

Child poverty

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According to the United Nations (UN), poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, it is a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society, therefore it is an exclusion of individuals, families and communities (UN, 1998). Poverty is a multifaceted problem that particularly affects children. Child poverty can threaten children's physical development (malnutrition, lack of hygiene) and even more so their social and emotional development. Children from poor families are sometimes rejected by their peers, excluded from school or family life, and may become victims of violence or engage in risky behaviour. Research shows that low family socio-economic status impairs children's quality of life in a number of dimensions (Petelewicz, 2016).

In Poland, children are a group particularly at risk of poverty. Statistically, a child in our country is much more likely to be in hardship than an adult or an elderly person. In addition, they are usually not in a position to take steps on their own to improve their material and living situation.

What is the scale of the problem? This chapter will present and discuss statistics from various sources showing the scale of poverty in relation to its various definitions. This is poverty as measured by indicators based on both household income and material needs that remain unmet (so-called material deprivation). Nutrition and housing aspects will also be addressed as being particularly important in the context of the youngest.

Definitions and measures of poverty

Poverty can be defined as a state of deprivation resulting from insufficient income. Operational definitions of poverty vary depending on what income we take as the poverty line. If the income that makes it possible to barely live on is taken as such a line, we are referring to poverty in the absolute sense. If the poverty line is set as a relative income compared with the material standard of a given society, we speak of a relative approach to poverty. There is also a so-called statutory poverty line set by the amount of income entitling individuals and families who fall below this income to apply for cash benefits from the social assistance system.

Absolute poverty

In Poland, absolute poverty (also sometimes referred to as extreme poverty) is usually defined in relation to the subsistence minimum. This is the amount (calculated on an ongoing basis by the Institute of Labour and Social Affairs [IPISS]) that only allows for necessary expenses that cannot be postponed. Income below this threshold endangers a person's health and threatens biological existence. The amount is calculated by creating a so-called basket, which includes only expenses for food, housing,

medicine, hygiene, clothing and footwear and, in the case of families with school-age children, school handbooks. In 2021, this amounted to an average of PLN 671.36 for a single person, PLN 1,662.82 for a family of three with a child aged 4–6 (PLN 554.70 per person), PLN 1,814.71 for the same family with a child aged 13–15 (PLN 604.90 per person – the higher costs are due to higher nutritional needs and school expenses) and PLN 2,329.77 for a family of four with one younger and one older child (PLN 582.44 per person; IPISS, 2022a).

The subsistence minimum should not be confused with the social minimum. The latter one takes into account the expenses needed to function in society, so also minimum expenses for education, entertainment and culture. In 2021 it amounted on average to PLN 1,329.24 for a single person, PLN 3,318.18 for a family of three with a child aged 4–6 (PLN 1,106.06 per person), PLN 3,546.62 for the same family with a child aged 13–15 (PLN 1,182.21 per person – the higher costs are related to higher nutritional needs and school expenses) and PLN 4,286.15 for a family of four with one younger and one older child (PLN 1,071.54 per person; IPISS, 2022b; Table 1). Those living below the social minimum are not yet living in poverty, but are in a group at serious risk of poverty. The Statistics Poland (GUS) calls these people living in privation (GUS, 2021d).

Table 1. Subsistence and social minimum values in 2021

	Households made of			
	1 person	3 persons M+F+YC	3 persons M+F+OC	4 persons M+F+YC+OC
Subsistence minimum per household	PLN 671.36	PLN 1,662.82	PLN 1,814.71	PLN 2,329.77
Subsistence minimum per person	PLN 671.36	PLN 554.70	PLN 604.90	PLN 582.44
Social minimum per household	PLN 1,329.24	PLN 3,318.18	PLN 3,546.62	PLN 4,286.15
Social minimum per person	PLN 1,329.24	PLN 1,106.06	PLN 1,182.21	PLN 1,071.54

M – male, F – female, YC – younger child, OC – older child

Source: IPISS, 2022a; IPISS, 2022b.

Relative poverty

Poland usually adopts as the relative poverty line a level of household expenditure lower than half of the average household expenses in the country. Households below this line thus spend less than half of what the average Polish household spends. Its determination is mainly based on data from the Statistics Poland's household budget survey (Labour Force Survey). It should be noted that relative poverty is related to the general economic situation of the country. Therefore, it may happen that although the rate of poverty measured in this way will increase (e.g. due to increased income stratification), the standard of living behind this notion will improve at the same time (due to general wage growth). In Poland, in 2020, the level of half of the average income per person (so-called equivalent) in a household was PLN 799 (GUS, 2021d). In statistics of the European Union (EU), the indicator used to measure relative poverty is the so-called at-risk-of-poverty rate, i.e. the share of people with income below 60% of the median income in a given economy (Eurostat, 2022a).

Statutory poverty

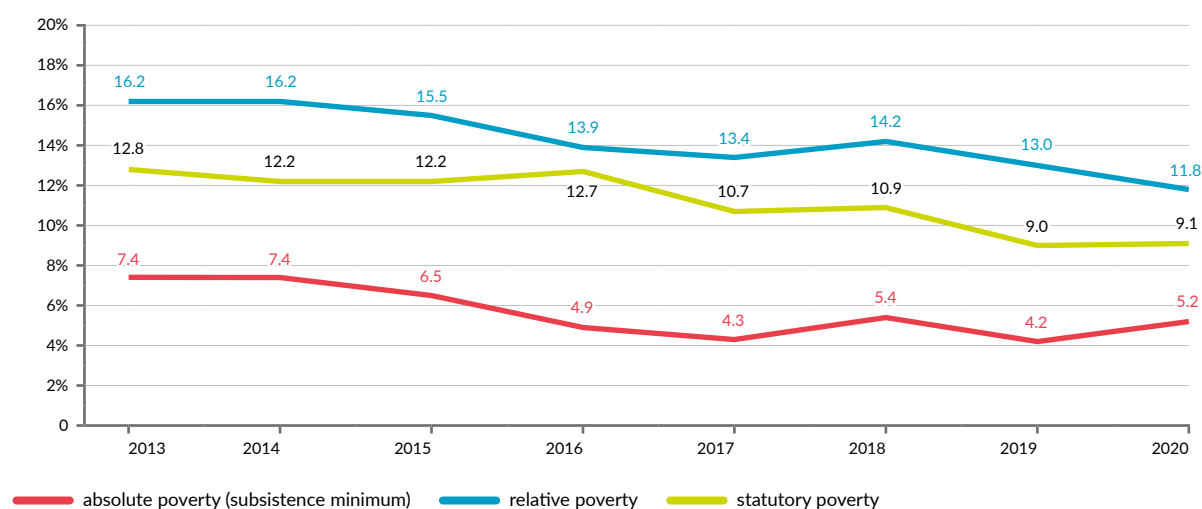
Poverty is also sometimes defined as not reaching the income level set by law as the limit below which one can apply for cash benefits from social assistance. Currently (as of 1 January 2022), for a person running a household alone it is an income not exceeding PLN 776, while for a person in a family it is PLN 600¹. Under the Social Welfare Act, these thresholds are updated every three years.

