

## **The Characteristics of Child Poverty in Hungary – Regional Inequalities and Regional Model Programs**

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### **Abstract**

Child poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and the overlapping of its dimensions exponentially threatens the psychosocial development of the children. Several social and psychological examinations prove that the permanent poverty in childhood does not disappear without a trace. When a child is growing up in a multiply disadvantaged family and does not have the material environment that promotes chances for mobility and when the child is deprived from these activities that otherwise the society consider as norms and his/her human relationships are not balanced then her/his psychosocial development is at risk and the chances for healthy development are decreasing. This can cause the reproduction of poverty and increases the risk of social exclusion in the future. In this study, we present the Hungarian child protection's situation firstly, including the characteristics of child poverty and educational participation of disadvantaged children. Then we explain the most important experiences of programs against child poverty.

**Keywords:** Child poverty in Hungary, Sure Start program, fight against child poverty

### **1. Introduction**

One of the most critical social consequences of the Hungarian political transformation was the radical deterioration of the situations of families with children. According to the UNICEF's report published in 1994, the biggest losers of the political transformation were the children. Child poverty is an extremely complex phenomenon that can be interpreted as a combination of several elements relating uncertainty of existence. Several factors contributed to this adverse trend of poverty risk of household with children. The first and most important one is related to the change in the labor market that mainly hit the household with children. It is not only about the appearance of unemployment but also about the drastic decrease in the rate of economic activity among both men and women. Beside the change in the employment situation, the price liberalization also had decisive role in the adverse financial situation of the families with children as well as in the value deduction of family allowance and the elimination of central price subsidy that had significant role before the collapse of socialism. In Hungary today, those households with children are the most vulnerable where the parents' education level is low and the families live in a region where the employment rate is low, mainly in rural area. In terms of risk of impoverishment, the families with three or more children, single-parent households and are gypsy

household live in the least favorable conditions. One sign of the poor performance of the Hungarian education system is that the educational disadvantage of poor children is not decreasing during the school years but increase in most of the cases. The main social factors that lead to poverty in Hungary: low rate of economic activity and high rate of unemployment, low educational level and lack of skill, poor settlement, living in small settlement for those who live in disadvantaged region, poor health and belonging to Roma ethnicity. In this study, we demonstrate that these factors trigger child poverty as well. Those children are especially infringed whose parents are unemployed, uneducated, are Roma or live in small settlement. The children living in single parent household are also at risk.

## **2. The Characteristics of Child Poverty**

Scientific attempts to examine children's situations are relatively recent; the children's social situation has only become a social policy issue since the 90's in the member states of the European Union. In Hungary, the National Social Inclusion Strategy (2011-2020) defines the improvement of disadvantaged, multiply disadvantaged and Roma children's situation and the prevention of transmitting poverty are the key issues in achieving social inclusion.

In 2010, 11% of the children (198 000 people) were recorded as being at risk by the guardianship authorities, mainly because of financial reasons. The disadvantaged region is 2-3 bigger than the proportion in other regions. The primary determinant of the quality of being children is the family environment. The poverty and exclusion of the child and the prospects for her/his future are linked with the surrounding household's financial and mental situation and dependent on the families' value judgment. The basic condition of the healthy development is healthy eating habits. Many of the children living in extreme poverty do not receive adequate amount of healthy food. Every tenth child does not access to meat or fish due to financial reasons and every fifth child experienced it who are in the bottom income fifth proportion. In terms of fruit and vegetable consumption, the situation is worse since in 15% of the average Hungarian households, they are not available because of lack of money. (KSH, 2010). If the parents become unemployed, they are forced to cut back consumption due to the considerably decreased household income and in order to be able to ensure livelihood. This naturally affected the evolution of food consumption. Almost every third child does not eat meat regularly who live in a household where the head of the household is poorly linked to the labor market and often have only low educational level, additionally, more 38% of these children do not eat fruit regularly and a quarter of them do not either regularly. (KSH, 2010) Therefore, providing free canteen meals has great importance, 400 000 children receiving child protection allowance and attending to nursery, kindergarten or primary school received this benefit in this period.

