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## The scope and effects of child poverty in Germany

### Zasięg i skutki ubóstwa dzieci w Niemczech

#### Abstract

**Aim.** The article presents issues regarding the scope and effects of poverty experienced by families affected by statutory poverty and the children living in them. The definition of poverty presented in German literature on the subject was presented. Their focus is on the life situation of children. The first of them refers to determining the poverty line in the welfare state (statutory poverty). The second definition of poverty is relative. In this case, the level of income in the households in which the children live is analyzed. The article aims to describe selected dimensions of child poverty in Germany. It identifies issues relating to the scope and effects of poverty experienced by families affected by statutory poverty and the children living in them.

**Materials and methods.** The effects of poverty were characterized based on representative PASS surveys. They were divided into two groups. The first is created by shortages

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in the material sphere (material deprivation) in families where children live. The second group includes deprivation of needs specific to children.

**Results and conclusion.** Despite numerous forms of material support for German families provided by the federal government, child poverty is a serious social problem in Germany. The proportion of children at risk of poverty remains high. It is assumed that in Germany every fifth child is affected by poverty. This means that approximately 2.8 million children and young people under 18 years of age (of which 2.4 million children and young people under 15 years of age) are growing up in poverty.

**Keywords:** social pedagogy, child poverty, social policy, family support, preventing child poverty.

### **Abstrakt**

**Cel.** W artykule zaprezentowano kwestie dotyczące zasięgu i skutków ubóstwa, jakie odczuwają rodziny dotknięte ubóstwem ustawowym oraz żyjące w nich dzieci. Przedstawiono definicje ubóstwa zawarte w niemieckiej literaturze przedmiotu. Koncentrują się one na sytuacji życiowej dzieci. Pierwsza z nich odwołuje się do określenia granicy ubóstwa w państwie opiekuńczym (ubóstwo ustawowe). Druga natomiast ma charakter relatywny. W tym przypadku analizowany jest poziom dochodów w gospodarstwie domowym, w którym żyją dzieci. Celem artykułu jest deskrypcja wybranych wymiarów ubóstwa dzieci w Niemczech. Pokazano również działania podejmowane przez rząd Republiki Federalnej Niemiec na rzecz finansowego wsparcia rodzin.

**Materiały i metody.** Skutki ubóstwa scharakteryzowano na podstawie reprezentatywnych badań PASS (Panel Arbeitsmarkt und soziale Sicherung [Panel ds. rynku pracy i zabezpieczenia społecznego]). Zostały one podzielone na dwie grupy. Pierwszą z nich tworzą niedobory w sferze materialnej (niedostatek materialny) w rodzinach, w których żyją dzieci. Do drugiej grupy zalicza się deprawację potrzeb specyficznych dla dzieci.

**Wyniki i wnioski.** Pomimo licznych form materialnego wsparcia świadczonych przez rząd federalny dla niemieckich rodzin to ubóstwo dzieci stanowi ważki problem społeczny w Niemczech. Odsetek dzieci zagrożonych ubóstwem pozostaje stale na wysokim poziomie. Zakłada się bowiem, że w Niemczech co piąte dziecko dotknięte jest ubóstwem. To oznacza, że około 2,8 mln dzieci i młodzieży poniżej 18. roku życia (z czego 2,4 mln dzieci i młodzieży poniżej 15. roku życia) wzrasta w ubóstwie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pedagogika społeczna, ubóstwo dzieci, polityka społeczna, wsparcie rodziny, zapobieganie ubóstwu dzieci.

## Introduction

Poverty is a social problem that can be considered on many levels: social policy, economic policy, social science or social pedagogy. This phenomenon does not only refer to the material dimension and does not only mean insufficient financial resources to meet basic human needs. Concerning the value of the basket of goods, absolute and relative poverty lines are defined. In the case of the absolute poverty line, the value of the basket of goods and services deemed necessary to meet the needs of the individual and the family is determined by the level of standard expenditure, i.e., it refers to the basic conditions that need to be met for the individual and the family to survive and remain healthy (Gierszewska, Łopato, 2007). The relative poverty line (relative poverty) refers to when a family's standard of living and income deviates significantly from the average of the country or region in which it lives. Relative poverty is measured about 50% of the median average expenditure (less frequently income) per person in the household (Gierszewska, Łopato, 2007). In terms of the criterion of risk to the biological and social functioning of a person, biological poverty and social poverty are distinguished (Szarfenberg, 2020). Biological poverty is referred to when biological needs are not met (e.g., lack of food, water, and shelter). Social poverty, on the other hand, refers to deficits in social functioning (e.g., lack of access to education or culture).

