

THE CROATIAN POPULATION AMONG THE OLDEST IN THE WORLD: SHIFTS IN AGE STRUCTURE, 1991–2021

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ABSTRACT

The Croatian Population Among the Oldest in the World: Shifts in Age Structure, 1991–2021

This paper presents changes in the age composition of the Croatian population from 1991 to 2021 using several analytical indicators to quantify and establish the level of aging of the country's population. During the observed period, the share of the population aged 0–19 decreased from 26.2% to 19.2%, while the share of the population aged 60 and over increased from 17.5% to 29.9%, making the Croatian population one of the oldest in the world. Due to these demographic shifts, Croatia will soon face economic, social, and financial difficulties, as fewer people contribute to the country's pension and health-care systems.

KEYWORDS: depopulation, age structure, Croatia, population aging, migration

IZVLEČEK

Hrvaško prebivalstvo med najstarejšimi na svetu (spremembe v starostni strukturi, 1991–2021)

Avtorji v prispevku na podlagi več analitičnih kazalnikov, s pomočjo katerih so kvantificirali in opredelili stopnjo staranja hrvaškega prebivalstva, predstavijo spremembe v starostni sestavi prebivalstva na Hrvaškem med letoma 1991 in 2021. V opazovanem obdobju se je delež mladega prebivalstva (do 19 let) zmanjšal s 26,2 % na 19,2 %, delež starejših (nad 60 let) pa se je povečal s 17,5 % na 29,9 %, s čimer se prebivalci Hrvaške uvrščajo med najstarejše na svetu. Zaradi takšnih demografskih sprememb se bo Hrvaška kmalu soočila z gospodarskimi, socialnimi in finančnimi težavami, saj vse manj prebivalcev prispeva v pokojninski in zdravstveni sistem.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: depopulacija, starostna struktura, Hrvaška, staranje prebivalstva, migracije

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INTRODUCTION

A population's composition or structure refers to the different characteristics of the individuals comprising its total population; it suggests that individuals in a given area differ from one another according to various attributes such as sex, age, marital status, occupation, profession, educational attainment, and so forth (Nejašmić, 2005). Therefore, the concept of population composition with respect to a given characteristic denotes the distribution of the number (frequency) of individuals according to the values or modalities of a specific attribute (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999). Since several attributes are involved, we speak of so-called partial structures, which are most commonly classified into the following three groups: a) biological (demographic), where the most important compositions are by sex and age; b) socioeconomic, which includes composition by occupation, activity, profession, education (educational attainment), and so forth; and c) cultural-anthropological, which encompasses composition by race, nationality, language, religion, and so forth (Nejašmić, 2005).

The age structure of the population is often highlighted as one of the most important demographic structures because it affects both population development and socioeconomic development. It indicates the need for preschools, primary and secondary schools, and universities, shows the volume of jobs required for new generations entering their active years, and indicates the likely scale and structure of health-care expenditures, among other things (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999). For some authors, the age structure occupies a central place in understanding the functioning of society because it is essential for analyzing social processes and systems and for predicting future social changes.

The most important process in the development of Croatia's age structure, with far-reaching and severe consequences for overall demographic and socioeconomic development, is the accelerated process of demographic aging and the very high degree of aging of the total population (Nejašmić, 2003). Croatia is among the most severely affected countries in the world, with its residents already being among the oldest, and the situation is expected to worsen. To date, this rapid population aging—reflected in the growing share of older people and the declining share of young people—has not been halted, slowed, or substantially mitigated.

Moreover, it is not only about the aging of the total population but also about partial aging processes, which involve the aging of specific functional age contingents, such as the working-age population, the reproductive-age population, the economically active population (labor force), and so on (Wertheimer-Baletić, 2002).

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

Since the main data sources are population censuses, a descriptive and comparative analysis was conducted. The analyzed data show that population aging has become a dominant demographic, social, and economic issue in Croatia. Demographic aging, per se, is not inherently a problem (Čipin et al., 2014). Čipin et al. (2014), however, describe the increase in longevity underlying demographic aging as one of humanity's greatest achievements in the last century, manifested in a significant increase in life expectancy at birth following a long period of relatively low and slowly growing life expectancy. What could pose a problem are the economic and social costs associated with demographic aging. If public policies fail to adapt to the new demographic regime (an increasing share of the population aged 60 and over), demographic aging could indeed become one of the greatest socio-financial challenges for political authorities.

The main goal of this study is to present changes in the age structure of the population across four successive censuses, namely, from 1991 to 2021. Two hypotheses were formulated and tested in the study:

H1 – From one census to the next, the share of the younger population in Croatia is decreasing, while the share of the older population is increasing; therefore, according to all aging indicators, Croatia's population records an increasing degree of aging with each subsequent census.

H2 – According to all indicators, the female population is, on average, older than the male population.

The hypotheses are based on a constant decline in birth rates, intensive emigration, and an increase in life expectancy, which is higher for women than for men.

The paper presents the following: first, indicators of population aging; second, indicators of age structure; and finally, the potential consequences of population aging.

THE IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC COMPONENTS ON CHANGES IN AGE STRUCTURE

Age structure is influenced by birth and mortality rates and by migration. These factors can be indirectly influenced by external factors such as wars, natural disasters, epidemics of infectious diseases, and so on.

