

## **SOCIAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AT RISK**

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**Abstract.** *Social services offered and provided to children at risk are tailored to the individual needs of children and are divided into six groups, namely: information and counseling services, professional help and support services, counseling services, home care services, community services and out-of-home services for protection.*

*The objective of this paper is to look at the social protection system and its role and efficiency in providing social services to children at risk and the necessary changes. The method of work is the analysis of the content of the reports of the Center for Social Work and partner organizations.*

*The analysis of the engagement of the Center for Social Work in working with children at risk shows that intensive work is being done on the development of new social services in the last 5 years, especially with the adoption of the new Law on Social Protection (Official Gazette of RNM No.104/2019).*

*The development of the social protection system is achieved through a plural system and the integration of innovations in the engagement of licensed and authorized social service providers. Decentralization of the social protection system is being established, which responds to local challenges, reduces poverty and increases the social inclusion of children at risk.*

*Work is being done on creating and strengthening the capacity and resources of the social protection system through education and strengthening staff with specific knowledge and skills for working with children and their integration into the local environment. Continuous work is being done on the development of multisectoral work with the use of available resources in solving complex social risks. The adopted standards in the provision of social services are being implemented, continuous monitoring and evaluation are being carried out, which give a realistic picture of the delivered social services.*

*The new integrated system in the provision of social services enables access to quality and more inclusive social services that provide positive changes for children at risk.*

**Key words:** *social services, children at risk, plural system*

### **Reforms in the system of social protection of children at risk**

The reforms of the social protection system are based on experiences of other countries going through administrative reforms, adapted to the local context. In principal, three main dimensions have been identified that are taken into account in the process of the implementation of the administrative changes, being as follows: the wider social context in which the reforms are implemented (history, tradition, impact, strategic goals), the political environment (political system, organization of local self-government, degree of centralization /decentralization) and the existing institutional arrangements that characterize the social security system.

The implementation of the reforms takes into account several key factors that have impact on the success of the reforms: a clear distribution of competencies between central and local government, reliable

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sources of funding for social services, transparent contracting mechanisms and a system of legal and professional oversight. The quality of public administration, i.e. its capacity to articulate goals and find and elaborate policy solutions, may also affect policy outcomes, especially in the case of complex institutional reforms. This implies that lessons derived from an analysis of some countries have been applied with considerable adjustments based on a thorough analysis of any differences in the local context (Scharle, 2014).

The social services for children were established with the adoption of the Law on Social Protection (Official Gazette of RNM, no. 104/2019) as rulebooks on the manner, scope, norms and standards in terms of space, means, staff and necessary documentation for the realization of each social service separately, which enables the observance of functional and structural standards that ensure quality social services in accordance with the individual needs of the children. The rulebooks define providers of social services, partner organizations in the plural system of social protection of children.

The providers of the social services to children and their families are also guided by the provisions of the Law on Child Protection ("Official Gazette" No. 23/13, 12/14, 44/14, 144/14, 10/15, 25/15, 150/15, 27/16, 163/17, 21/18, 198/18, 104/19, 146/19, 275/19, consolidated text, June 2020) and the Law on Juvenile Justice ("Official Gazette" No. 148/13), according to which part of the rights and social services for children at risk are exercised.

### **Defining the term child and child at risk**

The definition of a child is given and defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) ratified by the Republic of North Macedonia. The Convention defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen, unless the age of majority is attained earlier under national legislation.

According to the classifications in the Law on Child Protection, the Law on Social Protection and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, three groups of children are distinguished:

A child at risk is a child who is in a certain situation that adversely affects its growth and development and it adversely affects meeting the needs of the child. This can have lasting consequences on the child.

A child with a psychosocial need - this is a condition in which the child faces an inability or difficulty in meeting development needs.

