



PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

Croatia Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Children participating in Croatia Red Cross project for unaccompanied and separated children
Photo credit: Croatia Red Cross

ifrc.org



Photo description: Child participating in protection programming.
Photo credit: Croatia Red Cross

Background

The Croatian Red Cross has been providing support to Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) since 2003. In recent years, the number of UASC entering Croatia has increased rapidly. According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, in 2021, there were 195 UASC who applied for asylum, while in 2022, the number rose to 436. A sharp increase occurred in the past two years, with 1,516 UASC recorded in 2023, and 1,688 by the end of September 2024. The number is expected to rise further by the end of the year. The majority are boys, while the proportion of girls is less than 5%.

The actual figures are even higher, as many children are not asylum seekers but are still accommodated in social welfare institutions across Croatia, where the Croatian Red Cross mobile teams visit them to provide support.

Who was Supported and How

Support for UASC in Croatia is provided irrespective of their legal status. Based on the experience of the Croatian Red Cross, children often face significant challenges in coping with daily life and mental health issues as a result of multiple traumatic experiences and separation from family members. These difficulties are further compounded by barriers to inclusion in the education system, language obstacles, and feelings of being alienated in a culture that differs from their own.

The activities of the Croatia Red Cross aim to mitigate the negative effects of institutional care, foster the development of essential competencies, and enhance social and communication skills, thereby facilitating the integration of UASC into the local community.

Key activities designed to support UASC include:

- Identifying UASC – at times, other involved parties may fail to recognize them as more vulnerable than others.
- Multidisciplinary mobile teams (including MHPSS experts, Restoring Family Links specialists, and interpreters) visiting UASC accommodated in children's homes across Croatia.
- Tracing and Restoring family links between UASC and their family members.
- Social activities with UASC, such as language classes, school curriculum assistance, and other support tailored to their specific needs (with focus to volunteers).
- Providing support to special guardians through training on specific care practices for UASC and through helping to answer questions or uncertainties regarding the care and well-being of the children, or any other related issues.
- Facilitating UASC inclusion in local community activities, including sports clubs, educational and creative workshops, and excursions with peers.

Successes

An initial needs assessment is conducted with nearly every UASC involved in the programme, and many of the identified needs are met, particularly the need for psychosocial support, Restoring Family Links, and participation in social activities that provide opportunities for meaningful and purposeful leisure time. The activities in which the children participate are planned in collaboration with the children themselves, ensuring that they are tailored to their preferences and needs, leading to positive outcomes.

Additionally, the volunteers involved in the program are young individuals specially trained to work with UASC. Through training and engagement in social activities, they gain new knowledge and skills, as well as developing a particular sensitivity towards continuing their volunteer work with UASC. Examples show how many of them, with the support of the Croatian Red Cross, establish contacts with specific social welfare institutions accommodating UASC and plan to visit regularly to facilitate the children's integration into the local community.

Another positive outcome of the programme is the strengthening of connections between various public institutions and social welfare organizations, as well as with the Croatian Red Cross and other NGOs, enabling more comprehensive and higher-quality care for unaccompanied children through joint efforts.

Challenges and Difficulties

The Croatia Red Cross has also faced a number of challenges.

- The absence of interpreters for languages such as Kirundi or Mongolian creates significant communication barriers, thereby impeding the provision of effective support to UASC.

- Bureaucratic delays, particularly in the enrollment process for UASC into the educational system, can severely disrupt their access to timely and appropriate education.
- Lack of formal or structured pathways for accessing services and support for UASC. The process for UASC to access the assistance they need may depend heavily on the goodwill or discretionary decisions of individuals working within various institutions, such as government agencies or NGOs.
- When a legal guardian is a representative from the social work office, their physical absence from the UASC's place of residence, coupled with the challenge of managing multiple cases, often leads to a lack of familiarity with the child's specific needs. This, in turn, can undermine their ability to advocate effectively for the child's rights and well-being. For this reason, CRC organizes trainings for legal guardians to improve their understanding of children's rights and the available opportunities for working with UASC.
- Many UASC perceive Croatia primarily as a transit country, with stays in accommodation often lasting less than 24 hours, which restricts their access to critical services and support.

Lessons Learned

The importance of conducting an initial needs assessment for every UASC involved in the program is essential. This ensures that each child's specific needs are addressed in a timely and appropriate manner. It highlights key areas such as psychosocial support, Restoring Family Links, and participation in social activities tailored to children's preferences, which ultimately leads to positive outcomes for them.

The importance of providing UASC with appropriate accommodation, particularly with other children their age, and with access to professional staff who can support their emotional, psychological, and developmental needs has also been a key learning.

The role of volunteers in the program is also crucial. Engaging young individuals who are specially trained to work with UASC not only provides essential support to them but also contributes to the volunteers' personal development. Through training and active participation in social activities, volunteers gain new knowledge and skills, while also developing a heightened sensitivity to the needs of these vulnerable children.

Another important lesson is the value of strengthening collaboration between various public institutions, social welfare organizations, the Croatian Red Cross, and other NGOs. This interconnectedness ensures a more comprehensive and higher-quality approach to caring for UASC. By working together, these organizations can share resources, build knowledge, and coordinate their efforts to provide better care for the minors.

Several challenges need to be addressed in the programme. Communication barriers due to a lack of interpreters hinder effective support. Bureaucratic delays, especially in the education enrollment process, disrupt access to timely education. Additionally, some legal guardians may struggle to meet the specific needs of children due to insufficient training or knowledge, and many children see Croatia as a transit country, limiting their time to access essential services. These issues highlight the need for improved resources, streamlined processes, and better coordination to ensure that children's needs are met effectively.