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Policy Analysis
Network (ESPAN)

Access for children in need to the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee

Poland

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Summary

On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation establishing a “European Child Guarantee”, with a view to guaranteeing access to six key services for “children in need”:

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities; at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which low-income children in Poland do indeed have effective (or effective and free) access to these services.

Access to high-quality ECEC in Poland has improved in recent years. Many local authorities invest in the development of ECEC places for children under 3, using funding from the European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund and the government’s “Toddler+” programme. Despite the progress observed, the coverage of ECEC for the youngest children is still generally low, with significant differences between cities and municipalities. Access to pre-school education for children aged 3-5 is higher: but regional disparities, as well as those between urban and rural areas, remain. Since 2013, after the introduction of a maximum fee for pre-school care, financial barriers to accessing pre-school education have been significantly reduced. Many municipalities have introduced further reductions in these fees, including (among other things) a low-income criterion. New cash benefits introduced in 2022 provide further support to cover the cost of childcare up to age 3.

Children in Poland have access to publicly financed primary and secondary education. In primary schools, all children are provided with free textbooks. Students who live far from primary schools are also entitled to free transport. Other school-related needs attract support for the low-income households of students in primary and secondary schools, based on the social assistance criterion.

Low-income children are provided with free meals in ECEC facilities and in schools, based on the government’s “free meals at home and at school” programme. From 2023, the income criterion for the programme is 200% of the social assistance threshold, which is above the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.

All children under 18, regardless of their income status, are eligible for healthcare services if registered with the National Health Fund. Registration determines the flow of social insurance contributions – whether social insurance is covered from parents’ contributions or from public sources of different kinds. There are no special arrangements regarding access to services for low-income children.

The main publicly funded food aid programmes in Poland are the free meals at home and at school programme, the “food aid operational programme 2014-2020” and “European funds for food aid 2021-2027”. The programmes contribute to broadening access to free meals for children.

With respect to housing, the main support measure aimed at low-income households is the housing allowance. However, there is a lack of research on the adequacy of the allowance in relation to the housing expenditure of poor households with children.

Introduction

On 14 June 2021, the EU Member States unanimously adopted the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a “European Child Guarantee” (ECG).¹

The objective of the ECG is to offset the impact of poverty on children and to prevent and combat their social exclusion. To this end, it is recommended that Member States guarantee for “children in need” (defined as people **under 18** who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion – AROPE):

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities;² at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

According to the ECG Recommendation, **effective access** means “a situation in which services are readily available, affordable, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely manner, and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them” (Article 3d). **Effective and free access** means “effective access” to the services, as well as free-of-charge provision – either by organising and supplying such services or by providing “adequate benefits to cover the costs or the charges of the services, or in such a way that financial circumstances will not pose an obstacle to equal access” (Article 3e).

The Recommendation directs the Member States to prepare action plans, covering the period until 2030, to explain how they will implement the Recommendation.³ These plans are to be submitted to the European Commission.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which children AROPE have effective and free access to four of the six services covered by the ECG and effective access to the other two (see above). Given that the eligibility criterion (or criteria) for accessing those services in individual Member States (at national and/or sub-national level, depending on how the service is organised) is/are not based on the EU definition of the risk of poverty or social exclusion,⁴ the report focuses on access for low-income children to each of these services, using the national low-income criterion (or criteria) that apply (e.g. having a household income below a certain threshold or receiving the minimum income). Throughout this report, “low-income children” is to be understood as children living in low-income households.

In Poland, all six services covered by the ECG are primarily or solely regulated at national level. Therefore, the report seeks to provide a general picture of the (effective/free) access for low-income children in the country. In addition to this general picture, if access differs

¹ The full text of the ECG Recommendation is available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC.

² According to the Recommendation (Article 3f), “school-based activities” means “learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community”.

³ Once they have been submitted to the European Commission, the plans are made publicly available online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

⁴ According to the EU definition, children are AROPE if they live in a household that is at risk of poverty (below 60% of median income; hereafter AROP) and/or severely materially and socially deprived, and/or (quasi-)jobless. For the detailed definition of this indicator and all other EU social indicators agreed to date, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=756&langId=en>. In 2021, EU Member States agreed a target to be reached by 2030: a reduction in the number of people AROPE in the EU by at least 15 million, including at least **5 million children**.

substantially across the country, it illustrates these geographical disparities by providing an example of both a sub-entity in the country that performs well and a sub-entity that performs poorly.

The report is structured by service:

- effective and free access to high-quality ECEC;
- effective and free access to education and school-based activities;
- effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare (e.g. free regular health examinations and follow-up treatment, and access to medicines, treatments and support);
- effective access to healthy nutrition;⁵ and
- effective access to adequate housing.⁶

1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to ECEC services.

1.1 Mapping accessibility and affordability of ECEC

In Poland, ECEC services are divided into childcare for children below age 3 (in the form of crèches, children clubs, childminders and nannies) and pre-school education for children aged 3-6.

Access to childcare for children under 3, as well for those aged 3-6 in pre-school education, is provided at the level of the municipality (*gmina*) in Poland. In recent years there have been many policy changes, aimed at improving the accessibility and affordability of childcare.

Table 1.1: Accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Childcare (usually under age 3)		Pre-school setting (usually age 3 to compulsory school age)	
Accessibility	Affordability	Accessibility	Affordability
PRIOR-5 months	NO	ENT-ALL3years	NO

Note: "ENT-ALL3years" means a legal entitlement for all children from age 3. "PRIOR-5 months" means priority access for low-income children from age 0. "NO" in the affordability column means not free for low-income households. If the information differs between centre-based and home-based care, the information provided applies to centre-based care.

Childcare under 3

The Act on the care of children up to age 3 does not define specific criteria based on which municipalities running crèches and children's clubs should admit children, apart from age. All other admission criteria are determined by the municipalities individually and must be

⁵ According to the Recommendation (Article 3g), "healthy meal" or "healthy nutrition" means "a balanced meal consumption, which provides children with nutrients necessary for their physical and mental development and for physical activity that complies with their physiological needs".

⁶ According to the Recommendation (Article 3h), "adequate housing" means "a dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, and is available and accessible at an affordable cost".

enshrined in the statute of the crèche or children's club. The most common is the requirement for parents to live in the catchment area, and to pay taxes in the respective municipality. Priority may also be given to children who are brought up in large families, and to those whose parents are working (or studying) or single parents.

In public nurseries, the fees for the child's stay and meals are set by the local authority. The fee for the stay is usually around PLN 300-500 (€64-106) per month. Warsaw is the only city in Poland where public crèches, as well as those places in private crèches that are financed by the city, are free of charge. In non-public nurseries, the nursery itself sets the fees on a market basis. In public crèches, a partial or complete exemption from these fees is possible. One of the criteria for a reduction of fees is low income (Table 1.1). Each municipality sets its own rules of exemption, including both income thresholds and scale of the fee reduction.

Pre-school education (age 3-6)

All children in Poland have a right to pre-school education. This means that if parents want a child aged 3-5 to be in pre-school education, the municipality is obliged to provide a place. In the absence of free places in public pre-schooling, pre-school units, and other forms of pre-school education, the local authority is obliged, not later than before the start of supplementary admissions, to provide a place in a non-public pre-school unit, a pre-school unit in a non-public primary school or another form of non-public pre-school education. However, there is no information as to whether all parents are aware of this right.

