



Report on the Work of the Ombudsman for Children for 2024 SUMMARY

Zagreb, March 2025

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ACRONYMS



AI	Artificial Intelligence
BP	Behavioural problems
CARNET	Croatian Academic and Research Network
CBSC	Community-based service centre
COPE	Children of Prisoners Europe
CPP	EU Children's Participation Platform
DD	Developmental disabilities
DIP	State Election Commission
DPSP	Directorate for Prison System and Probation
EMC	Electronic Media Council
ENOC	European Network of Ombudspersons for Children
EU	European Union
HZSR	Croatian Institute for Social Work
HZZO	Croatian Health Insurance Fund
JCA	Juvenile Courts Act
LO CISW	Local office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work
LRSJU	Local and regional self-government units
MJPADT	Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation
MLPSFSP	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy
MoH	Ministry of Health
Moi	Ministry of the Interior
MSEY	Ministry of Science, Education and Youth
NYA	Network of Young Advisors
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OIB	Personal Identification Number
PSSEA	Primary and Secondary School Education Act
RoC	Republic of Croatia
SWA	Social Welfare Act
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
16+YF	16+ Youth Forum



The author of the cover illustration for this Report is Karmen Rohaček, a 4th grade student at Podmurvice Elementary School, Rijeka. She drew a picture as part of the Forum for Freedom in Education 'Colour the World 2023' competition, which encourages children's creativity and artistic expression in the field of creating an inclusive school environment and the respect and appreciation of diversity among groups and individuals.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite all the challenges and tragic events that further highlighted the need for improved support system for the youngest members of society, we must reflect on 2024 so that all of us—especially those who work with children and support them—can learn the key lessons to build a more effective system for realising and protecting children’s rights. The twenty-second Report on the Work of the Ombudsman for Children offers a comprehensive overview of our activities in 2024 and presents the current state of children’s rights, highlighting the progress achieved and identifying the challenges that require further action. In accordance with the provisions of the *Ombudsman for Children Act*, we submit this Report to the Croatian Parliament to present our activities and initiatives and to highlight key problems, along with the recommended solutions.

As in previous years, our work is based on dialogue with children and young people, regular meetings, and active cooperation with our advisory bodies – the sixth generation of the Network of Young Advisors and the second generation of the 16+ Youth Forum. Their perspective offers valuable insights and helps us better understand the real needs and challenges facing children and young people today.

Children have identified priority areas where they expect more from the institutions responsible for their wellbeing: protection from all forms of violence, timely access to health care services without long waiting times, preservation of mental health, reducing stress caused by academic overload, education that fosters developing life skills, the provision of quality school meals, improved work of Student Councils, and more opportunities for child participation.

Unfortunately, 2024 was marked by traumatic events that exposed critical gaps in our child protection system. A number of cases of violence in families, kindergartens, and schools, as well as instances of child trafficking and peer and other forms of violence in the virtual world, including the most serious one—the loss of children’s lives—underscore the urgent need for additional support, especially in the field of improving living conditions and ensuring children’s safety, mental health services, prevention programmes, as well as supporting children and young people with behavioural problems. The final days of this year cast a dark shadow over Croatia, marked by the tragic loss of a child’s life and harm suffered at school—a place that should be safe, which has deeply shaken us all, urgently calling for further investments in the child protection system.

In 2024, the Office received 2,424 new complaints concerning violations of children’s rights, which is 11% more than in the previous year, as we continued to work on 2,058 cases carried over from previous periods. We recorded an increase in the number of complaints concerning health care rights, the protection of children from violence and neglect, and education rights, while there was a slight reduction in the number of complaints received in the areas of rights in judicial proceedings and parental care compared to the previous year. The increase in complaints also indicates that parents, professionals, and children are becoming more aware of the mechanisms available to protect children’s rights. At the same time, it underscores the commitment to strengthening these mechanisms and systematically improving their effectiveness.

In addition to presenting quantitative indicators of our work, the Report also addresses issues concerning the quality and effectiveness of protection of children’s rights—such as escalating problems in communication and relationships between parents and educational institutions, delays in decision-making, which affects children across various systems, inadequate monitoring of strategic plans, and the lack of evaluations of policies for children. These are just some of the many challenges we have faced in realising children’s rights in Croatia. Further information can be found in the Report.

Our focus was also placed on participating in the adoption or amendment of a total of 29 legislative initiatives. Through various activities, we submitted 80 specific proposals aimed at protecting and improving the position of children, with particular emphasis on three strategic documents and two protocols important for protecting children from violence. We visited a total of 77 institutions and other organised settings where children reside, and we met with 906 children.

We issued 65 recommendations, warnings, or communications to the authorities, of which just over half (58%) were accepted, while we have not received any feedback on nine recommendations. Despite our concerns about declining acceptance rate of our recommendations compared to 2023, we remain tireless advocates for children's rights and their best interests.

Given the length of this Report, we used abbreviations. They are explained at the beginning of the document. The terms and expressions used in this text apply equally to both female and male gender.

In addition to outlining the activities of the Ombudsperson for Children, this Report calls on all stakeholders—institutions, professionals, parents, and the wider community—to work together to build a safer, encouraging, and fairer environment for every child. Only joint and collaborative efforts can help us make sure that every child in Croatia grows in an environment that truly recognises, understands, and protects their rights.

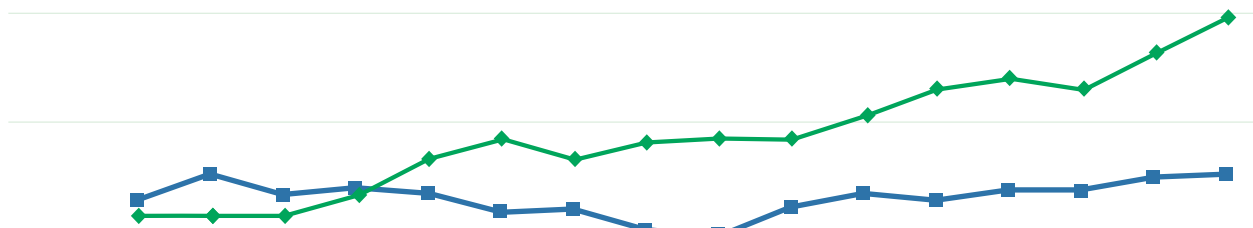
I would like to thank everyone, especially my team in the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, for their dedication to achieving this important goal.

I hope this Report will contribute to the development of an even better support system for every child, as well as to the goal of ensuring that every child in Croatia can enjoy their rights and conditions for holistic development.

Ombudsperson for Children

Helenca Pirnat Dragičević, LLB

Total number of complaints of individual violations of children’s rights (CR) and other pending cases (OPC) in the period from 2009 to 2024



	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
◆ CR	1050	1059	1054	1228	1436	1595	1456	1558	1573	1588	1741	1923	2004	1932	2183	2424
■ OPC	1167	1350	1205	1253	1223	1090	1092	956	929	1125	1215	1158	1226	1230	1316	1344

Complaints concerning individual violations of children’s rights in the period from 2009 to 2024

COMPLAINTS OF INDIVIDUAL VIOLATIONS OF RIGHTS	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Personal rights	625	687	636	753	701	742	702	711	726	690	737	772	825	826	943	1055
Rights of children as members of society	13	11	6	11	11	12	12	29	29	38	32	28	40	31	62	90
Education rights	187	153	159	161	262	273	239	296	310	318	391	492	478	421	524	593
Health care rights	35	21	25	28	107	257	184	161	155	173	137	162	172	141	97	170
Social rights	48	29	43	42	55	60	42	39	41	45	46	62	48	52	53	50
Economic rights	55	72	79	93	90	77	77	87	89	68	74	72	77	82	80	64
Cultural rights	11	10	8	19	26	22	37	23	32	39	34	36	30	50	38	43
Rights in judicial proceedings	33	38	55	61	81	62	67	96	97	72	81	115	141	139	197	150
Children’s safety and protection	12	12	15	13	25	26	36	51	31	81	130	116	121	121	137	143
Discrimination	3	3	6	16	25	24	20	18	20	38	42	35	49	31	28	37
Lack of jurisdiction	22	19	16	26	42	38	39	41	42	21	29	32	20	37	23	28
Other	6	4	6	5	11	2	1	6	1	5	8	1	3	1	1	1
TOTAL	1050	1059	1054	1228	1436	1595	1456	1558	1573	1588	1741	1923	2004	1932	2183	2424

2 MONITORING INDIVIDUAL VIOLATIONS OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

In 2024, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children received 2,424 complaints, enquiries and requests related to the individual violations of children's rights. In addition to these complaints, the Office also worked on 2,058 active cases carried over from previous years, considering their complexity and specificity, as well as the need for long-term monitoring of institutional work and its effectiveness in addressing those demanding tasks. Most cases related to personal rights.

Complaints of individual violations of children's rights in 2024

INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS	Number of cases carried over from previous years	Number of cases received in 2024	Number of children	Child group
Personal rights - total	915	1055	1565	84
Rights of children as members of society	20	90	119	28
Education rights	607	593	508	129
Health care rights	81	170	191	19
Social rights	37	50	68	5
Economic rights	93	64	97	10
Cultural rights	50	43	34	24
Rights in judicial proceedings	117	150	179	9
Children's safety and protection	101	143	136	54
Discrimination	23	37	34	6
Lack of jurisdiction	14	28	25	3
Other rights	/	1	1	/
TOTAL	2058	2424	2957	371

The complaints pertain to 1,410 boys, 1,100 girls and 76 children whose sex was not specified. The complaints also addressed 371 child groups, predominantly concerning education (classes or all students within educational institutions). Furthermore, groups of children in kindergartens, sports clubs, social welfare institutions and educational institutions, as well as children living in specific settlements or neighbourhoods, social media users and other groups of children were included, depending on the issues and potential threats to their rights. Child groups vary in terms of their age structure, size, and potential threats and violations of their rights.