Child with a psychosocial problem - this is a condition in which the child faces problems related to: social development related to the poor family, social deprivation, problems of modern family: illness, disability, psychophysical development impairments, incomplete families due to the death of one parent or divorce, a child who is without parents and without parental care and deviant behavior that occurs as a conflict of values and norms, juvenile delinquency, child trafficking, addiction diseases, homelessness, etc.

The social risks and challenges experienced by children in the Republic of North Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic are direct and indirect. Direct social risks are caused by the closure of day care facilities, including preschool institutions, schools, and day care centers, such as those for children with disabilities. Restricted mobility also directly affected the rights and needs of children without parents and parental care or children of divorced parents to establish regular contact with either their guardians or the parent who shares parental rights.

Indirect risks are associated with the loss of their parents' jobs or reduced economic opportunities for household members, leading to increased financial insecurity, as well as the risk of poverty and material

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly, Resolution 44/25 dated November 20, 1989 (came into force on 02.09.1990)

deprivation for children. The social risk is a condition that has the potential to hinder or impede the smooth social functioning of the child and its family.

The susceptibility of children to different lines of risk factors and their combined impact on children is continuously pointed out. It often happens that similar risk factors affect children and common features of the circumstances in which these children live and grow can be identified. In this regard, it is possible to formulate general interventions in the Individual child support plans, which must be further adjusted and enriched with activities in accordance with the individual needs of each child and its family. For this, it is necessary to make an assessment of the child's personality, the circumstances in which the child lives, the problems it faces, but also the strengths and areas of resistance that the child and his family have.

For each risk group of children, in which there is a combination of risk factors, it is possible to formulate specific interventions. For example, one of the aspects that need to be taken into account are the resources that exist in the local community and the possibility of implementing the necessary interventions from different institutions and service providers in the plural system of delivery of social services. In line with these opportunities, the aspiration is to constantly improve, enrich, and introduce new programs and measures to support children at risk. They must ensure various social services, with specialized programs to support children and their families that have already shown good results in working with children. When creating interventions and designing an Individual Support Plan, it is important to know what specific risk factors we want to reduce, neutralize or eliminate. There are very few studies in the Republic of North Macedonia on children at risk in terms of delivered social services in the last few years and they indicate the dominant effects of the social services provided to children. One of the reasons is that the social services system began to be developed in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic significantly slowed it down.

### **Social services for children at risk**

Social services provided in accordance with this Law on Social Protection are information and referral services, professional assistance and support services, counseling services, home services, community services and out-of-family care services.

We start the analysis of social services at the municipal level in the Republic of North Macedonia with an overview of the existing facilities and their qualitative assessment from the perspective of the interviewees. The assessment of the capacities is necessary in order to be able to perceive their compliance with the existing risks in the municipality, hence the needs for improvement and new social services.

Social services provided in the form of nonmaterial assistance are aimed at protection from social risks, prevention and overcoming of social problems that adversely affect the well-being of children. In accordance with the Law on Social Protection, children can benefit the following social services:

*The information and referral services* include informing the children at risk and their parents about the rights in the field of social protection as well as about the available social services, based on the initial assessment and referral to other institutions in order to achieve unimpeded access to rights and services. Informing the child and his / her parents is one of the continuous activities of the Center for Social Work, but in the documentation of the Center for Social Work, this service is not systematically guided, and its presence as a service is not expressed.

*The second group of services are professional assistance and support services*, which include assistance and support in overcoming the individual problems of the child and his / her family through assessment, planning, intervention, monitoring, evaluation and completion. This aims to enhance the capacity of the child, promote his/her smooth development, ensure and maintain well-being and independence as well as to enable long-term training for independent overcoming of problems.

The third group of services are counseling services, which include counseling, i.e. counseling work, in order to prevent, mitigate and overcome the consequences of social problems of children at risk and their families with specialized types of counseling.

