuse cases, as noted by Interpol (2020) for previous public health emergencies. Nor does

the data presented support Interpol's (2020) expectation of a greater increase in reporting of child abuse and sexual assault when restrictions are relaxed. On the other hand, the increase in some sexual crimes against children should be noted – sexual harassment, grooming and child pornography, which implies the need for more prevention and education activities.

The Croatian Ministry of Interior published a special report on crime in COVID-19 times and stated in relation to materials on sexual exploitation that “there has been an increase in all indicators monitored by Europol: Internet service providers' reports, P2P activity, the number of attempts to access child sexual exploitation materials on the internet, the number of police reports, the number of new posts on child sexual exploitation materials online forums and the amount of activity on darknet forums” (MUP, 2021). Europol (2020b) also notes a significant increase in child sexual abuse and exploitation activity on the internet and darknet during the COVID-19 lockdown period, which could be partly explained by travel bans and the diversion of perpetrators from illegal offline to online activities.

This analysis showed some changes in child sexual victimization, but the true picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child sexual abuse will only become apparent in the coming years.

In the end, it is important to recognize the limitations of this analysis. The most important limitation of this analysis is the use of official data. As noted earlier, official data on child sexual abuse are limited only to cases reported to official agencies. Many children do not tell anyone about their victimization, and when they do, only a smaller proportion of such cases are reported to the appropriate agencies. According to the meta-analysis based on 217 studies worldwide, Stoltenberg et al. (2011) found in self-report studies that 1 in 8 children were sexually abused before their 18th birthday, and European data suggest that 1 in 5 children in Europe are victims of some form of sexual violence (Moody et al., 2018). Therefore, the results of this analysis based on official statistics should be taken with caution.

## CONCLUSION

Child sexual abuse is a significant problem, both on an individual and societal level. Many children around the world suffer the long-term consequences of childhood sexual victimization. Crises such as the pandemic COVID-19 put children at even greater risk in terms of additional forms of victimization and limited resources for help. The lack of reliable data on children experiencing this type of victimization and the lack of understanding of the nature of the problem hinder appropriate activities and interventions that could be implemented during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving professionals on the estimation level and consequently children in need behind.

At the national level, the following recommendations could be helpful in strengthening the child protection system in times of crisis:

- Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the gaps and challenges faced by various governmental and non-governmental organizations during the pandemic COVID-19 (and the earthquake in Croatia) to learn valuable lessons and develop a more flexible framework for maintaining a functioning child protection system in times of crisis;
- Create prevention and awareness-raising campaigns for children and parents;
- Train professionals from different sectors for better victim identification (education system, health care, social care, criminal justice);
- Create functioning networks of professionals working in the field of detection, law enforcement and victim protection;
- Create school programs (offline and online) on offline and online safety for parents and children;
- Promote existing hotlines and helplines for children
- Improve existing data collection in this area;
- Create evidence-based knowledge on the problem of child sexual abuse at the national level.

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