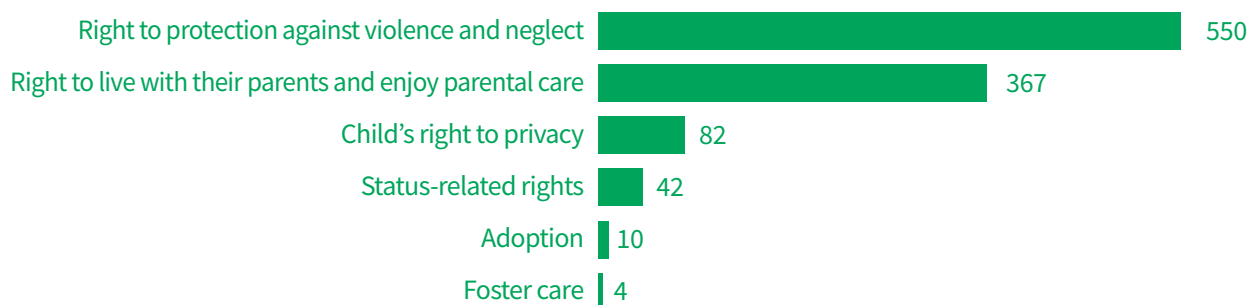
Most complaints (1,328) were filed by parents (875 by mothers, 305 by fathers and 148 by both parents). These are followed by complaints filed by institutions, mostly educational institutions, schools and kindergartens, seeking advice and recommendations for action, or reporting violations of children's rights, as they notice neglect or suspected violence within the family. Schools also report the cases of sexual violence against children, being obliged to do so pursuant to the *Protocol on the Procedure in Case of Sexual Violence*.

Throughout the year, only a small number of children reached out to our Office (32 complaints filed in person). Children reached out to us when they were victims of the crime of sexual violence, abuse by a parent or their partner, or violence experienced at school. The children wanted to know who to contact to file complaints about teachers and expressed discomfort with the security cameras in schools. They expressed concerns about court decisions regarding their referral to institutions, as well as the length of time needed to enforce those decisions. Some children expressed a desire to return to their parents from community-based service centres, while others turned to the Office for help after being denied a residence visa.

Grandparents, other relatives, neighbours, anonymous individuals, and other individuals also contacted the Office. In 115 cases, the Office also acted on its own initiative, usually based on media reports.

2.1 Personal rights

Complaints of violations of children's personal rights in 2024 by area of violation



The largest number of complaints regarding violations of children's personal rights (1,055) concerned their right to protection from violence and neglect (550) and their right to live with their parents and enjoy parental care (367). They are followed by complaints regarding violations of the right to privacy (82) and those of children's status-related rights (42). Other violations of children's personal rights were less frequent; they mostly centered on issues relating to adoption (10), and foster care (4).

Right to life - According to the latest data from the Croatian Institute of Public Health (HZJZ), in the last ten years, 602 children under the age of 19 in Croatia died due to injuries, which averages to 60 children per year. The leading external causes of death were traffic accidents, fatalities, suicides, and drowning. Choking accounted for 3% of deaths. According to the 2022 report from the Poison Control Centre, 2,889 cases of child poisoning were recorded. Between 2011 and 2021, the leading causes of child hospitalisations due to injuries were traffic accidents and falls. In 2022, 2,515 children were hospitalised due to traffic accidents and 1,831 due to falls.

Unfortunately, in 2024, there were **many child casualties in traffic accidents**. According to the Ministry of the Interior, 13 children were killed in traffic accidents in 2024 (compared to 21 in 2023). Of these, four children were killed as drivers, six as passengers, and three as pedestrians.

As shown by data presented by Brave Phone for Children, the most common reason for reaching out in 2024 concerned psychosocial difficulties and mental health (35%). The highest number of calls related to self-harm (41%), suicidality (34%), anxiety and fear (13%), and depressiveness (12%), as well as panic attacks (12%).

Child helplines are essential, as they can provide immediate psychological assistance in crisis situations. However, children's mental health care must be long-term, systematic, and continuous.

For children to fully exercise their rights, including personal rights guaranteed by the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child began drafting *General Comment No. 27 on Children's Rights to Access to Justice and Effective Remedies* that will provide guidance to States Parties on empowering children as rights holders, as well as on taking appropriate legislative, administrative and other actions to ensure children can access justice and effective legal remedies. In 2025, the Office will continue to actively participate in this process, while the adoption of General Comment is expected in the first half of 2026.

2.1.1 Status related rights

In 2024, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children received 42 complaints about children's status-related rights.

Children of Croatian citizens born abroad face challenges when registering their births in the Republic of Croatia, typically due to invalid or missing birth certificates. Due to the length and complexity of procedures for obtaining birth certificates for those born in other countries—required for regulating their status in the Republic of Croatia—some children do not have a personal identification number (OIB) and face difficulties in exercising certain rights. We monitored the case of a child born abroad, who, despite the existing birth registration issued in their country of birth, was denied registration in the Croatian Register of Births and the Book of Citizens. The Croatian authorities refused registration because the child was conceived through medically assisted reproduction using a donated egg. The child was born via a surrogate mother, and the only parent listed on the child's registration was the child's father. After three years of court proceedings, during which the child was unable to acquire their status-related or any other rights, the High Administrative Court of the Republic of Croatia upheld the Administrative Court's decision to register the child in the Register of Births, with father's details and Croatian nationality. We also monitored the case of a child born abroad who was registered with different personal names and father's details in the registrations in the Republic of Croatia and their country of birth. Even if the registration contained incorrect information that should have been harmonised with foreign public documents or corrected in the registry, the competent administrative authority instructed the individual to go to court to challenge paternity.

Status-related rights of the children of foreign nationals - Parents of children-foreign nationals often face difficulties in regulating the status-related rights of their children—usually the right to temporary residence, along with related rights such as access to health care and other rights arising from the legal stay in Croatia. The current regulation, which does not allow children to automatically acquire the temporary residence status of their parents, remains problematic. Regarding the issuance of temporary residence permits to foreign nationals for family reunification, we welcome the amendments to the Aliens Act, introducing an exception allowing family reunification for a minor child before the one-year deadline. To ensure equal access to health care for children who were granted temporary stay in the Republic of Croatia, we proposed an amendment to the regulations aimed at providing all children with the same health care opportunities, regardless of their parents' financial status.

Parents whose **children are Croatian nationals** most often complain about the realisation of children's status-related rights in cases of parental conflict. **The child's right to permanent residence** is often violated when a family union dissolves, and conflicted parents fail to reach an agreement on the child's place of permanent residence. Obstructing the registration of the child's permanent residence impacts the child's exercise of other rights, such as kindergarten or school enrolment. Although current legislation allows registering the child's residence at the address of the parent with whom they live, after obtaining consent of the Croatian Institute for Social Work (HZSR), in practice, some of the HZSR local offices are reluctant to grant such consent and instead instruct parents to take the matter to court, which can be a lengthy process. In some cases, we observed positive practices in which the HZSR supported the parent's request to change the child's permanent residence—taking into account the family situation, the other parent's lack of cooperation, and suitability of the new accommodation.

2.1.2 Right to privacy

In 2024, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children addressed 82 individual cases concerning children's right to privacy, along with 11 complaints involving violations of other rights (personal, educational, judicial, and participation rights) that also indicated breaches of children's right to privacy. The Office also addressed ten cases related to general initiatives for protecting children's privacy, as well as enquiries, notifications, and requests for advice on that issue. Most complaints (34) concerned children's privacy

in the media, including social networks, institutions, and other places, as well as within families. They mostly concerned media coverage of cases involving children, including the publication of identifying information, photos/recordings of children without parental consent, images of local politicians with children during election campaigns, and media stories featuring children in vulnerable situations.

Ahead of the 2024 elections for the Croatian Parliament and the European Parliament, we issued **a statement** to the State Election Commission (DIP) on **the need to protect children's rights during election campaigns**¹. The DIP published the statement on its website.

The complaints received by the Office continue to highlight the need to raise awareness about children's vulnerability and the principle of minimising their exposure to the public in order to protect their privacy—through public campaigns, as well as systematic and continuous education of professionals across sectors, parents, and children themselves.

2.1.3 Right to live with parents and enjoy parental care

In 2024, we received 367 written complaints related to family relations, which, in the narrower sense, concern the child's right to live with their parents and enjoy parental care. These complaints and enquiries relate to the exercise of parental care, parental disputes, the imposition of measures to protect children's rights and wellbeing, and difficulties in securing a child's right to maintenance.

Exercising parental care – While some complaints concern requests for information about procedures and jurisdiction in cases of divorce or the dissolution of a family union, most complaints highlight concerns about the actions of one parent towards the child or the parent submitting the complaint. In addition to disputes concerning the exercise of parental care, complaints frequently involve violent or neglectful behaviour, along with complaints related to specific parts of the system—primarily the Croatian Institute for Social Work, but also the courts, police, expert witnesses, special guardians, and supervisors of child visitation. In the reporting period, we monitored a number of cases of high-conflict divorces, in which children were often exposed to manipulative behaviour by one or both parents.

Our impression is that the system still lacks adequate mechanisms for the timely identification of manipulation, or its prompt prevention. There were also cases when children can only feel resentment towards a parent due to negative experiences, a sense of injustice, dissatisfaction, or disappointment with that parent's actions. All such cases require a careful and comprehensive expert assessment of the child's best interests, and support and professional assistance for both the child and the entire family.

Despite ongoing and implemented reforms, the family law protection system — composed of institutions across various sectors — still shows numerous weaknesses. Given its key role in protecting children's personal rights and wellbeing, we expect the Croatian Institute for Social Work to be strengthened and adequately staffed. We also expect improved collaboration between institutions and more effective cooperation on individual cases. The length of proceedings adversely impacts the position and rights of children raised in families where conflicts persist. Parents and children should be given easier access to family justice, which must be both swift and effective (with the regular implementation of interim measures where necessary). In all respects, it is essential to build capacities and reinforce the authority of the system, while ensuring the availability of counselling centres and other specialists (including those for mental health) who can offer support and assistance to children and families.