**Table No. 1: Procedures conducted at the Center for Social Work for Children**

Areas of work	Realized		
	2017	2018	2019
<b>Marriage and family</b>	<b>2470</b>	<b>2190</b>	<b>2693</b>
Regulation of the relationship of the child with the parent that does not live with the child	367	344	422
Extramarital child custody	89	98	92
Children who want to get married before legal age	26	8	15
<b>Child protection</b>	<b>3775</b>	<b>4097</b>	<b>4542</b>
Child without parents and parental care	340	331	272
Child with impairment	1262	1557	1856
Child at risk	639	776	1501
Child in conflict with the law	1030	845	448
Child under guardianship	320	490	291
Supervision over the exercise of parental rights	57	43	43
Termination of parental rights	7	7	4
Adoption	120	130	125
Illegal migrants–children			2

Source: Report for the operation of the Intermunicipal Centre for Social Work Skopje, 2019

The data in Table No.1 show the types of social services of the marriage and family service and the child protection service, with the division into social risk groups of children and the type of services that differs with the division of the same according to the new Law on Social Protection. It can be concluded that the number of social services provided increases over a period of three years. The handled cases dealing with regulation of the relations of the parents who do not live with their children and the overall support for the children with provision of appropriate social services according to their individual needs and best interests, indicate that there is a trend of increasing the number of children in need for regulation of the process of meeting their parents, as well as the number of children with developmental impairments. In the course of 2019, the staff of the Center for Social Work worked on 850 cases for divorce proceedings, which indicates that there is an increase of such cases compared to 2018. Legal guardians were appointed for 342 children due to insufficient care of the parents of the children or the inability to take care for their children.

The assistance requested from the from the Center for Social Work during the pandemic included provision of information on the exercise of the right of divorced parents to see their children who do not live with them, movement allowed during curfew for parents of children with autism, assistance in overcoming obstacles with employers for obtaining permits for absence from work and assistance to parents who lost their jobs during the pandemic.

The fourth group of services are community services including day care and temporary residence services, re-socialization, rehabilitation, reintegration of beneficiaries, family care replacement and halfway house.

The day care service includes day care, individual activities with the child to acquire living and working skills, social, cultural and recreational activities, education, and social support to children and their families. There is a trend of increasing the number of categorized children in the period 2017/2019, but there are no changes in the number of children who use the social service Daily Center for Children with Disabilities. According to the data obtained from the analysis of the annual records of children with mental or physical disabilities, referred to categorization, it can be noticed that the most frequent is the group of categorized children with combined developmental disabilities and children with chronic diseases and seriously impaired health.

From the analysis of data from the official records of the Center for Social Work, it can be concluded that the Day Care Centers for Children with Special Needs take care for children at the age from 3 to 26 in a specific Day Care Center according to the type and degree of disability. 34 *Day Care Centers for persons with disabilities* were opened, out of which 28 for persons with disabilities, 2 for cerebral palsy, 2 for autism, 1 for children with impaired vision and 1 for Down syndrome, and their services are used by a total of 473 beneficiaries. During the year, a total of 30 children visited the Daily Center for People with Cerebral Paralysis.

The service for rehabilitation and reintegration of children facing social and/or health problems is provided through psychosocial support, therapeutic work, occupational therapy, and support for acquiring work and employment skills, reintegration and independent living.

The resocialization service is provided through counseling work, individual, family and group therapy, educational support, escorts, skills development education, sports, recreation, creativity support, job support and employment skills support and other resocialization services, depending on the needs of children. The service for children at risk and children in conflict with the law is provided in a children's center, in accordance with the Law on Juvenile Justice.

**Table No.2: Street children**

		Realized		
		2017	2018	2019
Number of cases (street children)	Transferred	35	30	42
	Newly admitted	12	19	180
	Solved	12	7	66
	Operating cases	30	42	158

Source: Report for the operation of the Intermunicipal Centre for Social Work Skopje, 2019

According to the data from Table No. 2, there is a significant increase of the number of street children. The Center for Social Work has strengthened mobile teams that map street children at the most frequent locations and at places where children are begging. The day care center for street children – provided support to 22 children out of 158 registered children.

