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## DISABLED PERSONS INCLUSION PATTERNS IN THE CROATIAN EMPLOYMENT SECTOR

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses the quantitative research on disabled persons' social inclusion patterns in the Croatian employment sector. Croatian Employment Service and Croatian National Institute for Expertise, Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities aggregated open source data have been used to calculate the national structure and movement of employed and unemployed persons with disabilities in the Croatian employment sector from 2005-2022. The paper used a statistical analysis of the dynamic change of employed and unemployed persons with disabilities in the period from 2005 to 2022 in monitoring changes in the number of employed and unemployed persons with disabilities. The shares of the number of employed persons in the total number of persons with disabilities and the shares of the number of unemployed persons in the total number of persons with disabilities were calculated. Statistical coefficients were also presented, showing the ratio of the number of unemployed persons with disabilities to employed persons with disabilities. The analysis results show a positive trend in the employment of persons with disabilities in the Croatian employment sector from 2005 to 2022. Observing the direct relationship between employment and unemployment of persons with disabilities, there is an encouraging trend. Since 2005, the number of unemployed per employed person with disabilities has been decreasing year by year. There is a noticeable reverse trend of decrease in the period of the great economic crisis 2008-2011 and a discrepancy in 2020 at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating the employment sector reaction to pressures of significant socio-economic changes on the employment rates of people with disabilities, which are consequently negatively reflected and primarily affecting employment status of vulnerable social groups. Finally, research and practical implications, limitations and further research recommendations are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Disabled persons, Employment sector, Social inclusion*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from the etymological and socio-cultural frame, the root of the term disabled, as found in the earliest meaning from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was used in presenting a legally disqualified person, continuing further with the synonym in the meaning of incapacitated person during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The overall societal perception of persons with disabilities continues in our broad contemporary cultural comprehension till nowadays in the same, almost unchanged mindset and notion.

People with disabilities are a vulnerable group in every society, often exposed to stereotypes, discrimination and prejudices that hinder their integration into active social life, especially into the world of work and employment. However, disability in itself is not a characteristic of a person but a set of factors created by the broader social atmosphere (labelling), a complex social network made up of negative social attitudes (stigmatization), spatial and cultural barriers, including norms, availability of services and programs (Hughes, 2019). Permanent social exclusion of disabled persons from the primary inclusive practices and flows results in deep socio-economic degradation and rejection from all spheres of social life, consequently employment and work. On the UN human rights list, as noted in Article 23, the right to work, or active employment sector engagement, is guaranteed equally to all (UN, 1948). Additionally, social inclusion for persons with disabilities in the workplace labour market is further claimed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Article 27 (UNCRPD, 2006), while EU Commission and Croatian national legislation through its formal – legal and policy framework protect and promote further disabled persons social inclusion practices and employment sector participation. The Act on the Croatian Register of Persons with Disabilities (Official Gazette 64/01) prescribes the method of collecting, processing and protecting the confidentiality of data on persons with disabilities. The Croatian Institute of Public Health maintained the register and started operating in 2002. According to the document, as mentioned earlier, "disability is a permanent limitation, reduction or loss of ability (resulting from health impairment) of some physical activity or mental function appropriate for a person's age and refers to abilities, in the form of complex activities and behaviours, which are generally accepted as essential components of everyday life" (HZJZ, 2022). Although a minority, according to the estimates of the United Nations, the problem of disability is much more widespread than is usually thought: at least one out of ten inhabitants of every country is, to some extent, a person with a disability. This share is even higher in the Republic of Croatia, as people with disabilities make up about 15% of the total population (HZJZ, 2022).

## **2. DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN DISABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT**

The topic of disabled persons' inclusive practices in the employment sector has been gaining more focus in the last few decades, especially in light of the contemporary challenges the employment sector faces nowadays with fast-changing environments, technology upgrades and working force migration and motivation. Current International Labour Organization data show that persons with disabilities are roughly 60% less likely to be employed than those without disabilities (ILO, 2023).