Restriction of parental responsibility - During 2024, the Office addressed 68 cases concerning the restriction or deprivation of parental responsibility rights.

¹ <https://dijete.hr/hr/djeca-nisu-ukras-poruka-pravobraniteljice-za-djecu-povodom-parlamentarnih-izbora-i-izbora-hrvatskih-predstavnika-u-europskom-parlamentu/>

Most complaints we received came from parents. They usually expressed dissatisfaction with the separation of children from the family, stating that their children had been “taken away” from them without justifiable cause. However, reports from the local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work confirm that in all these cases, the children were exposed to inadequate living conditions, neglect of basic needs, and a lack of cooperation from the parents with the institutions responsible for their care, even despite the family law protection measures that had been imposed. Therefore, the assessments on the need for children to be taken into care were justified.

Due to a heavy workload and staffing shortages in the local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work, the parents, when their children are taken into care, rarely engage in counselling or activities designed to address harmful behaviours, resolve family issues, and eliminate factors that pose a significant risk to the child’s safety, and psychological and physical development. This contributes to the prolonged stay of children in institutions and foster care.

We remain concerned about situations in which, when local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work identify a risk to a child’s wellbeing within the family, they fail to suggest taking into care due to a lack of available accommodation capacities, and rely on family law protection measures, which are often insufficient to ensure adequate child protection.

We also monitored cases in which children were provided with accommodation services in crisis situations, due to threats to their life, health, and wellbeing, in accordance with the provisions of the Social Welfare Act. We continue to observe significant challenges within the system in providing adequate care for children with behavioural problems, primarily due to the shortage of accommodation facilities for this child group. The delayed assessment of these children’s specific needs is concerning, particularly when they are urgently separated and placed in institutions for children without adequate parental care (usually through crisis accommodation service), as they are left waiting for months to undergo inpatient diagnostic assessment.

Regarding the **deprivation of parental responsibility**, complaints reflect parents’ dissatisfaction with a court decision. Through our contact with staff at institutions responsible for children taken into care, we are frequently informed about the protracted nature of the proceedings, which directly impacts the establishment of conditions necessary for children to qualify for permanent care.

2.1.3.1 Children without appropriate parental care

The provision of care for this group of children in Croatia is inadequate. An excessive number of children still live in residential care, the quality of foster care remains inconsistent, and many children are still exposed to harmful family environments due to a shortage of adequate accommodation.

According to data from the *Research on children and young people accommodated, placed and residing in homes for children without appropriate parental care and community-based service centres*, on 31 December 2024 there were 941 children in institutions, 576 of whom were accommodated and 365 residing. Given the need for placement of children in alternative care, the increase in the number of children placed in residential care would have been even higher compared to previous years had institutions not already reached their capacity. There is still a lack of available places for children in residential care and foster families, and despite the efforts of social care professionals to promote foster care, interest in fostering has not increased. As a result, many children remain in unsafe conditions in their biological families, or in overcrowded institutions and foster families.

The developments in relation to the placement of children under the age of seven, with 285 currently living in institutions, is concerning. Their placement in institutions is detrimental to their development, even more so due to the limited physical space in which they live. According to the professionals in

the social care system, there is no available foster care for young children, and it is essential to open additional accommodation facilities. At the same time, data from the Croatian Institute for Social Work are conflicting, as they mention 250 available places in foster care as of 31 December 2024. However, professionals say they are unable to place them, or that children are placed in foster families where they exceed the numerical limitation, which contradicts the provisions of the *Foster Care Act*.

Given the frequent complaints from professionals involved in children's care, we believe that there is a need for additional staffing in the social welfare system, alongside the further development of high-quality services and interventions for families that put the development and rights of children at risk. Furthermore, to prevent the separation of children from their families, it is essential to provide more professionals trained to provide professional help and support to families whose children have been temporarily entrusted to a third person, a social welfare institution, or a foster family.

Insufficient accommodation capacities reveal only a part of the challenges faced within the social welfare system by child service users, foster carers, and professionals working on family law protection cases in the local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work and residential care institutions. In addition to concerns regarding the suitability of accommodation in meeting the individual needs of each child, the quality of services available to children in alternative care remains problematic. This is linked to an insufficient number of professionals in residential care and local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work, inconsistent availability of social services for all children, and the inconsistent practices among staff in the institutions. Placements are often determined by availability rather than by a professional, comprehensive assessment of children's individual needs, which would enable service providers to respond appropriately. Matching in foster care is not being implemented, despite the recognised importance of placing children in accordance with their individual needs and developing a child's individual change management plan, with the aim of ensuring positive outcomes and preventing the breakdown of foster placements.

In the area of children's rights protection concerning **adoption**, the Office addressed ten cases, some of which involved foster carers who, while not expressing an interest in adopting the child, actively obstructed the process of preparing the child for adoption and the establishment of personal relationships with the most suitable prospective adoptive parent. Despite complaints concerning the length of the process for registration in the register of prospective adoptive parents, we consider that, in order to safeguard the best interests of children, rather than prioritising the interests of adoptive parents, the preparation of prospective adoptive parents by professionals should be extended. This would serve to equip them with additional skills and knowledge necessary for the responsible and demanding role of adoptive parenting, as well as to enhance their understanding of the needs of adopted children. This would also help prevent situations in which adoptive parents, whose expectations have not been fulfilled after the child joins the family, request that the child is 'returned' to institutional care.

2.1.3.2 Child support

In 2024, our Office received a total of 27 written complaints, along with 19 telephone calls, regarding child support. In their complaints, complainants most often file grievances against the non-paying parent, expressing outrage in situations where that parent deliberately avoids their responsibility to care for their child and fails to meet the child's needs in any other way. However, complaints often reveal dissatisfaction with the functioning of one or more competent institutions, or specific segments of the system responsible for the protection of children's rights.

In their complaints related to **civil proceedings**, complainants frequently highlight the length of proceedings, the failure to impose interim measures, and various other objections to the judges' work. We continue to observe the challenging position of children who, due to the **incapacity of their parent to work**, are unable to obtain an enforceable maintenance order, and they are left permanently deprived

of the financial contribution from the other parent.

The most frequent category of complaints this year regarding maintenance concerned **enforcement proceedings**. In these cases, individuals approach the Financial Agency (FINA) to enforce payments, however, enforcement often fails, primarily due to insufficient funds in the account. Given that imprisonment does not effectively address the child's basic needs, nor does it contribute to the enforcement of their right to maintenance, and may further complicate the situation, we continue to advocate for the development of more efficient mechanisms within the criminal justice system to protect the child's right to maintenance. This includes exploring alternative legal options, such as imposing a special order to fulfil the maintenance obligation with the professional assistance of the probation authority, imposed with a suspended sentence.

In 2024, the Office participated in the e-Consultation regarding the *Proposal for the Interim Maintenance Act*, where we welcomed the positive changes concerning the amount and payment term orders, while also providing several remarks and proposals. *The Act*, which transferred the authority for recognising this right to the Agency for Securing Employees' Claims, was adopted at the end of 2024 and came into force at the beginning of 2025.

2.1.4 Right to protection from violence and neglect

In 2024, the Office received 550 complaints of child **violence and neglect**, which is 40% more than in 2023. Out of this number, 434 were reports of violence, and 96 were reports of neglect. The Office also received 61 complaints about **child sexual exploitation and abuse**. Most complaints (289) concern violence in educational institutions, which is nearly 60% more than in 2023. This is followed by domestic violence (96), which saw an increase of approximately 50%, and other forms of violence (58). A total of 96 complaints concern neglect, with 91 involving neglect within the family and five in institutions. We received 184 phone calls reporting violence against children and 39 calls regarding child neglect. Violence against children remains common in our society, highlighting the need to strengthen and expand community-based preventive initiatives, particularly at the level of universal prevention and mental health protection. It is equally important to take more decisive action in cases where adults commit violence against children, but also against adults, and to impose stricter sanctions for all forms of violence. This is how society would send a clear message that all forms of violence within the community are deemed unacceptable and that they will be met with punishment.

Domestic violence and child neglect - In 2024, the Office received 96 complaints about the violations of the children's right to protection from domestic violence, involving 160 children. Most complaints were submitted by mothers. The reported number does not fully reflect the extent of this issue, as many citizens report cases of domestic violence to other relevant institutions rather than to us. The majority of complaints concerned multiple and psychological domestic violence against children. Complaints about multiple forms of violence are usually made by parents who consistently question the quality of the other parent's parental care, lack effective communication, and are unable to reach an agreement on matters of parental care. The Office also addressed complaints regarding **corporal punishment of children** within the family. Despite being considered violent, degrading, and punishable, corporal punishment of children continues to be practised by some parents and close relatives. The Office received 91 complaints concerning **child neglect**, the majority of which pertain to overall neglect (health, education, and the upbringing of children). The most common complaints come from parents accusing each other of neglecting the child's overall care, which is caused by unresolved issues in their relationship; a significant number of these complaints are, however, unfounded.

Violence in educational institutions - Out of 289 reports of violence in educational institutions, 24 concerned the instances of violence in kindergartens (nine reports of staff violence, one report of violence by another adult, and 14 reports of violence among children). There were 265 complaints about violence in primary and secondary schools, which is an increase of nearly 60% compared to the previous

year. There were **210 complaints** concerning **peer violence**, which is **an increase of approximately 44% compared to the previous year**, along with **52 complaints** relating to **violence perpetrated by adults within the school environment** (of these, 49 concerned violence by teachers and other school staff, and three involved parents or other individuals), which represents an **increase of around 147% compared to the previous year**. Although complaints submitted to the Office do not necessarily reflect the actual situation—since they come from both institutions and citizens, and some may be unfounded—the rise in reports of peer violence is nonetheless a cause for concern. The rise in complaints of adult violence against children in schools is also troubling, as it points to a trend that warrants further investigation and highlights the need to strengthen child protection in this area. Reports of peer violence involve physical, verbal, and sexual harassment, and violence often occurs in the virtual sphere. The education system still lacks a systematic and structured professional response to peer violence and other behavioural problems among children in schools. Preventive activities are not implemented consistently across all settings, making it essential to invest more in their strengthening and improvement.

