Child poverty is being discussed as one of the most relevant problems all over the world. In many – but not all – European countries, it is not so much an issue of a lack of basic goods such as food and shelter. In fact, child poverty means deprivation in terms of goods and services that are regarded as customary in a given country as well as lacking opportunities to fully participate in society and in education. It is important to take a closer look at child poverty and its effects in order to discuss strategies to improve children's lives and their future opportunities.

Sarah Menne

Some data on child poverty in Europe

Measuring child poverty is a difficult task – and even harder when aiming at comparing different countries. In the EU, the concept of relative income poverty as well as the rate of people being at risk of poverty or social exclusion (the so-called "AROPE\textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{st} rate) are most often used. In Germany, the rate of children living in households that depend on social benefits ("Hartz IV") is also a very common measure.
In 2015, 25.2 million children and adolescents up to the age of 18 (26.9%) were threatened by poverty or social exclusion in the European Union. In the crisis-ridden countries of Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, the rates are even higher (33.8 percent).

Taking a closer look at Germany as the biggest economy of the EU, almost 2 million children were living in households depending on social welfare benefits – this corresponds to a child poverty rate of 14.7 percent. This rate has increased slightly by 0.4 percentage points since 2011. However, there are large regional differences within Germany (e.g. Bavaria 6.8%, Bremen 31.6%). 57.2% of the affected children between ages 7 to 15 have been living in poverty for 3 years and more.

**Single-parent families: a high poverty risk**

One family form is particularly negatively affected: children growing up in single-parent households. 47.7 percent of all single-parent families in Europe are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while this is only true for 17.7 percent of households with two adults and a child.

By taking a closer look at single-parent families in the two countries Germany and the U.K., we get a more detailed picture of their specific underlying family structures and their socioeconomic situation. A quarter of all families in the U.K. and a fifth of all families in Germany is headed by one adult only (in 90% of the cases by the mother). The AROPE rate of single-parent families lies at 43% in Germany and even 57.5% in the U.K. compared to the respective rates for two-parent families of 10.9% (GER) and 18.3% (U.K.).

Most of the single mothers in both countries have a job in addition to taking care of one or more children by themselves. Yet, their income is often not sufficient to avoid poverty. About 37% of all single-parent families in both countries depend on basic social benefits. This means that children living with only one parent are about five times more likely to depend on basic social benefits than children being raised by two parents. Another severe problem is that the enforcement of child maintenance arrangements has not been very successful in either of those two countries. As a result, only one child in two in lone-parent families receives child maintenance payments on a regular basis.

**What exactly does it mean to live in poverty in an industrialized country such as Germany and what are the consequences?**

Living in poverty affects children in various dimensions of their lives: materially, socially, culturally and in terms of health – these are the results of recent studies conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung. To give some examples:
The housing situation of poor children is often cramped and they live in neighbourhoods with few possibilities for playing outside. Often, they do not have their own room or at least a quiet space to relax or to do homework. They participate less often in sports clubs or leisure activities and are more often socially isolated than their peers in families with higher incomes. Many of them are not able to invite friends over to their home. A one-week vacation to enjoy time with their parents and siblings and to relax is not affordable for most poor families. Poor children eat less fresh fruit and vegetables and are more likely to face health problems than other children.

During their entire educational biography they are more likely to face various problems than children growing up in more affluent families. As a consequence, the future life chances of poor children are much smaller compared to those of their peers in other families: Less educational attainment, fewer opportunities on the labour market, and less possibilities to participate in our society. Moreover, the longer children live in poverty, the more negative are the effects on their future development.

However, it is very difficult to analyse these multi-dimensional consequences of poverty on children's lives in a systematic way due to insufficient data. There is only few reliable qualitative and quantitative data describing these effects. As a result, data-driven studies taking a multi-dimensional perspective on the consequences of poverty are largely missing in the case of Germany. Comparisons to other countries are almost impossible due to this lack of reliable data.

What does the Bertelsmann Stiftung suggest to overcome child poverty?

In order to combat poverty effectively, we need to better understand the consequences on children's lives – and thus we need more longitudinal studies as well as a more systematic evaluation of monetary poverty based on existing data.

Since children cannot escape poverty by themselves, governments should be obliged to guarantee each child the opportunity to develop and fully participate in our society. New child-centred policies should include financial security, time for children with their families, high-quality early childhood education and care (from the age of one year onward) that is accessible and affordable for all families, access to education, healthcare, culture and leisure as well as guaranteed rights and participation options for all children.
As a short-time measure, single-parent families should be in the focus as they account for such a great proportion of families in poverty. Reform options include support to combine work and caring for children, training and qualification to find adequate jobs, enforcement of child maintenance payments as well as tax credits for children.

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[1] At risk of poverty or social exclusion, abbreviated as AROPE, refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty, or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity.
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