Extent of child poverty in Poland

The most important indicator of poverty is its extent, i.e. the percentage of people below the poverty line. Of course, due to the – already discussed – different definitions of poverty, the extent also varies depending on the poverty line used.

Absolute poverty, as measured by the subsistence minimum, affected around 5.2% of Poles in 2020, with almost one in ten (9.1%) being entitled to social assistance due to low income. Relative poverty, i.e. monthly expenditure lower than half of the average expenses, in turn affected 11.8% of Poles (GUS, 2021d; Figure 1).

Figure 1. Extent of poverty in Poland between 2013 and 2020 (%)



Source: GUS, 2021d, 2021e.

Over the last years, the extent of relative poverty has been constantly decreasing (this decline has been maintained for almost two decades – in 2003, the extent of relative poverty was above 20%). After Poland's accession to the EU, the situation has in principle improved every year. This is also related to the slow but systematic reduction of income stratification over the last two decades. The Gini

1 Before valorisation in 2022, this was PLN 701 for a single person and PLN 528 per person in a family. In 2021, the statutory thresholds were therefore below the value of the subsistence minimum. In other words, a family may have been in extreme poverty but not eligible for social assistance cash benefits.

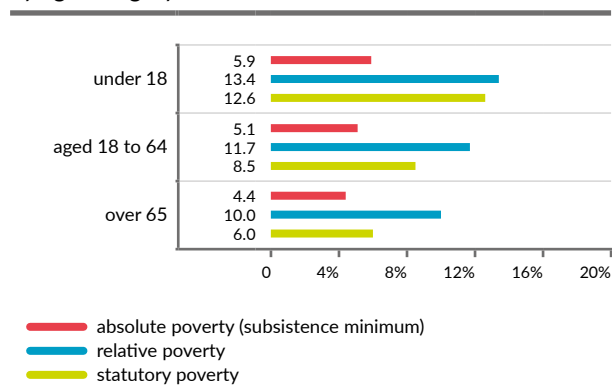
index² used to measure stratification amounted for Poland in 2020 to 27.5 points and has also been steadily decreasing over the last decade. This index was lower in Poland than the EU average (30.0 in 2020). Poland, along with the Scandinavian countries and the Czechia, Slovakia and Slovenia, ranks among the EU countries with the lowest income disparities (Eurostat 2022b).

The extent of poverty, however, did not decrease in a linear manner when considering the absolute poverty line (subsistence minimum). Although it decreased between 2014 and 2017, in recent years the trend is not clear. An increase in the absolute poverty line in 2020 is linked by both the GUS (2022d) and experts (Szarfenberg, 2021) to the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to a deterioration of living standards for the least affluent citizens. In 2020, absolute poverty exceeded 5% again, which means that about 2 million Polish citizens lived in conditions of extreme hardship with incomes below the minimum subsistence level.

The extent of poverty naturally differs in relation to different social groups. With regard to age categories, all data clearly show that children and young people (those under 18 years of age) are most affected by poverty. The extent of extreme poverty was 5.9% among children in 2020, 16% higher than for people of working age (5.1%) and 34% higher than for seniors (4.4%). The extent of relative and statutory poverty is also highest for those under 18. Almost one in eight children lives in families entitled to social assistance benefits (12.6%; GUS 2022d; Figure 2).

In recent years, the extent of child poverty has been decreasing, however – especially with regard to extreme (absolute) poverty – the decrease has not been as significant as some experts predicted in the context of the introduction of the Family 500+ programme. While it is true that between 2014 and 2017, the extent of absolute poverty among children fell by more than half and relative

Figure 2. Extent of poverty in Poland in 2020 by age category



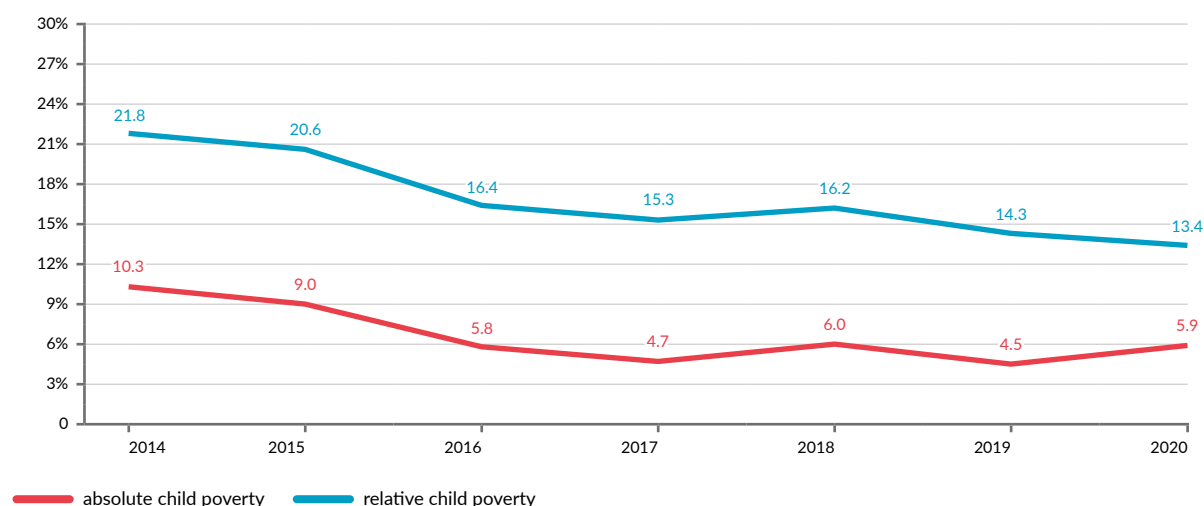
Source: GUS (2021d).

poverty by 30 per cent, this trend did not continue between 2017 and 2020. In 2020, the extent of absolute poverty among children increased from a record low of 4.5% in 2019 to 5.9% (Figure 3). In absolute terms this means that the number of children in extreme poverty increased by 98,000 – from 313,000 in 2019 to 410,000 in 2020. Looking at the trend, it can be said that the situation of the poorest children has not clearly improved since 2016.

The above-average extent of poverty among the under 18 age group is linked to the difficult material situation of families with children, especially families with many children. Figure 4 shows the extent of poverty in 2020 by household type. We can see that single-person households, but also (married) couples without children or with one child, are statistically much less likely to experience material hardship than the general population. Also families with two children are in a better situation than the average. Families with three and more children, on the other hand, are exposed to a much higher risk of poverty. Such families live below the minimum subsistence threshold twice as often as families with two children and four times as often as families with one child. In recent years, the Statistics Poland has noted an improvement in the standard of living of families with many children. The gap in the average material situation of families with many children compared to families without children and families with one or two children has also decreased.