### **2.1. Overview and Intersections: Theory vs Practice**

In explaining the obstacles in the labour market for people with disabilities, Russell (2002), Bruyère & Saleh (2018) identify causes of unemployment opportunities for people with disabilities, which are manifested in discriminatory attitudes and practices of employers and obstacles present in the workplace, while Stapleton (2023) is pointing towards discrepancy between policy, legislative and institutional norms and social values presented through employment practice. His work often examines the effectiveness of policy interventions and the impact of disability-related programs on employment. He has made significant contributions to understanding the factors influencing employment outcomes for disabled persons, while Schur et al. (2013) focus on disability discrimination, debate challenges faced by disabled persons in the employment context and shed light on ways to promote their inclusion in an overall societal context. Jakulić (1983) believes that unemployment of persons with disabilities primarily reflects society's negative attitude towards the specific minority group, unlike their inability to work and contribute to the employment market. Crnković-Požaić (2002) emphasizes that in the open labour market, companies reaching for profit compete and

oppose competition with employees' abilities, skills and knowledge, not attracting and employing members of a specific social group. Therefore, the current global employment market produces Agencies specialized in disabled people's employment, discovering talents and offering their services to employers, removing obstacles to their employment (Cloerkes, 1997; Conlin, 2000). Babić & Leutar (2010) noted that integrating people with disabilities in the Croatian labour market still falls significantly behind the progress made in the legislative and institutional infrastructure. Kiš-Glavaš (2009) research showed that employers do not sufficiently support the employment and work of people with disabilities in the Croatian employment sector. Only 9% of employers see the possibility of employing them on the open labour market, and only 30% have thought or are considering employing people with disabilities. Leutar & Milić Babić (2008) finally emphasize the importance of disabled persons' employment and active participation in the labour force and employment sector due to increment in their independence, self-sufficiency and overall life quality.

## 2.2. People with disabilities in the labour market in the Republic of Croatia

According to the data of the Croatian Employment Service, CES (2023), in 2022, a total of 131,938 people were employed in Croatia, of which 3,065 were disabled (about 1.6%). The percentage of employment of men (51.8% of the total number of employed persons with disabilities) is higher than that of women with disabilities (48.2%).

| Year  | The overall number of persons with disability | Dana on date | M      |       | F      |       |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
|       |                                               |              | Number | %     | Number | %     |
| 2007. | 475391                                        | 1.5.2007.    | 282948 | 59,52 | 192443 | 40,48 |
| 2008. | 488312                                        | 27.11.2008.  | 290342 | 59,46 | 197970 | 40,54 |
| 2009. | 511080                                        | 14.12.2009.  | 305418 | 59,76 | 205662 | 40,24 |
| 2010. | 529103                                        | 13.12.2010.  | 316557 | 59,83 | 212546 | 40,17 |
| 2012. | 518081                                        | 12.1.2012.   | 311995 | 60,22 | 206086 | 39,78 |
| 2013. | 520437                                        | 17.1.2013.   | 313217 | 60,18 | 207220 | 39,82 |
| 2014. | 510274                                        | 30.1.2014    | 308060 | 60,37 | 202214 | 39,63 |
| 2015. | 508350                                        | 12.3.2015    | 306614 | 60,32 | 201736 | 39,68 |
| 2016. | 511094                                        | 14.03.2016.  | 307505 | 60,17 | 203589 | 39,83 |
| 2017. | 511850                                        | 14.3.2017    | 307934 | 60,16 | 203916 | 39,84 |
| 2019. | 511281                                        | 3.5.2019.    | 307647 | 60,17 | 203634 | 39,83 |
| 2020. | 582428                                        | 23.9.2020    | 334816 | 57,49 | 247612 | 42,51 |
| 2021. | 586153                                        | 9.9.2021.    | 335050 | 57,16 | 251103 | 42,84 |
| 2022. | 624019                                        | 1.9.2022.    | 335550 | 56,66 | 270469 | 43,34 |

*Table 1: The number of persons with disabilities in the period from 2007 to 2022 in Croatia (Source: Authors according to CIPH data, Report on persons with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia 2017-2023)*

The share of employed persons with disabilities in the total number of all employed persons from the records of the Croatian Employment Service is 2.3% (the share of employed male persons with disabilities is 2.9%, and females 1.9%), which is an increase compared to the last year (by 0.5%). Of the total number of employed persons with disabilities, 96.7% are employed based on establishing an employment relationship and 3.3% based on other business activities (registration of a trading company, trade, employment contract, etc.). In 2022, 117,816 unemployed persons were registered in Croatia, and 7,196 were persons with disabilities (6.1%). According to the published data of the Croatian Institute of Public Health, HZJZ (2018), in the reports on persons with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia, there were 475,391 persons with disabilities in Croatia in 2007. The number of persons with disabilities from 2007 to 2022 increased by 31.3% (table 1), reaching 624,019 in 2022.