The temporary residence service aims to provide protection and professional assistance to children in crisis in order to overcome their crisis and to ensure their social integration. The purpose of the replacement family care service is provision of short-term care for children for purpose of rest and meeting personal and professional needs of family members who take care of the child. The temporary residence service provides protection and professional assistance to children who are in crisis in order to overcome the situation and their social integration. Beneficiaries of the service are as follows: a child who will be found without parental care, a stray child, a child victim of abuse, and homeless child. The

service is provided for a period of up to three months, with the possibility of extension for another three months, and in exceptional cases when the condition is not resolved, for up to one year.

Beneficiaries of the halfway house service are as follows: child without parents and parental care, a child after leaving an educational institution for resocialization who needs preparation for independent living. The Halfway house provides assistance, support and preparation for independent living of a child who was previously under foster care, does not have his / her own home or living conditions in his/her home and needs preparation for independent living.

The fifth group of services are the services of out-of-family protection, which consists of three subgroups of services, namely: living with support, placement in a foster family and placement in an institution. The out-of-family care services provide basic protection that includes: accommodation, assistance and support from professionals, care, nutrition, clothing, health care, and other services depending on the needs of the children, who do not have living conditions in their family or for other reasons they need out-of-family protection.

A supported housing unit can accommodate a maximum of seven children without parents or parental care over the age of 14, and the children can remain in the support housing unit until the end of secondary education, or until they complete training for independent living and integration into society. Assistance is provided to children in performing homework and school projects with provided psychosocial counseling and quality use of free time.

The second out-of-home care service is placement in a foster family that can be provided as general, specialized, occasional, interventional care or care by relative. The beneficiaries of the general family care service are as follows: children without parents and parental care and children with disabilities. Special care is provided for a child victim of domestic violence, a child at risk and a child in conflict with the law. Occasional care is provided for a child living with a parent / guardian for rest, therapy, treatment and completion of home, family and professional responsibilities of the caregiver, i.e. parent / guardian. Interventional care is provided for a child without parents and parental care, child from conflicting families, child that is a victim of violence or victim of human trafficking and other children whose social problem require immediate care and protection. Parental care is a service for provision of care of a child who is orphan and without parental care and is placed in the family of his/her grandparents, brother, sister, uncle, uncle or aunt.

Foster care covers basic care and 24-hour care for children who do not have a family of their own or do not have living conditions in their own family. Regarding foster families, the need to monitor the condition of foster care is emphasized, especially for children at high risk. We have professional foster families in the world, which in the Republic of North Macedonia is not provided by law, where professionals, psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers take care of a child for a certain period and work on correction of his/her behavior. The staff of the Center for Social Work are convinced that this is a good practice that can be used to support children at risk. In the Republic of North Macedonia, a total of 212 foster families are registered, which accommodate a total of 408 beneficiaries, out of which 357 children. The foster family network has been developed into 21 social work centers.

The third type of out-of-family care service is the service for placement in an institution, which includes basic protection with provision of the following services: care, 24-hour assistance and support from professionals, nutrition, clothing and health care, depending on the identified needs of the child.

In accordance with the regulations in the field of execution of sanctions and referral to an appropriate institution, in addition to basic protection, it also includes resocialization, reintegration, upbringing, access to education and educational support, organized leisure and other services for resocialization, for acquiring life skills, occupational training and professional rehabilitation, social, cultural and recreational activities, depending on the needs of the child.

The service for accommodation of children in conflict with the law at the age of 14 to 18 is organized in an educational institution for children, in accordance with the Law on Juvenile Justice.

During 2019, 327 children used out-of-home care services where the largest number of children (214 children) benefited foster care services, 76 children were placed in an institution, 37 children benefited a supportive living service.

From the middle of 2017, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy started working on the process of deinstitutionalization in accordance with the National Strategy for Deinstitutionalization in the Republic of Macedonia 2018-2027 "Timjanik". Transformation of childcare institutions into a network of small group homes is being done. This reform provides an individual approach to each child, better care and a significant reduction in social risk.