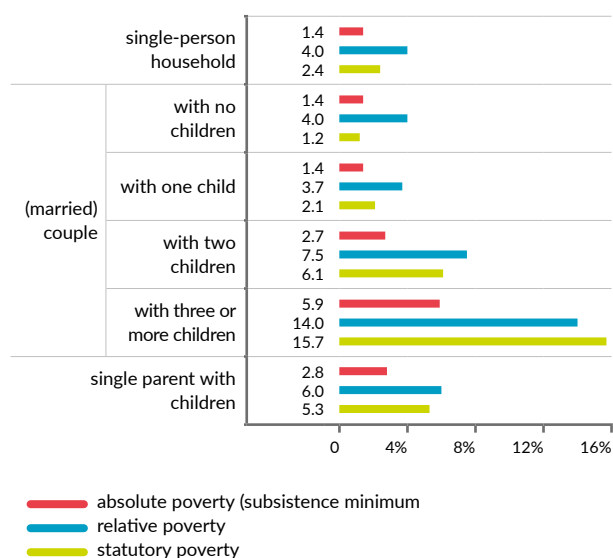
2 The Gini index takes values of 0–100 points. A score of zero indicates full income equality and 100 indicates a situation where one person in society would accumulate all income. The higher the index, the greater income inequality exists in a given society.

Figure 3. Extent of poverty in Poland between 2014 and 2020 (%)



Source: GUS, in: Szarfenberg, 2021, p. 28.

Figure 4. Extent of poverty in Poland in 2020 by household type



Source: GUS, 2021d.

allowances collected by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (MRPiPS).

With regard to the issue of child poverty, the most important information is on family allowances. This is a benefit (in the amount of PLN 95–135 per child) that a parent or guardian of a child can receive if the family does not exceed the income criterion per person. The criterion in this case has not changed since 1 November 2015 and is PLN 674 per person or PLN 764 if there is a disabled child in the family. It is worth noting that these criteria are set at a very low level. The PLN 674 criterion is only by PLN 91 higher than the subsistence minimum (for 2021 per person in a family of four M+F+OC+YC) and by PLN 397 lower than the social minimum (for 2021 per person in a family of four M+F+OC+YC). The number of family allowances granted is therefore another indicator of the number of children in a very difficult material situation³.

Family allowances

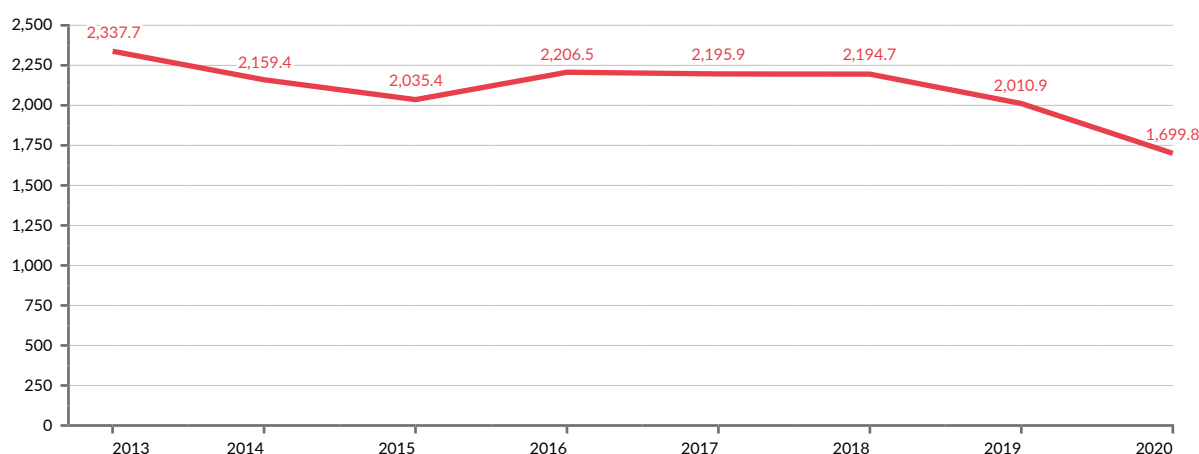
In addition to statistical data from the household survey conducted by GUS, important information on the material situation of children is also provided by data on family

3 Although, due to the complicated system of granting this allowance, not all recipients actually have incomes below this criterion. Firstly, the Family 500+ benefit and some other benefits are not taken into account when determining the right to the allowance, and secondly, according to the 'zloty for zloty' principle, once the threshold is exceeded, the right to allowance is retained, but reduced by the amount exceeding the threshold.

In 2020, family allowances were received by 821.9 thousand families, granted to 1,699.8 thousand children, and the total sum of payments amounted to PLN 2.3 billion. Seventy-three per cent of the recipient families were families with one or two children, and 27% were families with many children (three or more). In addition, 21.5% of recipient families were single-parents and 12.9% families with a disabled child. Quite shocking are the data that as many as 51% of collecting families (419 thousand) do not reach an income of PLN 400 per person in the family, i.e. well below the subsistence minimum threshold (GUS, 2021b).

As shown in Figure 5, the number of children for whom family allowance was granted between 2013 and 2019 fluctuated around 2 million. In 2020, this figure dropped to 1.7 million children. This may be related to an increase in income combined with the unchanging very low income criterion for these benefits.

Figure 5. Number of children for whom family allowance was granted between 2013 and 2020 (in thousands)



Source: GUS, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021c.

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Lessons are online, and I don't have a computer. We have a bad financial situation in our family. My peers laugh at me for having no money.

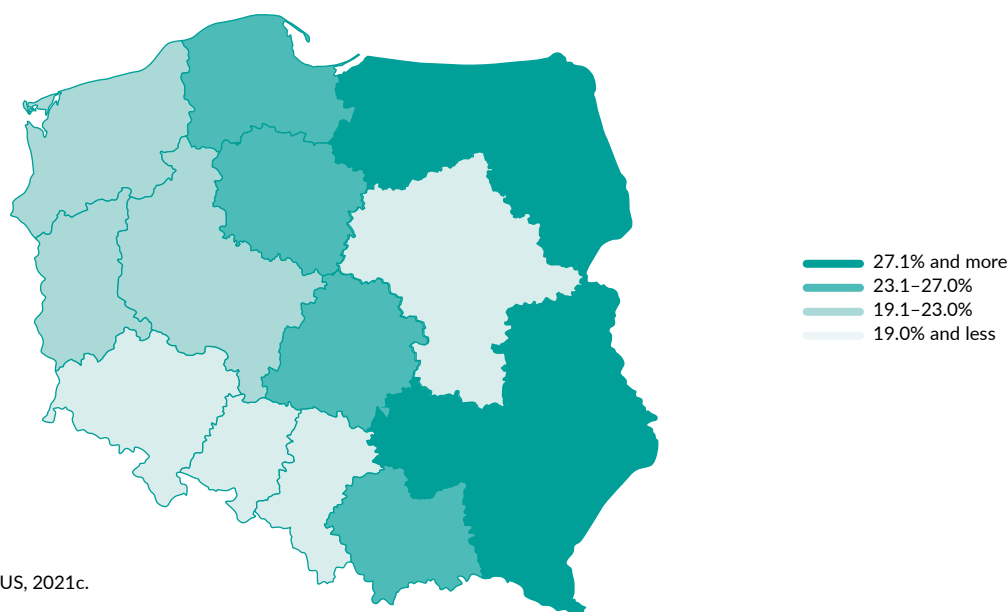
15-year-old boy

A quote from phone calls and emails to

116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People

Overall, in 2020 family allowances were paid to 22.7% of all children under 18, so almost one in four children received them. In addition, it should be noted that the share of these children in the general population varied by province. Image 1 clearly shows that it was significantly higher in the eastern provinces⁴. The highest rate was recorded in Lubelskie Voivodeship (30.2%) and the lowest in Dolnośląskie Voivodeship (16.8%).