There are two predominant definitions of child poverty in the German literature that focus on children's living situations. The first refers to the definition of the poverty line in the welfare state (statutory poverty). According to the legislator, children are considered poor if they live in a household receiving benefits under the *Kodeks Socjalny—Księga Druga* [Social Code—Book Two] (this is an essential security for jobseekers, the so-called “SGBII/Hartz IV”) (*Kinderarmut in Deutschland*, 2020). The second definition is relative poverty. In this case, the income level of the household in which the children live is analysed. According to this understanding, children living in a household where the income is less than 60 % of the weighted average family income (median equivalent net household income) are considered poor (Hollenstein, Nieslony, 2018).

According to UNICEF and the World Bank, there were 356 million children under the age of 18 living in absolute poverty (17.5 %) worldwide in 2017 (Silwal, Engilbertsdottir, Cuesta, Newhouse, & Stewart, 2020). This paper aims to describe selected dimensions of child poverty in Germany. It isolates issues concerning the extent and consequences of poverty experienced by families affected by statutory poverty and the children living within them. The measures taken by the government of the Federal Republic of Germany to financially support families are also shown. The choice of issues discussed in the article is subjective.

A comparison with other countries is not undertaken, as firstly, its content is intended to show the extent and consequences of child poverty living in Germany, and secondly, the selection of the presented results of the representative PASS studies (Panel Arbeitsmarkt und soziale Sicherung [Labour Market and Social Security Panel]) is the central database for research on poverty and social security in Germany and at the same time the basis for the quantitative description of the issues presented in the paper.

## **Extent of child poverty in Germany**

The probability of child poverty is related to the situation in their families of origin. According to social pedagogy, the characteristics of families at risk of poverty include single parenthood, low parental education, migrant background, the child having more than two siblings, and living in a risk environment. If a child's family situation is characterised by one or more of the characteristics mentioned above, the child is at risk of poverty (Hollenstein, Nieslony, 2018).

According to data published in 2023 by the Statista Research Department, 16.7% of German citizens were at risk of relative poverty in 2022 (in 2019, the year of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 15.9% of people were reported to be at risk of poverty) (*Armutgefährdungsquote in Deutschland*, 2024). For children, 21.6% of the population was at risk of poverty in 2022 (*Armutgefährdungsquote von Kindern in Deutschland*, 2024). Overall, 13.2% of children under the age of 18 living in the Federal Republic of Germany were affected by statutory poverty in 2023 (*Bürgergeld*, 2024). Despite German reunification, which became a reality on October 3, 1990, there is still a gap between the standard of living of citizens of the former German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany. In so-called "East Germany," 15 % of children under the age of 18 lived in statutory poverty in 2023, while in West Germany it was 12.8 % of children. The spatial differentiation of statutory poverty does not only apply to East and West Germany. It can be observed that its level varies between the 16 Länder of Germany. In statutory poverty, the highest number of children under the age of 18 lived in the state of Bremen (29.5%). In Berlin, 24.5 % of children under the age of 18 were in statutory poverty in 2023. The lowest percentage of children in poverty (statutory poverty) in 2023 was recorded in Bavaria (6.7%) (*Bürgergeld*, 2024). In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, a federal state bordering the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, 12.7% of children were living in statutory poverty in 2023 (this figure places the state in tenth place out of the sixteen other federal states).

When people live in households with incomes below 60% of the median income of households living in a country (relative poverty), it is said that they are at risk of monetary poverty. In 2022 in Germany, this annual income limit for a family with two children under the age of 14 was €31,500 per year, while in 2021 it was €31,432 per year (by comparison: for people running a household alone, this limit in 2022 was €15,000 per year and in 2021 it was €14,968 per year) (*Armutsgefährdungsschwelle und Armutsgefährdung*, 2024). Overall, the average income gap separating the income of the poor from the poverty line (depth of poverty) in Germany in 2019 was 23.2 % (for under-18s it was 15.8 %) (*Armutsgefährdungsschwelle und Armutsgefährdung*, 2021). In 2022, the average income gap was 20.1% (for under-18s it was 16.8%) (*Armutsgefährdungsschwelle und Armutsgefährdung*, 2024).