We also received several complaints regarding **neglect and violence in other institutions, as well as other forms of violence** by both peers and adults against children in social welfare homes (known as ‘community-based service centres’), sports clubs, public transport, public spaces and facilities, and violence involving police officers, priests, and neighbours.

2.2 Rights of children as members of society

The Office received 90 complaints, 35 of which concerned violations of children’s rights, while 55 related to children’s applications in response to our public *Call for the selection of the new generation of the Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudsman for Children and the 16+ Youth Forum*.

We were usually approached by adults seeking to **protect children from potentially harmful information**. Only three complaints concerned the **right of children, capable of forming an opinion, to participate in family law matters, school, and other settings**. This highlights the core of the concept of the child as a right holder and an active member of society. One of these three complaints was submitted by children directly.

Child participation/child’s right to participate must be **meaningful, empowering, voluntary, and safe**, and should be upheld in all environments and situations in which the child grows, develops, and learns. At the same time, children must be protected from manipulation, coercion, and being used as props. Children must also be protected from inappropriate and potentially harmful messages and reactions from adults in response to their expressed views. It is essential to provide systematic education for professionals working with children on how to support the exercise of this right and raising children’s awareness of their right to participate.

2.3 Education rights²

In 2024, the Office received 593 complaints concerning violations of children’s rights in the field of education—69 more than in the previous year—indicating a continuing upward trend in this area. These complaints involved 508 children and 129 child groups (educational groups, classes or institutions). As in previous years, the highest number of complaints by levels of the educational system related to primary education, followed by preschool education, with the fewest complaints concerning secondary education. There has been a particular increase in complaints related to preschool education. Furthermore, the Office received 213 complaints regarding violations of the rights of children with disabilities in the field of education.

² At the time of preparing this Report, we have not yet received data for 2024 from the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth.

Most of the complaints were filed by mothers (281), followed by institutions (116), while only eight complaints were filed by children directly. As in previous years, most complaints (179) came from the City of Zagreb, the county of origin could not be identified for 128 complaints, followed by complaints from the Split-Dalmatia County (55).

Individual reports of violations of children's education rights related to the availability of education, safety, spatial and organisational conditions, staffing and curriculum programmes, the relationships between parents and staff in educational institutions, appropriate education for children with disabilities, and suitable education for gifted children.

Given the trend of increasing complaints in this area, and based on all the information collected, we organised three expert meetings on 'Challenges in the Exercise of Children's Rights in Schools' to present the state of children's rights and violations of children's rights in the field of education. The events covered topics such as violations of children's rights in education, child participation in schools, challenges in the educational inclusion of children with disabilities, and the occurrence of peer violence. The participants were presented with the Ombudsperson's messages aimed at ensuring the comprehensive and timely protection of children's rights, with special emphasis placed on the role of education personnel in safeguarding these rights.

2.4 Health care rights

The Office acted on 170 complaints, issued 8 recommendations, participated in 2 legislative procedures and visited 2 health care institutions. The meetings and events focused primarily on topics related to the protection of children's mental health, paediatric palliative care, addiction prevention, child nutrition, and vaccination.

The complaints and notifications concerned difficulties with the availability of health care services for children, particularly paediatricians in primary health care and **orthodontists**, long waiting times for health services, care for children with disabilities and foreign national children, dissatisfaction with the Croatian Health Insurance Fund's decisions regarding compulsory health insurance rights, and dissatisfaction with attitude of health care workers towards both parents and children. We responded to enquiries regarding the mandatory vaccination of children, particularly preschool children. We reacted to the policies of a healthcare institution that unjustifiably restricted the presence of parents with their child during hospital treatment. We acted upon notifications regarding the limited availability of certain medicines and medical devices for children with rare and chronic diseases.

We believe the solution for better **mental health care for children** lies in organising accessible professional support and assistance at all levels, based on the assessment of their needs, the complexity of the required interventions, and the expertise of those providing the support. Special attention should be given to efforts aimed at changing behaviour and addressing the underlying causes of mental health issues in children and young people—those over whom we have influence as adults and society.

In the event of a physician shortages for certain specialties (such as paediatricians and orthodontists), a systematic and transparent approach must be taken to ensure the child's fundamental right to health care, with parents being informed in a timely manner.

Regarding the **vaccination of children** with compulsory vaccines, as well as the HPV vaccine, it is essential to work intensively on informing the parents about the benefits of vaccination in a comprehensive way. Paediatricians, family doctors, school doctors, and experts from all public health institutes play a key role in this process. It is crucial to conduct public health and media campaigns, and to permanently implement preventive programmes through the educational system, with stronger impact both on

children and their parents in order to contribute to the development of healthy lifestyle habits, the preservation of children's health, and the prevention of addictive behaviours.

2.5 Social and economic rights

Child poverty - The state is obligated to assist children in escaping poverty when parents are unable to do so. It is not enough to merely observe child poverty statistically, as real-life examples demonstrate its impact on a child's health, the development of cognitive, emotional, social, and other skills, family stress, academic performance, and other areas. The consequences of child poverty also shape opportunities in adulthood, meaning that children often grow into adults with similar life prospects, which underscores the difficulty of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty.

Social rights - The Office received 50 complaints concerning violations of children's social rights. Most of the complaints related to child benefit, the right to work part-time to care of a child with disabilities, maternity and parental benefits, family pensions, personal disability allowance, the right to parent-caregiver status, child care leave, one-time allowances, assistance and care allowances, and other rights within the social welfare system. Despite the progress, given the large number of children and families affected and their vulnerability, this system should stand more firmly in ensuring their protection and social inclusion and expand access to assistance.

Economic rights - The Office received 64 complaints related to the violation of children's economic rights, half of which concerned the right to an adequate standard of living. Other complaints related to the illegal work and employment of children within employment relations, the protection of children's property rights, safeguarding children from inappropriate advertising, violations of students' rights in work-based learning settings, and other concerns.

The right to an adequate standard of living - Socially disadvantaged families struggle to meet the high cost of living (utilities, food, education, health care, etc.), and any unexpected expense pushes them to the brink of survival. Enforcement proceedings are a daily source of stress for many families with children. There is a continuous rise in property prices and rents, meaning that the available market options no longer meet the needs or financial capabilities of families with children. Many parents who, due to disability, illness, or job loss, have no income, as well as those receiving insufficient remuneration, cannot afford a family home, either through renting or buying, and are reliant on state assistance – which is lacking. Therefore, state assistance is needed in ensuring adequate housing for every child, particularly those living in poverty.

Economic exploitation and hazardous labour - Currently, there is no oversight mechanism in the regulations governing vocational education and apprenticeships to monitor and sanction employers for violations of students' rights. Unprofessional, unethical, or inappropriate behaviour towards student apprentices remains unregulated. Certain issues related to students' work through the student job centre remain unregulated, such as employer's failure to recognise the work performed, leaving students without their remuneration. In the fields of **artistic, audiovisual, promotional, sports, and similar activities**, there are no clear rules on the participation of children, whether the participation is paid or voluntary. In relation to **child beggars**, the measures taken by the police, courts, and social welfare authorities are not sufficiently effective to protect them.

Protection of the child's property rights - There are concerns that children's property rights are usually violated due to some parents' ignorance of the legal consequences of actions they take in the name and on behalf of their children. Furthermore, a broad interpretation of the concept of 'more valuable property' can, in the short term, lead to the irreversible loss of significant funds belonging to children. We emphasise the need for continuous training of professionals at the Croatian Institute for Social Work,

judges, and notaries public, as well as the elaboration of protocols and guidelines that explain probate and other processes, in order to ensure the timely application of protective mechanisms.

Inappropriate advertising - Children are not sufficiently protected from the potentially harmful effects of advertising under current regulations, particularly given the risks to their mental health, the negative influence on healthy lifestyle habits, and issues such as obesity and addiction. Additional efforts should be made to protect children in all environments from exposure to advertising and access to games of chance, alcohol, energy drinks, tobacco and related products, as well as food and beverages whose excessive consumption is not recommended. We hope that the Republic of Croatia will adequately respond to these challenges and align its actions with the need for the priority protection of children and young people who are exposed to the various challenges of the advertising industry.

Children's Budget - In line with *General Comment No. 19 (2016) on Public Budgeting for the Realization of Children's Rights*, States parties should be able to demonstrate that at every stage of the budgetary process, and in all budget-related decisions affecting children, the best interests of the child were given primary consideration. To make this possible, it is necessary to establish a dedicated children's budget that enables the constructive participation of children throughout the entire budgetary process, in accordance with the general principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and sound budgetary principles.

2.6 Cultural rights and leisure time

In 2024, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children received 43 complaints about the violations of cultural rights, outnumbering those from the previous year (38). As in previous years, a significant portion of complaints in this area concerned the protection of the rights of child athletes, with an increase observed compared to the previous year (31, compared to 24 in 2023). Other complaints concerned the need to ensure safe and child-friendly play and leisure areas, safe conditions for conducting babysitting as a small business activity, accessible and free leisure opportunities for children, and proper supervision of the activities of associations.

The operation of playrooms, children's playgrounds, and other play areas remains unregulated, particularly in terms of spatial, technical, and staffing conditions. For years, we have been recommending to the competent authorities to adopt relevant regulations and establish a monitoring system for play areas. Despite repeatedly raising this issue with the Government of the Republic of Croatia, such a regulation has yet to be adopted.