Image 1. Share of children under 18 for whom parents received family allowance in the total number of children of that age in 2020



Source: GUS, 2021c.

Alimony fund benefits

In addition to family allowances, also benefits from the Alimony Fund have an impact on material situation of many families at risk of poverty. These are intended to help children whose parents fail to meet their maintenance obligations. It is worth reminding that this fund was curtailed in the 1990s and was completely abolished in 2004. In the face of numerous public protests and the hardship faced by of many families, it was reinstated in 2008.

In order to be eligible for the Fund's benefits, two criteria must be met. Firstly, the ineffective enforcement of maintenance payments from the debtor must be established. Secondly, the family must meet the income criterion, which is currently (as of 1 October 2020) PLN 900 per person in the family⁵. The benefit is granted in an amount equal to the alimony ordered, but not higher than PLN 500. In 2020, the average

⁴ Excluding the Mazowieckie Voivodeship, whose average rates are inflated by the affluent Warsaw agglomeration.

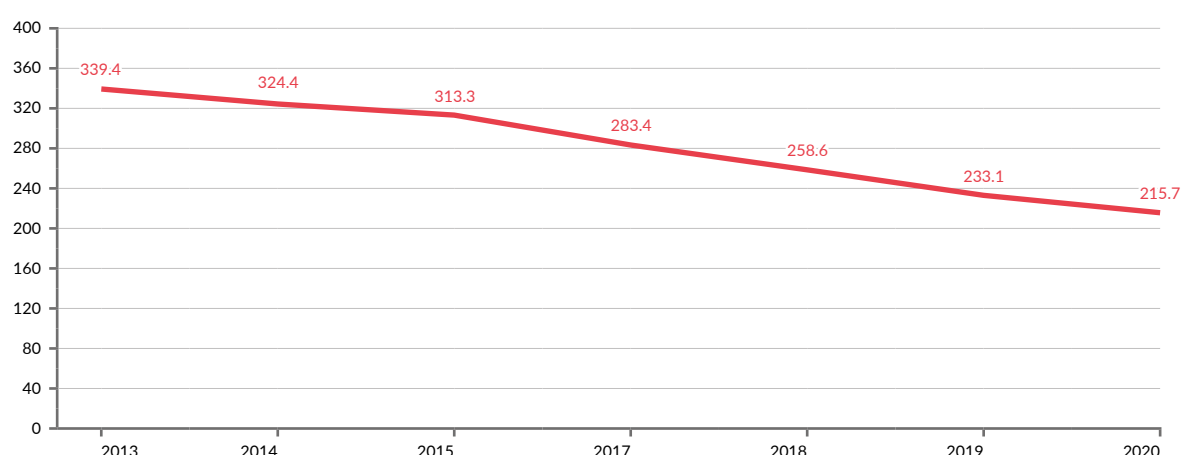
⁵ The previous criterion, from October 2019, was PLN 800, and before that, from 2008 – PLN 725.

monthly benefit amounted to PLN 411.80. Children whose parents evade paying alimony, but who exceed the income threshold, cannot count on any benefit.

Figure 6 shows the changes in the number of benefits from the Alimony Fund between 2013 and 2020. This number – despite the increase in income criteria – has continuously decreased and reached a record low in 2020. This may be related both to the declining number of children in general and to rising incomes with still relatively low income thresholds and – possibly – to an improved collection of maintenance payments.

A fundamental problem is the persistently low collection of alimony over the years. In 2017, an amendment to the Criminal Code came into force, introducing penalties for parents whose debt exceeds the alimony owed for a period of three months and simplifying the criminal provisions that had previously caused interpretation problems and contributed to high number of cases being discontinued (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 2017). According to data reported by the Ministry of Justice (MS), alimony collection increased from 13% in 2015 to 43.2% in 2020 (MS, 2021). Further legal changes proposed in 2021 are expected to speed up the alimony procedure and introduce an immediate alimony procedure.

Figure 6. Number of benefits from the Alimony Fund between 2013 and 2020 (in thousands)*



* No data available for 2016.

Source: GUS, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021c.

Child-support benefit (Family 500+ programme)

The Family 500+ programme was introduced by the Act of 11 February 2016 on state aid in the upbringing of children and became effective on 1 April 2016. Originally, it provided for the payment of child-support benefits in the amount of PLN 500 per month for each second and subsequent child in the family and for the first child if the income per person in the family did not exceed the threshold of PLN 800 (PLN 1,200 in the case of a disabled child). As of 1 July 2019, a major amendment to the programme came into force, granting a child-support benefit for each child up to the age of 18, regardless of the income earned by the family. The year 2020 was the first full year of the programme under

the new rules. Expenditure for this purpose increased to PLN 40 billion (a 31% increase compared to 2019; GUS, 2021c). The benefit was paid monthly on average to 6.5 million children, that is 94% of the population under 18. Over the five years of the programme, PLN 141 billion was spent on it. The costs of the programme now account for almost 4% of Polish GDP (Fejfer, 2021).

With such a large scale of cash transfers to families with children, the programme has a significant impact on reducing child poverty, especially in families with many children. As shown earlier, there has indeed been a significant decrease in the extent of child poverty since 2016. The original projections carried out at the introduction of this programme assumed a decrease in the extent of relative poverty among children to 10% and extreme poverty to 0.7% (which was presented in policy statements as the goal of eradicating extreme child poverty; Inchauste et al., 2016). In reality, unfortunately, the decreases have not been that large. The extent of relative poverty among children in 2020 was at 13.4% and extreme poverty at 5.9%. And while the former continues to decline and may well reach the assumed target, the latter has not been declining for 3 years, with an increase recorded in 2018 and 2020. It is worth noting that for the situation of the poorest families with children, the 2019 amendment was irrelevant, as they were already entitled to the 500+ benefit based on the income threshold. The smaller-than-expected decline in extreme poverty may result from the lack of valorisation of the benefit since its introduction while inflation is rising. Nevertheless, between 2016 and 2020, the Family 500+ programme certainly contributed to a very significant reduction in poverty in families with many children (Szarfenberg, 2019, 2021). Economic analyses show that a hypothetical termination of the programme would have resulted in a significant deterioration in the situation of families with children – given data for 2020, 795,000 children were raised in the two poorest deciles of families, whereas without the 500+ programme there would have been 1,216,000 (Myck et al., 2021).

