

Child Poverty in Germany (January 3, 2018)

Abstract

Child poverty has emerged as a pressing political issue. Studies show that children of single parents are particularly affected. The author calls for new policy approaches that focus not only on families but specifically on the welfare of children.

Source

Combating child poverty. This is how!

Inequality in Germany is growing – and those most affected are the youngest members of society. A new federal government must resolutely confront child poverty.

Things are quite unfair for Germany's children. Germany is a four-fifth society, where one out of every five children comes from a financially disadvantaged household, and the trend is rising. The 2013 coalition agreement forged by the CDU/SPD government said nothing about child poverty. Now that politicians have been speaking so much about fairness during the campaign and studies are continuously corroborating the rising inequality, the next government cannot afford to be so careless.

The sums paid out for the basic provision for job seekers according to the Social Security Code II, also called Hartz IV, are constantly rising. According to data from the Federal Labor Agency, the number of children living in so-called Hartz IV households is almost 2 million – nearly 15 % of all those under 18. Parents receive up to 311 euro per month for each child. However, in spite of these transfer payments, they often live in relative poverty.

In Germany, 2.8 million of those under the age of 18 live in relative poverty, that is, in a household with an income of less than 60 % of the median income of all households. That is more than 20 % of all children. In single parent households, the percentage is 45. These rates have risen steadily in recent years, as even the official Family Report of the federal government shows. One fifth of all families are single-parent families, nearly all headed by women. Child poverty is family poverty, but often also maternal poverty.

The World Vision children studies and the Shell Youth Studies reveal: most children are doing well – but one child in five is growing up in economically unsatisfactory conditions. Our four-fifth society condemns these young people to restrictions in consumption and health, to developmental delays, to social and psychological problems. A lack of impulses at home often causes poverty to turn into educational poverty.

Denmark, the Netherlands, and other European countries with a lower child poverty show that a comprehensive strategy with coordinated steps is necessary. The chances for a revamping of the entangled German social, welfare, and family policy are uniquely good: 45 million people are employed, more than ever before; unemployment is at a historic low; the public coffers are well filled.

Unfortunately, all support for children in Germany still revolves around the family. But parents must no longer be held solely responsible for their children.

Reducing child poverty is a **societal task** that involves **six steps**. Each individual step is important, but it can take effect only if it is combined **with the others**. For the reduction of poverty among children is a

cross-sectional task that incorporates all areas of politics. Of course we are talking about **money**, but also about a **cultural rethinking**, the **dismantling of false conventions**.

Child poverty is interwoven with the entire architecture of social and welfare policy, and here above all with the traditions of family policy. This architecture is in urgent need of being newly adjusted in Germany.

Here are the **six steps out of child poverty** that belong into a new coalition agreement:

Step 1: creating an unconditional basic provision for children

First of all, the new federal government should create a basic financial provision for children. Instead of debating in a high-blown fashion an unconditional basic income for all, one should debate very concretely about an unconditional basic provision for the youngest members of society. Families with children are considerably worse off in material terms than couples without children. Increases in child benefits and child allowances tie up a lot of tax revenues and are not pinpointed. Targeted transfer payments could be better at helping children in households at risk of poverty. The current Minister of Family Affairs, Katarina Barley, has proposed bundling child benefits, child supplements, income support, and tax allowances. That would be the right first step.

Step 2: reshaping the labor market for parents

We need a labor policy that is sensitive to families. Today, almost all parents wish for gainful employment and a good balance between family and work. However, they often feel left alone with the demand to organize a family life in which they can do justice to both their children and to their employer. Politics and the economy should create offers for more flexible work arrangements.

Step 3: promoting the pedagogical competence of parents

Parents are under pressure: they are supposed to have a good relationship with their children, provide them with opportunities, while at the same time meeting the challenges in the workplace. Courses for parents already exist, but they have to actively look for them and in most cases also pay for them. That is the wrong path, it should be exactly the other way around: a “connected” parent education that is integrated into the everyday activities should be set up in every day-care center and school. Anyone who takes part in courses there should receive financial benefits, such as free passes for swimming pools.

Step 4: improving the social infrastructure for families with children

Public institutions for the provision of public services are especially important for the poor. Now that the expansion of pre-school offerings has made good progress, the focus is on ensuring the quality of care for children. And on the costs: it does not make sense why schools and universities in Germany are free, while the pre-school sector is substantially financed by parents. All federal states should follow the example of Rhineland-Palatinate and provide free pre-school education. Low-income parents would then be more likely to send their children to pre-school.

Step 5: switching the education system to targeted support

In Germany, achievements in school depend very strongly on family background. Children from poor families still do not get the early support they urgently need, from day care through their entire schooling. The all-day schools, which achieve that goal, are very expensive. Many federal states are still putting on the brakes in this regard. Lifting the ban on cooperation in the educational sector would provide new impulses to the federal government and the federal states.

Step 6: including children's rights in the Basic Law

The legal position of children should be strengthened. Children's rights are not enshrined in the Basic Law. In response to National Socialism, after the Second World War the course was set in the direction of a parent monopoly. If parents exercise their responsibility, children do well; if parents do not, children do badly. Enshrining children's rights in the Basic Law would underscore the responsibility of society as a whole for its children.

Source: Klaus Hurrelmann, "Kinderarmut bekämpfen. Und zwar so!," *Spiegel Online*, 3 January 2018, <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/kinderarmut-diese-sechs-massnahmen-muss-eine-neue-bundesregierung-beschliessen-a-1185499.html>

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Recommended Citation: Child Poverty in Germany (January 3, 2018), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5290>> [July 05, 2025].