Pre-school education is mandatory for children at age 6, as a preparation for primary education.

The stay of a child under 5 in public pre-schooling is free of charge for the first five hours of care (usually from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.). Fees for attending pre-school education in public pre-school settings and other forms of pre-school education beyond the fifth hour may not exceed the maximum amount specified in Article 52(3) of the Act on financing educational tasks. From the 2022/2023 school year, the amount of the fee for pre-school education is PLN 1.14 (€0.24) per hour. Parents of children aged 6 engaged in school preparation do not pay for their children's stay in pre-schooling. Local authorities can reduce this fee for all children, but also for selected socio-economic conditions, such as residence in the municipality, disability of the child, a single-parent family, a large family, or low income (Table 1.1).

1.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

There are no conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child” that are applied on a unified basis. Local authorities can apply different thresholds, taking into account local conditions.

There are different approaches that local authorities use. They can use the threshold used for social assistance or family benefits. In some places (e.g. Warsaw) a decision on the reduction of fees is based on a decision by the head of the pre-school establishment. Both social assistance and family benefits thresholds are below the AROP threshold (see Table A.1 in the Annex). However, thresholds that are applied at different levels can exceed the AROP threshold.

Fee reductions or exemptions can be applied to households in a difficult financial situation, families with many children, or families with children with disabilities. Local authorities can also reduce fees based on tax residence in the municipality. The income threshold and the fee reduction are specified by the local authorities.

1.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Given local differences regarding the fee to access ECEC, it is not possible to assess the size of this group in relation to the AROPE population.

The income criterion does not use the equivalence scale used to determine the AROP threshold. It is therefore difficult to assess whether the population of children covered by the financial support is greater or less than the AROPE population. However, it can be expected that access to free ECEC education covers a larger population than the number of AROPE children.

There is no information on the number of children who have free access to ECEC education at the national level, on non-take-up, or on groups of children over-represented in the AROPE population but lacking free access.

1.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to ECEC for low-income children

1.2.1 Financial barriers

Barriers related to access to childcare have been monitored in the Polish labour force survey since 2008. These are based on the subjective assessment of respondents. It should be noted that the barriers are identified in relation to all types of ECEC (both public and private). The labour force survey specifies three types of barriers: cost, distance and quality. The share of women of child-rearing age who experience such barriers, by level of educational attainment, is shown in Figure A.1 in the Annex.

Financial barriers were the most frequently indicated, particularly by women with lower educational attainment, who face higher barriers compared with those with tertiary education. Between 2008 and 2019 the barriers related to access to ECEC were reduced. This was a result of the introduction of the maximum fee for pre-school education in 2013 (as described above).

To address financial barriers, the “family care capital” (*Rodzinny Kapitał Opiekuńczy* – RKO) is a new instrument of family-friendly policy that came into effect on 1 January 2022. It is a new benefit received by parents for the second and subsequent child in the family. The benefit is payable from the month in which a child turns 1 until the end of the month in which they turn 3.

The total value of the RKO is PLN 12,000 (€2,553.19) for childcare. The family is entitled to PLN 500 (€106.38) or PLN 1,000 (€212.77) per month. Parents themselves can indicate whether they want to receive the capital in the amount of PLN 500 for 24 months or in the amount of PLN 1,000 for 12 months. The benefit is available regardless of household income. According to government statistics, 610,000 children have benefited from the RKO.

The Family Care Capital Act also provided for changes to the Act on care for children up to age 3, as a result of which, among other things, a financial subsidy for a stay in a crèche, a children's club or at a daycare centre has been introduced for children not covered by the RKO. This subsidy is available – upon request – to parents, legal guardians and other people entrusted by the court with the care of a child, and reduces the financial barriers to ECEC participation. It is linked to the stay of a child not covered by the RKO in an institution for

children up to age 3 and leads to a reduced fee (excluding meals but taking into account discounts provided by the entity running it).

The subsidy is available:

- for the first and only child in the family;
- for the first child in families where another child is covered by the RKO; and
- for a child under 1, and a child aged 3 or over.

The subsidy amounts to a maximum of PLN 400 (€85.11) per month per child in a crèche, children's club or daycare centre (up to the amount of the fee). It is estimated that around 110,000 children are covered by this support, which came into effect from 1 April 2022.

According to Statistics Poland, in 2021 there were 256,400 children covered by ECEC, of which 167,900 had the cost of ECEC partially or fully covered by the municipality (Statistics Poland, 2022b).

1.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Among the non-financial barriers related to access to ECEC is limited accessibility due to the distance to ECEC facilities. As a result, participation in childcare varies among municipalities, and between urban and rural areas. There is also a difference between participation in care for children under 3 and pre-school education. In 2021, 88.3% of children aged 3-5 attended ECEC, and only 15.5% of children under 3 attended institutional ECEC. According to estimates by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, in 2021 the share of children aged 0-2 covered by different forms of care – crèches, children clubs, day carers (*opiekunki dziecięce*), and nannies (*nanie*) – was 19.9%, compared with 17.5% in 2020 (Statistics Poland, 2022b).

Childcare under 3

Participation of children under 3 in ECEC varies territorially. As of 2021, in cities with county rights (*miasta na prawach powiatu*) just over 18% of children attended ECEC facilities, and 13.4% in other urban municipalities, but only 4.7% in rural municipalities (Swianiewicz and Łukomska, 2022).

Through the annually renewed “Toddler+” (*MALUCH+*) programme, central government subsidises the establishment and maintenance of childcare places, thus reducing the accessibility barrier. In 2022, the Toddler+ programme was transformed into a long-term programme for 2022-2029. Toddler+ is a programme integrating European funds – funds from the National Recovery and Resilience Facility and the European Funds for Social Development programme financed by the European Social Fund Plus within the 2021-2027 financial perspective – as well as funds from the state budget. The programme envisages the creation and operation of 102,000 subsidised care places. The creation of crèches and care places is also subsidised from structural funds, within regional operational programmes. These activities have already resulted in a significant increase in the ECEC participation of children under 3 – from 6.8% in 2015 to 15.5% (more than double) in 2021. In 2021, the highest share of children in childcare institutions (as in the previous year) was recorded in the Lower Silesian voivodeship (23.0%), while the lowest occurred in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeship (10.7%). A low value on this indicator was also recorded in the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship (11.8%) (Statistics Poland, 2022d).

Another form of childcare that helps to reduce the accessibility barrier is the possibility of providing care by day carers or nannies. According to the Social Insurance Institution data, in 2021 there were 4,878 nannies employed on the “activation contract” (compared with 5,559 in

2020), of which 1,800 were aged 50-59. Most nannies (97.2%) were women. The largest number of nannies was in Mazowieckiej voivodship (1,100) and the lowest in Opolskie (40).

Furthermore, there were 1,637 day carers in 2021 (compared with 1,576 in 2020). The Ministry of Family and Social Policy estimated that 8,167 children were covered by such care. The largest number of day carers was registered in Mazowieckiej voivodship (864), with the lowest in Opolskie (3), Podlaskie (4) and Świętokrzyskie (7).