Disadvantaged children living in poverty can catch up successfully only with the parents involvement. Child welfare services have special role in caring disadvantaged families, prevention and elimination conditions that threaten the children and in organizing cooperation of the sectors (education, health care, child welfare). However, the differences in the services' quality and capacity mean serious problem as well as the care is the least available where it is needed the most. The child welfare and child protection's care, services and institutions are characterized by – primarily in small settlements – maintenance problem and lack of professionals.

In Hungary, the age groups being at highest risk of poverty are the children and young people. In contrast to the average 14% poverty, the rate is 21% among people between 0 and 15 years old and 20% among young people between 16-24 years old. In case of adults, the rate of poverty is average 14% among middle-aged people (26-64 years old). However, the rate of poverty among elderly population over the age of 65 is lower than the average, only 4% (Gábos-Szivós, 2010). As for the tendency, the risk of child poverty had increased from 17% to 21% between 2007 and 2009; and increased to 26% by 2012. (Gábos et al., 2013)

In Hungarian families, the presence of children increases the risk of poverty, especially when the parents raise at least three children. If one of the parents is missing from the household with

children, that means great risk. In Hungary, the poverty rate was the highest in households of single parents (31%), those with three or more children (25%) and non-elderly one-person household (17%) in 2009. In contrast, the poverty rate of childless couples or couples with one child is below the average (Gábos-Szivós, 2010). In 2012, the rate of poverty was the highest in single parent households (30%), in households with three or more children (41%), in ‘other types of household with children’ (29%), and in non elderly one-person households (22%) in Hungary. In contrast, the poverty rate of childless households is below the average: the rate is 4-6 among couples which do not raise a child depending on their age and 12% among childless elderly people living alone. In the case of people raising children, the occurrence of poverty was the least likely in the cases of couple who raise two children (14%) or only one (7%) which is slightly below the average, as we could observe it, is significantly higher than the average where there are three or more children (Gábos et al. 2013)

According to data of 2008-2009, the biggest difference between the households with children and childless household regarding income poverty was in Hungary among the EU member states. Within the EU, Hungary is among those five countries where the distance is the largest between the population and child poverty to the detriment of the children.

**Table 1:** Income poverty of households with children and childless (%)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Households with children	16,8	20,5	16	16,1	17
Households without children	9,7	10	7,6	7,7	6,8
Difference	7,1	10,5	8,4	8,4	10,2

**Source:** EUROSTAT, Statistics database <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>

One of the key reason of child poverty is the parents’ unemployment. The rate of children living in unemployed household was 14% (255 000) in Hungary between 2008 and 2009; this was the second highest rate in the EU. The number of people living in households with very low work intensity was continuously increasing in this period. The seriousness of this indicated problem is demonstrated by the fact that in Hungary, the proportion of households with children is quiet big among the household with low work intensity, in European comparison: in Hungary: 55,6%, in Poland: 46,3% and in the 27 members of the EU: 49,2% (EUROSTAT, 2010). In this period, 60% of poor children lived in inactive or low work intensity households. In Hungary, due to the low rate of employment, this proportion is significant, it is 870 000 people of the population under the age of 60, according to the data of 2009. This is the 11,3% of the total population. 590 000 of them live in families with children and approximately 300 000 of the children aged 0-17 live in such family. Time series data are not available, in terms of households with children but analysts suggest that bigger and bigger proportion of children born into and grow up in a household in which nobody works. Without interventions both poverty and employment indicators are worsening. A large proportion of inactive people are disabled, Roma, have low educational level, live in small settlement or in disadvantaged area. In Hungary, the main obstacles of getting on the labor market are regionally uneven availability of jobs, low level of education, motivation problems resulted from permanent unemployment, lack of caring service for children and other relative who need care.

The evolution of the number of people living in financial deprivation reflects well the impacts of economic crisis. This indicator is greatly depending on the change in economic growth and social well-being. In the European Union comparison, significantly big number of people live in household in Hungary which are affected by severe financial deprivation (EUROSTAT, Statistics database: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>). The majority of the population do not have the possibility to save money which is reflected by the fact that in Hungary, the majority (75%) do not have sufficient savings to finance unexpected expenses from their own sources. There is no other member state in the EU, where the rate is this high (35% was the EU27 average in 2009) (KSH, 2011). This means that number

of people at risk of falling behind is great in the Hungarian society, even a life situation causing short-term income loss – losing job, illness, divorce – can result in permanent crisis.