The relationship between birth and mortality rates, on the one hand, and age structure, on the other, is causal. Components of natural population change shape age structure over the long term, which in turn determines the levels of general and specific birth and mortality rates in the following long-term period. Of these two

components of natural change, birth rates have a significantly stronger impact on age structure. They are the most dynamic determinant of age-structure changes under normal population development. Therefore, a high birth rate typically results in a young age structure and, consequently, large cohorts that later enter the working-age population. In contrast, a low birth rate leads to a relatively high proportion of the population in middle and old age. Although the number of births and deaths together determine the number of people in different age groups, the impact of mortality is much weaker because it affects all age groups.

Migration often modifies the age structure shaped by birth and mortality rates (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999) as migrants are mainly between the ages of 20 and 40. In countries of origin, emigration reduces these cohorts, leading to gaps in the age structure. In destination countries, immigration enlarges these cohorts beyond the size formed by birth and mortality rates. These changes in the age structure have an immediate effect because, in the country of origin, the population of reproductive age decreases, the number of births decreases, and the mortality rate may increase as younger populations, less exposed to the risk of death, emigrate. Destination countries experience the reverse: an influx of working-age adults, resulting not only in demographic but also economic gains.

Migration also has a long-term (delayed) impact on demographic and economic development in countries of origin because emigrated populations take their reproductive potential with them, which is reflected in approximately two decades of reduced influx of new generations into the working-age category, thereby increasing the proportion of older residents. In destination countries, the consequences are again reversed: immigration of populations aged 20–40 leads to more births and, therefore, to a short-term increase in the proportion of the population in the youngest age groups.

In addition to affecting population reductions, external events also alter birth rate trends. Wars impact the age structure through military and civilian deaths, sharp declines in births, and internal and external migrations. Population losses due to war, emigration (including refugees), and declines in birth rates (due to psychological factors and the absence of male family members due to military duty) have lasting consequences for population size and its age structure. In contrast, internal migrations (displaced persons) at the state level may have only temporary consequences.

DATA SOURCE

The main source of data on population age is the census, and this characteristic is most commonly defined by the number of completed years of life, that is, age on the last birthday before the census. In Croatian censuses from 1921 to 2021, age was generally recorded in completed years; the 1948 census was the exception, grouping the population by calendar years of age.

In the population censuses, the total population is presented in one-year or five-year age groups, from which it is later possible to be regrouped into broader or narrower age groups depending on the needs of a specific study. For the study of the reproductive potential of the female population, three broad age groups are distinguished: prereproductive age (0–14), reproductive age (15–49), and postreproductive age (50 and over). For assessing labor resources, the total population is divided into three broad age groups: the pre-working-age population (0–14), the working-age population (15–64 for men and 15–59 for women), and the post-working-age population (65 and over for men and 60 and over for women). The population can also be grouped by age to assess and plan other resources, predict the number of schoolchildren, students, and so on.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE ON CHANGES IN THE AGE STRUCTURE OF THE POPULATION OF CROATIA

A review of the literature found that very few authors focus primarily on this topic. There are significantly more works in which changes in the age structure and aging processes are mentioned mainly as part of the analysis of general demographic changes. Changes in the age structure of Croatia's population have been addressed sporadically by Gelo (1987), Friganović (1990), Nejašmić (1991), Wertheimer-Baletić (1999; 2001; 2004; 2007), Živić (2003b), and Živić et al. (2005). Živić et al. (2005) state that, despite differences among classifications of population age structure, Croatia was already on the threshold of aging in the early 1960s and had entered the category of demographic old age by 1971. By 2001, Croatia had reached the category they term “deep ageing” (Živić, 2003a; Živić et al., 2005). Josipović (2024) uses deep aging as a tentative term for a situation in which aging driven by below-replacement fertility is intensified by substantial emigration among people of reproductive and working age. He identifies Croatia and Serbia as the countries in the former Yugoslav region in which this process is most pronounced.

Demographic aging has also been studied using examples from rural settlements (Nejašmić & Toskić, 2016) and Croatian islands (Nejašmić, 1992), while several studies focus on population aging at the regional and county levels. Gelo (1999) approached the issue of demographic aging by analyzing wartime events between 1991 and 1995. Some studies address the implications of demographic aging (Stipetić, 1994; Banovac et al., 2001; Podgorelec & Klempić, 2007; Obadić & Smolić, 2008; Puljiz, 2016; Čipin, 2022). Nejašmić (2003) and Živić (2003a) have engaged in a more comprehensive analysis of the aging of the entire population of Croatia over the past twenty years, analyzing basic trends in the population's age structure development in the periods 1981–2001 (Nejašmić) and 1961–2001 (Živić). Gelo et al. (2005) provide an overview of age-sex structure trends in Croatia throughout the twentieth century, while Nejašmić and Toskić (2013) discuss the causes and features

of demographic aging, including the spatial aspect of the process and comparisons with European countries. In addition to the demographic aspect of population aging, Peračković and Pokos (2015) provide an overview of the most important theories of aging, while Živić et al. (2017) analyze changes in the age structure of the population between 1953 and 2011. The latter authors emphasize that demographic aging is becoming not just one of many but the most significant factor in the total and natural depopulation that Croatia has experienced for more than two decades. It is also an important destabilizing factor for economic development and social stability, as reflected in the increasing challenges regarding pensions, social, and health care for older people (Pokos & Peračković, 2016).

It is also worth mentioning the study *Stručna podloga za izradu Strategije prostornog razvoja Republike Hrvatske: demografski scenarij i migracije* [Demographic scenarios and migration: Expert basis for the development of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia] (Čipin et al., 2014), which presents comparisons with other EU member states and indicators of demographic aging at the county and municipal levels.