A ranking of access to childcare for the youngest children, published at the end of 2022 (Swianiewicz and Łukomska, 2022), showed significant differences between municipalities. In the case of voivodship cities, the highest participation of children was in Rzeszów (70.19%), Opole (69.72%) and Zielona Góra (67.99%), while the lowest was in Gdańsk (49.43%) and Łódź (50.70%). In the case of cities with county rights, the top-ranking cities were Koszalin (80.96%), Chełm (73.96%) and Tarnobrzeg (68.25%).

The benefits of investing in ECEC were summarised by the Mayor of Koszalin: *“Just 20 years ago, Koszalin was a bastion of unemployment, which reached 20%. Young people were leaving because they saw no prospects for themselves. The creation of the Special Economic Zone reversed this trend to the extent that there was trouble finding employees. Fortunately, we had diagnosed this problem earlier and decided to direct our efforts towards young people deciding to settle permanently in Koszalin. We decided that clean air, proximity to the sea, numerous lakes and forests were not enough. One of the conditions was therefore to provide good enough conditions for children and young people to convince their parents that Koszalin is their place on earth. We have had very good results in education for a long time, which is confirmed, among other things, by the rankings. Hence the idea to develop the crèche base so that young mothers can return to the labour market, leaving their children in the care of qualified caregivers.”* (Swianiewicz and Łukomska, 2022).

The last places in the ranking in this category are held by Piekary Śląskie (36.72%), Ruda Śląska (38.24%) and Świętochłowice (39.22%).

Among county cities (*miasta powiatowe*), participation ranged from Sejny (95.41%), Siemiatycze (87.54%) and Zgorzelec (81.51%) to Żnin (26.17%), Pisz (21.28%) and Lipsko (16.6%). The significant local government effort to invest in ECEC in Sejny was not approved initially by all, but it led to improvements in other areas, as indicated by the Mayor of Sejny in an interview (Swianiewicz and Łukomska, 2022). Among smaller cities, the top of the ranking was held by Józefów (81.97%), Mszana Dolna (72.01%) and Swarzędz (68.13%), while Małomice (8.76%), Nowy Korczyn (8.59%) and Izbica Kujawska (8.37%) were at the bottom. Finally, among rural municipalities ECEC participation was highest in Mielnik (87.88%), Branice (83.93%), and Kobierzyce (83.11%). At the other extreme, in Braniewo, Nowy Dwór and Płużnica there were no children aged 0-3 covered by ECEC, which may indicate that there were no ECEC places available in these municipalities. It should be noted that in 2016 Mielnik (the leader of the ranking) was ranked 191st among all rural municipalities (out of 1,525 places). Mielnik (with 2,200 inhabitants) is an example of how Toddler+, ERDF and ESF financing can support the creation of ECEC places. It implemented a “joyful toddlers in the community crèche” project in 2018, which envisaged the launch of a community crèche with eight childcare places for children up to age 3. The project made it possible to provide basic equipment, hire the carer, and ensure the day-to-day running of the newly created care places.

Pre-school education (ages 3-5)

Pre-school education for children aged 3-5 in Poland is increasingly accessible. The share of children covered increased from 81.1% in 2016 to 88.3% in 2021. In the 2021/2022 school year, there were 22,400 officially registered pre-school establishments, 76 more than in the

previous school year (13,500 pre-school units, 7,500 pre-primary sections in primary schools, 100 pre-primary education units and 1,400 pre-primary centres). They provided pre-primary education to 1.5 million children, 48,000 (3.4%) more than a year earlier. Most pre-primary establishments (68.9%) were managed by public governing bodies (Statistics Poland, 2022a). Participation in pre-school education varies territorially, from 92.5% of children in Mazowieckie voivodship to 81.7% in Kujawsko-pomorskie voivodship, which indicates the existence of barriers – related to a lack of either proximity to the place of residence or the willingness of parents to enrol their children in pre-school education. Among cities with county rights the highest participation was in Chełm (120%), Konin (115.6%) and Ostrołęka (115.1%). Participation is calculated at a gross rate (i.e. the number of children in pre-school education, relative to the number of children aged 3-5 who live in the city). Figures above 100% show that children from nearby communities are also attending pre-schooling, for example when their parents commute to work. The lowest participation is observed in Świętochłowice (78.3%), Ruda Śląska (86.1%) and Piekary Śląskie (87.0%). The latter three cities were already indicated as being the cities with the lowest participation of children under 3.

Information from Statistics Poland's local databank shows that at county (*powiat*) level (excluding the cities), participation is highest in the following counties: Otwocki (96.5%), Piaseczyński (95.8%) and Pruszkowski (95.0%), with the lowest being in Chełmski (53.2%), Grudziądzki (60.4%) and Suwalski (60.4%), which is compensated for by the higher participation of children in the nearest cities (for example Chełm, which is at the top of the ranking for cities).

The issue of access to pre-school education was assessed by the Supreme Audit Office (NIK) in 2019 (Supreme Audit Office, 2019), which is the most recent such assessment identified in the literature and studies in Poland. As stated in the report: *"In almost half of the municipalities inspected by the NIK (14 out of 30 municipalities) there were problems with the availability of pre-school care. The number of applications for admission of children exceeded the number of available places by an average of 30-60%. Almost a third of the children did not get into the pre-school of their choice, almost all of which were three- and four-year-olds. In some municipalities, parents were either not shown alternative facilities or were offered facilities that were unattractive, e.g. due to their location or working hours. In almost half of the municipalities, the recruitment process was not properly supervised. This was particularly evident in municipalities where IT systems were not used to support the process. The consequence was a lack of transparency in the process."*

In municipalities examined by the NIK where there was a shortage of pre-school places, there were situations where appropriate conditions for its implementation were not ensured. There were cases of exceeding the maximum size of pre-school groups (nine municipalities) or failing to provide pre-school care at the appropriate time (after the end of the pre-school unit, the children stayed in school daycare centres). In five of these municipalities, parents were not able to send their children to pre-schooling during the holidays. It was also a problem for most municipalities to provide care for children with allergies and chronic illnesses that required constant monitoring and medication (Supreme Audit Office, 2019).

There are no other studies identified that could provide more information on the scope of pre-school services provided by municipalities.

1.3 Free meals provision for low-income children in ECEC

Parents of children in ECEC pay for their children's meals. These fees depend on whether the pre-school unit has its own kitchen or uses external catering. On a monthly basis, this is a cost

of around PLN 200 (€42.55). If the child only eats breakfast and lunch, the monthly fee is lower. Local authorities may partially or fully exempt households from the fees or authorise the pre-school heads to agree such exemptions.

Low-income children have access to free meals based on the multi-year government programme for free meals at home and at school for 2019-2023. Module 1 of the programme is designed to provide meals to children below school age, either in kind or in the form of a cash benefit. Local authorities apply for the programme and provide support to schools and pre-school units in the municipality or the city. The government has so far not announced its intention to establish a similar programme for 2024 onwards.

Initially, the income criterion for eligibility for support was 150% of the social assistance income criterion, and this has been raised to 200% since January 2023. This means that assistance under the programme will be provided to people with low income, whose net monthly income does not exceed PLN 1,200 (€255.32) per person in a household (previously it was PLN 900, or €191.49).

