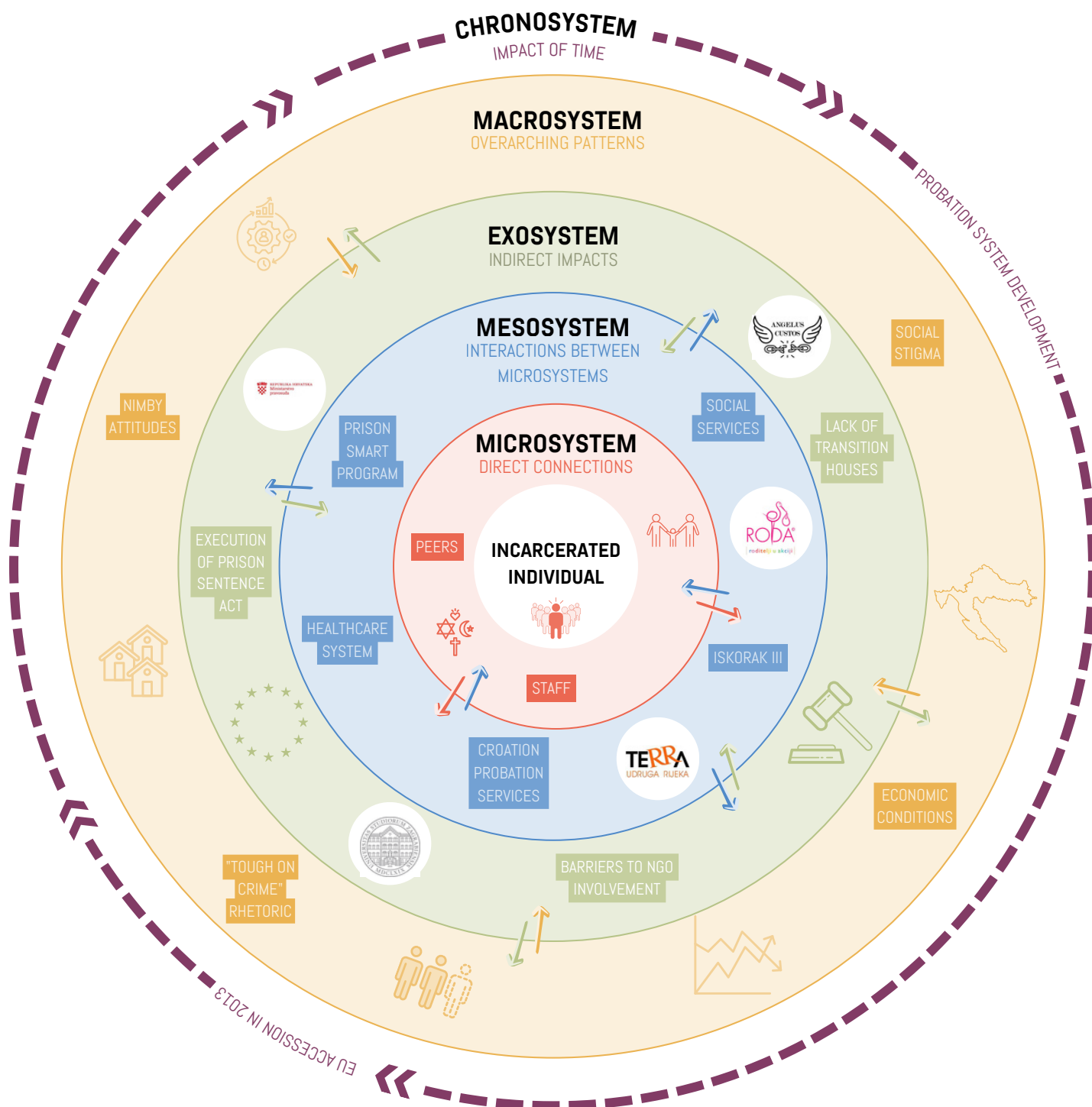
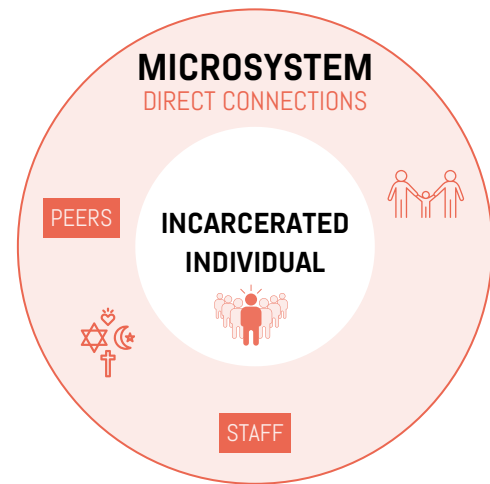