**Table 2:** Number, rate of people living in severe financial deprivation

		2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Hungary	%	22,9	20,9	19,9	17,9	20,3
	thousand people	2271	2077	1922	1771	2061
EU27	%	11	10	9,1	8,5	8,1

Source: EUROSTAT, Statistics database <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>

Family allowance is the most important additional income beside salary in the cases of families with children; however, other family benefits also mean great help for certain groups. In 2011, two million people received family allowance, 170 000 got maternity subsidy and 90 000 got maternity benefit.

### 3. Regional Inequalities

In Hungary, the regional dimension has much greater role in the development of socio-economic disadvantage than in the other member states of the EU, according to the measurements, the regional inequalities are the largest in Hungary within the EU. Regions where the economy is typically underdeveloped, the rate of unemployment is typically high and the cultural and ethnical differences are big in the population, compared to the social mainstream, those regions are the central focus of social exclusion. These phenomena typically accumulate in regions falling behind. By the millennium, the rural poverty became permanent and the rate of unemployed village habitants grew extremely then fixed on this high level. By this, the expanded reproduction rural poverty has started. The consequence of these processes resulted from these extreme inequalities regarding settlement development greatly affect the development of child poverty. The situations of the children are greatly influenced by their settlement where they live. The 33 disadvantaged micro-region can be typically found in North Hungary and in the Northern part of the Great Plain (Northern Great Plain), in the South Transdanubia region and in the region of Ormánság. The Hungarian phenomenon is particularly notable; while in the Western-Europe countries the poverty is concentrated in big cities, in Hungary it is rather a rural phenomenon (Kovách, 2012). In these settlements, the over-representation of Roma population is significant as well. The “settlement comfort” is substantially below the national average in terms of apartments, institutions and commercial establishments. The population’s age pyramid of the settlements that provides the greatest risk of poverty is constantly moving towards the young population; this relates to the increased segregation of the population (Bihari-Kovács, 2006). Approximately two-thirds of the children in need live in rural areas. Particular attention should be paid on the regions where the proportion of children living in poverty is overt the national average because in terms of settlement structure, the small villages are dominant in these regions. Its direct consequence is the people living there hardly can access to basic health, social and child welfare and public educational services. Regional dimensions’ effect on education is particularly significant in Hungary as well. In Hungary, the education of youth and the inequalities in the education are mostly influenced by the size of the regions, including the settlements where they live. The smaller the settlement, the more likely lower the inhabitants’ educational level the than the national average, preventing them to get higher educational attainment than vocational qualification. The groups of inhabitants with low educational attainment are in inverse proportion to the settlement slope in Hungary. Children of those parents who have only or less than primary education regularly face with school failures. (Kovách, 2012) The size of the settlement creates difference in between the schools, the number and educational level of the teachers, optional curriculum programs, the competence level and knowledge quality of the students so significantly affect the school effectiveness and mobility chances of the children as well.

#### **4. Disadvantaged Children in School**

According to the results of the international PISA survey of 2000 and 2003, the Hungarian education system is unable to ensure equal chances for children from different social situation and does not provide the sufficient cultural knowledge in the school that is required for the social inclusion. The results of the PISA survey show that in Hungary, the educational attainment of the parents has greater influence on the school achievement of the children than in the OECD countries generally and the profession of the parents defines the school performance the most as well. Hungary belongs to those countries where the differences between school types mean difference in the performance of the students too. In schools, where strong selection presents and students have better social-economic background, there the performance of the students is better. (Mihály, 2002) The Hungarian school education's tools and outcomes do not adjust to modern expectations and confine only to transmit knowledge, the development of skills is missing. Frontal teaching method dominates in the majority of the schools that hardly adapts to the different characteristics and personality of the students. School education conveys usually middle-class norms of socialization and aims to achieve general knowledge accepted by the middle-class which has exclusionary nature towards children having lower social status (Radó, 2007). Research results show that since the political transformation in Hungary, there is a group of people that have reproduced a group of people of every age group, 20%, which group is unable to get higher education than primary school; this way they get onto the labor market untrained and have great chance to be unemployed in their active life cycle. (Kertesi-Varga, 2005)

Havasi et al. (2002) examined those characteristics of Roma children's family background that determine the child's school performance. Linguistic drawbacks, lack of material tools for learning at home have negative effect. In many cases, children do not live in proper hygienic conditions and the fact that they find it hard to adapt school rules makes difficulties. Teachers often complain about the behavior of adolescent Roma children makes it impossible to teach. Instead of solving these problems, they try to shift the responsibility to other institutions; it is a typical practice that they place the children in other school or send them to pedagogical advisory service (Havasi et al., 2002:165). According to Kertesi (2005), a Hungarian Roma child is fifty times less likely acquire completed secondary educational attainment than a non-Roma.