According to the assessment by the NIK in 2019, assistance in the form of meals in 2019 was implemented in 7,011 kindergartens (including 2,529 kindergartens in rural areas) and 447 nurseries (including 66 nurseries in rural areas). In 2020, there was a slight fall in the number of educational establishments where this assistance was implemented, which was offered in 6,791 kindergartens (including 2,491 in rural areas) and 426 nurseries (including 80 in rural areas).

2. Education and school-based activities

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to education and school-based activities.

Section 2.1 maps the main school costs in public primary and secondary education, distinguishing between the following:⁷

- compulsory basic school materials (schoolbag, pens, glue, scissors, etc.);
- compulsory school materials (textbooks, school supplies, notebooks, etc.);
- compulsory specific clothing (uniform, sports clothing);
- IT equipment requested by the school;
- sports equipment or musical instruments requested by the school;
- compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum;
- other compulsory fees or costs; and
- transport costs to or from school.

Section 2.2 briefly describes the cash benefits specifically intended to help meet educational costs.

Finally, Section 2.3 seeks to identify the main barriers that prevent low-income children from having effective and free access to “school-based activities” as defined in the Council Recommendation establishing the ECG (see “Introduction” section). Given that the distinction between these activities and some of the activities covered above – especially the “compulsory

⁷ Tuition fees charged by private schools are not covered.

extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum” – may not always be clear-cut, the focus of Section 2.3 is specifically on school-based activities which are not part of the curriculum.

2.1 Mapping the main school costs in public primary and secondary education

Table 2.1a: School costs of primary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
MOST ITEMS	ALL	MOST ITEMS	POOR ALL 4 th grade	MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	ALL-distance

Note: “ALL” means that this category is free for all children. “POOR” means that it is free for low-income children. “MOST ITEMS” means that most but not all items in the category are free for low-income children.

In Poland, support for households related to the cost of school education is provided both in kind (i.e. school books for all children in primary education) and through cash benefits. In this section, support in the form of in-kind services or refunds for the purchase of specific school equipment is presented, as shown in Table 2.1a. Low-income students (those below the social assistance threshold) in primary and secondary schools may obtain a refund in the form of a school scholarship granted by the municipality.⁸ This benefit includes full or partial coverage of the costs of participation in educational classes, including remedial classes, going beyond the classes conducted at school as part of the curriculum, as well as participation in educational activities conducted outside school, in particular for:

- additional educational activities (e.g. tutoring, learning foreign languages, sports activities, excursions, trips, and school events);
- textbooks, school books, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, atlases, school and art supplies, instruments, and other educational materials related to the profile of the classes;
- a school backpack once a school year;
- a change of shoes once a semester;
- outfits for physical education classes (sports shoes, sports shorts, T-shirts, sports blouses and sports trousers) once a semester;
- sportswear and equipment connected with the profile of classes in sports classes or sports clubs;
- clothing required by the school for participation in educational activities;
- computer equipment (computer or laptop, monitor, printer or multifunctional device, system software, hard drive, processor, power supply, keyboard, mouse, toners, storage media, and printer paper); and
- a desk and chair.

Since 2017, all children in primary schools have received free textbooks. Textbooks are selected by the teachers and purchased by schools, with government subsidies. It is expected that one textbook will be used for three years by different children.

⁸ Further information on these benefits is provided in Section 2.2.

There are various initiatives in the provision of computers to students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities could apply for IT equipment provision. In 2020-2021, two projects were initiated to provide students and teachers with equipment. The projects were implemented by the Digital Poland Project Centre. The aim of the first project (“remote school”) was to provide schools and students with the necessary equipment for remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak. The “remote school +” project was a continuation of the earlier one. The aim was to provide students from large families and teachers with the necessary equipment for remote learning. Some of these initiatives were financed from EU funds. The ERDF supported the purchase of computers under the “digital Poland” project for 2014-2020. The ESF also contributed to the purchase of laptops to enable remote teaching.

Another project initiated by the Digital Poland Project Centre was “PPGR grants – supporting children and grandchildren of former state farm workers in digital development”, concluded in November 2022. Under the project, 1,599 municipalities applied for total funding of PLN 584.63 million (€124.39 million), financed from EU funds. Within this funding, municipalities envisaged the purchase of nearly 14,000 desktops and about 200,000 laptops, which would be transferred to students. There are no data on the actual number of computers and laptops purchased and provided to students.

Finally, a new government initiative is to provide laptops for all grade 4 students in primary schools. The first edition of the programme will start in autumn 2023. New laptops will be provided to 370,000 children in grade 4, at a cost of PLN 760 million (€161.7 million).

With regards to transport, the student’s route from home to school must not exceed 3 km for students in grades 1-4 of primary schools and 4 km for students in grades 5-8 of primary schools. It is the responsibility of the municipality to provide free transport and care during the child’s transport or to reimburse the cost of the child’s travel by public transport if the distances are greater.

In the case of secondary education, similar support to low-income children is provided, with the exception of free textbooks and transport to students living at a distance from schools, as shown in Table 2.1b.

Table 2.1b: School costs of secondary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	MOST ITEMS	NA

Note: “MOST ITEMS” means that most but not all items in the category are free for low-income children. “NA” (not applicable) means that this category is not requested/compulsory in the country.

2.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

In the case of provision of school support, as presented in Tables 2.1a and 2.1b, the income threshold applied is that for social assistance support – PLN 600 (€127.66) net monthly income per household member.

2.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

There is no information on the number of low-income children covered by school support. The income threshold per capita for school support is below the AROP income threshold; but in the latter case, equivalence scales are used. It is therefore not possible to compare the number of children provided with support and the AROPE population. A comparison of the social assistance threshold with the AROP threshold is provided in Table A.1 in the Annex.

There is also no information on non-take-up by children entitled to the services, or on groups of children who are over-represented in the AROPE population but lack access to school support.

2.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet educational costs

All children under 18 in Poland are eligible for a universal cash benefit of PLN 500 (€106.38) monthly. The introduction of this benefit contributed to a significant reduction in child poverty, as well as supporting families with the costs related to, among other things, education. According to Eurostat data, between 2015 (prior to the introduction of the benefit) and 2021, the share of children under 18 who were AROPE declined from 26.8% to 16.5%. Furthermore, all children in primary and secondary schools are eligible for a universal annual benefit called a “good start” (*Dobry Start*), equal to PLN 300 (€63.83), payable at the beginning of the academic year. In 2021 the good start benefit was paid to 4.4 million children.

Low-income households (with net monthly income below PLN 674, or €143.40, per person) are entitled to family benefits. This amounts to PLN 95 (€20.21) per child up to age 5; PLN 124.00 (€26.38) per child aged 6-18; and PLN 135 (€28.72) per child aged 19-24. Family benefits in 2021 were received on average by 679,000 families each month (142,900, or 17.4%, fewer families than in 2020). Family benefits were paid on average each month to 1.456 million children (compared with the 1.14 million children who are AROPE), with the largest group being children aged 6-12 (568,200 – 39.0%). Children under 6 (428,900 children) accounted for 29.4% of the total number of children for whom family allowances were paid, compared with the 375,000 children who are AROPE. Children aged 13-15 accounted for 15.7%, those aged 16-17 for 9.1%, and those aged 18 and over who were dependent mainly for schooling for 6.8%. The share of children under 18 whose parents received family benefits in the total number of children of that age was 19.6% – down by 3.1 percentage points compared with 2020, compared with 16.5% of children AROPE (Statistics Poland, 2022c).