INDICATORS OF AGING OF THE CROATIAN POPULATION

Due to the sustained, full-intensity emigration from Croatia, which has persisted for almost a century and a half, and the deterioration of Croatia's natural population dynamics, especially the birth rate, certain specific factors that have disrupted biodynamic processes in the country must also be considered alongside population aging. These include an industrialization and agrarian policy model that encouraged rural-to-urban migration and contributed to rapid urban overcrowding. Furthermore, there has been a decades-long lack of any meaningful and stimulating pronatalist population policy in the country. An effective pronatalist policy should certainly be coupled with changes in the attitudes of both society and individuals toward the family, which are reflected in family planning, nuptiality (marriage rates), divorce rates, female employment, and similar factors (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1995).

We will begin the analysis of the age structure with the year 1991 and the number of inhabitants in five-year age groups in absolute and relative terms for the total population and separately for males and females (Table 1). At that time, the most numerous group, both overall and among males and females, was the 35–39 age group. The predominance of this age group reflects the increased number of births during the “baby boom” period in Croatia, which lasted from 1946 to 1954. Although the 40–44 age group might be expected to have been similar in size, it was 7.9% smaller than the immediately younger 35–39 age group, primarily because a relatively larger share of this cohort had emigrated in the early 1970s. Therefore, the second most numerous group consisted of inhabitants in the 30–34 age group, even though the number of births during their birth years was lower than that in

the 40–44 age group. The 45–49 age group had 24.8% fewer inhabitants than the preceding 40–44 group and 14.6% fewer than the immediately older 50–54 age group, reflecting the reduced number of births during World War II. Due to the continuous decline in births during the 1980s, the youngest 0–4 age group had 11% fewer inhabitants than the 5–9 age group. The 0–4 age group accounted for only 5.9% of the total population, compared with 10.2% in 1953 and 8.7% in 1961. Such a significant decline in live births at the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s was expected to result in even fewer live births after 25 to 30 years, when most members of these cohorts reached parenthood.

Age group	Total*	Men	%	Women	%
0–4	280,056	143,588	3.0	136,468	2.9
5–9	314,697	161,383	3.4	153,314	3.2
10–14	331,426	169,518	3.5	161,908	3.4
15–19	326,290	166,909	3.5	159,381	3.3
20–24	320,222	162,613	3.4	157,609	3.3
25–29	342,388	172,740	3.6	169,648	3.5
30–34	365,956	185,298	3.9	180,658	3.8
35–39	375,091	192,203	4.0	182,888	3.8
40–44	345,466	176,628	3.7	168,838	3.5
45–49	259,849	129,464	2.7	130,385	2.7
50–54	304,427	150,063	3.1	154,364	3.2
55–59	311,402	149,183	3.1	162,219	3.4
60–64	278,948	126,447	2.6	152,501	3.2
65–69	219,466	83,278	1.7	136,188	2.9
70–74	119,676	43,574	0.9	76,102	1.6
75–79	109,642	38,517	0.8	71,125	1.5
80–84	73,229	24,218	0.5	49,011	1.0
85–89	26,810	7,786	0.2	19,024	0.4
90–94	6,193	1,633	0.0	4,560	0.1
95 and older	1,024	233	0.0	791	0.0

* The difference from the total population refers to inhabitants of unknown age.

Table 1: Age structure of the Croatian population in 1991 by five-year age groups (source: Population Census 1991, Population by Sex and Age. Documentation 882, DZS, Zagreb, 1994).

In the 2001 census, the most numerous age groups are the same as in 1991, but now they are aged 45–49, just slightly outnumbering the 40–44 age group, where there were more women than men, unlike ten years earlier in the 30–34 age group. Identical changes were noted in the 35–39 age group, which can be explained by the fact that these cohorts suffered greater losses among the male population than among the female population during the Homeland War. The two age groups comprising people in their sixties were together 5.9% larger than the two youngest five-year age groups (0–4 and 5–9) (Table 2).

Age group	Total*	Men	%	Women	%
0–4	237,522	121,718	2.7	115,804	2.6
5–9	248,528	127,274	2.9	121,254	2.7
10–14	268,584	137,175	3.1	131,409	3.0
15–19	298,606	152,676	3.4	145,930	3.3
20–24	305,631	155,739	3.5	149,892	3.4
25–29	294,497	148,666	3.4	145,831	3.3
30–34	295,431	147,920	3.3	147,511	3.3
35–39	317,273	158,506	3.6	158,767	3.6
40–44	333,403	166,499	3.8	166,904	3.8
45–49	333,576	168,290	3.8	165,286	3.7
50–54	299,773	148,224	3.4	151,549	3.4
55–59	229,775	108,673	2.4	121,102	2.7
60–64	262,016	120,667	2.7	141,349	3.2
65–69	252,947	110,459	2.5	142,488	3.2
70–74	203,885	81,884	1.8	122,001	2.7
75–79	137,201	44,149	1.0	93,052	2.1
80–84	56,954	17,040	0.4	39,914	0.9
85–89	30,833	8,682	0.2	22,151	0.5
90–94	10,265	2,571	0.1	7,694	0.2
95 and older	1,455	323	0.0	1,132	0.0

*The difference from the total population refers to inhabitants of unknown age.

Table 2: Age structure of the Croatian population in 2001 by five-year age groups (source: Population Census 2001, Population by Sex and Age, by Settlements; Statistical Report 1167, DZS, Zagreb, 2003).