CROATIA



MICROSYSTEM

The most immediate environment, including family, peers, staff, and the detention facility itself, directly influences individuals' development and well-being. Positive interactions within this microsystem can foster resilience and enhance individuals' ability to cope with challenges.



FACTOR

Family connections

In Croatia, family ties are generally recognized as important for (re)integration. Most facilities provide designated "family rooms" that allow for more private interactions, and video calls were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, geographic distance, administrative procedures, and a lack of consistent psychosocial support still create barriers. Child-parent accommodation in prison settings is limited to rare cases, such as in Požega for mothers with infants. Structured programs to support parenting and child contact exist but are mostly led by NGOs and vary by facility.

ECOSYSTEM CONNECTIONS

Maintaining relationships with family, especially children, is a key element of (re)integration in Croatia. While most prisons allow visitation, there are limited resources for structured family programs. NGOs such as RODA and Terra offer parenting and reentry support, and some initiatives (e.g. Children of Prisoners Week) aim to maintain family bonds. However, these efforts are fragmented and lack formal integration into prison policy. National-level coordination or guaranteed family-oriented programming is still missing.

Security staff in correctional facilities

Security staff in Croatian prisons primarily operate within a control- and order-based framework. Training tends to emphasize procedural and safety elements, with limited exposure to rehabilitative or relational models. However, a shift is slowly emerging, particularly among younger officers, who show openness to relational security and more humane approaches.

Despite some openness, there is no systematic training in dynamic security or communication strategies that support rehabilitation. Security staff are rarely included in multidisciplinary planning for reintegration.

Psychosocial Staff in correctional facilities

Psychologists, social workers, and educators form the core of psychosocial teams within Croatian prisons. While their role is essential for rehabilitation, they are often overburdened and unevenly distributed across facilities. Resources, training, and institutional recognition for their work remain limited.

Collaboration with community services such as health care, employment offices, and housing support is irregular and typically driven by individual initiative. There is no national framework to support sustained, ecosystem-based work by psychosocial teams.

Peers

Peer relationships within prisons have a significant impact on behavior, mental health, and motivation. However, there are few peer-led initiatives or formal structures (such as peer mentoring or lived-experience groups) that could channel this influence positively.

There are no structured peer mentoring programs, and informal dynamics can be either supportive or risky. Their potential is not systematically harnessed.

Judicial system actors (judges and attorneys)

Judges and attorneys play a key role in shaping the early experiences of individuals in the justice system. Their understanding of rehabilitative opportunities and discretion in sentencing or diversion significantly affect outcomes. However, in Croatia, training for judicial actors on social reintegration and ecosystem-based approaches is minimal.

Judges rarely participate in multi-sector coordination, and referrals to alternative or rehabilitative pathways depend heavily on individual discretion rather than institutional practice.

Schools and teachers

For young offenders or individuals with disrupted education histories, schools and educators can be essential support systems. In Croatia, however, there are few systemic links between schools and the correctional system, and education for juvenile or young adult offenders is often limited or delayed.

Educational institutions are not consistently involved in reintegration planning. Where collaboration exists, it is typically through NGO-led projects rather than formal institutional pathways.

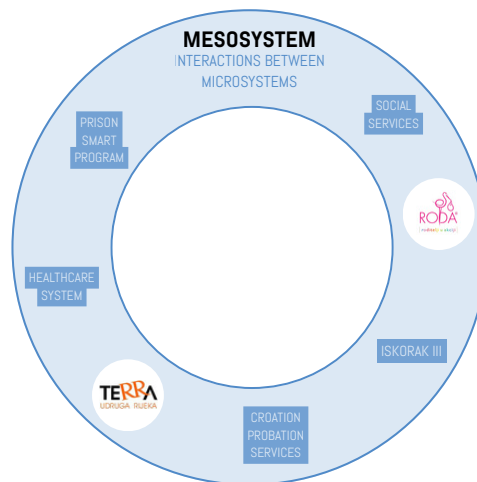
Personal faith and spirituality

Many incarcerated individuals rely on personal faith or spiritual practices for coping and resilience. In Croatian prisons and other detention facilities, religious representatives have access to facilities and chaplaincy services are available, though their involvement and scope vary widely.