The first years of life are determining in terms of development of the nervous system and development of learning skills so tools should be made available for disadvantaged children that prevent the cultural gap between children from different cultural situation. Early development is crucial since the fate of the school starts and it turns out that the child cannot cope in a class with normal curriculum, she/he might get into close-up class, consequently, has little chance to get to secondary school were she/he can provide marketable profession and chances for social mobility (Darvasi-Tausz, 2006). Gypsy children have to face significant challenges in education too. The schools should accept the unique customs of Roma people, which are different from the value system of mainstream society. This only can be successful if the teachers cooperate with the families and build partnership with each other (Havasi et al., 2002)

New, alternative skill developing pedagogical techniques are should be ensured for institutions operating in the most disadvantaged children's successful participation. Alternative day care, study halls, community centers and family day care providing afternoon programs and programs for children can be solutions. (Darvas-Tausz, 2006)

#### **5. Model Programs against Child Poverty in Hungary**

In the recent years, the fact is more and more recognized that healthy childhood has prominent role in the reproduction of poverty. Researches show that the pace of development is faster in the period between the conception and school age than in any other period in the later life stages (Szilvási, 2009). After getting to know these, several programs and interventions in early childhood were developed and introduced across Europe. In order to establish a professionally established children's program, it is

necessary think over the problematic of hierarchy of needs in the cases of children specially the scarcity of resources. According to Tausz (2006), in the case of children in multiply depending situations, particular attention should be paid on the authority dimension of the issue, that is, who defines the needs: state, market, parent contemporary group or media.

In Hungary, the so-called National Program Against Child Poverty was developed in order to reduce and prevent the reproduction of child poverty; the program is complex relating more generations and consider 25 years ahead (2007-2032). The program aims to reduce the children and their families' poverty, exclusion and extreme poverty. It also aims to restructure the institutions to prevent segregation and to ensure healthy condition already in the early childhood that enable them to grow up in conditions that fit to their abilities. Its purpose to reduce serious problems like the regional and ethnical differences and conflicts since these factors greatly influence the development of the children's situation.

The most urgent tasks set by the National Program Against Child Poverty:

- Reducing the extend of income poverty,
- Reducing the depth of income poverty,
- Improving parents' employment,
- Creating more equal conditions to have skills and ability unfolded and segregation reduced,
- Improving the social and child welfare care and service,
- Improving housing conditions of families with children,
- Ensuring healthier childhood. (Gyermekszegénység Elleni Nemzeti Program, Rövid Program, 2006)

The national Strategy, so-called 'Legyen jobb a gyerekeknek!' (2007-2032) – in which the Program Against Child Poverty is incorporated – emphasize that the poverty does not automatically reduce as the economic situation develops positively, beside the financial factors, the more equal allocation of knowledge an information, strengthening rights and improving services are needed

The National Strategy aims to achieve three comprehensive aims:

- Reducing the children's and their families' poverty significantly and at the same time have the children's chances for further education and life chances close.
- Eliminating the extreme forms of child's poverty, exclusion and segregation and reducing the likelihood of deviancies that destroy life chances.
- Changing those institutions' and services' operation and approach fundamentally which contribute to the reproduction of poverty and social exclusion. These institutions and services should contribute more the evolvement of the abilities than today in order to be able to join to society as full right citizens through reasonable activities (Legyen jobb a gyerekeknek!, 2007).