The introduction of the programme also had the effect of reducing income inequalities in the society. According to the World Bank's forecast, the Gini index was expected

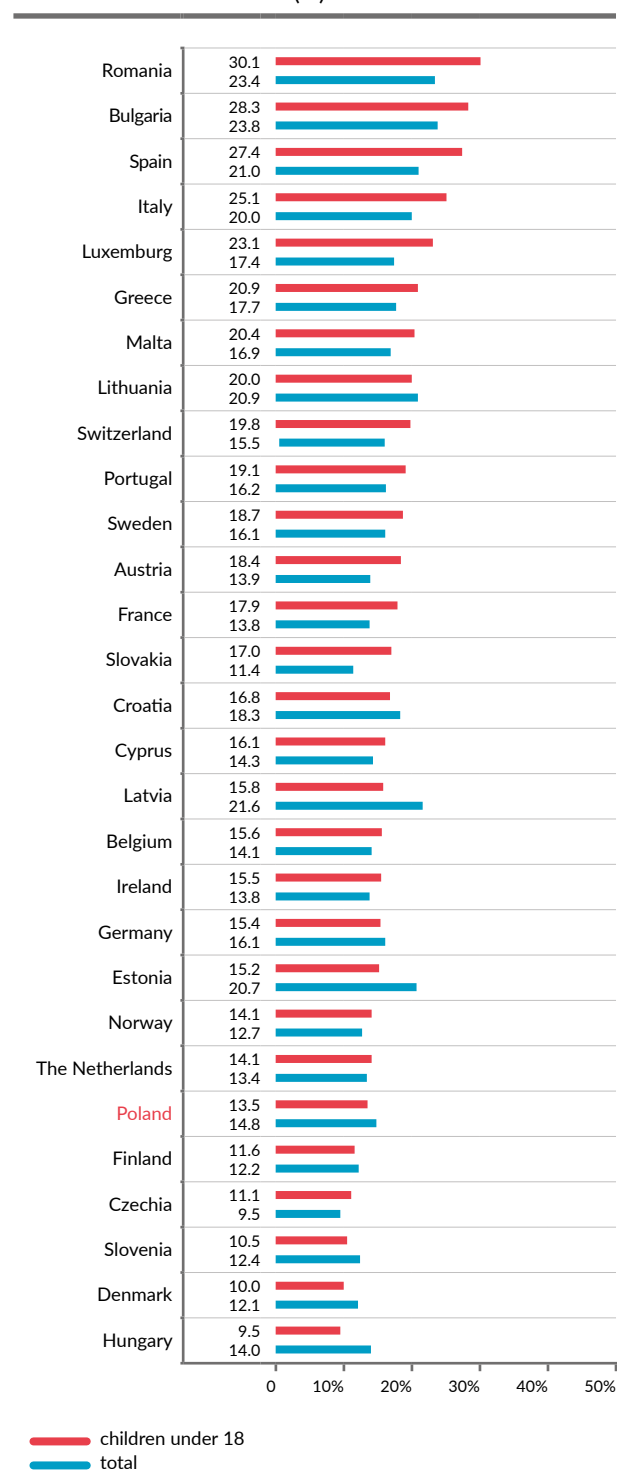
to fall to a value of 31.8 points in Poland. This is related to the 500+ programme because a larger share of child-support benefits goes to families from the lower income strata (Inchauste et al., 2016). Currently, the Gini index for Poland is only 27.5 points (Eurostat, 2022). On the other hand, some experts claim that a similar effect of reducing child poverty could have been achieved with much lower resources if the programme was selective rather than universal. Yet another issue is the question of integrating child-support benefits (500+) with family benefits (e.g. family allowances; Myck et al., 2021).

Extent of poverty in Poland comparing with other EU states

Comparative data on child poverty against the European background is provided by the European statistical office Eurostat. Figure 7 shows the extent of relative poverty in the 30 EU and European Economic Area countries in the general population and among children. A relative poverty rate with a cut-off at 60% of median income (the so-called at-risk-of-poverty-rate) is used here.

Taking this indicator into account, the extent of relative poverty in Poland in 2020 was greater in the general population (14.8%) than in the child population (13.5%). Before 2017, the situation was the opposite, but the introduction of the child-support benefit brought changes here. This gives us sixth place in the EU in terms of the extent of relative poverty among children (behind Hungary, Denmark, Slovenia, the Czechia and Finland). This is a big improvement, as in 2015 we were in 10th place with a score of 22.5%, and in 2005 – one year after joining the Community – we ranked last as the worst EU country. Between 2015 and 2020, there was an extremely dynamic decrease in the extent of relative poverty among children – from 22.5% to 13.5%, i.e. by 9 percentage points and by 40%. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that this is an indicator relative to the standard of living (income) in a given country. It reflects Poland's progress primarily in terms of reducing income disparities. In each of the EU countries, relative poverty can mean different living conditions for both children and adults.

Figure 7. Extent of relative poverty (at-risk-of-poverty rate) in EU countries for the total population and for children under 18 in 2020 (%)



Source: Eurostat, 2022a.

Material and social deprivation and malnutrition of children

The second basic indicator used for European comparisons is the so-called severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD). It is not based on an income criterion, but tells what proportion of the population cannot afford to meet specific needs for financial reasons. This indicator was developed in 2019 to measure the implementation of the Europe 2030 strategy and replaced the previously used severe material deprivation index. The new indicator is more comprehensive and also sensitive to the needs of children and young people (Eurostat, 2022d). People are considered to be suffering from material deprivation if they do not collectively meet at least seven of the 13 conditions in the following lists (six measured at the individual level and seven measured at the household level). Data for under 16-year-olds are estimated according to a special methodology based on the responses of their parents/guardians and co-residents.

List of items at household level:

1. Capacity to face unexpected expenses
2. Capacity to afford one week annual holiday away from home
3. Capacity to pay arrears (on mortgage, rent, utility bills, purchase or loan instalments)
4. Capacity to afford a meal with meat or vegetarian equivalent every second day
5. Ability to keep home adequately
6. Having access to a car for personal use
7. Ability to afford replacing worn-out furniture

List of items at individual level:

1. Having internet connection
2. Replacing worn-out clothes by some new ones
3. Having two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including a pair of all-weather shoes)
4. Spending a small amount of money each week on own needs
5. Having regular leisure activities
6. Getting together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month

The value of this indicator lies in its objectivity. The previously compared relative poverty results refer to the level of wealth in a given country (and being below such a poverty line means something different in Poland and, for example, in Luxembourg). The deprivation indicator refers to specific goods and services and denotes a similar situation of a household in each surveyed country.