Due to increasing mortality rates, the group aged 55–59 in the 2011 census was no longer the largest, replaced instead by the group aged 50–54 (Table 3). Regarding the youngest age groups, it is notable that children aged 5–9 were fewer than those

aged 0–4 by 3.9%, and even fewer than those aged 10–14 by 13.2%. Such an imbalance is a direct consequence of the sharp decline in births in the early years of this century. There is also a significant increase in the oldest population, with 168.7 thousand individuals aged 80 years and over, compared to just 99.5 thousand individuals ten years earlier, representing a relative increase of 70%.

Age Group	Total	Men	%	Women	%
0–4	212,709	109,251	2.5	103,458	2.4
5–9	204,317	104,841	2.4	99,476	2.3
10–14	235,402	120,633	2.8	114,769	2.7
15–19	244,177	124,918	2.9	119,259	2.8
20–24	261,658	133,455	3.1	128,203	3.0
25–29	289,066	147,416	3.4	141,650	3.3
30–34	294,619	149,998	3.4	144,621	3.4
35–39	284,754	143,984	3.2	140,770	3.3
40–44	286,933	143,603	3.4	143,330	3.3
45–49	307,561	152,446	3.6	155,115	3.6
50–54	320,502	157,981	3.7	162,521	3.8
55–59	311,818	153,750	3.6	158,068	3.7
60–64	272,740	127,851	3.0	144,889	3.4
65–69	202,002	89,364	2.1	112,638	2.6
70–74	212,401	88,912	2.1	123,489	2.9
75–79	175,526	66,456	1.6	109,070	2.5
80–84	108,104	35,999	0.8	72,105	1.7
85–89	47,641	12,415	0.3	35,226	0.8
90–94	10,758	2,580	0.1	8,178	0.2
95 and older	2,201	482	0.0	1,719	0.0

Table 3: Age structure of the Croatian population in 2011 by five-year age groups (source: Population Census 2011, Population by age and sex by settlements; https://web.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/H01_01_01/H01_01_01.html).

Due to the epidemiological situation, the 2021 population census was conducted several months later than planned, and the data reflect the situation as of August 31 of that year. In contrast, in previous censuses, the data reflected the situation as of March 31. Therefore, the five-year age groups in 2021 do not completely cover identical cohorts as in the three previous censuses. However, disregarding this mismatch, it is evident that in the latest census, the largest group is the one aged 60–64, that is, individuals born between September 1957 and August 1961. After them, in terms of

numbers, the next two adjacent five-year age groups are nearly equal in population; those aged 55–59 and those aged 65–69, which largely include individuals born in the baby-boom period. Following Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013, substantial emigration among the working-age population contributed to marked cohort losses. The cohort aged 15–19 in 2011 was 12.3% smaller when it reached ages 25–29 in 2021. Similarly, the cohort aged 20–24 in 2011 was 13.0% smaller at ages 30–34 in 2021, while the cohort aged 25–29 in 2011 was 11.6% smaller at ages 35–39 in 2021. In 2021, people aged 80 and over accounted for 5.5% of the total population, up from 2.2% in 1991. Table 4 and Figure 1 show Croatia's age-sex structure in 2021.

Age group	Total	Men	%	Women	%
0–4	175,535	90,245	2.3	85,290	2.2
5–9	181,445	93,311	2.4	88,134	2.3
10–14	195,436	100,216	2.6	95,220	2.5
15–19	188,729	97,228	2.5	91,501	2.4
20–24	208,852	107,102	2.8	101,750	2.6
25–29	214,023	109,139	2.8	104,884	2.7
30–34	227,551	114,778	3.0	112,773	2.9
35–39	255,617	128,398	3.3	127,219	3.3
40–44	267,349	134,213	3.5	133,136	3.4
45–49	260,146	130,035	3.4	130,111	3.4
50–54	260,056	127,953	3.3	132,103	3.4
55–59	279,504	134,655	3.5	144,849	3.7
60–64	288,351	136,338	3.5	152,013	3.9
65–69	279,106	129,728	3.4	149,378	3.9
70–74	228,612	100,506	2.6	128,106	3.3
75–79	146,855	59,065	1.5	87,790	2.3
80–84	122,719	44,672	1.2	78,047	2.0
85–89	67,249	21,206	0.5	46,043	1.2
90–94	21,019	5,604	0.1	15,415	0.4
95 and older	3,679	737	0.0	2,942	0.1

Table 4: Age structure of the population of Croatia in 2021 by five-year age groups (source: Population Census 2021, Population by age and sex by settlements; <https://podaci.dzs.hr/hr/podaci/stanovnistvo/popis-stanovnistva>).