### 3. DATA AND METHOD

Data on the number of employed and unemployed persons with disabilities were collected from the Croatian Employment Service, CES. Data are available from 2005 to 2022. Data on the number of people with disabilities were collected from the Croatian Institute of Public Health, CIPH, which has been available since 2007. Data for 2011 and 2018 have not been published. The paper used a statistical analysis of dynamic change (Radman-Funarić, 2018). of employed and unemployed persons with disabilities in the period from 2005 to 2022 to monitor changes in the number of employed and unemployed persons. The shares of the number of employed persons in the total number of persons with disabilities and the shares of the number of unemployed persons in the total number of persons with disabilities in percentage were calculated. Also, statistical coefficients were calculated that show the ratio of the number of unemployed persons with disabilities to one employed person with disabilities.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

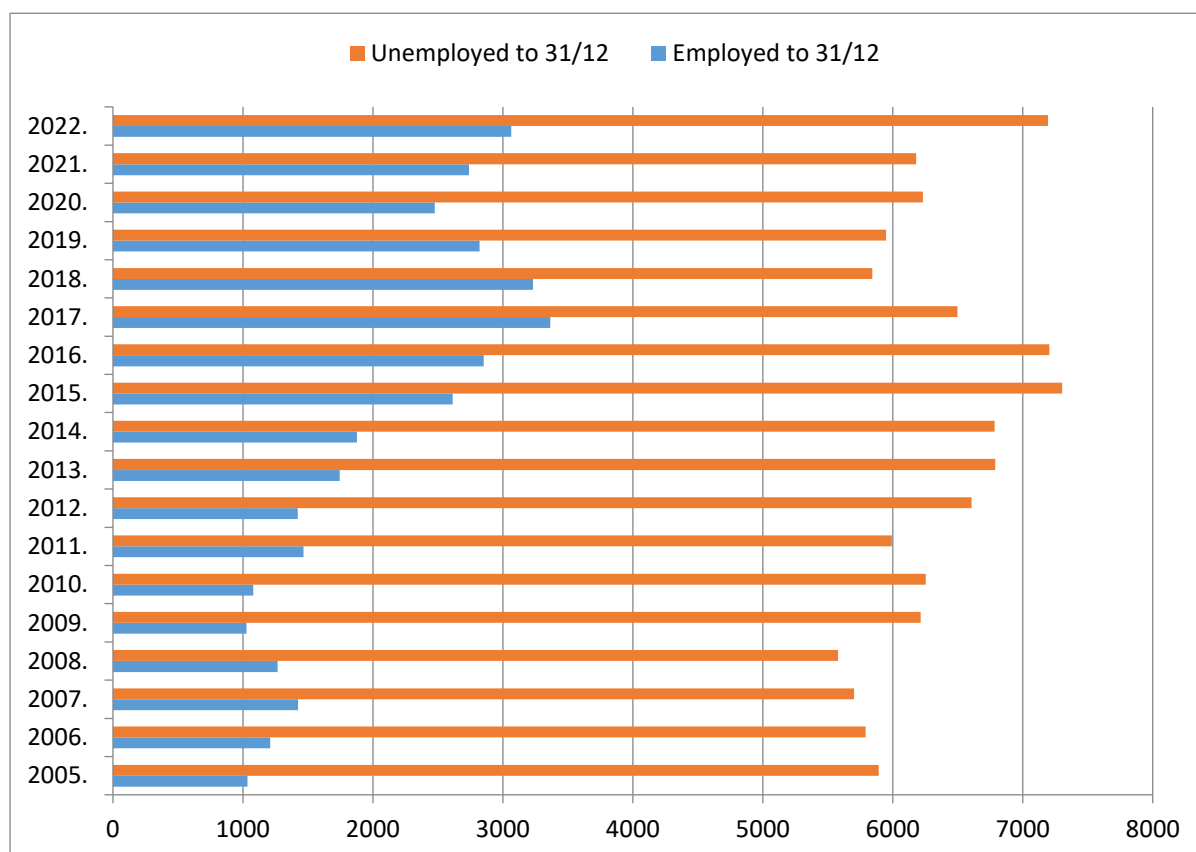
The number of employed and unemployed persons with disabilities in Croatia in the period from 2005 to 2022 is shown in Table 2 (CES, 2015; 2023).