According to social pedagogy, increased levels of poverty risk are influenced by, e.g., family structure. According to 2020 data collected by Bertelsmann Stiftung (*Kinderarmut in Deutschland*, 2020), 45.2% of children in Germany live in single-parent families that receive benefits under the *Social Code—Book Two* (SGB II/Hartz IV). In West Germany, 43.9% of children live in such families, while 49.8% of children live in East Germany. Also in the case of lone parenthood, it is possible to see different levels by federal state. Brandenburg has the highest percentage of lone-parent children living in poverty (55.2%). In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 54.7 % of children from lone-parent families live in poverty, while the smallest number of such children is in Saarland (40.2%). Also, polygamy has an impact on the poverty risk level (*Kinderarmut in Deutschland*, 2020). According to the data, 19.1% of families with three or more children receive benefits under *the Social Code—Book Two* (with two children, 5.8% of families receive benefits). For single parents with three or more children, 66.7% receive benefits under the *Social Code—Book Two* (40.2% of single parents with two children receive benefits).

## The impact of child poverty in Germany

Children who live in poverty-stricken families often do not have the same developmental opportunities and material resources as children living in families with adequate financial security. The effects of poverty will be presented based on representative PASS studies (Tophoven, Lietzmann, Reiter, & Wenzig, 2018). The PASS studies are the central database for research on poverty and social security in Germany. They are funded by the *Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales* (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs). These representative sur-

veys have been conducted annually in Germany since 2006. Around 15,000 people aged 15 and over participate. PASS surveys provide information on the material and social situation of German households (e.g., family income, housing situation, paid work, benefits received, health, and social participation). Since 2016, questions on the deprivation of needs of children living in respondents' households have been included in the surveys (Lietzmann, Wenzig, 2020). Fundamental to considering the effects of child poverty is the financial situation of the families in which they live. The consequences of child poverty can be divided into two main groups. The first is formed by deficiencies in the material sphere (material deprivation). The second group includes deprivation of child-specific needs.

The PASS survey provides information on the financial situation of families and the living standards of children. Survey participants answer questions on 23 elements (assets and activities undertaken). They are asked whether their households have the material assets in question or whether the survey participants undertake the activities indicated in the survey. The individual elements are grouped into five categories: housing, food and clothing, consumer goods, finances, and participation in cultural or social life. When survey participants declare that they lack a certain good or do not undertake an activity, they are asked to complete whether this deficiency is due to financial or other reasons. Scarcity or deprivation occurs when respondents have to give up a particular good or activity for financial reasons (Lietzmann, Wenzig, 2020).

The results of the PASS survey reveal the material deprivations experienced by families with children fewer than 15 living in statutory poverty. The following shows these in the five categories mentioned.

- Housing category: 47.1% of the respondents declared that they do not have a dwelling with sufficient/adequate number of rooms (19.7% cited lack of adequate financial resources as the reason for this deficiency), 9.7% claimed that they lack a dwelling without damp walls and floors (lack for financial reasons: 3.6%), 1.4% of survey participants claimed to lack a bathroom within the dwelling (0.3% claimed lack for financial reasons), 0.2% claimed to lack a toilet in the dwelling (0.1% claimed lack for financial reasons), 13.4% of families with children under 15. years of age living in statutory poverty declared the absence of a garden/balcony/terrace (4.3% declared the absence for financial reasons).
- Food and clothing category: 5.3% of families with children under 15 living in statutory poverty declared lack of sufficient winter clothing (5.2% declared lack for financial reasons), 35.3% of respondents declared not having the possibility to buy new clothes from time to time (24.5% declared lack for financial reasons), lack of one hot meal a day was declared

- by 1.1% of families with children under 15 living in statutory poverty (0.5% declared lack for financial reasons).
- Consumer goods category: 61.2% of families with children under 15. years old living in statutory poverty declared no car (49.2% declared no car for financial reasons), 3.1% of respondents claimed to have no TV (0.8% declared no TV for financial reasons), 40.1% of survey participants declared no DVD/video player (10.2% declared no DVD/video player for financial reasons), 24% declared no computer with internet access (13.5% declared no computer for financial reasons), 1.8% of survey participants claimed to have no washing machine (0.9% declared no washing machine for financial reasons).
  - Finance category: 75.2% of respondents said they had no opportunity to save money (61.8% declared no savings for financial reasons), 82.3% of survey participants declared no opportunity to replace worn-out furniture (64.5% declared no opportunity to buy new furniture for financial reasons), 35% were unable to cover costs arising from unforeseen expenses (33, 7% declared not being able to do so for financial reasons), 23.8% of survey participants said they did not follow doctor's orders that were not covered by the health insurance fund (20.9% declared not following doctor's orders for financial reasons), 3.6% of respondents declared not paying rent on time (1.3% for financial reasons), 2.6% said not paying gas, water, and electricity bills on time (1.0% for financial reasons).
  - Participation in cultural and social life category: 73.2% of respondents stated that they do not go on a week-long holiday at least once a year (67.6% do not go on holiday for financial reasons), 40.6% of survey participants declared that they do not invite their friends for a treat at least once a month (15.0% do not invite for a treat for financial reasons), 61, 8 % of the respondents declared that they do not go to a restaurant at least once a month (42.8 % do not go to a restaurant for financial reasons), 53.9 % of the survey participants claimed that they do not go to the theatre/concert/cinema at least once a month (33.5 % do not go for financial reasons) (Lietzmann, Wenzig, 2020).