2.7 Protection of rights in judicial proceedings

In 2024, the Office addressed 150 cases involving violations of children's rights in judicial proceedings, which included the conduct of police officers, employees of the Croatian Institute for Social Work, special guardians, and judicial bodies. These complaints concern the conduct of police officers when performing tasks and exercising powers involving children or in their presence. They also relate to the work of employees of the Croatian Institute for Social Work in the area of family matters, particularly regarding the inadequate protection of children in family proceedings due to untimely decisions. Court proceedings in the field of criminal justice take too long, leaving the child victim of a criminal offence waiting for the outcome, which prolongs uncertainty and delays the child's recovery. Along with the length of proceedings, the best interests of the child are further harmed by inconsistent decisions across criminal justice, misdemeanour, and family law systems, and ineffective enforcement. Amendments to the *Territories and Seats of Courts Act* in 2022 allowed for the establishment of **family departments** in municipal courts located at the seats of county courts. However, many local offices, along with parties within their territorial jurisdiction, continue to face challenges in accessing justice. It is essential to

establish appropriate procedural, technical, and staffing conditions within family departments, as well as to promote the continuous education of judges and associates. **Special guardianship** is an important link in the protection of children in court proceedings. However, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children has for some time now been pointing out the weaknesses and doubtful efficiency of special guardianship, persisting despite all the efforts invested in technical conditions and staffing improvements.

2.7.1 Protection of child victims and witnesses

According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, 6,337 criminal offences against children were committed in 2024, which is 72 offences, or 1.13% less than in 2023. In many cases, children were victims of crimes committed within the family environment or directly related to family relationships. The reported crimes affected 6,495 children, including 3,549 children under 14 years old, 1,494 aged 14-16 years, and 1,452 aged 16-18 years. Victims face challenges in accessing justice due to judicial delays and slow prosecution of perpetrators, lack of appropriate treatment for children, insufficient support and protection for victims, inadequate information, and lenient sentencing.

The importance of ensuring the right to child-friendly justice was recognised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which initiated the drafting of *General Comment No. 27* to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* on children's rights to access to justice and effective remedies. To improve the position of child victims, Croatia is working to introduce the Barnahus model. This project aims to reduce the trauma experienced by child victims during court proceedings by bringing relevant professionals under one roof. Through a multidisciplinary and inter-agency approach, it ensures the cooperation and coordination of judicial, social, and health institutions, providing comprehensive services to both the child and their family. Support for child victims also includes effective legal assistance, or the representation of the child's interests throughout criminal proceedings. We advocate for the **adoption of a special regulation** that would outline the criteria for appointing a legal representative, as well as the mandatory training requirements for legal representatives to qualify for representing the child.

2.7.1.1 Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

According to the Ministry of the Interior, 881 sexual offences against children were reported in 2024. The Ombudsperson for Children received 60 notifications regarding the right of the child to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and 61 reports of sexual violence. Most of the notifications came from educational institutions upon the implementation of the *Protocol on the Procedure for Dealing with Cases of Sexual Violence*, as they are required to inform the Ombudsperson for Children about such cases, along with involving the relevant authorities. Reports of **sexual violence within the family** that lead to criminal proceedings are particularly concerning. We are appalled by cases of **sexual violence** in schools committed by teachers or school staff, as well as in sports clubs, which must be a place where children feel safe and protected, free and motivated to report such behaviour without fear of negative consequences. Reports of **sexual harassment** of students in schools by teachers and school staff are particularly concerning. The 2023 amendments to the Primary and Secondary School Education Act introduced the possibility of suspending employees immediately upon the filing of criminal charges, marking significant progress in the protection of children. However, the sanctioning of perpetrators of sexual violence against children, including sexual harassment, must not be linked to criminal liability or the outcome of criminal proceedings. Schools may take immediate disciplinary action against the perpetrator of sexual harassment or violence upon receiving a report, irrespective of any ongoing criminal proceedings. We believe that being sanctioned for sexual harassment should result in prohibition from working in school settings. Despite our proposals to update regulations concerning employment barriers in educational institutions, this still has not happened.

The case law continues to demonstrate that offenders who commit sexual offences against children often receive penalties like community service and suspended sentences. In addition to the lenient sentences for perpetrators, we also face a serious issue with the **length of court proceedings** and the insufficient imposition of precautionary measures. Waiting for the outcome of a case involving a child can be an incredibly challenging experience. Lengthy trials can have a detrimental effect on the child's recovery, intensifying their long-term psychological pain. Perpetrators of sexual violence are seldom enrolled in specialised treatment programmes, and after serving their prison sentences, they are not subject to ongoing supervision by the relevant authorities. As a result of these lenient sentences, data on convictions are retained in criminal records for a limited period, allowing offenders to rehabilitate quickly. Once rehabilitated, they are treated as non-convicted individuals, and their criminal records can no longer be accessed. After that, sex offenders can work in kindergartens, schools, children's homes, become foster parents, or adopt a child. We maintain that data on individuals convicted of sexual violence against children should be permanently stored in a dedicated register to prevent them from being in contact with children. We believe it is crucial to **adopt a specific regulation** that mandates the prior convictions records check in all areas of work and organised activities involving children. It is concerning that perpetrators of sexual violence are seldom enrolled in specialised treatment programmes, and after serving their prison sentences, they are no longer supervised by the relevant authorities.

With the advancement of digital technology, sexual violence against children has also spread to the **digital space**, exposing children to heightened risks of sexual abuse and exploitation, while also creating significant challenges in preventing and prosecuting these crimes. Prevention and education about the dangers of sexual violence play a crucial role in establishing a systematic approach to protecting children from sexual abuse. Sexual violence preventive programmes are not included in the regular and compulsory education curriculum and are not consistently accessible to all children under the same conditions.

2.7.2 Protecting the rights of children in conflict with the law

According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, there was a 11.4% increase in the number of child and juvenile offenders, and a 19.4% rise in the number of criminal offences, compared to 2023. Property crimes continue to dominate; however, the data also indicate frequent violent behaviour among children and young people, as well as sexual offences. Criminal offences related to drug abuse and internet use also rank high. There has been a rise in threats and false emergency reports. The data also indicate numerous traffic misdemeanours and criminal offences against traffic safety committed by children and minors, sometimes resulting in fatalities.

The Office monitored the rights of children and juveniles³ in conflict with the law through complaints filed by children, their parents, other family members, employees of correctional institutions, as well as by lawyers and judges. The Office also acted on its own initiative in response to media reports about juvenile perpetrators of criminal offences and misdemeanours, some of which endangered lives or caused significant material damage. We also participated in meetings organised by other bodies and initiated several activities to promote the rights of minors in conflict with the law. The Office also visited the youth remand centre and several reformatories.

The measure of **detention on remand** for minors is implemented in special prison units, because closed reformatories, envisaged by the Juvenile Courts Act of 2011, have not yet been established. Other international and national standards governing this measure of deprivation of liberty are also lacking. Problems are also evident in cases where youth with extremely aggressive and criminalised behaviour are referred by a juvenile judge to **temporary accommodation in a social welfare institution** during criminal proceedings.⁴ We believe that, in such cases, the individual assessment of juvenile offenders was not adequately conducted. The **treatment of juveniles deprived of their liberty** is provided in

³ In Croatian criminal legislation, the term "juvenile" means child offenders aged 14 to 18 who can be held criminally responsible.

⁴ Pursuant to Article 65 of the *Juvenile Court Act*.

the Prison Hospital in Zagreb, but the separate area designated for juveniles has not been adapted, even if it was announced two years ago. There was an increase in the number of juveniles declared **mentally incompetent** during criminal proceedings, and **psychiatric assessments** are often carried out by general psychiatrists who do not specialise in working with children and adolescents, which the Office has flagged to the justice system. **Judges and state attorneys** specially appointed for youth also handle general criminal cases, which diverts focus from children and minors. Difficulties persist in the operation of social welfare homes where **correctional measures** are implemented, and **specialised foster care** as an alternative to placement in youth correctional institutions remains undeveloped. The Office receives complaints concerning the lack of **post-institutional support** for minors after discharge from correctional facilities, as well as insufficient access to psychiatric services.

2.8 Safety, accidents and hazardous environment

In terms of child safety, the Office received a total of 143 complaints concerning violations of children's individual rights, involving 136 children and 54 child groups. Most of the complaints concerned traffic risks and traffic accidents involving children (101). Other complaints (42) concerned the adverse effects of environmental factors on children's health and other safety hazards, such as exposure to air pollution, harmful emissions, potential asbestos-related risks, and excessive noise. The Office also monitored issues related to missing children, foreign nationals' residence in the RoC, the safety of children in playgrounds and playrooms, at bathing sites, as well as risks to children arising from various factors, such as unsupervised and unleashed dogs, and injuries associated with pyrotechnic incidents.

Traffic safety of children – Regarding children's involvement in traffic accidents and traffic risks, we addressed 101 cases based on reports from the Ministry of the Interior and citizens. We also monitored broader trends, issued recommendations, and participated in legislative initiatives aimed at building a comprehensive system for the protection and promotion of children's rights and interests in road, rail, and maritime transport.

In 2024, 1,560 children (842 passengers, 439 drivers and 279 pedestrians) were involved in road accidents in Croatia. Thirteen children lost their lives: six as passengers in vehicles, four as drivers, and three as pedestrians. For children who lost their lives while operating a vehicle, the modes of transport included a motorcycle, a car, a bicycle, and various personal mobility devices. As for those who died as passengers, the modes of transport included a motorcycle, a car, a freight vehicle, and a tractor. 292 of them sustained serious bodily injuries (135 drivers, 94 passengers, 63 pedestrians). 1,255 of them (742 passengers, 300 drivers, 213 pedestrians) had minor injuries.

It is essential to strengthen traffic culture and preventive measures for the protection of children, to impose stricter and more frequent sanctions on the "Fatal 4" offences (failure to use seat belts, speeding, alcohol consumption, and mobile phone use), while also enhancing the quality and control of buses transporting children and improving road infrastructure nationwide.

Children's safety in playgrounds and playrooms – Despite our repeated warnings over the years, there is still no regulation in place to govern the conditions for opening children's playrooms, including spatial, staffing, and safety requirements, as well as supervision of their work, nor is there any designated authority responsible for overseeing this area or adopting such regulations.