| Year  | Employed until 31.12. | Index of change compared to last year | Share of employed persons with disabilities per 100 persons with disabilities | Unemployed at 31.12. | Index of change compared to last year | Share of unemployed persons with disabilities per 100 persons with disabilities | The number of unemployed per employed person with disabilities |
|-------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1     | 2                     | 3                                     | 4                                                                             | 5                    | 6                                     | 7                                                                               | 8                                                              |
| 2005. | 1034                  | ...                                   | ...                                                                           | 5892                 | ...                                   | ...                                                                             | 5,7                                                            |
| 2006. | 1211                  | 117,12                                | ...                                                                           | 5790                 | 98,27                                 | ...                                                                             | 4,8                                                            |
| 2007. | 1423                  | 117,51                                | 0,30                                                                          | 5703                 | 98,50                                 | 1,20                                                                            | 4,0                                                            |
| 2008. | 1267                  | 89,04                                 | 0,26                                                                          | 5579                 | 97,83                                 | 1,14                                                                            | 4,4                                                            |
| 2009. | 1028                  | 81,14                                 | 0,20                                                                          | 6215                 | 111,40                                | 1,22                                                                            | 6,0                                                            |
| 2010. | 1080                  | 105,06                                | 0,20                                                                          | 6255                 | 100,64                                | 1,18                                                                            | 5,8                                                            |
| 2012. | 1421                  | 97,00                                 | 0,27                                                                          | 6607                 | 110,26                                | 1,28                                                                            | 4,6                                                            |
| 2013. | 1744                  | 122,73                                | 0,34                                                                          | 6789                 | 102,75                                | 1,30                                                                            | 3,9                                                            |
| 2014. | 1877                  | 107,63                                | 0,37                                                                          | 6783                 | 99,91                                 | 1,33                                                                            | 3,6                                                            |
| 2015. | 2613                  | 139,21                                | 0,51                                                                          | 7303                 | 107,67                                | 1,44                                                                            | 2,8                                                            |
| 2016. | 2853                  | 109,18                                | 0,56                                                                          | 7204                 | 98,64                                 | 1,41                                                                            | 2,5                                                            |
| 2017. | 3366                  | 117,98                                | 0,66                                                                          | 6497                 | 90,19                                 | 1,27                                                                            | 1,9                                                            |
| 2019. | 2820                  | 87,28                                 | 0,55                                                                          | 5948                 | 101,80                                | 1,16                                                                            | 2,1                                                            |
| 2020. | 2475                  | 87,77                                 | 0,42                                                                          | 6231                 | 104,76                                | 1,07                                                                            | 2,5                                                            |
| 2021. | 2740                  | 110,71                                | 0,47                                                                          | 6179                 | 99,17                                 | 1,05                                                                            | 2,3                                                            |
| 2022. | 3065                  | 111,86                                | 0,49                                                                          | 7196                 | 116,46                                | 1,15                                                                            | 2,3                                                            |

*Table 2: Employed and unemployed persons with disabilities from 2005 to 2022  
(Source: Authors according to CES data, 2015; 2023)*

Data presented in Table 2 show that the employment and unemployment of persons with disabilities generally increased from 2005 to 2022, oscillating during the mentioned period (Graph 1). The increase in employment is not accompanied by the decrease in unemployment of persons with disabilities every year. In the years of the global financial crisis, in 2008, compared to the previous year, the number of employees (Table 2, column 3) fell by 11%, and in 2009 by an additional 9%. During the crisis, the unemployment of people with disabilities increased. Since 2013, the employment of persons with disabilities has recorded positive developments. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people with disabilities are again under the attack of unemployment, while the year 2021 shows the recovery of the labour market for people with disabilities.