Faith-based organizations are not formally integrated into reintegration networks, but may offer valuable emotional and moral support during and after incarceration.

MESOSYSTEM

This encompasses the interactions between various microsystems, such as the relationships between the detention house and community organisations such as care facilities, schools, employers, and social services. These connections can enhance or hinder the support individuals receive, emphasizing the need for collaboration among different systems to promote successful reintegration. The meso level highlights the complex and interdisciplinary nature of the challenges and opportunities surrounding detention and its interaction with the broader community, where different systems and contexts influence and shape each other.



FACTOR

Probation services

Since its establishment in 2009, the Croatian probation system has expanded the use of non-custodial sanctions and supervision. However, its integration with prison-based planning is limited, and its reach varies across regions.

ECOSYSTEM CONNECTIONS

Probation is involved in some pre-release planning, but this remains inconsistent. Stronger institutional ties with detention facilities and reintegration services are needed to enable continuous support.

Social welfare services

Although social welfare centers are legally mandated to support vulnerable populations, including formerly incarcerated people, their practical engagement with reintegration is inconsistent. Staff often lack specialized training, and services such as housing or psychosocial support are limited and overstretched.

Coordination with correctional services is informal, reactive, and heavily reliant on individual initiative. There are no national protocols or inter-ministerial agreements to guide systematic collaboration.

Collaboration with external healthcare services

Healthcare in Croatian detention facilities is managed by the Ministry of Justice, not the Ministry of Health, which creates systemic separation from mainstream services. Mental health and addiction treatment are especially under-resourced.

Mental and physical healthcare are formally available in prisons, but often limited in scope and quality. Transition to external care is fragmented. Upon release, most individuals are expected to reconnect with general healthcare providers independently. Some NGOs help bridge this gap, but systemic coordination is lacking.

Education and employers

Access to education and employment support in Croatian detention facilities is highly uneven. While some prisons collaborate with local schools or NGOs, vocational and job-readiness programs are rare and inconsistently funded.

Access to education and vocational programs varies widely. Some facilities have partnerships with adult education centers or NGOs, but consistent pathways to employment are rare. Initiatives that link incarcerated individuals with job preparation or employer engagement exist. Employment offices are rarely involved in pre-release planning. Where partnerships exist (e.g., through EU-funded initiatives), they are local and temporary, lacking national coordination.

NGO programs (educational, cultural, psycho-social)

Croatian detention facilities host a range of non-mandatory programs, including art workshops, drama, and yoga. Programs like Prison SMART or ISKORAK III offer mindfulness and addiction recovery support, but are often dependent on short-term NGO or EU project funding. Educational services exist but are inconsistently implemented.

Initiatives like Prison SMART, ISKORAK III, and Clubture are valuable but remain dependent on external funding and individual institutions. They are not part of a systemic approach. Their success points to the potential of broader institutional integration, which is currently lacking.

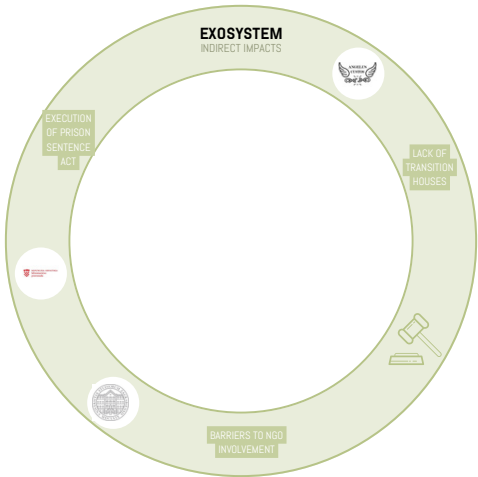
Family support initiatives and organizations

A small number of NGOs in Croatia work to support incarcerated individuals' families, particularly children of incarcerated parents. Organizations such as RODA and Terra have developed targeted programs offering parenting support, emotional counseling, and structured visits. However, such initiatives are not systematically embedded in prison services.