Harmful and hazardous environmental impacts and other issues - Climate change, as well as rising air temperatures and global warming, have an impact on more frequent and intense severe weather events and storms, along with extreme heat, floods, and droughts. Therefore, one of the priority goals should be to reduce vulnerability by strengthening resilience of both natural systems and society to the adverse effects of climate change. Several individual complaints from citizens concerned the prolonged exposure

of children to harmful emissions that negatively affect their health (smoke, gases, and unpleasant odours). In most cases, the air pollution originates from neighbouring land and/or facilities. We monitored child safety at bathing sites and observed an overall inadequate level of safety for all users and visitors, with children particularly at risk. There is a lack of a comprehensive and appropriate legislative framework defining the rights and obligations of bathing sites in the implementation of observation, rescue, and first aid activities for all users.

According to the Ministry of the Interior, in 2024, the use of pyrotechnic devices resulted in seven children under the age of 14 and two children aged 14 to 18 sustaining severe injuries, while ten children under the age of 14 and two children aged 14 to 18 sustained physical injuries.

The number of injured children under the age of 14 should serve as a clear warning of the need to intensify preventive efforts and consider a complete ban on the sale and use of pyrotechnic articles.

Missing children - Every moment that a child spends on the run from an institution or their own home represents a risk, as such children often fall victim to violence and exploitation by adults who offer them 'shelter' and to whom they form attachments because of their vulnerability given their age and circumstances, as they often come from unstable family environments, unaware of the risks they are exposed to. Exposed in this way, they may become victims of human trafficking. It is necessary to act with particular attention in situations where children escape from the institutions, as a prompt response and timely location of the child are essential. It is important that correctional institutions do not treat escapes by children as normal behaviour but recognise them as serious problems requiring investigation and prevention.

2.9 Discrimination

The Office received 37 complaints under the *Anti-Discrimination Act*, which is nine reports more than in 2023. The highest number of complaints pertained to the area of **education** (31). One case each concerned **public information and media, cultural and artistic creativity, sports, access to goods and services, and pension insurance**, with one case being a complaint involving **multiple areas**.

It is necessary to ensure systematic education for educational staff on discrimination and the regulations prohibiting discrimination, including intolerance and hate speech and the means of protecting children from discrimination within the education system; to develop mechanisms for monitoring and responding to any form of discrimination in education; to accelerate the process of introducing an alternative to religious education in all primary schools; to intensify efforts aimed at preventing the educational segregation of Roma students in primary education; to amend or abolish provisions in the general legislation of local and regional self-government units and kindergartens that govern enrolment, the right of priority, and day-care centres funding, where such provisions have a discriminatory effect on children; to create a protocol for assessing the developmental profile of a child with disabilities during the initial kindergarten enrolment interview with the child and parents, and provide education to representatives of public authorities on human rights and the prohibition of discrimination.

2.10 Other rights and lack of jurisdiction

A part of the received enquiries, requests, and telephone calls did not concern violations of children's rights and fell outside the Ombudsperson's scope of competence. In such cases, the Office directs the complainant to the proper institution or offers guidance on whom to contact.

3 CHILD PARTICIPATION

3.1 Network of Young Advisors and 16+ Youth Forum

The Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudsman for Children (NYA) is a standing advisory body to the Ombudsperson for Children, established in 2010. The 16+ Youth Forum (16+ YF) is an advisory group of coming-of-age children. The work of the 16+ YF and that of the NYA are based on the same principles.

In 2024, we worked with the fifth generation of the NYA, the newly elected sixth generation, and the first generation of the 16+ YF children.

There were three “in-person” national meetings of the NYA and one of the 16+ YF, two online meetings of all NYA members on the protection of children in the digital environment that resulted in the NYA recommendations for ***the National Programme for Children in the Digital Environment***, as well as several online meetings with members who were preparing for public appearances. NYA members were active in commemorating the 35th anniversary of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* by engaging in a panel discussion titled ***Mental Health of Children and Youth and the Right to Leisure Time***. They participated in the radio show of the Croatian Radio *Uvijek prvi – obrazovanje i znanost (Always in the Lead – Education and Science)*, and in the National Campaign for Persons with Reading Difficulties and Dyslexia *‘I Want to Read Too!’*. At the invitation of UNICEF, they took part in the work of the UNICEF Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (CPMERG) and responded to the call to complete the *‘Europe Kids Want’* questionnaire.

At the international level, they remained active within the EU Children’s Participation Platform (CPP) through the activities of the CPP Advisory Board and during the Platform’s working meeting titled *Create, Plan, Participate*.

3.2 Meetings with children

The main purpose of meetings and conversations with children is to support them in gaining a better understanding of their rights and to encourage and empower them to exercise their right to participation.

Our meetings with children are designed as workshops where we present them the institution of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and our working methods. We provide information about *the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, through play and group activities, we encourage children to reflect on their rights, the relationship between rights and needs, and the difference between rights and wishes. We also involve children in discussions on the importance of exercising their inherent and guaranteed rights responsibly, while respecting the rights of other children and adults with whom they interact in society. We also aim to understand children’s perspectives on the current state of their rights, identify the challenges they face in society, and explore who could help and how they could be supported in overcoming these obstacles. At these meetings, children also learn about the NYA and the 16+ YF and how to contact the Ombudsperson. As a souvenir, children receive educational materials on children’s rights. In 2024, a total of 36 in-person meetings and three online meetings were conducted, involving 906 children.

We collaborated with children and shared insights into the exercise of their rights through the ‘ISKORAK’ (A Step Forward) programme, within the activities of encouraging active and meaningful children’s participation, at the SKRB2024 Pre-Conference, held with children and youth from alternative care and their mentors, and at the International Scientific and Professional Conference SKRB2024 – *Systems that support and care*.

At the meetings, children emphasise that adults should pay greater attention to topics such as protecting children from all forms of violence, ensuring timely access to health services for children, safeguarding children's mental health, addressing the high levels of stress caused by excessive academic workload, promoting education focused on life skills rather than grades, improving school meals, enhancing the functioning of Student Councils, and supporting meaningful child participation.

4 SPECIFIC AREAS OF THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

4.1 National minority children

This year, complaints pertain to the exercise of rights of children from the Roma and Serbian national minorities. Most complaints concerning Roma children related to inadequate housing conditions for their upbringing, limited access to pre-school education, neglect and early school dropout, as well as early marriages. Regarding the rights of children from the Serbian national minority, the complaints primarily concerned peer violence in schools.

4.2 Children with behavioural problems

The rights of children with behavioural problems are violated across all systems—education, social welfare, health care, justice, law enforcement, and the execution of correctional measures. Exercising their rights often presents a significant challenge for professionals and the systems alike.

The highest number of complaints concerning **children with behavioural problems in schools** were related to peer violence and other forms of behavioural problems. Although a child with behavioural problems is considered a student with difficulties and is entitled to inclusive education and the fulfilment of all specific educational needs within the regular school system, the education system still responds to the needs of these children in ad hoc manner, lacking a clear approach and legal framework to ensure consistent, improved professional practices for protecting their rights and interests. It is essential that schools, in cooperation with other sectors, develop systematic professional support for these students, which underscores the need to adopt an appropriate legal and professional framework for working with children with behavioural problems. It is also necessary for teachers to receive more comprehensive training during their studies on the specific needs of children with behavioural problems and methodologies for working with them. It is necessary to involve more specialists in the school support team, who, in addition to supporting children with behavioural problems, will work more systematically on prevention. The inadequate realisation and violation of the rights and interests of children with behavioural problems is further exacerbated by the absence of clear regulations, given that the announced *Ordinance on the Method and Form of Providing Educational Support and Professional Treatment to Children at Risk of Developing Behavioural Problems and Children with Behavioural Problems* has still not been adopted, despite having been submitted to the public consultation process in 2019.

The **social welfare** system should enhance the forms of assistance and support available to families and children at risk and ensure that interventions are accessible to everyone. In this sector, the rights and interests of children who need to be separated from their family who puts them in danger in a timely manner are most severely violated, as **placing a child with behavioural problems to a social welfare institution** is often difficult due to limited capacities. As a result, some children are left waiting for several months to receive appropriate care, protection, and treatment. **Specialised foster care** for children with

behavioural problems has yet to be developed, and **systemic difficulties in the functioning of homes for children with behavioural problems** (community-based service centres) persist.

4.3 Children of incarcerated parents

According to the Directorate for Prison System and Probation⁵, in 2023, a total of 14,434 individuals were deprived of liberty in penal institutions, including 6,905 remand prisoners. Of the 5,365 prisoners and juveniles serving a prison sentence, juvenile imprisonment, or a correctional measure of referral to a reformatory in 2023, 36% were parents with minor children. As of December 31, 2023, prisoners and juvenile offenders had a total of 1,877 children. In 2023, there was a total of 4,870 physical visits between minor children and parents serving prison sentences, juvenile imprisonment, or a correctional measure of referral to a reformatory. A total of 5,040 video visits involving children were also conducted. In 2023, six children under the age of three stayed with their mothers in the Maternity Ward of the Požega Penitentiary, while in 2024 there were five children.

The prison system's report still does not contain any data on the children of remand prisoners, who make up 48% of all persons deprived of their liberty; as a result, this group of children and their needs remain largely invisible. The rise in the number of children of persons deprived of their liberty places an obligation on systems beyond penal system—particularly education and social welfare—to develop awareness of the needs of these children and ensure the protection of their rights and interests. These children are exposed to more significant risk factors in their lives and require more intensive support from both their loved ones and professionals.

In 2024, the Office received a total of 36 complaints concerning the rights of children whose parents were deprived of liberty, and we conducted around 30 telephone consultations, along with dozens of activities related to cooperation with the prison system or international organisations.

The complaints were submitted by the children's parents (both those at liberty and those in prison), as well as by other family members. The complaints concerned inappropriate parental and/or kinship care, insufficient opportunities for visits and contact, obstruction of involvement in the child's life, often due to a conflicted parental relationship, difficulties in exercising the child's status rights where the other parent is unable to do so without the imprisoned parent or due to parental conflict, and the inability to facilitate the child's visit because of financial constraints or the distance of the correctional institution from the child's place of residence. Some of the complaints concerned the actions of the correctional institution, such as shortening visits, prolonged waiting times, and the prevention of physical contact between the child and the imprisoned parent during visits. Upon receiving the complaints, we requested reports from the Croatian Institute for Social Work and the Directorate for the Prison System and Probation and issued recommendations for further action.