Families entitled to family allowances can also receive supplements that cover the cost of education as follows.

- For starting the school year (PLN 100, or €21.28, once a year).
- Starting education outside the place of residence:
 - due to residing in a town in which there is a secondary school or equivalent art school in which compulsory education is provided, as well as a primary school in the case of a child or student with a disability certificate or a disability degree – in the amount of PLN 113 (€24.04) per month per child, or

- due to commuting from the place of residence to the town where the secondary school (or art school) is located where compulsory education is provided – in the amount of PLN 69 (€14.68) per month per child.
- Supplement for education and rehabilitation of a child with disabilities. The amount of the supplement is (per month): PLN 90 (€20.21) per child up to age 5, or PLN 110 (€23.40) per child aged 6-24.

The third type of support for families is financial support for students at school. The provision of material assistance to students on social grounds is the municipality's own responsibility, for which it receives state funding (Article 90r, paragraph 1 of the Education System Act). The Ministry of Education and Science, in fulfilling its task of providing material assistance for students in the form of school scholarships and school benefits, relies on the funds from the special purpose reserve of the state budget, which increases the funds for material assistance provided by municipalities.

Scholarships paid to students range from PLN 99.20 (€21.11) to PLN 248 (€52.77) per month and may be paid for up to 10 months in a given school year. The maximum net monthly income per person in a family entitling a student to apply for the school scholarship is PLN 600 (€127.66). The amount granted must be 80-200% of the reference value of PLN 124 (€26.38).⁹

Article 90d of the Act of 7 September 1991 on the educational system (Journal of Laws of 2016, item 1943, as amended) specifies that a school scholarship may be awarded to a student in a difficult material situation resulting from low per capita income in the family, in particular when the family has: unemployment, disability, severe or prolonged illness, a large number of children, lack of ability to fulfil caring and upbringing functions, and alcoholism or drug addiction, as well as where a family member is absent or an unforeseen event has occurred.

A school scholarship may be granted to students in the form of:

- 1) total or partial coverage of the costs of participation in educational classes, including remedial classes, which go beyond the classes conducted at school as part of the teaching plan, as well as participation in educational classes conducted outside school; and
- 2) educational assistance in kind, including in particular the purchase of textbooks (described earlier).

Detailed legal solutions concerning the implementation of assistance for students living in a given municipality must be included in the municipal regulations on material assistance on social grounds. According to data from the education information system (*System Informacji Oświatowej – SIO*) there were 241,378 scholarships paid to students at schools at different levels (detailed information is provided in Table A.2 in the Annex).

Another form of social assistance is the school allowance. This is granted to students who are temporarily in a difficult material situation due to an unforeseen event, or due to the death of a parent. The school allowance may be granted in the form of a cash benefit to cover educational expenses or in the form of educational assistance in kind. The school allowance may be granted once or more times during the year, irrespective of the school grant received. The school benefit may not exceed, at any one time, five times the amount of the family allowance to which a child aged 5-18 is entitled, as defined in Article 6(2)(2) of the Act of 28 November

⁹ The reference value specified in the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 31 July 2018 on the amount of family income or student income constituting the basis for applying for family allowance and special care allowance, the amount of family benefits and the amount of allowance for the guardian.

2003 on family benefits. There were 6,656 school allowances granted in 2021, according to SIO data (detailed information is provided in Table A.2 in the Annex).

Another form of support implemented in recent years was the government programme in 2019-2021 to help children and students through an allowance for therapeutic-educational trips and care activities with a therapeutic-educational purpose (*Rządowy program pomocy dzieciom i uczniom w formie zasiłku losowego na cele edukacyjne, pomocy uczniom w formie wyjazdów terapeutyczno-edukacyjnych oraz pomocy dzieciom i uczniom w formie zajęć opiekuńczych i zajęć terapeutyczno-edukacyjnych w latach 2019-2021*). This has now been continued for 2022-2024. In 2021, according to SIO data, 105,890 students benefited from this programme (detailed information is provided in Table A.2 in the Annex).

Regional and local government also provide their own support, in the form of regional or local programmes for equalising educational opportunities and supporting the education of talented students. According to SIO data, 38,451 students benefited from such support in 2021 (detailed information is provided in Table A.2 in the Annex).

There are no studies identified that analyse whether the financial support for students described above adequately covers the needs of children. In particular, there is no information on the non-take-up of benefits, or on groups of children over-represented in the AROPE population but lacking access to the benefits.

2.3 Main barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities for low-income children

2.3.1 Financial barriers

There are no specific studies that focus on identifying barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities for low-income children.

Parents pay for extracurricular activities, which were attended by as many as 93% of students according to a 2019 Santander consumer bank survey. The survey results indicated that costs borne by families (which include the costs of textbooks, clothing or meals) amounted to more than PLN 500 (€106.38) per month for 23% of respondents.¹⁰

2.3.2 Non-financial barriers

An analysis of the risk of educational exclusion was carried out in 2014 based on the results of the “determinants of educational decisions” survey (Rószkiewicz and Saczuk, 2014). The results of the analysis showed the influence of parental education – lower parental education was correlated with lower levels of educational attainment, and vice versa.

The influence of low parental education might be counterbalanced by other factors where motivation played an important role, including choosing a school according to one’s interests and institutions with a high quality of education.

In addition to parental education, attitudes were also important, including an emphasis on work and study in the family home, which reduced the risk of low educational attainment and promoted higher levels of attainment. The analysis also revealed the positive impact of

¹⁰ <https://businessinsider.com.pl/twoje-pieniadze/budzet-domowy/ile-kosztuje-edukacja-dziecka-w-szkole-panstwowej/2ymdy5f>. The survey results do not allow costs related to school-based activities (only) to be identified.

participation in extra-curricular activities, which appeared to reduce the risk of low educational attainment and increase the chances of achieving higher levels of education.

The pathway analysis indicated that a school's reputation could encourage choices leading to a high level of education for those with high aspirations – but also choices leading to a low level of education for less aspiring students. These choices also depended on the type of school and the stage at which the choice was being made (primary, secondary or higher education).

The educational environment, including the level of development of the province and the infrastructure conducive to higher education, also had some bearing on the level of education achieved.

Family biographies related to early parenthood influenced the risk of achieving a lower level of education, which applied mainly to secondary education with a high school diploma and tertiary education.

3. Free meals at school

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to at least one free healthy meal each school day.

3.1 Mapping free provision of school meals

Since 1 September 2022, primary schools have been required by law to provide a meal for students. The use of these meals by children is voluntary and subject to a fee.

Meals can be served by the school canteen or by an external provider. Children from low-income households can receive a free (reimbursed) lunch at school under the free meals at home and at school programme for 2019-2023. There is no information as yet about the new programme, which would operate from 2024. The programme currently in force was adopted by the government in October 2018. It is therefore possible that the next programme will be adopted in the autumn of 2023.