European results from 2020 – for the total population and for children under 18 years of age – are shown in Figure 8. Poverty measured by this indicator shows much greater variation between countries, ranging from less than 4.3% in Norway to more than a third of the children population in Bulgaria and almost two-fifths in Romania. In most countries, the deprivation rate measured for the child population is higher than for the general population. In Poland, however, deprivation affects the general population more than children (6.4% and 5.3% respectively). Also in this comparison, Poland performs very well in 2020. In terms of deprivation among children, we rank fourth in the EU – after Finland, Norway and Slovenia. The extent of deprivation as measured by this indicator is in our country almost half the EU average (12.6% for general population and 14.2% for children). Here as well, we have seen improvements in recent years. As recently as 2014, this indicator was 20.5% for children in Poland and was then slightly higher than the EU average. Between then and 2020, therefore, there has been as much as a threefold decrease in the extent of this problem among children (Eurostat, 2022e)

This is undoubtedly good news, especially as material deprivation has a more direct bearing on children's quality of life than monetary poverty (as measured by income indicators). This is because it relates to the conditions in which a child lives, their clothing or their daily diet. However, it should still be remembered that poverty measured in this

way is statistically experienced by one in 20 children in Poland. This result is quite consistent with the measurement of absolute poverty by the Statistics Poland and allows us to estimate the scale of the problem of extreme poverty among children at just about 5%.

At the same time, the EU also points to significant weaknesses in the Polish state's support for children. The main recommendation to our country is to develop a coherent strategy to combat child poverty and better coordinate the activities of various institutions (e.g. making benefits more coherent), to strengthen the area of education for the youngest children and care services,

as well as to place more emphasis on respecting children's rights and their participation (ESPN, 2017). This is a diagnosis derived from the assumptions expressed in the European Commission's Recommendation of 20 February 2013, Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (2013/112/EU), which set up the fight against child poverty on three pillars: access to material resources, access to public services and respect for children's rights, including the right to co-decide about their activities. While Poland has made significant progress in the first area, the same cannot be said for the other two.

Another indicator on real deprivation is data on school feeding. The Ministry of Family and Social Policy publishes data on the scale of this assistance provided

mainly in schools. The number of children provided with meals under the programme is shown in Figure 9. As with the statistics on family benefits, the number of children receiving this type of assistance decreases every year. Over the period 2015–2020, this was a very significant, more than twofold decrease – from 664 thousand in 2015 to 292 thousand in 2020. This can be linked both to the general improvement in the material situation of families with children during this time and the infrequent valorisation of income

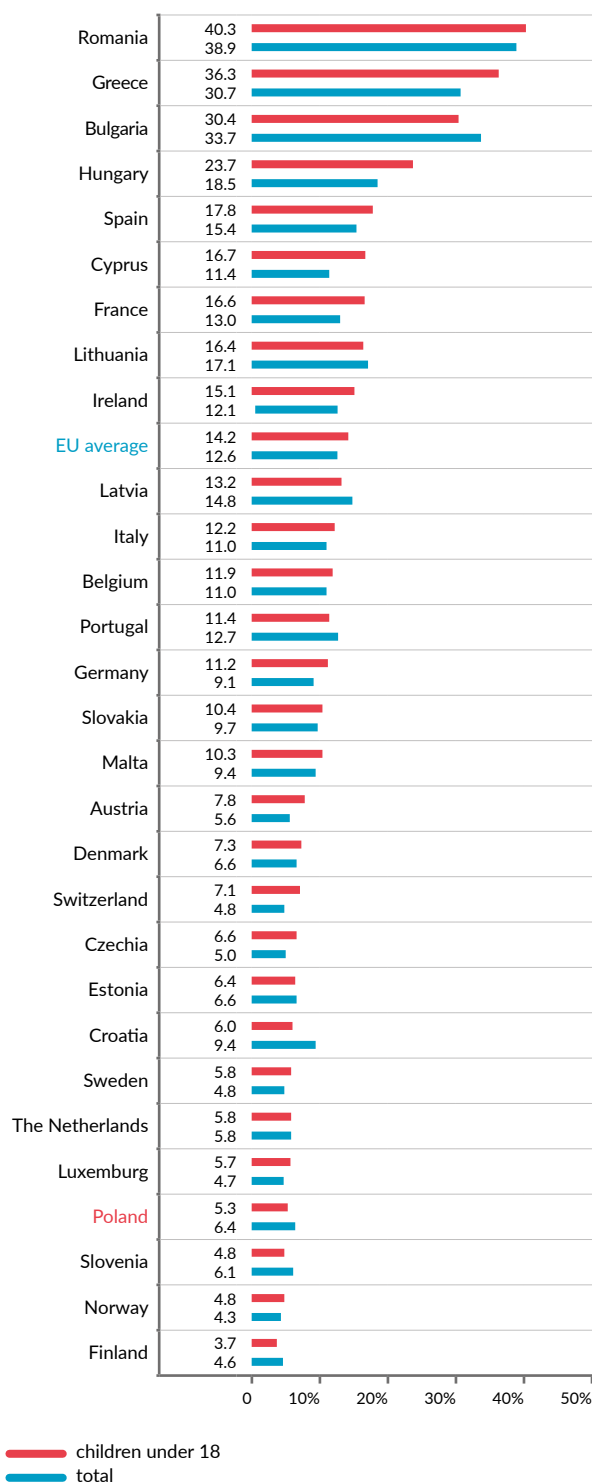
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I am 14 years old. I live with my parents, younger brother and aunt in a small house, actually in one room. My mother is pregnant and I will soon have a younger sister. The atmosphere at home is very tense. I have no place to study because there is only one desk in the house. I envy my friends their homes.

14-year-old boy

A quote from phone calls and emails to 116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People

Figure 8. Severe material and social deprivation (SMSD) in EU countries for the total population and for children under 18 in 2020 (%)



Source: Eurostat, 2022.

thresholds entitling to such assistance. However, this still represents 9.4% of all primary school pupils and 4.2% of all children in Poland. In 2019, the government has launched the Meal at School and at Home programme for 2019–2023, which will allocate PLN 2.75 billion for nutrition – mainly for children. Meals are offered to children who meet the income criterion of 150% of the one used for social assistance, i.e. for 2021 it was the amount of PLN 900 per person in the family. The programme also allows entities providing this benefit to offer meals to children who have not met this criterion (have a higher income per person in the family), but who wish to receive a meal (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2018).

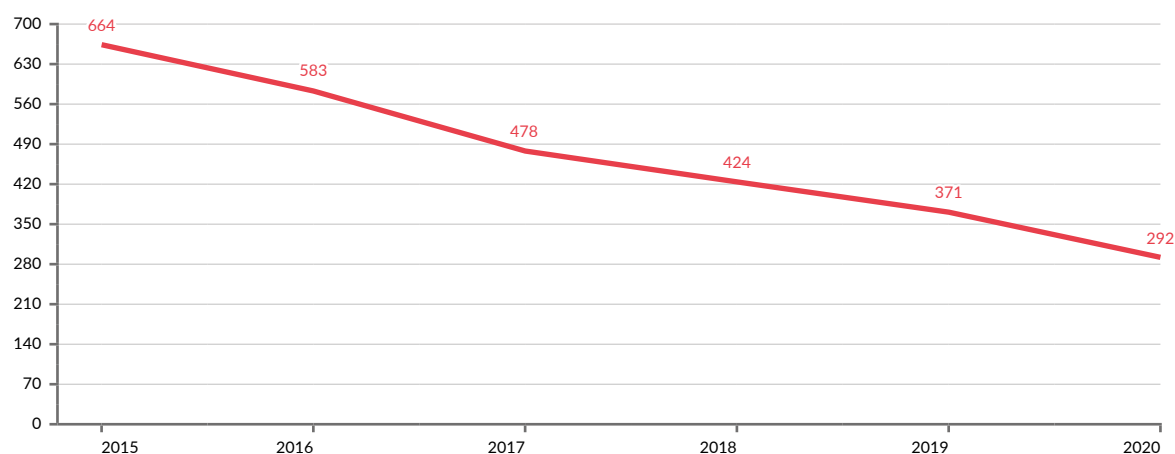
Accurate data are also available on the housing conditions in which Poles, including children, live. The basic indicator used in European Union statistics to determine the scale of housing problems is the so-called overcrowding rate. It tells what percentage of the population lives in conditions which do not meet the following standards:

- 1 room of general use per household and;
- 1 room per (married) couple,
- 1 room per two children⁶,
- 1 room per each additional adult.