These family-oriented programs often bridge the gap between detention facilities and the community, helping to maintain relationships during incarceration and support reintegration. Still, their reach is limited to individual projects and local partnerships, with no national policy framework to ensure continuity or expansion.

EXOSYSTEM

External factors that indirectly impact individuals, such as government policies, community resources, and social services, play a crucial role in shaping experiences within detention facilities. Changes in the exosystem, such as shifts in funding or legislation, can have significant implications for the quality of care and support available to individuals.



FACTOR

Legal framework (Execution of Prison Sentence Act; Probation Act)

While Croatia’s laws enable probation, early release, and alternatives to incarceration, they do not sufficiently operationalize reintegration or mandate cooperation across sectors. There is also no legal obligation to provide post-release housing, health, or employment support.

ECOSYSTEM CONNECTIONS

The legal framework allows for alternatives to imprisonment and recognizes probation, but it does not systematically promote ecosystem-based reintegration. Legal amendments often focus on technical aspects of execution rather than continuity of care or reintegration. There are no legal guarantees for coordinated reentry planning involving housing, employment, and healthcare. Recent amendments have weakened minimum detention conditions, which may hinder more humane, small-scale alternatives.

Institutional structure (Ministry of Justice, Prison Administration)

The correctional system is centrally governed, with a top-down structure that limits flexibility and local innovation. EU-funded projects occasionally introduce new practices, but there is no clear mechanism for scaling successful models.

The justice system is centrally managed and highly hierarchical, which often slows innovation. While some EU-funded projects have introduced good practices, they are rarely sustained or scaled up. There is no dedicated national strategy for small-scale or community-integrated facilities. In addition to that, lack of horizontal cooperation between ministries (e.g., justice, health, social affairs) hinders the development of integrated services for reintegration.

Barriers to greater NGO's and civil society involvement

NGOs play a critical role in bridging gaps in services such as housing, counseling, cultural engagement, and addiction recovery. However, their involvement is often informal and project-based, without long-term contracts.

NGOs play a crucial role in filling systemic gaps, offering reintegration support, housing, and counseling. However, cooperation with state institutions varies and is often informal. These actors often lead innovative pilot projects, but without long-term contracts or structural support, their impact remains fragile.

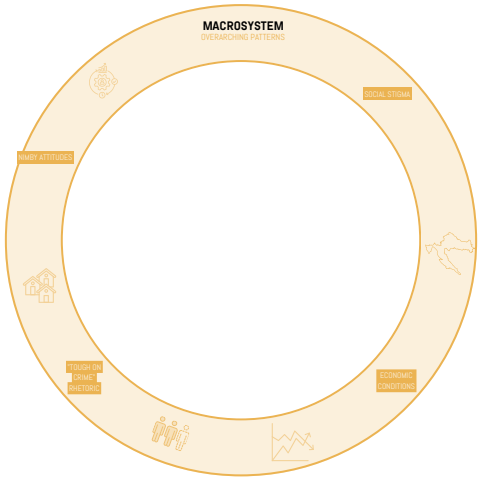
Lack of transitional facilities

Croatia does not have a structured network of transitional or halfway houses under state administration. Most transitional support is offered by NGOs on a small scale, often tied to short-term projects

The absence of transitional housing options limits continuity of care and increases the risk of homelessness and recidivism, especially for high-risk or marginalized groups.

MACROSYSTEM

The broader cultural, societal, and ideological context influences individuals’ opportunities and experiences within the detention house. Legislation around labour and employment, staff training, social security, health care, urban development, cultural norms, prejudices, and power structures all shape the environment in which detention houses operate, impacting access to resources and support for incarcerated individuals. Social inequality, stigma, and discrimination can impede access to care and reintegration, as well as opportunities for successful reintegration after incarceration.



