

Children's Awareness of Danger from Firearms, Land Mines, and Other Explosive Devices in Croatia, 1996

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Aim. To assess the awareness of primary school children and their parents and teachers about the dangers from firearms and explosive devices before the initiation of a national program for protection against these weapons.

Methods. The initial evaluation survey was carried out in primary schools from all 20 counties (two primary schools from each) of the Republic of Croatia during May and June, and September and October 1996. The survey was organized by the Police College, Police Academy, Zagreb. The sample included a total of 1,910 pupils, 3,283 parents, and 344 teachers of these pupils. Specially prepared questionnaires addressed general information, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of pupils, and attitudes, level of information, and activities of parents and teachers. Interviews were conducted by specially trained social workers from Social Care Divisions of County Police Departments.

Results. Firearms and explosive devices were accessible to 19% of the primary school pupils, mostly to those living in high-risk areas directly affected by the war activities. Almost one third of the pupils believed that it was necessary to keep firearms and explosive devices at home. Pupils' knowledge of facts, dangers, and protection from firearms and explosive devices was generally incomplete and insufficient. Higher graders used firearms and explosive devices more often but also knew more about them. Children were most impressed by TV spots showing consequences of careless weapon handling. Pupils characterized by teachers as unsuccessful in school carried firearms and explosive devices more often than others, had more positive approach to them, and a lower level of knowledge of a proper reaction in dangerous situations. Six percent of the teachers believed it was not necessary to teach the children on the topic because of the safety of their area. Twenty-one percent of the parents kept firearms and explosive devices at home, and 9% allowed their children to handle those weapons. Parents from high-risk areas were also more tolerant to firearms and explosive devices, kept them at home more often, and believed that their children were well informed about dangers and protection measures from firearms and explosive devices.

Conclusions. The National Program should concentrate on showing promotional spots on TV because they had the highest impact on children; more efficient education of children and parents in high-risk areas, as well as teachers from low-risk areas, should be organized. Teachers should pay a special attention to boys from higher grades, they should include parents in their educational activities, and work more with children of parents with lower education. Parents should not keep weapons at home and allow their children access to them. The police should continue their efforts in reducing the number of unauthorized firearms and explosive devices at home.

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