The results for the European Union countries in 2020 are presented in Figure 10. As can be seen, Poland is well below the EU average in this respect. Overall, more than 36% of Poles and 48% of children live in housing that does not meet these standards. Worse results were obtained only in four EU countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia and Croatia) (Eurostat, 2022f). In this aspect, there was only a slight improvement comparing with 2015. (then it was 43% of Poles and 57% of children) and there was no change in Poland's position versus other EU countries. Poland looks much worse in this regard than in the monetary poverty and material deprivation benchmarks. Still, almost half of Polish children live in inadequate housing conditions by European standards.

⁶ One room for two children is counted for children up to 12 years of age. From 12 to 17 years of age, the guideline is one room per two children of the same sex (e.g. one room for two teenage sisters) and separate rooms for children of different sexes.

Figure 9. Number of children who received a meal benefit between 2015 and 2020 (in thousands)



Source: MRiPS, 2016–2021.

The data of Statistics Poland also confirm that the amount of living space per person decreases with the number of children per household. In 2020, there was in Poland an average of 29.5 m² and 0.9 rooms per person. For couples with one child there was 26.5 m² per person and 1.0 persons per room, for couples with two children – 22.9 m² and 1.2 persons per room, and for couples with three and more children – 18.3 m² and 1.4 persons per room. The increase in housing area over recent years has unfortunately been relatively small. Instead, the sanitary facilities of homes have improved and, according to GUS, in 2020, 100% of households with children have access to a water supply system and 99% have access to a flushable toilet, bathroom and hot running water (GUS, 2021a). Still, 8% of households are heated with individual solid fuel stoves, in which – especially in the poorest households – waste or low-quality fuels may also be burned, causing a risk to the safety and health of children on the one hand, and failing to provide adequate comfort during the heating season on the other (Wiosna association, 2021).

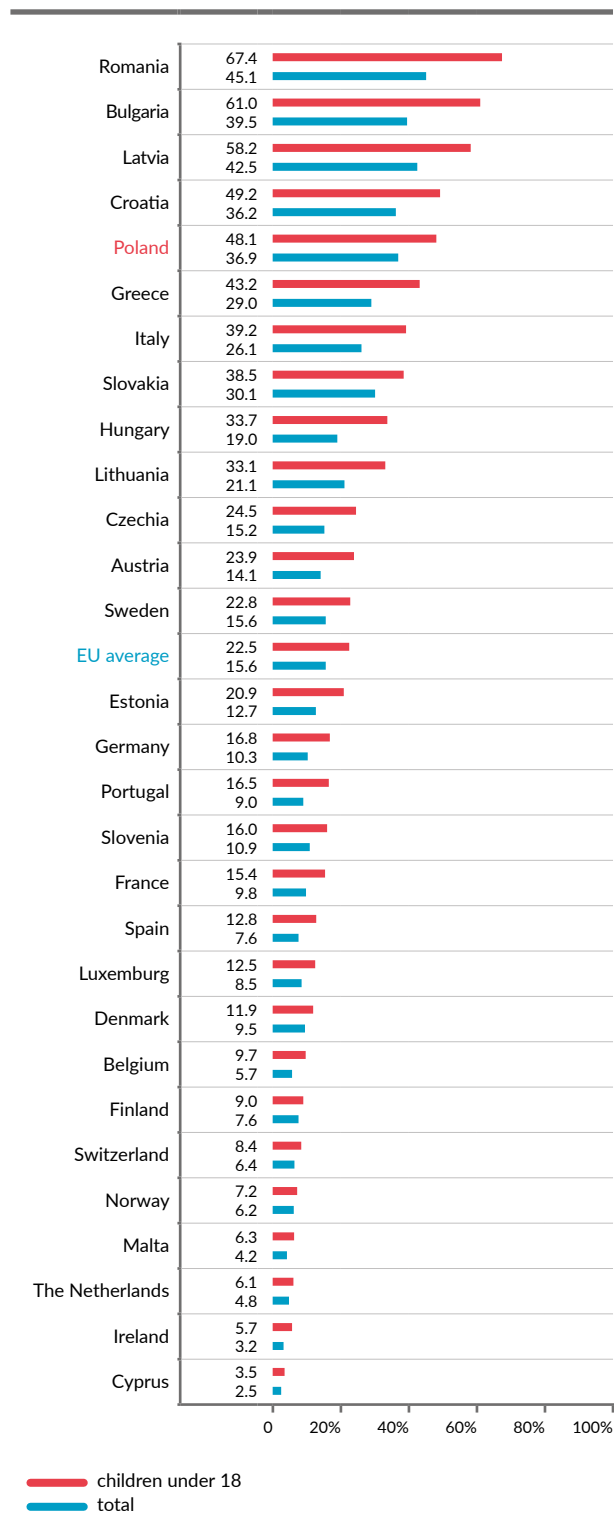
”

I would go to see a psychiatrist, but I don't have the money for a train or bus ticket to get to the city where there is one.

16-year-old girl

A quote from phone calls and emails to 116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People

Figure 10. Extent of overcrowding rate in European Union countries for the total population and for children under 18 in 2020

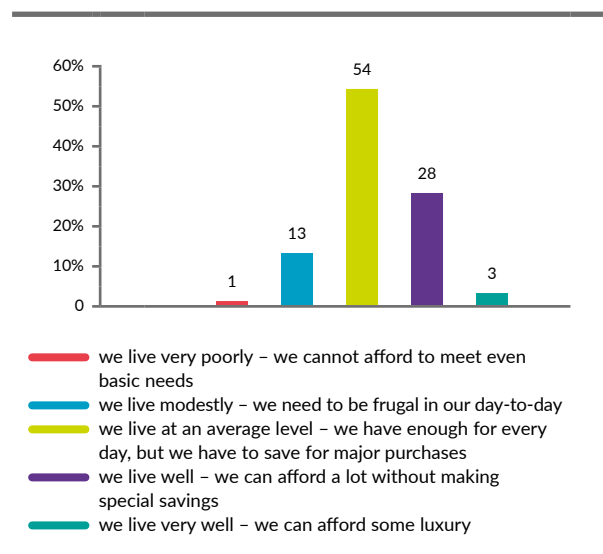


Source: Eurostat, 2022f.