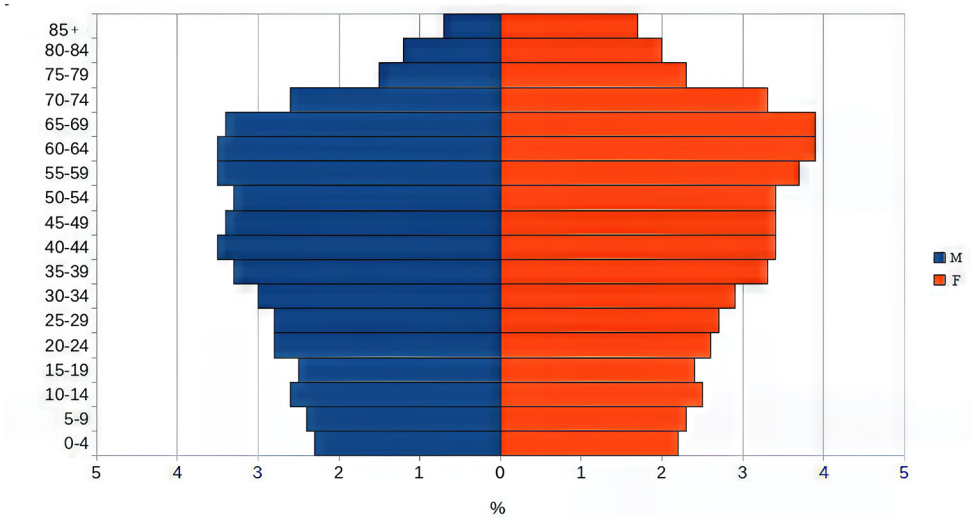


Figure 1: Croatia’s population by age group and sex, 2021. Note: The oldest category combines people aged 85 and over. Source: Authors’ calculations based on Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2021 census data.

The introduction indicates that one of the most important factors in population aging is the dynamics of the number of births and deaths. Table 5 presents data on the number of births and deaths between 1990 and 2021, showing how the decline in the number of births, which has been almost continuous in Croatia since the mid-twentieth century, along with other factors such as emigration and generational depopulation, is the primary determinant of demographic aging in Croatia (Živić, 2003b). The sustained decline in births indicates Croatia is experiencing “aging from below.” Since 1991 saw an increase in the number of deaths due to wartime events, and data on births and deaths were not available from the occupied parts of Croatia for several months at the end of the same year, the prewar year of 1990 is used as the starting point. Between 1990 and 2021, the number of births decreased by almost a third, or 32.2%, while the number of deaths increased by 21.2%. However, considering that in 2021, as well as in 2020, there was an increase in the number of deaths compared to previous years, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more relevant to compare the number of deaths to that of 2019, which shows that the number of deaths in 2019 had not significantly changed compared to 1990.¹

1 The highest number of deaths due to COVID-19 in Croatia was recorded in November and December 2020, as well as in March, November, and December 2021 (Graovac Matassi & Josipović, 2023).

Year	Births	Deaths	Natural Change
1990	53,869	51,752	2,117
1991	50,815	55,714	-4,899
1992	44,679	52,315	-7,636
1993	46,106	51,118	-5,012
1994	45,426	49,440	-4,014
1995	45,671	50,294	-4,623
1996	48,218	49,657	-1,439
1997	48,604	50,801	-2,197
1998	47,068	52,311	-5,243
1999	45,179	51,953	-6,774
2000	43,746	50,246	-6,500
2001	40,993	49,552	-8,559
2002	40,094	50,569	-10,475
2003	39,668	52,575	-12,907
2004	40,307	49,756	-9,449
2005	42,492	51,790	-9,298
2006	41,446	50,378	-8,932
2007	41,910	52,367	-10,457
2008	43,753	52,151	-8,398
2009	44,577	52,414	-7,837
2010	43,361	52,096	-8,735
2011	41,197	51,019	-9,822
2012	41,771	51,710	-9,939
2013	39,939	50,386	-10,447
2014	39,566	50,839	-11,273
2015	37,503	54,205	-16,702
2016	37,537	51,542	-14,005
2017	36,556	53,477	-16,921
2018	36,945	52,706	-15,761
2019	36,135	51,794	-15,659
2020	35,845	57,023	-21,178
2021	36,508	62,712	-26,204

Table 5: Number of births and deaths in Croatia 1990–2021 (source: Bulletins “Natural Movement of the Population of the Republic of Croatia”, Croatian Bureau of Statistics 1991–2022).

INDICATORS OF THE AGE STRUCTURE OF THE CROATIAN POPULATION

To determine the level of population aging and the dynamics of demographic processes in the age structure, several sets of indicators are available. The first group comprises two measures of central tendency: mean age and median age. Mean age—termed “average age” in the Croatian Bureau of Statistics tables—is the arithmetic mean of the ages of all members of the population at the census date. This value is influenced by the representation of both the highest and lowest age groups, and the aging process is considered to begin when the mean age reaches 30 years. Accordingly, the population of Croatia was already in the aging process in 1953, when the mean age was 30.7 years. Data for the census years 1991–2021 show an increase in the mean age from one census to another, driven by the decreasing share of the young population and the increasing share of the working-age contingent and the older population. Between 1991 and 2021, the mean age increased by as much as 7.2 years, or in that period, the mean age of the Croatian population increased annually by 0.24 years (Table 6). Due to the higher number of males in younger age groups, which is conditioned by a greater number of male births than female births, as well as the longer life expectancy of females, men have had a lower mean age than women every year, with this difference ranging from 3.3 to 3.5 years.

Year	Total	Men	Women
1991	37.1	35.4	38.7
2001	39.3	37.5	41.0
2011	41.7	39.9	43.4
2021	44.3	42.6	46.0

Table 6: Mean Age of Croatia’s Population 1991–2021. Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2023), Average Age of Population, 1953–2021 Censuses.

The median age represents the age at which the total population is divided into two equal parts. As this year is determined by its position in the numerical sequence, the median is the positional middle value. It is a better indicator of the average age than the mean age because extreme values of the population distribution by age do not affect the median. The presented time series from 1991 to 2021 shows an increase in the median age from one census to the next, confirming the process of intense aging of the Croatian population.