The prison system has made significant progress in the protection of the rights and interests of children whose parents are deprived of liberty. However, we observe inconsistencies and, at times, a regression in previously achieved standards, and we emphasise the need to uphold these standards while also developing new ones. The Office of the Ombudsman for Children emphasises that there is still significant room for improvement in developing support for this group of children, particularly through the involvement of other systems, such as education and social welfare.

⁵ Report on the State and Operation of Penitentiaries, Prisons, Reformatories and Centres for 2023

4.4 Children and the media

The media can play an extremely positive and powerful role in promoting children's rights, raising public awareness of threatening phenomena and situations that affect children, and significantly improving public sensitivity to the negative impacts children may face. However, they still often overlook the obligation to report on children with the utmost care and caution, according to international and national regulations, and to ensure maximum child identity protection.

In 2024, we addressed 76 complaints (42 concerning the protection of children's privacy in the media and 34 related to safeguarding children from inappropriate and harmful media content). Regarding the protection of children's privacy in the media, in two cases, we sent a warning or recommendation directly to the media, and in five cases, we requested action from the Electronic Media Council (EMC). As for inappropriate content on television, we contacted the EMC on several occasions, but it did not find grounds for action for violating the *Electronic Media Act*.

Publishers are encouraged to develop professional standards (codes of conduct) for reporting on children and communicating directly with them, and to refrain from publishing recordings of violence and conflicts involving minors. It is necessary to provide more content for national minorities children and youth in their mother tongues (on both linear and non-linear platforms), as well as content targeted at older school-age children.

4.5 Children in the digital environment

Monitoring the exercise of children's rights in the digital environment covered various areas, including equal access to the Internet for children, different forms of online violence, harmful content on the Internet, misuse of personal data and violations of children's privacy, as well as the use of artificial intelligence and its risks to children's health. The exercise of children's rights in the digital environment, along with the growing trend of various violations of these rights in this area, was addressed through contacts with children, international and national regulations and documents related to this field, individual complaints from parents and experts, media reports, state institutions' reports, non-governmental organisations, and participation in conferences and meetings.

We participated in the European Commission's working group on 'Safer Internet for Children' and coordinated the data collection for the *Better Internet for Kids* (BIK) portal of the European Commission. Together with the NYA, we participated in the working group for the *National Programme for Children and Youth in the Digital Environment for the period 2024-2026*. Although the programme was prepared, it has not yet been adopted, leaving children and professionals without a number of activities and measures in the field of child protection in the digital environment.

4.6 Children and artificial intelligence

Given the new trends and phenomena in the digital environment, including artificial intelligence, the monitoring of this challenging and complex area has emerged as a new field in our efforts to protect, monitor, and promote children's rights. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems covers a wide range of fundamental rights, regardless of the scope of their application. This includes, but also extends beyond, privacy, data protection, non-discrimination, access to justice, as well as other areas such as health, education, and protection against violence. Pursuant to *Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence*, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children has been designated as one of the competent authorities responsible for supervising or enforcing compliance with Union law obligations on the protection of fundamental rights, including the right to non-discrimination,

regarding the use of high-risk AI systems. For our Office, this area represents a new field that will require updating the expertise and more capacities to assess violations of fundamental rights and provide effective support to those whose fundamental rights are impacted by artificial intelligence.

In 2024, we contributed to the development of the *Ethical Guidelines on the Use of Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence in Education*, as part of the CARNET Working Group. The text of the Guidelines is planned to be adopted in 2025, and it is one of the OECD accession requirements for the Republic of Croatia. Furthermore, through our cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation, the Office supported the adoption of the *OECD Recommendations on Information Integrity*, which offer guidance to states on enhancing society's resilience against misinformation, disinformation, and other forms of information manipulation.

4.7 Child athletes

There were 52 cases related to the protection of the rights of child athletes. Complaints and case reports involving various forms of violence in sports reveal that there is, unfortunately, an alarmingly high tolerance for violence in this area, including violence against children, which is unacceptable and should be confronted. Some complaints continue to reveal conflicts between adults, which can, in turn, affect the status and rights of child athletes in different ways. In most cases, complaints are about individual decisions made by sports clubs that unilaterally terminate the child's membership or prevent the child from transferring to another club.

By engaging in sports activities, children fulfil their needs for physical activity, play, and social interaction, which is why it is essential to ensure the availability of such activities. Our proposals remain that the competent ministries develop a strategy for including physically inactive children in physical activities and sports, and that PE lessons for students in lower primary classes are taught by masters of kinesiology. We believe that children would be more motivated to participate in sports if the overall system placed less emphasis on top results and/or sports success, and focused more on the importance of participation, particularly in sports at school. This would be facilitated by a regulated sports system, the one that ensures the quality of sports facilities, the health and safety of participants, and is prepared to address any violations of the rights of child athletes.

4.8 Children on the move

The Office also monitored the exercise and violations of rights of migrant children. In May 2024, new rules for migration management and the establishment of a common asylum system at the EU level were adopted, which Member States are required to implement within their national legal systems. The rules provide many guarantees for unaccompanied children, and their implementation requires increased attention to the protection and respect for children's rights, respecting their best interests. Compared to 2023, the overall number of applicants for international protection has decreased, but there was an increase in the number of unaccompanied children.

The trend of short stays continues, with voluntary departure from the centres remaining the main reason for terminating accommodation. The Office continues to observe difficulties in the reception and accommodation of migrant children, including a lack of suitable accommodation and staff, as well as their placement in homes for children and youth with behavioural problems. A specialised institution tailored to the specific needs and age of unaccompanied children would contribute to the system of care for unaccompanied children, with trained and qualified staff, which would also enable better record keeping, individualised approach, and better quality of care.

It remains necessary to introduce assessment and monitoring of the work of special guardians for unaccompanied minors, as well as to ensure their standardised and regular training. We observed a positive development in the number of children placed in foster care, but better support for foster parents is needed to address the specific needs of unaccompanied children. It is also necessary to strengthen the inclusion of migrant children in the education system and ensure structured, systematic, and intensive Croatian language courses, the availability of interpreters and translators, and access to psychological support as needed.

Positive developments have been observed in the exercise of the rights of displaced children from Ukraine, such as overcoming language barriers and their acceptance within the school setting; however, certain circumstances continue to hinder their full adaptation to the education system. Preschool education is still not universally accessible across the entire territory of the Republic of Croatia. While many NGOs and organisations offer psychosocial and integration support, mental health services should be further strengthened.

4.9 Rights of children living on islands

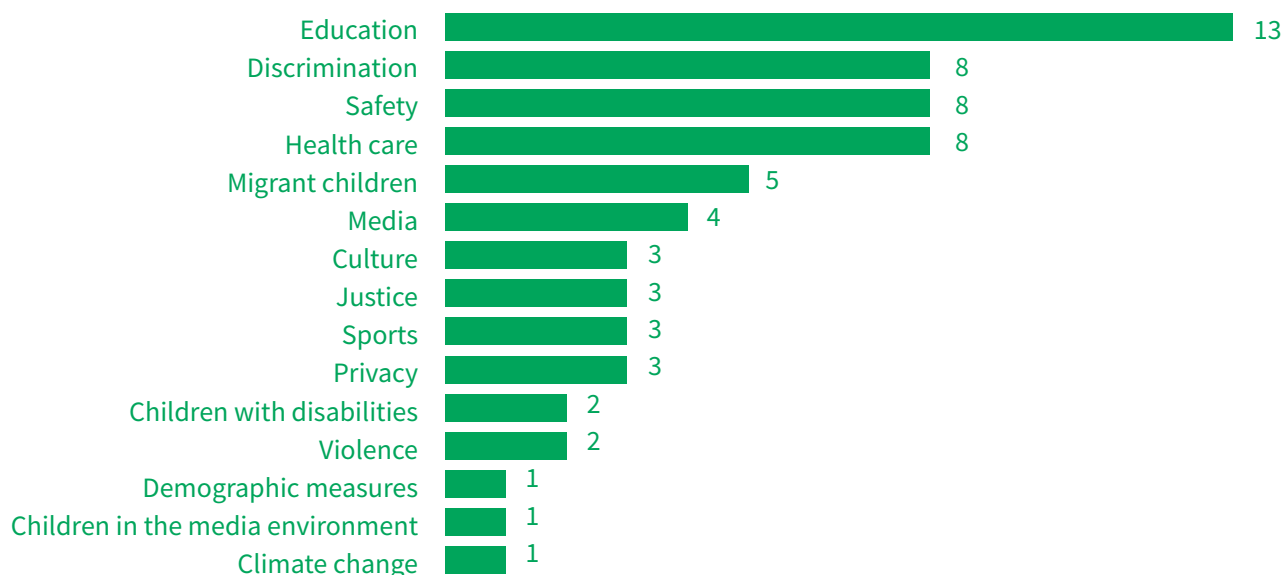
This year, given the specific circumstances and challenges faced by children living on islands, we continued to monitor the exercise of their rights through individual complaints, visits to educational institutions and other public institutions on the islands, as well as through direct contact with children and the professionals involved in their care. The complaints and our findings motivated us to make recommendations aimed at enhancing the protection of children’s rights on the islands. The Office promoted the rights of children living on islands at international and national conferences, particularly among education professionals and decision makers, highlighting their specific needs and the challenges they face.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE OMBUDSPERSON FOR CHILDREN



In 2024, the Office issued 65 general recommendations, warnings, and communications aimed at improving the protection of rights for all children or specific child groups.

Recommendations of the Ombudsman for Children in 2024, broken down by areas



Most recommendations are made to the Government of the Republic of Croatia and competent ministries - in particular, the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation, while some were sent to multiple ministries at once. Recommendations were also issued to other state administration bodies, judicial authorities, legal entities with public powers, counties, cities, media, and NGOs.