3.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

School meals are reimbursed for students from households that meet the income criterion. From 2023, this is 200% of the income criterion for social assistance¹¹ per person in the family (PLN 600, €129.22) – that is, a net monthly income per person below PLN 1,200 (€255.32).¹²

To obtain reimbursement for school lunches, parents should submit an application to the social assistance centre, which verifies that the family meets the income criterion and reimburses the cost of meals. The family should also meet at least one other condition for receiving assistance indicated in the Social Assistance Act. These include: unemployment, disability, long-term or

¹¹ In the Polish social assistance system, there are two income criteria: PLN 776 (€166) for single-person households and PLN 600 (€129) for multi-person households. Regarding family benefits (*zasiłki rodzinne*), the income criterion is PLN 674 (€145) per person in the family, with an increased threshold of PLN 764 (€164) for families that have at least one child with a disability.

¹² The criterion in 2022 was 150% of the threshold used in social assistance per person in the family (that is, a net monthly income per person below PLN 900, or €189.75).

serious illness, family violence, multiple children, and helplessness in matters of care and household management (especially in single-parent families or families with many children).

3.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

In 2021/2022, 99,500 pupils benefited from free meals in primary schools, representing 3% of all pupils in these schools (Statistics Poland, 2022a). There were 617,000 children aged 6-15 (a range similar to the school age for primary schools of 7-14) who met the AROPE criteria and 536,000 who were AROP.¹³ These figures represented 13% of children in this age group. The number of children benefiting from free lunches in primary schools was therefore many times lower than the figure that the AROP rate for children of a similar age would suggest.

The income criterion of 200% of the social assistance criterion is equivalent to 44% of the net monthly minimum wage in 2023 (PLN 2,709, or €576.38). It is 65% of the AROP monthly income threshold in 2020 (PLN 1,842, or €386.17). However, the income criterion does not use the equivalence scale used to determine the AROP threshold. A family of two adults and two children has a monthly net income criterion of PLN 4,800 (€1,006.31), while the AROP threshold for this family is PLN 3,868 (€815.51). It follows that the income criterion is sufficient for all children from relatively poor households to be reimbursed for their school meals.

The lower income criterion, at the level of 150% of the social assistance criterion, amounts to 38% of the net minimum monthly wage in 2022 (PLN 2,363.56, or €498.32), and 49% of the 2020 AROP threshold. In this case, not all households AROP would meet this criterion. For example, for a family of two adults with two children, the criterion for meal reimbursement was PLN 3,600 (€759.01) net monthly income, and the poverty line for this type of family according to the equivalence scale would be higher, at PLN 3,868 (€815.51).

3.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children

3.2.1 Financial barriers

There is no research on financial barriers for households AROP to benefit from reimbursed school meals. The income criterion was a barrier for some low-income households in 2022, but not in 2023, as shown in Section 3.1.1. The current criteria ensure that all people living in households that face relative poverty could benefit from reimbursed school meals. For instance, every family comprising two adults and three children with a monthly income below PLN 6,000 (€1,287) is eligible for school meal reimbursements. The AROP threshold for such a family was PLN 4,423.60 (€948) in 2021. This more extensive coverage helps alleviate financial strain on numerous households and ensures that children obtain proper nutrition, which is vital for their overall well-being and academic success.

3.2.2 Non-financial barriers

There is no research on non-financial barriers for poor households to take up reimbursed school meals. Since the income criterion is much higher than the relative poverty line for families with children, there must be other reasons why a large proportion of poor households

¹³ Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023.

do not use reimbursed school meals, such as lack of knowledge, misconceptions about the conditions, or fear of negative reactions from other children.

4. Healthcare

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to healthcare, focusing on vaccinations, care from a general practitioner (GP) or infant nurses, specialist care, dental care (not orthodontics) and prescribed medicines.

4.1 Mapping the provision of free healthcare services and products

All children under 18, regardless of their income status, are eligible for healthcare services if registered with the National Health Fund (*Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia* – NFZ). Parents or legal guardians should register a child with the NFZ, otherwise a social assistance centre or a school can step in with the registration. Registration determines the flow of social insurance contributions – whether social insurance is covered from parents’ contributions or from public sources of different kinds. There are no special arrangements regarding access to services for low-income children.

Table 4.1: Healthcare costs (free for all/low-income children)

Vaccination	GP	Infant nurses	Specialist care	Dental care (not orthodontics)	Prescribed medicines
ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	NO

Note: “ALL” means that all services/products in the category are free for all children. “NO” means that most/all services/products are not free for low-income children.

Table 4.1 summarises the coverage of free healthcare services provided to children. Children are granted access to all basic and mandatory vaccinations (TB, pneumococcal infections, diphtheria, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus, hepatitis B, and haemophilus influenzae type B) covered by the NFZ. In Poland, as in other post-communist countries, access to and coverage of basic mandatory vaccinations is high, although falling. In 2021, 8.3 per 1,000 children aged 0-19 were not covered by vaccinations (compared with 0.7 per 1,000 children in 2012).¹⁴

GPs, infant nurses and specialist consultations are granted to all children. Dental care is granted to all children, with a larger range of services covered by the health insurance accessible to children than to adults. There are no specific regulations regarding access to pharmaceutical products for low-income children. However, not all medicines on prescription are covered by health insurance (or are co-funded only up to a certain level – 50% or 70% depending on the product), which might create constraints on access by children from low-income households.

4.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

¹⁴ <https://szczepienia.pzh.gov.pl/faq/jaka-jest-liczba-uchylen-szczepien-obowiazkowych/>

4.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

The Ministry of Health provides information on either the number of medical services provided to different age cohorts or the number of patients in a given age group, depending on the type of service.¹⁵

In 2021 there were 20.14 million primary care services provided to children aged 0-6 (7.71 services per person) and 11.64 million services (2.49 per person) to those aged 7-18. The number of services was high. Due to limited information on the number of patients treated by age (one child could receive many care services provided), it is difficult to compare the number of children treated with primary care services with the number of AROP children. It can be assumed that all children, including those at risk of poverty have access to free medical services.

Secondary care was used by 2,553,000 children under 18, twice the number of AROP children in this age group: however, the data do not cover information on their income status. Overall, 8,590 specialist ambulatory care consultations were provided to children under 18.

Over 1.43 million patients under 17 were hospitalised in 2021, compared with the total of 1.01 million AROP children: but the income gradient of children in in-patient care is unknown. The average number of days spent in hospital care was 3.5.

4.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet healthcare costs

There are no cash benefits to meet healthcare costs for children, as all public healthcare services are available regardless of income status.

If necessary, the social assistance centre can grant a special purpose allowance (*zasiłek celowy*) to cover the healthcare costs of a family member, including one or more children. The special purpose allowance is granted to households who meet the social assistance eligibility criteria, including incomes below the social assistance income threshold (net monthly incomes per capita below a threshold of PLN 776, or €163, per single person and PLN 600, or €127, per person living in a family), which is below the AROP threshold. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy,¹⁶ 294 beneficiaries (with 406 family members) were granted the special purpose allowance to cover medical costs. However, the statistics do not provide information on whether the actual beneficiaries were adults or children.