In Hungary, there were and are several model-attempts for establishing services that aim to reduce the risk of falling behind resulted from disadvantage situation and child poverty. They are mostly operate on settlement or micro-region level. Strategy document aiming reduce child poverty puts great emphasize on introducing early childhood programs and on the adaption of Sure Start program, which started in 1999 in England, in order to reduce child poverty an exclusion. The English program is for children aged of 0-4 and got to 4 million disabled children, which is one-third of children under the age of 4. The basic philosophy of the program is building on the supportive power of the local community with the active involvement of the families, wide-range of professionals work together intensively with the family. In Hungary, the model programs, which adapted the Sure Start, started in the disadvantaged regions of the country in 2004. By the introduction of the model programs, 400 families and 700 children under the age of 6 received support. In 2005, an expert workshop was established and several experts joined to the program so the introduction of the national program, Sure Start (Biztos kezdet) started (Nagyné, 2006) The wide spreading of the program was needed because in the disadvantaged regions since not all the needed services was established due to maintenance

problems and lack of professionals. These are settlements where the only available expert is the health visitor so the parents do not get proper help in solving lifestyle problems, the day care is missing so they find it difficult to work due to travel and life organizational problems. The children's development gaps are only found out when they start to attend to school but by that time it is more difficult to overcome these disadvantages. The Sure Start program has the function of creating chances, coordinates the services for children between the age of 0-6 and insert them into the local social and child welfare care system and also creates community which can provide further support for the parents. The adaptation of the program is realized on two levels: 1) program on local level (settlement, district), 2) program on national level (methodological development). The program works basically on mezzo level since it creates local supportive communities (formal and informal) but it has affect on micro level since it has the support of families raising disadvantaged children in the focus.

Main aim of Sure Start Program in Hungary:

- To support social and emotional development (supporting the relationship between the children and their parents, helping the families operation, early detection and addressing of the children's emotional and behavioral difficulties).
- Developing health culture (helping parents in raising children, ensuring the healthy development of the children).
- Strengthening and supporting the families (provisions to solve the everyday problems of the families, promoting parents' employment).
- Strengthening local community and community participation (helping families to participate in forming their environment, strengthening the local community, solving parents' mutual problems, collaboration).

It is worth to highlight Szécsény's programs for children that started in 2006. Sure Start Children's House, hosting children aged 1-5 and their parents, provide irreplaceable help in improving chances of disadvantaged children. There is Children's House in three villages in the micro-region of Szécsény (Rimóc, Géc, Varsány). They usually get to 70 families per month, 35-45 children attend to the Children's House daily. One of the aims of Szécsény' program is the desegregation and spread of integrated education in the micro-region and the modernization of pedagogical work. Furthermore, it aims to reduce dropout and make children's and young people's lives more meaningful. 23 000 young people between the age 11 and 19 live in the micro-region and one-quarter of them dawdle. In the micro-region, there was not a youth institution or programs before. As a result of model-project, there were established community places providing computers and internet access in the 8 settlements of the micro-region's 13 settlements. The number of indebted families in the micro-region is significant, for these families, the establishment and maintenance of a debt management program would be a great help. The program continuously provides community developing programs, courses, trainings and institution visit for local professionals and staff working in the program where they can learn about a good practice. (Bass et al., 2009)

By now 44 Children's Houses operate in disadvantaged micro-regions using European Union sources which aim to provide help for those children at the earliest possible age who are under the age of five and cannot access any services in the given settlement.

The effect of programs against child poverty and exclusion can be measured in short- and long-term. The short-term, indirect effects can be measured with indicators that show how the children's early development changes during and after the program. The long-term effects turn up in the adulthood: in the rise of the educational level, in the labor market activity and in the extent of the indigence for social benefits.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion we can say that the experience of the researches on child poverty and program against child poverty clarify that in relation to child well-being, the polices should have the priority of

improving children's situation living in the Hungarian society and decreasing the number of people living in extreme poverty.

Regional inequalities have not decreased typically but increased in some regions. Among the disadvantaged regions, the North-Hungary region and North Great Plain region are the significant. The employment and deprivation indicators are the worst in these regions. The differences between the most developed and falling behind regions is 8-12 percentage points (Gyerekesélyek Magyarországon, 2011).

As the children grow older, the number of their needs is increasing. According to the research findings those children are in the worst situation who live in large family, in a household without active worker or the head of household has low educational or live in one of the two mentioned falling behind regions.

Experiences of programs against child poverty indicate that these programs have significant role in preventing social exclusion and reducing socialization disadvantages since ensuring early development for children is crucial in order to achieve successful school career.

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