Based on the results presented, it can be concluded that deficiencies in the material sphere are greatest in the case of family finances and, therefore, participation in cultural and social life.

As mentioned above, the representative PASS poverty study was supplemented by four questions designed to provide information on the deprivation of child-specific needs. Respondents were asked about each child's ability to invite friends

to the family home at least once a month (e.g., to play together or have a meal). Survey participants commented on each child having sufficient warm/winter clothing and their own place to study and do homework. The fourth question asked about each child having regular pocket money that the child could manage independently. According to the results of the PASS survey, the shortfalls in the area of meeting children's specific needs are as follows:

- inviting friends home: for children up to the age of 14, 28.3% of respondents said they do not invite their friends to home (2.9% do not do so for financial reasons);
- having enough warm/winter clothes: for children up to the age of 14, 4.6% of survey participants declared that they do not have enough warm/winter clothes (4.5% of respondents said they do not have enough winter clothes for financial reasons);
- a place to study and do homework: for school-aged children (aged 6 to 14), 13.0% said they did not have their own place to study and do homework (7.7% for financial reasons);
- receiving pocket money regularly: for school-aged children (aged 6 to 14), 44.9% declared that they do not receive pocket money (20.0% for financial reasons) (Lietzmann, Wenzig, 2020).

From the above data, it is clear that in the case of deprivation of needs specific to school-age children (6 to 14 years of age), almost every second survey participant declared deficiencies in the sphere of having pocket money. In the case of younger children (0 to 14 years), almost one in three survey participants claimed that the need for social contact, i.e., inviting other children into the family home, was deprivation.

## **Material support of German families by the government**

The European Court of Auditors, in its *Special Report 20/2020 on child poverty*, notes that this phenomenon is a serious problem in the European Union, with one in four children living in EU countries at risk of poverty or social exclusion (*Special Report 20/2020*, 2020). This report, which addresses the topic of child poverty for the first time, notes that EU Member States and national governments should take action to reduce this phenomenon. It is therefore worth looking at how the government of the Federal Republic of Germany performs this duty. The German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (*Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und*



*Jugend*) has prepared several packages offering financial support for families. After the birth of a child, the basic financial security is a family benefit (see *Was ist Kindergeld?*). It is intended for all parents, regardless of their income level. Generally, child benefit is paid from the birth of the child until the child reaches the age of 18 and is intended to secure the child's minimum subsistence. Minimum subsistence is understood to mean the need to meet the child's minimum needs for maintenance, care and education. The amount of child benefit depends on the number of children in the family. In 2024, the child benefit per child is €250 per month. The legal framework for child benefits is contained in the Act on Income Tax (see *Einkommensteuergesetz*) and then the Act of Child Benefit (see *Bundeskindergeldgesetz*).

Parents who reduce or suspend their working activities after the birth of a child are entitled to child benefits (see *Was Sie zum Elterngeld wissen müssen*). This is intended to secure the financial means necessary to support the family. The German state provides three types of parental benefits: basic parental benefit (*Basiselterngeld*), parental benefit plus (*ElterngeldPlus*), and partner bonus (*Partnerschaftsbonus*). The amount of parental benefit depends on the parents' living situation and the type the parents have opted for. For example, the basic parental benefit can be between €300 and €1,800 per month, and parental benefit plus and partner bonus can be a minimum of €150 and a maximum of €900 per month. The legal framework for parental benefit is laid down in the Act of Family Benefits and Leave (see *Bundeselterngeld und Elternzeitgesetz*).