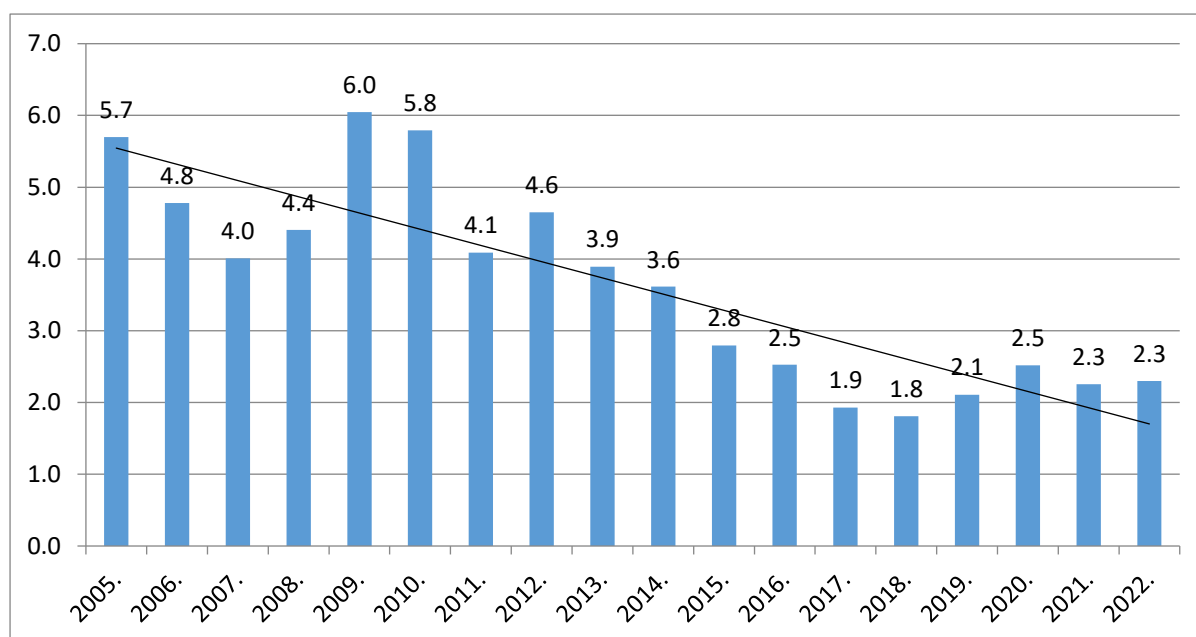
Data obtained here (for both global economic and COVID crises confirmed the findings of Babić & Leutar (2010) as well as Wong et al. (2022), stating how great socio-economic crises hit first and hard on the most vulnerable, marginalized and excluded social groups as people with disabilities are in today's contemporary society. The share of employed persons with disabilities in the total number of persons with disabilities shows almost the same trend. In 2007, this share was 0.3%; it decreased during the financial crisis, and since 2013 it has been recovering again, so in 2022, 0.49% of the employment of persons with disabilities was recorded (table 2, column 4). On the other hand, the share of unemployed persons with disabilities in the total number of persons with disabilities (table 2, column 7) decreased from 1.2% in 2007 to 1.05% in 2021. However, in 2022 there will be an increase in the number of unemployed persons with disabilities. The increase in the share of unemployed persons with disabilities during the financial crisis continued several years later. In addition to the unfavourable position in the employment system concerning the pressure caused by the economic crisis, the data also show that the active reintegration into the labour market for persons with disabilities and special needs is not flexible, adaptation is slow, and the needs and expectations of employers and employees in the reactivation of persons with disabilities are mismatched resulting in a slow pace of employment market openness and sensitivity to the disabled persons needs Babić & Leutar (2010, Wong, et al. (2022).



*Chart 1: Trends in persons with disabilities employment and unemployment from 2005 to 2022*

*(Source: Authors according to CES data, 2015; 2023)*

Observing the direct relationship between employment and unemployment of persons with disabilities, there is an encouraging trend. Since 2005, the number of unemployed per employed person with disabilities has been decreasing year by year. Thus, in 2005, that number was 5.7 unemployed per employed person, and in 2022 it was 2.3, as shown in Table 2.



*Chart 2: Number of unemployed persons with disabilities per one employed person with disabilities*

*(Source: Authors according to CES data, 2015; 2023)*

The results of the analysis shown in Chart 2 follow positive trends in the period from 2005 to 2022, showing that the number of unemployed persons with disabilities per one employed person with disabilities is progressively decreasing. There is a noticeable trend of slowing down in the period of the great economic crisis of 2008-2011 and a discrepancy in 2020 at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating the pressures that significant socio-economic changes have on the employment of people with disabilities, which are consequently reflected into the labour market and primarily affecting vulnerable social groups.

## 5. CONCLUSION

People with disabilities form a significant group in Croatian society that is often invisible in various aspects of social life. Social exclusion and stigmatization deprive persons with disabilities of participation in several social spheres: adequate level of education, competitive position in the labour market, and consequently, difficulties in employability and denial of the right to work. Such an undesirable position of persons with disabilities in the labour market leads to further and more profound structural socio-economic consequences that spill over into the framework of the social welfare system (insecurity, threatened existence, poverty). The analysis results in the paper show a positive trend in the employment of persons with disabilities in the Croatian labour market from 2005 to 2022. Employers increasingly decide to hire people with disabilities and give them the opportunity for self-realization in the labour market through employment and career as an essential component of the dignity of each individual. Being employed, working and contributing to the community (and not depending on someone's charity) is essential to every individual's life. Work and employment represent a source of existence, self-confidence, professional development, social contacts and, in general, a source of better quality and a better life perspective in every aspect we all want; regardless of differences among social groups, society is composed. The quantitative approach used in the data analysis is of limited scope and cannot fully describe the obstacles and challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the Croatian labour market, which the authors consider the limitations of this work.

Future research in the subject area, therefore, aims at qualitative research methods aimed at the key stakeholders in the process of removing obstacles to the full integration of persons with disabilities into the labour market, which, in addition to persons with disabilities, include employers and creators and decision-makers in this area aiming towards inclusive employment practice for all.

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