Out of a total of 65 recommendations, 38 recommendations were accepted (58%), of which 17 were fully accepted (26%). There were 15 implemented recommendations (23%), and two were not realised (3%). Eleven recommendations were accepted in principle (17%), and ten were partially accepted (15%). In total, 14 recommendations (22%) were not accepted, while we did not receive any feedback about nine recommendations (14%). The remaining four recommendations (6%) were issued at the end of 2024, and we expect to receive feedback soon.

Responses of public authorities and institutions to the recommendations of the Ombudsman for Children in 2024

Total: 65 recommendations						
Accepted 38 (58%)				Not accepted 14 (22%)	No feedback 9 (14 %)	Recommendations were issued at the end of 2024, and we expect to receive feedback in the near future 4 (6 %)
Fully accepted 17 (26%)		Accepted in principle 11 (17%)	Partially accepted 10 (15%)			
Realised 15 (23%)	Not realised 2 (3 %)					

We are concerned about the acceptance rate of our recommendations, especially as it has been declining compared to previous years. In 2023, 64% of our recommendations were accepted, a figure we still consider unsatisfactory.

6 LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITIES

The Office of the Ombudsman for Children actively contributes to improving the legislative framework for the protection of children’s rights by submitting proposals on draft legislation, initiating amendments or the adoption of new regulations, and participating in working groups and parliamentary committees. In 2024, the Office actively participated in the work of three committees and five working groups, offering proposals and opinions on 29 regulations, including three strategic documents. The Office proposed a total of 80 specific changes related to the protection of children by giving opinions on proposed draft legislation and initiating the adoption of new regulations or amendments to existing ones. However, we cannot be satisfied with the level of acceptance of the Ombudsman’s proposals as a partner in shaping a better legislative framework for children. Out of a total of 80 specific proposals, following the completion of the legislative procedures, only 18 were incorporated into the adopted regulations—one of them only partially.

Responses of the competent authorities of the Republic of Croatia to the proposals of the Ombudsman for Children aimed at the improvement of the legislative framework for the protection of children's rights in 2024

Total: 80 proposals			
Accepted	Not accepted	Taken note of	No feedback
18 (22%)	38 (48 %)	16 (20 %)	8 (10 %)

7 RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

7.1 Children in institutions for children without appropriate parental care

The Research on children and young people accommodated, placed and residing in homes for children without appropriate parental care and community-based service centres was conducted to monitor the protection of the rights and wellbeing of children growing up in institutions without adequate parental care. The data indicate a rise in the overall number of children placed in institutions, a decrease in the number of those admitted for accommodation, and a rise in children placed in organised housing. Out of a total of 941 children, 285 are below the age of 7, and 100 of them are under the age of 3. Out of the total of 285, 227 children were admitted for accommodation, and only 58 were placed in the organised housing. These 227 children account for 39.4% of the total number of children living in residential care, which is particularly worrying, given that the Social Welfare Act stipulates that a child—especially one under the age of seven—has the right to be placed primarily in foster care. Exceptionally, when placement in a foster family is not possible, children can move into residential care, but for no longer than one year. In 2024, 635 children and young people were taken into residential care, of which 613 were children, and 396 of them were separated from their biological families. A significant number of children (49) were moved from foster families to institutional care. It is positive that the number of children with approved residence in institutional care has increased.

In 2024, 43 children from institutions for children without appropriate parental care were adopted, which is 11 more than in 2023. As of December 31, 2024, 185 children who met the legal requirements for adoption lived in homes for children without appropriate parental care and community-based service centres.

In 2024, homes for children without appropriate parental care and community-based service centres admitted 364 unaccompanied foreign national children.

7.2 Availability of family departments within municipal courts

Building on the survey conducted at the end of 2023 among local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work regarding the functioning of family departments in municipal courts, in 2024, we continued with activities aimed at removing barriers to access to justice in family matters. The results of the survey conducted among local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work revealed that both the majority of the local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work in their daily operations and citizens as parties in court proceedings face difficulties due to the limited territorial accessibility of the courts. Based on the responses and survey results, we submitted an initiative to the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation, proposing amendments to the *Territories and Seats of Courts Act*. Since the current regulation allows for a non-legislative solution—through the authority of county court presidents, who can enable procedural actions to be taken in such cases in other municipal courts

within their jurisdiction—we pursued this option as well and, in parallel with our legislative initiative, reached out to the presidents of county courts. We received responses from 13 out of 15 county courts. Most of the responses (seven) denied the practice of holding court hearings in a territorially closer court, five courts stated that this happened, either continuously or occasionally, while one county court did not comment on whether it applied this legal possibility. It should be noted that six responses reflect the position of the county courts (or, possibly, the conclusions of meetings held with representatives of family courts and the Croatian Institute for Social Work) that it is necessary to amend the *Territories and Seats of Courts Act*. These amendments would aim to expand jurisdiction in family justice, specifically by enabling the establishment of family departments in a larger number of municipal courts within the jurisdiction of a given county court.

8 INSPECTION VISITS TO CHILD CARE INSTITUTIONS AND OTHER LOCATIONS



In accordance with their legal powers, the Ombudsperson for Children has the right to access premises and gain insight into the way care is provided for children who reside or are temporarily or permanently placed with natural and legal persons, as well as other legal entities based on special regulations. In 2024, the Ombudsperson and their associates visited a total of **77 institutions and other facilities organising stay for children**: **15** social welfare institutions, **six** local offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work, **four** family centres, **one** shelter for victims of domestic violence, **17** educational institutions, **two** health care institutions, **six** correctional institutions, **seven** institutions accommodating migrant and unaccompanied children, **four** playrooms where children spend their leisure time, and **15** other locations where children either live or exercise their rights. After the visits, observations and recommendations were submitted to the competent services, as appropriate.

9 OTHER ACTIVITIES RELATED TO THE PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS



In this chapter, we discuss 19 meetings, events and thematic conferences that the Office of the Ombudsman for Children organised independently or in cooperation with other institutions. Among them, we would like to highlight the 35th anniversary of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the conference “Challenges to Children’s Rights in Schools”, held in Osijek, Split and Rijeka.

We published six promotional and informational publications, among which the publications “Children’s Rights in Traffic” - Conference Proceedings “Protection of the Rights of Children in Traffic - Where do we stand and what do we still have left to do?”, the Calendar of the Ombudsman for Children 2025 and school timetable templates stand out.

We listed the published texts (co)authored by members of the Office’s multidisciplinary team, described five projects that we either participated in or supported, and presented our cooperation with various institutions and organisations. We delivered 55 presentations at conferences in the Republic of Croatia, including lectures and workshops for professionals and students.

10 INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITY

On the international front, we engaged in communication and collaboration with various international organisations, networks, institutions, and independent experts. We also actively participated in numerous meetings. In 2024, some of these activities were conducted as video conferences, virtual meetings, webinars, and hybrid events. A significant part of our international engagements entails collaborating with networks of membership-based organisations, such as ENOC, COPE, and Eurochild.

Together with the members of the Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudsman for Children (NYA), we joined the activities of the *EU Children's Participation Platform*, which promotes children's engagement as active citizens and advocates for the advancement of a democratic society.

11 OTHER ACTIVITIES OF THE CENTRAL AND REGIONAL OFFICES

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To enhance the access to the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children for both children and adults, we have established our regional offices in Osijek, Rijeka and Split, in addition to our central office in Zagreb. In their work, advisors advocate for children's rights based on the territorial principle, while the functional principle is applied in handling individual complaints about violations of children's rights and in proposing protection measures, in line with the advisors' specialisation and specific areas of monitoring and protecting children's rights. The full Report on the Work of the Ombudsman for Children offers a detailed overview of the methods employed by both the central office and regional offices throughout 2024. It lists the areas in which children's rights violations occurred and describes the Office's activities aimed at promoting and safeguarding children's rights.

12 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND FINANCES

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The Office is headed by the Ombudsperson for Children. The Office comprises the Expert Services Department and the General Affairs Department, each overseen by a Deputy Ombudsperson. As of 31 December 2024, the Office's tasks and activities were carried out by 19 civil servants, (which is 4 fewer than 23 positions planned in the organisational structure) and three officials (the Ombudsperson and her two Deputies).

The Office has four locations in Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek. The premises are owned by the Republic of Croatia and were made available for use by the Office. The budget of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children for 2024 amounted to **EUR 1,097,657.00**. The budget execution rate was **EUR 1,062,152.19 or 96.77%**.

This Report also highlights our concern regarding the inadequate regulation of children's access to games of chance, casinos, and slot machines near educational institutions, as well as the unresolved issues surrounding the conditions in children's playrooms.

Despite our warnings, we continue to observe long-standing issues in the judiciary, including the length of proceedings, insufficient sensitivity to the needs of the most vulnerable groups of children, and failure to understand the principle of the best interest of the child, or its inconsistent interpretation.

Violations of children's right to privacy and their dignity in the media have also been a notable concern, particularly in cases involving the media reporting on peer violence. Despite our repeated appeals, certain media outlets have continued to report inappropriately, using derogatory terms and disclosing details that undermine the wellbeing of children.

In 2024, we issued 65 recommendations, warnings and communications in order to improve the protection of children's rights, but only 58% of our recommendations were accepted, of which 23% were implemented, which is a decrease compared to the previous reporting period. All this calls into question the extent to which the best interest of the child is truly at the centre of decision-making at the national level.

We continue to work intensively with children and young people. We are thrilled to welcome a new generation of the Network of Young Advisors and the 16+ Youth Forum, two extremely valuable advisory bodies that actively contribute to articulating the needs of children and young people.

The establishment of the Barnahus (Children's House) model marks a significant progress in the protection of child victims of violence. Progress in the protection of children's rights on the islands is also evident, and we welcome the adoption of the new *Interim Maintenance Act* as a step forward in securing children's existential rights.

In conclusion, significant challenges lie ahead, and the effective protection of children's rights can only be achieved through continuous cooperation among institutions, civil society, parents, and children, with consistent prioritising a child's best interest in all decisions, policies, and measures adopted and endorsed by the Croatian Parliament. Let our commitment, decisions, and actions demonstrate our responsibility to deliver on behalf of the children, their present and the future of our society!