While in 1991, Croatia’s median age was 36.5 years, by 2021, it had risen to 45.4 years (Table 7). Within European contexts, data for 2022 show that only Italy (48.0), Portugal (46.8), Greece (46.1), and Germany (45.8) had a higher median age than

Croatia.² Among non-European countries, Japan has an older population; according to UN data for 2022, the median age there was 48.5 years (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2024). This indicates that, in terms of median age, Croatia ranks sixth among countries with the oldest population in the world. In 2022, Central African Republic had the lowest median age, at 14.3 years, followed by the Niger (15.1), Chad (15.1), Mali (15.3), and Somalia (15.4).

Year	Total	Men	Women
1991	36.5	34.9	38.3
2001	39.3	37.3	40.9
2011	42.0	40.0	44.1
2021	45.4	43.4	47.4

Table 7: Median Age of Croatia's Population 1991–2021 (source: authors' calculations based on data from Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Indicators of changes in age structure that focus on the older population are more precise indicators than the mean values. If they show the proportion of the older population in the total population, it is referred to as the old-age coefficient, and for the older population, individuals aged 60 and over or aged 65 and over can be considered. The old-age coefficient is a basic indicator of the level of aging, as it measures the increase in the share of the older population in the total population. It is generally considered that a country or region's population has begun to age when the proportion of the population aged 60 and over reaches 12% (Nejašmić, 2008), or the population aged 65 and over reaches 10% of the total population (Siegel & Swanson, 2004). Comparing the number and proportion of the older population across population censuses from 1991 to 2021 shows a significant increase in both absolute and relative numbers from census to census (Table 8). Over the entire period studied, the total population decreased by 19.1%, while the number of individuals aged 60 and over increased by 38.6% and the number of individuals aged 65 and over increased by 56.3%. The larger percentage increase partly reflects a cohort deficit at the lower end of this age group in 1991, especially among men. Born in the early to mid-1920s, these male cohorts experienced heavy losses in World War II.

By the proportion of those aged 60 and over, Croatia's population could already be considered old as early as 1971, when the old-age coefficient was 14.9, while the coefficient for those aged 65 and over first exceeded the 10% threshold in 1981, when their share of the total population was 11.4%.

Comparing Croatian data with age-coefficient data from other countries, it can be observed that in 2022, only Italy (23.8%), Portugal (23.7%), Finland (23.1%), and

² Monaco and San Marino also have a higher median age but as they have a relatively small number of inhabitants their data are often not compared with other countries (Eurostat, n.d.).

Greece (22.7%) had a higher proportion of individuals aged 65 and over.³ Of course, Japan remains ahead of them, with a significantly higher age coefficient of 28.9 in 2021.⁴ If we consider the population aged 60 and over, Croatia's situation is even more unfavorable, as only Italy (30.7%) and Portugal (30.5%) have a higher age coefficient than Croatia, second to Japan (34.7%).⁵

Year	Number of the Older Population (Aged 60 and over)	Old-age Coefficient: Population aged 60 and over (%)	Number of the Older Population (Aged 65 and over)	Old-age Coefficient: Population aged 65 and over (%)
1991	834,988	17.5	556,040	11.6
2001	955,556	21.5	693,540	15.6
2011	1,031,373	24.1	758,633	17.7
2021	1,157,590	29.9	869,239	22.5

Table 8: Older-Population Counts and Old-Age Coefficients in Croatia, 1991–2021 (source: authors' calculations based on data from Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Considering the age composition by sex, in 1991, there were 325,866 men and 509,122 women aged 60 and over, while in 2021, there were 497,856 men and 659,734 women in that age group. Thus, during the observed period, the absolute number of men aged 60 and over increased by 52.8% and the number of women aged 60 and over by 29.6%, primarily due to the aforementioned deficit cohort of men born in the 1920s. Therefore, in 1991, there were 56.2% more women aged 60 and over, while in 2021, the surplus in favor of women was only 32.5%. Even greater differences are observed in the population aged 65 and over, as the number of men increased from 199,239 in 1991 to 361,518 in 2021, an increase of 81.4%. During the same period, the number of women increased from 356,801 to 507,721, a 42.3% increase. In this age group as well, there were significantly more women than men in 1991 compared to 2021. In the latter year, there were 40.4% more women, while in 1991 the surplus of women over men reached 79.1%.

Due to higher specific mortality rates among males, resulting in a shorter average lifespan, the age coefficients for females are significantly higher than those for males (Table 9). Thus, in 2021, men aged 60 and over accounted for slightly more than a quarter of the total male population, while women aged 60 and over accounted for almost a third of the total female population. Among individuals aged 65 and over,

3 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjanind__custom_8570150/default/table?lang=en

4 <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/72nenkan/1431-02.html>

5 <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/72nenkan/1431-02.htm>; https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjanind__custom_8570212/default/table?lang=en

in 2021, the proportion among men was slightly less than a fifth, whereas among women it was slightly higher than a quarter.

Year	Age Coefficient of the Male Population (Aged 60 and over)	Age Coefficient of the Female Population (Aged 60 and over)	Age Coefficient of the Male Population (Aged 65 and over)	Age Coefficient of the Female Population (Aged 65 and over)
1991	14.0	20.7	8.6	14.5
2001	18.1	24.8	12.4	18.6
2011	20.5	27.4	14.3	20.8
2021	26.7	32.9	19.4	25.2

Table 9: Age Coefficients of the Male and Female Population in Croatia 1991–2021 (source: authors' calculations based on the data from Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Another analytical indicator that uses the older population in the numerator is the aging index, which compares the number of people aged 60 and over to those aged 0–19, or the number of people aged 65 and over to those aged 0–14.