A form of financial support for single parents is the maintenance advance (see *Unterhaltsvorschuss*). It is intended to secure the basic living expenses of a child when the other parent does not pay maintenance (or only partially or irregularly). It is paid up to the maximum age of 18. The maintenance advance for children up to the age of 5 years is €230 per month, for children aged 6 to 11 years €301 per month, for children aged 12 to 17 years it is €395 per month. Maintenance advances are regulated by the Law on Maintenance Advances (see *Gesetz zur Sicherung...*).

The German government offers parents a benefit in the tax system. This is the tax-free amount (*Freibeträge für Kinder*) (see *Steuerentlastungen*). The tax-free amount is available to all parents up to the age of 18 years of age of a child, without any conditions having to be fulfilled. Its allocation is decided by the tax office. When assessing income tax, the tax office examines which is more favourable to the taxpayer: the tax-free amount or the child benefit. The tax-free amount for 2023 is to be €6,024, while for 2024 it is to be €6,384. The tax-free amount is equally due to both parents.

The legal basis is the Act of Income Tax (see *Einkommensteuergesetz*), which regulates income tax.

### **Material support for low-income families**

The German Ministry for the Family, the Elderly, Women, and Youth provides low-income families with material support for the child in the family and at school, as well as support in the context of the child's participation in society. The first group can include the child benefit (*Kinderzuschlag*) and the welfare grant for pupils and students (*Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz* [BAföG]—the German Federal Scholarship Act for secondary school and university students). The second group benefits in the area of education and social participation (*Bildungspaket* or *Leistungen zur Bildung und Teilhabe*).

Child benefit (see *Kinderzuschlag*) is available to parents whose income is sufficient to cover their living costs but is insufficient or does not cover the needs of the whole family. It amounts to a maximum of €250 per month for each child. It is paid for each unmarried child up to the age of 25. The basic condition for receiving the child benefit is to receive a family benefit and to meet an income criterion. The parents' income cannot be higher than the minimum threshold set by law and is supposed to be €900 gross for couples and €600 gross for single parents. At the same time, persons eligible for social assistance benefits are not granted a child benefit.

The second financial benefit is for young people who want to gain an education (see *Bafög.de*). Both pupils and students can apply for scholarship assistance. The purpose of providing scholarship assistance is to enable young people to obtain an education that is relevant to their abilities and interests, regardless of their economic or social situation. As a general rule, applications for the scholarship can be submitted by persons up to the age of 30. The amount of this benefit depends on the personal situation of the applicant and the form of education he or she has chosen. The amount of this benefit is also influenced by the economic situation of the parents (their income). This benefit is paid in the form of a lump sum, which the recipient uses to support them (e.g., food, clothing, housing) and to cover the costs of their education (e.g., textbooks, commuting costs). The repayment of this benefit by students is divided into two parts. The first is a non-repayable grant and the second is an interest-free loan. The loan is repaid five years after completion of the grant. Typically, it takes six and a half years to repay the loan.

The education package (see *Bildung & Teilhabe*) (*Bildungspaket*) is a form of support for children, young people and young adults from low-income families. It aims to enable children to benefit from a variety of school and leisure activities that support their development and strengthen their social participation. Services in the area of education and social participation include:

- refunds for one-day and multi-day school and kindergarten trips;
- purchase of school accessories (amounting to €130 for the first semester and €65 for the second semester);
- transport of pupils to school;
- educational assistance (e.g., reimbursement of tutoring);
- collective feeding in schools and kindergartens;
- refunds arising from participation in cultural and social life (e.g., sports clubs or music school tuition - a benefit of €15 per month).

## Conclusion

Despite the various forms of material support provided by the federal government to German families, child poverty is a major social problem in the country. The percentage of children at risk of poverty remains consistently high. Indeed, it is assumed that in Germany, one in five children is affected by poverty, i.e., grows up in a family whose income does not exceed 60% of the weighted average family income (median equivalent net household income) and/or lives in a household receiving benefits under the *Social Code — Book Two* (basic security for jobseekers so-called “SGB II/Hartz IV”). This means that approximately 2.8 million children and young people under the age of 18 (of which 2.4 million children and young people under the age of 15) are increasing in poverty (Lietzmann, Wenzig, 2020).

The data contained in the report entitled *Between Pandemic and Inflation. Parity Poverty Report 2022* (Schneider, Schröder, & Stilling, 2022), published in 2022 by the Parity Social Association (Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband), indicate a socio-demographic profile of German families at risk of poverty that coincides with the profile described in the article: households with three or more children (32.2%) and single parents (41.6%) are most at risk. According to data from the 2021 report, 21.3% of children and young people were affected by poverty (Schneider, Schröder, & Stilling, 2022).

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