FACTOR	ECOSYSTEM CONNECTIONS
<p>Social stigma and public attitudes</p> <p>Formerly incarcerated individuals face significant social stigma in Croatia, particularly in employment and housing. Public discourse rarely supports rehabilitation, and media coverage often reinforces punitive narratives.</p>	<p>The lack of awareness campaigns or public education on reintegration issues contributes to exclusion and undermines community-based efforts.</p>
<p>Political will and penal culture</p> <p>Although policy documents reference rehabilitation, political discourse remains dominated by “tough on crime” rhetoric. There is little investment in or advocacy for alternatives to incarceration.</p>	<p>Most progress in ecosystem-based work comes from donor-funded projects rather than national leadership or legislative reform.</p>
<p>Economic conditions</p> <p>Justice institutions operate under financial constraints, affecting staffing levels, infrastructure, and available programs. Many services are funded by external donors rather than state budgets.</p>	<p>EU funds have enabled some innovations, but sustainability is a key challenge without long-term national investment.</p>

Media representation

Media coverage of justice and detention facility-related issues in Croatia often focuses on incidents such as escapes, violence, or corruption, while successful reintegration stories are rarely presented. This perpetuates negative stereotypes and contributes to public resistance toward rehabilitation-focused policies.

Media narratives shape societal attitudes and political agendas, making it difficult to advocate for systemic reintegration measures.

NIMBY attitudes

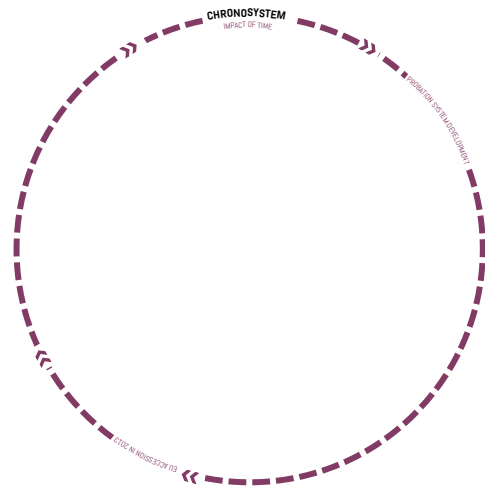
Communities frequently resist the establishment of transitional homes, community service programs, or social enterprises for former incarcerated individuals, fearing for safety or reputation. This "Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY) phenomenon limits the physical and social space available for reintegration efforts.

These attitudes create practical obstacles to community-based rehabilitation initiatives, forcing services to remain small-scale or hidden, often depending on NGO advocacy to proceed.

CHRONOSYSTEM

This dimension considers the impact of time, including major life events that affect individuals and communities, as well as broader socio-historical shifts such as the War on Drugs, the victims' rights movement, and the rise of mass incarceration. Changes in the chronosystem can influence development at all other levels of the ecological system. This is particularly relevant when considering our rapidly changing society:

Both technological and artificial intelligence systems play an increasingly bigger role in the justice system and, if not well-thought-out and monitored, come with severe consequences. Increased public awareness and (grassroots) movement also influence perceptions on the justice system, highlighting systemic injustices and racial disparities in incarceration. This has led to public demand for accountability, policy reform, and greater transparency within the justice system.



FACTOR

ECOSYSTEM CONNECTIONS

Probation system development in 2009

The establishment of the probation system marked a major shift toward non-custodial measures in line with European standards.

This reform expanded community-based supervision options but has yet to result in fully integrated reintegration planning.

EU accession in 2013

EU membership brought legal harmonization and access to funding for justice reforms, including prison modernization and training.

It facilitated pilot projects in reintegration and alternative sanctions, but there is limited institutionalization of successful practices.

COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic exposed digital, infrastructural, and human resource gaps in the prison system. Restrictions had a lasting effect on incarcerated individuals' well-being and service delivery.

While some digital innovations (e.g. video calls) were introduced, most support programs were suspended or scaled down, revealing a lack of systemic resilience.

Short-term EU funded projects

Programs like ISKORAK III, Pokretači promjene, and Terra's transitional housing project demonstrate cross-sector potential.

Despite their success, they remain isolated efforts without national-level follow-up or replication mechanisms.

Social and demographic change

Over the past two decades, Croatia has experienced significant emigration, population aging, and urban-rural disparities. These demographic shifts affect both the profile of incarcerated individuals and the availability of support networks upon release, particularly in depopulated rural areas.

Reduced family networks, fewer local services, and community fragmentation make reintegration more difficult, especially outside urban centers.