4.3 Non-financial barriers to effective and free access to healthcare

Although free access to healthcare is granted to all children, children from low-income households – including children of a single parent, children with disabilities, and children living in remote areas – might face difficulties in accessing adequate care. Survey research showed that 20% of single-parent households, and 17% of households with more than three children,

¹⁵ <https://basiw.mz.gov.pl/mapy-informacje/mapa-2022-2026/analizy/>

¹⁶ MRiPS-03 Annual report on social assistance benefits – financial, in nature and services.

declined medical advice for financial reasons in 2015 (Genowska *et al.*, 2017). The shares were even higher for dentistry (30.5% and 23.5% respectively).

Basic vaccinations are obligatory and available to all, and non-compliance is typically unrelated to income. However, the social health insurance system does not cover modern combined vaccinations. In addition to the obligatory vaccinations listed above, there are recommended vaccinations (e.g. against rotavirus, meningococcal infections) that are not covered by the social health insurance system and would need to be paid for out of pocket. Children from low-income households are to a large extent excluded from their use due to their high cost.

Access to specialist care might be restricted in more remote areas, as there are significant inequalities in access to specialist care between urban and rural settings. In case of long waiting lists for specialist consultations in public medical units, privately paid care (either covered out of pocket or by prepayment schemes) is often used, which is rarely an option for low-income households. 11.6% of low-income households use privately paid specialist care compared with 16.4% of high-income households (Statistics Poland, 2022e). Although children are by law eligible to a large spectrum of dental care services, and there are 9,263 dental care facilities with an NFZ contract, the number of publicly financed dental care facilities has been falling (from 10,851 in 2015). Dental care is highly privatised, with dentists having little financial motivation to provide care covered by the social health insurance system, for which the rates per service are lower. This might cause difficulties in access to dental care for low-income households and children, particularly in rural areas where the availability of care is poorer (Statistics Poland, 2022e).

Responding to the need for improving access to prevention and health promotion for children, in 2019 the Law on healthcare for pupils was introduced (*ustawa o opiece zdrowotnej nad uczniami*), obliging schools to provide dental care, as well as nursing and hygiene services. There were 722 dental care units in over 14,000 school premises at the end of 2022, and municipalities faced difficulties in attracting dentists to undertake employment at schools. Additionally, 16 “dento-buses” have been operating (one per voivodship) providing dental check-ups, hygiene services and simple dental procedures. The schedule of their trips is regularly published by the Ministry of Health.¹⁷ It is estimated that over 142,000 children have used dento-bus services since 2018.¹⁸

5. Healthy nutrition

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to healthy nutrition.

5.1 Main barriers to effective access to healthy nutrition

5.1.1 Financial barriers

There is no research on the financial barriers to low-income households accessing healthy food for children. If a family's income, including child benefits and allowances, is not sufficient

¹⁷ <https://pacjent.gov.pl/zapobiegaj/leczenie-w-dentobusie>

¹⁸ <https://cowzdrowiu.pl/aktualnosci/post/blisko-142-tys-dzieci-leczylo-sie-w-dentobusie>

to cover all their needs, it may lead to trade-offs between these essential aspects, potentially compromising healthy nutrition for children. However, financial barriers decreased markedly between 2016 and 2020 due to a significant increase in the generosity of child benefits. The share of Polish child benefits in the average wage for different family types was among the highest in the world in 2018 (OECD, 2019). In the case of poor households, it is possible to combine (without any restrictions) targeted family allowances with a universal child-rearing benefit (the “Family 500+” benefit). However, this situation has changed since 2021, as the government has decided not to index these benefits, which means that their real value is falling. Currently, inflation in Poland is one of the highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2023).

For example, in a family of two adults and three children with one person working for the minimum wage, family benefits plus a supplement for families with many children and child-rearing benefit (500+) were equivalent to 73% of the net minimum wage 2020, and 52% in 2023.

5.1.2 Non-financial barriers

There is a lack of research on non-financial barriers to low-income households accessing healthy food for children.

One report found that advertising and information about infant food in Poland violated EU law and WHO guidance. In addition, infant products were of inadequate quality: *“more than half (58%) of the products provided more than 30% of energy (calories) from sugars, around a quarter (24%) had sugar or other sweetening agents added, and 40% provided too few calories per 100 g to meet infants' needs”* (WHO, 2021).

The barriers related to the quality and marketing of infant food in Poland can make it more difficult for low-income families to access healthy food for their children. Misleading information, inadequate product quality, and insufficient calorie counts can hinder these families' ability to make informed choices and meet their children's nutritional needs.

5.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy nutrition

The main publicly funded food aid programmes in Poland are the free meals at home and at school programme for 2019-2023, the “food aid operational programme 2014-2020”, and the “European funds for food aid 2021-2027”. The first programme may involve cash benefits (most often), meals or food packages for families with children out of school, while the latter two include food packages and sometimes accompanying activities on healthy nutrition. From 2023, the food aid applies income thresholds twice as high as those of social assistance (see Section 3.1.1). There are no other criteria applied on the top of the income one.

No data are available for the number of children who benefit from the first programme outside schools. A total of 457,307 children and young people (45.1% of the total) benefited from this programme in 2020. Compared with 2019, the number of children and young people benefiting from the programme has fallen by 10.7% (by 54,814 people in this group). The main reasons for the fall in the number of people benefiting from the programme were the 500+ benefit and the increase in the wealth of the population (Supreme Audit Office, 2021).

The second programme provided food assistance to households with 328,617 children in 2021, a number that had declined since 2018, when it was 386,095 (MRiPS, 2022).

There is no research on the extent to which food aid from these programmes has been in line with healthy eating recommendations for children and young people, or the extent to which it has reduced problems of access to healthy food for this age group in low-income households.

6. Adequate housing

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to adequate housing.

6.1 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Housing allowances

Housing allowances (*dodatek mieszkaniowy*) are available to households with a legal title to a dwelling, after meeting an income criterion and a metric criterion (maximum area of the dwelling for which a housing benefit is granted). The income threshold is defined in relation to the monthly average wage published by Statistics Poland. It is 40% of the average wage for a one-person household and 30% for a multi-person household (Act on housing allowances). As of February 2023, these criteria amount to PLN 2,538.46 (€532.18) monthly for a one-person household and PLN 1,903.85 (€399.14) monthly for a multi-person household.

There is no research on the adequacy of housing allowances in relation to the housing expenditure of poor households with children.

The average housing allowance paid in 2021 was PLN 247.80 (€51.95) monthly. It is possible to check whether this amount is adequate by comparing it with the minimum expenditure on housing and energy for a family of two parents and two children. It is much lower than expenditure on these used in calculating the subsistence minimum (the extreme poverty line) of PLN 768.36 (€161.09) monthly net income per capita and in the social minimum of PLN 835.22 (€175.10) monthly net income per capita. Per capita housing and energy expenditure in households in the bottom 20% was PLN 186.75 (€39.15) per month. For a family of two adults and two children, this expenditure, converted using the equivalence scale, was thus PLN 308 (€64.57). The amount of the average housing allowance was thus much lower than the minimum expenditure on housing and energy estimated in the minimum consumption standards, and lower than the expenditure for these purposes in the bottom 20% of households at the time.

The housing allowance calculation, as defined by the Housing Allowances Act, is insufficient due to its structure. The formula considers housing expenditure based on the dwelling's normative area, which varies with household size, and subtracts a specific income percentage (10-15%, or 12% for a family of four). However, it excludes electricity and gas costs and caps expenditure for privately owned or rented homes at the public housing rate. Since private market housing costs are higher, low-income households with children in such homes receive inadequate housing allowance support.