*Public Institution Special Institution Demir Kapija* with the process of transformation and deinstitutionalization organized the work with children with disabilities in organizational units outside the institution.

*Public Institution Institute for Protection and Rehabilitation Banja BANSKO-STRUMICA* with the process of transformation and deinstitutionalization as of July 2019 organized the work of the institution in 3 services with five departments and operates in several facilities (2 within the institution and 2 residential units outside institution). The institution accommodates a total of 50 beneficiaries out of which 41 in the institution building and 9 in the two residential units.

*Public institution for care of children with educational and social problems and disturbed behavior* within the process of transformation and deinstitutionalization, organized the institution work in 2 services depending on the type of beneficiaries who are accommodated i.e., In the service for cohabitation of children with educational and social problems are accommodated children at risk and there are 5 organizational units, a total of 24 beneficiaries. In the service for cohabitation of children with disordered behavior *Public Institution "Ranka Milanovikj"* where children in conflict with the law are accommodated function 2 organizational units in where 10 beneficiaries are accommodated.

*Public Institution „Home for infants and young children”- Bitola* is organized in five departments (organizational units outside the building of the institution) 5 departments which accommodate a total of 33 children.

*In the Public Institution "Children's Home 11 October" Skopje* within its four organizational units as of June 30 2020, takes care for total of 18 beneficiaries for whom 24 hour protection is provided.

*In Small Group Home Berovo* are accommodated 5 beneficiaries, children without parents and without parental care. In the organizational unit of *Small Group Home Shtip* are accommodated 4 children without parents and parental care, all male, aged 9 to 14 years. The Small Group Home in Kavadarci accommodates a total of 5 children, up to 14 years old i.e., children with educational and social problems.

Within the *Private Institution SOS Children's Village Skopje*, as organizational units' function 4 living services with support and a unit for support of foster care which accommodates a total of 28 children aged 14-18 years.

Depending on the needs of the child, social protection services can be provided simultaneously and in combination with the services provided by educational, health and other institutions, for which a protocol for cross-sectoral cooperation has to be made. For the smaller municipalities, which are spatially and socio-culturally close, it is recommended that most of the services be organized at the inter-municipal level, i.e. with inter-municipal cooperation. In this way, children at risk are provided with services in their natural environment, through the rational use of financial resources that are at the disposal of local government (Zegarac and Brkić, 2007).

### **Providers of social services**

There are 30 centers for social work in the Republic of North Macedonia, and most of them are inter-municipal centers (i.e. covering more than one municipality). In almost all municipalities, there are available offices in the municipal buildings, which serve as local offices of the Center for social work. In the center for social work, there are teams that offer professional assistance and support / counseling, but in most cases, there is only one that treats various problems (domestic violence, divorce, juvenile delinquency, etc.) which leads to staff overload.

The Centers for Social Work do not have adequate premises where they would provide professional assistance / counseling, so these services are performed in ordinary offices of employees.

From the institutions for out-of-family protection, only small group homes have been identified, which are relatively new, and the need for expansion of the spatial capacities has been detected.

At the moment, there are no special centers for social services, which offer services for daily and temporary residence, so these services are offered by the Centers for social work. In terms of centers for daily services, at the moment there are only Centers for daily stay of persons with disabilities, in all municipalities where the headquarters of the Center for Social Work is, except in Radovich, Demir Hisar and Struga.

Local associations of citizens usually offer information services, professional assistance, support, and counseling. These activities are usually offered within internationally funded projects, which end with the completion of the projects.

The pluralization of the social protection system enables conducting activities in the field of social protection by other legal and natural persons, and associations of citizens. This creates preconditions for cooperation between the public, private and civil sector.

According to the conducted research for 2018 (Bogoevska et al. 2019), there were 370 social service providers in North Macedonia, of which 47.8 percent were foster families, 18.6 percent day care centers, 9 percent counseling services and 1.9 percent shelter-centers.