For the aging index that considers the population aged 60 and over and those aged 0–19, the critical value is 40. If it exceeds this value, it indicates that the observed population has already entered the aging process. Accordingly, Croatia's population became old as early as 1971, as the aging index was then 47.2. By 2001, the number of young people aged 0–19 had almost equalized with the number of people aged 60 and over, with only a 10.2% difference in favor of the young. However, in 2011, there were already 115 people aged 60 and over for every 100 young people. Over the next decade, the aging index increased rapidly, with the number of older people exceeding the number of younger people by as much as 56.2%.

Over the years observed, women have had significantly higher aging indexes. Therefore, among men, older people outnumbered the young only in 2021, while among women, this happened as early as 2001.

Year	Aging index of the total population	Aging index of the male population	Aging index of the female population
1991	66.7	50.8	83.3
2001	90.7	71.6	110.8
2011	115.0	92.3	139.0
2021	156.2	130.7	183.2

Table 10: Aging index (60+/0–19 years) of the total population of Croatia and by sex 1991–2021 (source: author's calculation based on data from Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

When analyzing the aging index, which shows the ratio of people aged 65 and over to those aged 0–19, a critical value of 30 is used. This means that when there are 30 elderly people for every 100 young people, the population is considered to have already entered the aging process. According to this indicator, Croatia's population already exceeded this value significantly in 1971, when the aging index was 42.6. By 1991, the aging index had increased to twice the critical value, and by 2001, the number of elderly and children was almost equal. Similar to the previously shown aging index (60+/0–19), in 2011, there was the first recorded instance of more elderly people than young people, with 116.3 individuals aged 65 and over for every 100 individuals aged 0–14.

When considering sex, there are also no significant differences between the two calculated aging indexes in two ways, that is, for both male and female populations in Table 11 (65+/0–14 years), except for 2021, where it is higher for the female population in Table 10 (60+/0–19 years). This is a result of entering the age category of 65 and over, with more women born in the first half of the 1950s, during the baby boom period or the post-war compensatory period. Thus, in 2021, the number of women aged 65–69 was 32.6% higher than in 2011, while in the 60–64 age group, this difference was only 4.9%. Although it was expected to be similar for men, this did not happen due to differential mortality, that is, higher casualties in the Homeland War for men born in the second half of the 1950s compared to those born in the first half of the same decade.

Year	Aging index of the total population	Aging index of the male population	Aging index of the female population
1991	60.0	42.0	80.0
2001	91.9	68.7	116.3
2011	116.3	88.5	136.1
2021	157.4	127.4	189.0

Table 11: Aging Index (65+/0–14 years) of Croatia's total population and by sex 1991–2021 (source: calculated by the author based on data from Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

CONSEQUENCES OF POPULATION AGING

Population aging, simply put, is reflected in the reduction in the number and proportion (youth coefficient) of young people (up to 19 years of age) and the increase in the number and proportion (age coefficient) of the elderly (above 60 years of age) in the total population.

The decline in the number and proportion of the young population, especially the proportion of the female population in the pre-fertile age, results in a decreasing influx of population into the fertile (reproductive) age, which directly implies lower

vitality, that is, new unfavorable trends in demo-reproduction, particularly concerning the dynamics of natality. This latter process in demographic theory is also known as the cohort shift effect (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999). The proportion of the female population in the pre-fertile age (up to 14 years of age) decreased between 1991 and 2021 from 18.3% to 13.4%, and the total number of women in this segment of the Croatian female population decreased by as much as 40.5%, while the overall population decrease in the same period was 19.1%. Furthermore, the proportion of women in the fertile age group (15 to 49 years) also decreased from 46.6% to 35.4%. However, during the same period, the proportion of women in the post-fertility age group (50 years and above) increased from 33.5% to as much as 46.7% of the total female population.

The decreasing number and proportion of the young population reduce the potential volume of the working-age population, negatively affecting overall population activity and the level of socioeconomic development in the country. Changes in the age structure of the working-age population are a significant determinant of labor force dynamics and employment, as the aging workforce implies a partial aging process of the labor force, which has profound and far-reaching demographic and especially socioeconomic consequences. This has already led to a labor shortage, necessitating the development and implementation of appropriate (selective) economic immigration policies. From a series of indicators from previous studies, it is evident that the existing demographic trends in Croatia do not ensure sustainable labor force development, directly jeopardizing not only economic activity but also the pension system. In this context, it is highly unfavorable that, for instance, in 2021, pension insurance contribution revenues accounted for only 55.7% of the total revenues and receipts of the Croatian Pension Insurance Institute, while expenditures for pensions and pension benefits accounted for 96.1% of total expenditures and outlays (Balija, 2023). The increase in the number and share of the older population may contribute to a slight rise in the crude mortality rate, as age groups with higher mortality risk become more numerous. It also leads to marked increases in the financial and other resources required for the older population's pensions, health care, and social care. These additional expenditures—undoubtedly—place further burdens on the country's already disrupted and struggling economy.