6.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Social housing

6.2.1 Mapping the provision of social housing

The main instrument for facilitating access to rental housing is the social tenancy. This has three main forms: tenancy in social housing (*Towarzystwa Budownictwa Społecznego* – TBS, or *Społeczne Inicjatywy Mieszaniowe* – SIM), tenancy in municipal housing (*mieszkania komunalne*), and social tenancy (*najem socjalny*). The rent in these three forms is lower than the market rent, being highest in the case of TBS or SIM, lower in the case of municipal tenancy and the lowest for social tenancy. Housing assistance for low-income households is provided through municipal and social rentals.

The criteria for access to municipal housing are set entirely by the municipalities. Among these criteria are income thresholds for multi-person households, the living area in square metres, and additional preferences introduced for households with children. For example, the rules for calculating the income criterion for municipal housing assistance in Warsaw are based on household size and the average salary in the Mazowieckie voivodeship. The criterion takes into account a base percentage depending on the number of household members and applies a coefficient for families with specific circumstances. For a family of two adults and three children, the base percentage is 240% for a four-person household, plus an additional 40% for the fifth member, totalling 280%. The coefficient for families with three or more children is 0.6. To calculate the income criterion, we multiply the average salary of PLN 6,735.13 (€1,462.58) in the Mazowieckie voivodeship by 280% and then by the 0.60 coefficient. The income criterion would then be PLN 11,315.02 (€2,455.97) for a whole family of two adults and three children. This means that the income per capita for such a family should not exceed PLN 2,263 (€491.20) to qualify for municipal housing assistance. In addition, points were assigned to multi-children households in the granting of municipal rental priority.

6.2.2 Main barriers to effective access to social housing

6.2.2.1 Financial barriers

There is a lack of research on financial barriers to effective access to social housing by low-income households with children.

Municipalities set their own income criteria, which can be quite high compared with the poverty risk threshold, as shown in the case of Warsaw in Section 6.2.1. Comparing the income criterion for municipal housing assistance in Warsaw for a family of two adults and three children (PLN 11,315.02, or €2,455.97) with the regional poverty threshold in the Mazowieckie capital for the same family (PLN 5,691.82, or €1,235.65), we see that the income criterion is almost double the poverty threshold. This suggests that the housing assistance programme in Warsaw may target a broader range of families, beyond those near or below the poverty line, considering local factors such as housing costs and availability.

6.2.2.2 Non-financial barriers

There is a lack of research on non-financial barriers to effective access to social housing by low-income households with children.

The Ombudsman's submissions in the context of the large influx of refugees from Ukraine indicate that the main barrier to accessing municipal housing is that “*municipalities have very limited capacity to fulfil their obligations. There is no vacant municipal housing and no money*

to build new ones [...]. The problem has been exacerbated in recent years, not least because of the declining housing stock of municipalities. The waiting period for a flat from the municipal stock is on average several years and varies from several months to several years" (RPO, 2022). The number of households waiting for municipal housing increased by 30%, and the maximum waiting time for social and municipal housing was 12 and 17 years respectively, over the 2013-2018 period (NIK, 2020).

6.3 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Other measures

A recent policy innovation in Poland is the social rental agency (*Spółeczna Agencja Najmu, SAN*). Its main objective is to rent flats from the private rental market, and from municipalities, to sub-let them to poorer tenants for a moderate rent in the longer term. In addition, it also offers them support in the form of social work and other social services. It is a form of integrated housing and service support. Since May 2021 it has been regulated by Chapter 3a of the Act on certain forms of support for residential construction. The establishment of an SAN requires an agreement between the municipality and the operating entity (e.g. an NGO). Each municipality may define its own criteria for households to access the housing offered by the SAN, among which may be low income; but neither the amount nor the calculation method is specified in the general law. Despite more than a year having passed since the law came into force, not a single SAN has been established according to this act, which may be due to the high demand for rental housing and the rapid increase in rental prices in the private market (Newseria, 2022).

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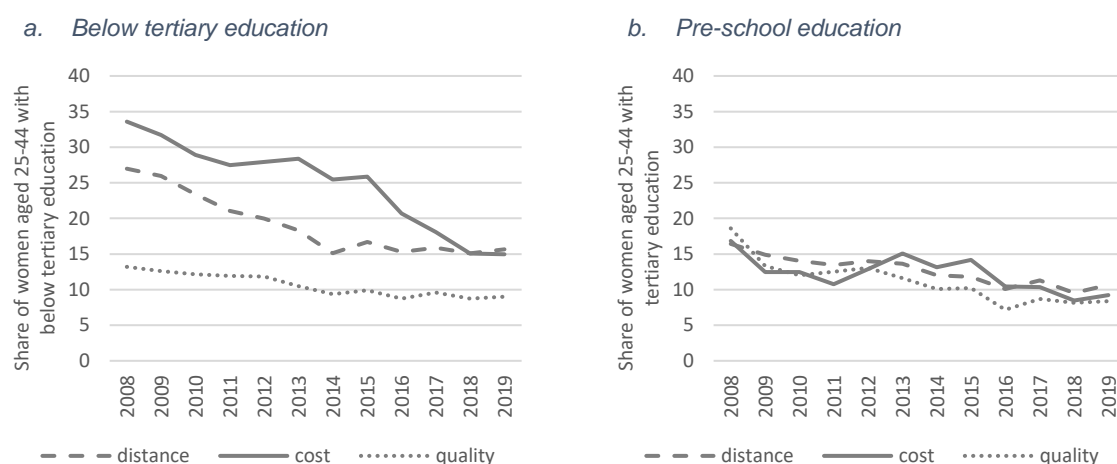
Annex

Table A.1 Income thresholds comparison

	Monthly net income per capita	
	National currency	Euro
AROP Two adults with two children under 14 (2021)	PLN 967.40	€205.83
AROP One adult and two children under 14 (2021)	PLN 982.75	€209.10
Social assistance threshold 2023	PLN 600.00	€127.66
Family benefits threshold 2023	PLN 674.00	€143.40

Source: Own analysis based on Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023, and regulatory sources in Poland.

Figure A.1. Share of women aged 25-44 experiencing barriers in access to childcare, by educational attainment, 2008-2019



Source: Chłoń-Domińczak, Marszałek and Łątkowski (2021).

Table A.2 Number of students receiving support to cover educational needs by type of school and type of support in 2021

Type of school	School scholarship (<i>stypendium szkolne</i>)	School allowance (<i>zasiłek szkolny</i>)	Help provided via local government programmes (<i>Pomoc w ramach programów JST</i>)	Help provided via central government programmes (<i>Pomoc w ramach programów rządowych</i>)	Total
Primary school	165,454	4,555	24,668	86,183	280,860
General secondary school *	18,241	702	7,026	9,742	35,711
Technical secondary school	34,442	912	2,234	9,541	47,129
Vocational school level I	21,203	405	268	300	22,176
Vocational school level II	231	5	-	41	277
Other schools	1,807	77	4,255	83	6,222
Total	241,378	6,656	38,451	105,890	392,375

* including art secondary schools (*licea plastyczne*)

Source: SIO data extracted on 21 April 2023.

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