Cross-sectoral or multi-sectoral cooperation<sup>3</sup> is based on the fact that the state, the market and the civil society have resources that can be combined in a productive and quality way to solve complex social problems, which on the one hand optimizes the advantages of each of the sectors, and on the other hand, limits the impact of their individual weaknesses. The emphasis is placed on the application of multilateral partnerships in the delivery of social services by bringing together institutions and organizations from the public, private and civil sector in order to jointly deal with complex and multidimensional social problems of children.

Today the promotion of the multi-sectoral partnerships in the Republic of North Macedonia is realized through activities aimed at reducing the role of the state in the social protection in relation to the social services. Thus, the focus shifts from institutional forms of protection to community-based alternative social services. Besides using specific services, the beneficiaries of the services within the social protection system are also expected to strengthen their personal capacities and the capacities of their families. The beneficiary, namely the child and his/her family should participate in the process of protection, and take over some of the specific activities and the responsibility for their own social security.

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<sup>3</sup>Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (2010), National Strategy for Reduction of Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Macedonia 2010-2020, Skopje

### **Conclusion**

The new Law on Social Protection envisages promotion and development of innovative and interventional social services in the home of the children at risk, in the community and outside the family that follow the individual needs of the children at risk. For successful, efficient and better performing of the working tasks and activities and compliance with legal deadlines for execution of these tasks and activities, as well as greater commitment in the work with children at risk and delivery of social services, one of the significant challenges is to ensure increasing staffing with professional human resources with different profiles (social workers, psychologists, pedagogues, lawyers, sociologists, etc.) in the Centers for Social Work. Regarding the provision of necessary social services for children at risk, there is a need to develop and strengthen the plural system of social protection of children at risk with the involvement of different stakeholders, state and private institutions, local self-governments, associations of citizens and other licensed social service providers for children at risk. Inter-municipal cooperation and planning of protection for children at risk are needed so that small municipalities can also contribute to the protection of children at risk and provide greater access to social services offered at local level.

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**СОЦИЈАЛНЕ УСЛУГЕ ДЕЦИ У РИЗИК**

**Абстракт:** Социјалне услуге које се нуде и пружају деци у ризику прилагођене су индивидуалним потребама деце и подељене су у шест група, и то: услуге информисања и саветовања, услуге стручне помоћи и подршке, услуге саветовања, услуге кућне неге, услуге у заједници и ван породичне заштите.

Циљ овог рада је да сагледа систем социјалне заштите и његову улогу и ефикасност у пружању социјалних услуга деци у ризику и изазову неопходне промене. Метод рада је анализа садржаја извештаја Центра за социјални рад и партнерских организација.

Анализа ангажовања Центра за социјални рад у раду са ризичном децом показује да се у последњих 5 година интензивно ради на развоју нових социјалних услуга, посебно усвајањем новог Закона о социјалној заштити, (Службен Гласник РСМ бр.104/2019).

Развој система социјалне заштите постиже се плуралним системом и интеграцијом иновација у ангажовању лиценцираних и овлашћених даваоца социјалних услуга. Успоставља се децентрализација система социјалне заштите која одговара локалним изазовима, смањује сиромаштво и повећава социјалну укљученост деце у ризику.

Ради се на стварању и јачању капацитета и ресурса система социјалне заштите кроз образовање и јачање особља са специфичним знањима и вештинама за рад са децом и њихову интеграцију у локалну средину. Континуирано се ради на развоју мултисекторског рада уз коришћење расположивих ресурса у решавању сложених социјалних ризика. Примењују се усвојени стандарди у давању социјалних услуга, спроводи се континуирано праћење и оцењивање, што даје реалну слику о пруженим социјалним услугама.

Нови интегрисани систем у пружању социјалних услуга омогућава приступ квалитетним и свеобухватнијим социјалним услугама које проузрокују позитивне промене деци у ризику.

**Кључне речи:** социјалне услуге, деца у ризику, плурални систем