CONCLUSION

Population aging is a global demographic trend that has been evident in Croatia for many years. The population of Europe is also aging rapidly due to overall aging and declining birth rates. It is estimated that the EU population will peak around 2026 and gradually decrease in the coming decades. It is projected that by 2070, the share of the population aged 65 and over will reach 30% of the total population. If such trends continue, labor shortages could worsen, and pressure on public budgets

could increase, significantly impacting investment and productivity. Consequently, in 2021, the European Commission published its *Green Paper on Ageing*, which launched an extensive strategic debate on aging, the options for anticipating and responding to its challenges and opportunities, and how to maintain the quality of life of the older population for as long as possible (European Commission, 2021). The toolbox for managing demographic change is based on four key pillars: supporting families and parents; supporting and empowering youth; empowering older generations; and, where necessary, addressing labor shortages through managed legal migration (European Commission, 2023).

Croatia's population began aging during the 1970s, initially in rural areas that lagged behind in economic development, largely due to the emigration of the reproductive-age population. During the 1980s and 1990s, population aging advanced substantially. In the 2021 census, the mean age in Croatia was 44.3 years (Table 6), placing it among the oldest populations in Europe. Croatia's advanced population aging is also reflected in the aging index, which for Croatia as a whole was 156.2, meaning that for every 100 young people aged 0–19, there were 156.2 people aged 60 and over. Besides the fact that in Croatia in 2021 there were significantly more older adults than young inhabitants, a significant indicator for understanding the state and process of population composition by age is the comparison between the child base (aged 0–4) and individuals aged 75 and over. In 2001, these age groups were almost equal in numbers, but by 2021, there were twice as many people aged 75 and over as there were children in the youngest five-year age group.

Due to the deepening natural population decline, emigration, and extended life expectancy, year after year the proportion of the young and working-age population decreases, while the aging process intensifies. Because of these demographic changes, Croatia will soon face economic, social, and financial difficulties, as fewer people contribute to the pension and health-care systems. The resulting fiscal pressure could jeopardize the functioning of the economic system, resulting in cuts to publicly funded health care, education, pensions, and other social benefits, among other things (Pokos, 2021).

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RESEARCH DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The authors state that the research data used in the article are maintained by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and are publicly available at <https://dzs.gov.hr>.

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POVZETEK

HRVAŠKO PREBIVALSTVO MED NAJSTAREJŠIMI NA SVETU (SPREMEMBE V STAROSTNI STRUKTURI, 1991–2021)

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Starostna struktura prebivalstva je iz več razlogov najpomembnejša demografska struktura. Pomembna je predvsem zato, ker predstavlja demografski okvir za vzpostavljanje reproduktivnega (vitalnega) in delovno aktivnega (delovnega) potenciala prebivalstva. Poleg tega trendi spreminjanja starostne strukture neposredno vplivajo na naravna in mehanična (migracijska) gibanja prebivalstva, s tem pa tudi na splošno demografsko dinamiko (spremembe števila prebivalstva) na določenem območju. Procesi spreminjanja starostne sestave hrvaškega prebivalstva so hkrati posledica in determinanta vseh relevantnih dejavnikov in komponent splošnega in naravnega upadanja števila prebivalstva na Hrvaškem. To je predvsem posledica dejstva, da so imeli vsi procesi, ki od leta 1991 vplivajo starostno strukturo hrvaškega prebivalstva, negativne razvojne značilnosti. To velja predvsem za stalno zmanjševanje rodnosti in s tem povezano povečanje umrljivosti, posledica česar je stalno naravno zmanjševanje prebivalstva od leta 1991 naprej. Poleg tega je za Hrvaško, zlasti od leta 2013 naprej, značilna intenzivna emigracija, predvsem mlajšega prebivalstva. Ti dejavniki so prispevali k intenzivnemu staranju prebivalstva, zaradi česar se Hrvaška po nekaterih kazalnikih uvršča med države z najstarejšim prebivalstvom na svetu.

Avtorji v članku na podlagi več analitičnih kazalnikov, s pomočjo katerih so kvantificirali in opredelili stopnjo staranja hrvaškega prebivalstva, predstavijo spremembe v starostni sestavi prebivalstva na Hrvaškem med letoma 1991 in 2021. Staranje prebivalstva se, najenostavneje povedano, kaže v zmanjšanju števila in deleža (koeficient mladosti) mladih (do 19 let) ter v povečanju števila in deleža (koeficient starosti) starejših (nad 60 let) v celotnem prebivalstvu. Tako se je na primer v obdobju 1991–2021 koeficient mladosti zmanjšal s 26,2 na 19,2, koeficient starosti pa povečal s 17,5 na 29,9. Z drugimi besedami, delež mladih v celotnem prebivalstvu Hrvaške je padel pod petino, delež starejših pa narasel na skoraj tretjino celotnega prebivalstva. V istem obdobju se je delež prebivalstva, starega do 14 let, zmanjšal z 19,4 % na 14,3 %, delež prebivalstva, starejšega od 65 let, pa se je povečal z 11,6 % na 22,5 % – to pomeni, da se je v le tridesetih letih skoraj podvojil!

Zaradi dolgoročne narave demografskih sprememb, vse bolj neugodnih trendov razvoja prebivalstva in njihovega negativnega vpliva na družbeno-gospodarski razvoj sta nujni celovita zasnova in izvedba aktivnega konceptu prebivalstvene in družinske politike. To je treba podpreti še s spodbujanjem pozitivnega družbenega ozračja do otrok, zakonske zveze in družine, s krepitvijo odgovornega starševstva ter z zagotavljanjem gospodarske rasti, ki omogoča zaposlovanje. Poleg tega je treba omogočiti lažji dostop do stanovanj ter uveljaviti druge spodbujevalne ukrepe prebivalstvene in družinske politike, zlasti na področjih delovne in davčne zakonodaje.