Subjective feeling of poverty

In addition to analysing statistical data on poverty, research on self-assessment of one's material situation is important for understanding the problem. In 2021, i.e. already during the pandemic, just over half of Poles (54%) declared that they were living at an average level, 28% rated their situation better – as good, and 3% of respondents rated their situation as very good. At the same time, 13% declared that they live very modestly on a daily basis and only 1% admitted that they live very poorly. These latter results seem inconsistent with the fact that more than 6% of Poles live below the absolute poverty line. However, it is possible that some people in a very poor material situation are ashamed to admit this even in anonymous surveys (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Declarations on the material situation of the household in Poland in 2021

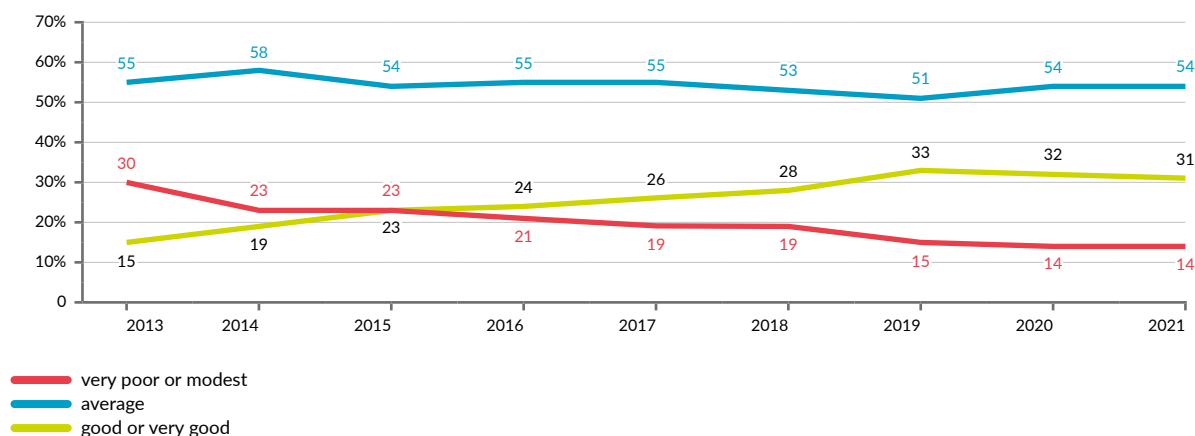


Source: CBOS, 2021.

In terms of changes over time, the percentage of Poles describing their material situation as average has not changed significantly over the last 10 years. However, over the decade, the number of those who assess their material status as good or very good has increased, while the number of those who consider themselves to be living poorly or modestly has decreased (Figure 12). In 2016, for the first time since CBOS has been studying this issue

(1993), the group of 'poor' was smaller than that of 'rich'. In 2019, the number of those assessing their situation well reached a record 33% and the percentage of those assessing it badly fell to a low of 14% in 2020. This is consistent with the figures discussed earlier for poverty specifically in relative terms, which also fell over the period. Consistency can also be seen between the extent of relative poverty (12%) and the percentage of those assessing their situation negatively. At the same time, CBOS researchers point out that the favourable trend in assessments of one's own material situation came to a stop in 2020 and 2021, which is linked to the anxiety accompanying the pandemic and the rise in inflation (CBOS, 2021).

Figure 12. Declarations regarding household material situation in Poland between 2013 and 2021 (%)



Source: CBOS, 2021.

Consequences of poverty for children

Child poverty deserves particular attention for at least several reasons. Firstly, as the data quoted earlier shows, in Poland children are the group relatively most affected by poverty. Secondly, childhood is a key period in human development and a shortage of resources in this phase of life can have particularly serious consequences for further growth. Thirdly, as Warzywoda-Kruszyńska (2008), a researcher specialising in this subject matter, rightly points out, children are not usually the real recipients of state measures to combat poverty, as these usually boil down to cash transfers or employment support programmes.

The most obvious and direct effect of child poverty is the risk to their health resulting from malnutrition, poor housing and inadequate hygiene, as well as a lack of adequate clothing. In poverty-stricken families, the diet is usually very poor and unbalanced, and children do not get food to take to

school nor can afford to buy lunches at school. In addition to its health effects, malnutrition results in poorer academic performance, as studies show that it impairs concentration and prevents effective learning (Tarkowska, 2011).

In addition to the negative effects on a child's health and physical development, poverty also carries serious risks for the proper socialisation. Contrary to what we might think, parents in poor families, often unemployed, do not devote more time to raising their children. In addition, children in poor families are often burdened with more domestic responsibilities than their peers. For example in poor families with many children, the eldest daughter may take over a large proportion of the mother's responsibilities (Tarkowska, 2011). The phenomenon of child labour is also common. Seasonal child labour in agriculture (on Saturdays and holidays) is a characteristic of rural poverty. Hardship can also push children to seek illegal sources of income. These include, in particular, petty theft, prostitution (including online) and begging. Studies have shown statistical correlation of low socioeconomic status with risk-taking behaviour (e.g. Kipping et al., 2014).

In view of all these problems, the main question arises: how to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty? It is a complex matter. The chances of escaping poverty are influenced by such independent variables as the spatial environment (fewer chances in so-called enclaves of poverty) and the depth of poverty (how far one falls short of an adequate income level). Assistance benefits in cash, apart from their obvious positive contribution, also have

negative effects, mainly in the form of fostering dependence on institutional support. All available data show that the greatest risk of poverty is among families with many children. In this context, the introduction of the 500+ programme in 2016 may have contributed to the reduction of poverty in such families and a significant decrease in the extent of child poverty nationwide.

Poland is one of the countries that continued to make significant progress in poverty reduction in the last decade, i.e. between 2011 and 2020 (it had started even before, after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004). The extent of poverty among children has decreased more than among adults. Income inequality has declined and living conditions have improved. Nevertheless, Poland is still a country where poverty as well as material and housing deprivation among children are widespread and experienced by hundreds of thousands of children. Rising inflation and a deteriorating economic situation as a result of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine may cause a recession that will halt the trend of favourable changes, and children are likely to be the first victims of increased poverty.

Meanwhile, as the EU points out, preventing the inheritance of poverty is not only a fundamental duty of all states arising from respect for human dignity and human rights. It can also be seen as an investment that, in the long term, benefits not only individuals but society and the economy as a whole. Moreover, the potential benefits far outweigh the costs necessary to improve the living conditions of children (ECA, 2019).

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Citation:

Wójcik, Sz. (2022). Child poverty. In: M. Sajkowska, R. Szredzińska (ed.), *Children Count 2022. Report on risks to children's safety and development in Poland* (pp. 88–107). Empowering Children Foundation.



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English edition of the Report prepared in partnership with UNICEF



Polish version of the Report prepared with financial support from the Justice Fund, at disposal of the Ministry of Justice



Sfinansowano ze środków Funduszu Sprawiedliwości, którego dysponentem jest Minister Sprawiedliwości