



European Social
Policy Analysis
Network (ESPAN)

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

Slovakia

Daniel Gerbery, Zuzana Polačeková and Rastislav Bednárík

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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; 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 Slovakia do indeed have effective (or effective and free) access to these services.

There is no universal legal entitlement to publicly funded childcare for children under 3 in Slovakia. In the older age category (3 or over), children who attend kindergarten within one year of the start of compulsory school attendance (i.e. aged 5-6) benefit from free-of-charge participation in pre-primary education. Low-income children do not pay fees for attending kindergartens, irrespective of age. The Recovery and Resilience Plan contains a commitment to introduce a legal entitlement to a place in a kindergarten from age 3 by 2025. Children from low-income households do not pay fees for kindergartens.

Within the system of primary and secondary education, parents have to pay for basic materials, clothing, extramural activities, and transport. Some low-income children (those in the last year of primary school) benefit from subsidies on school supplies. Some parents are helped to meet educational costs through increased child benefit, which is granted to those whose children have started compulsory primary education (i.e. the first year in primary school).

Low-income children in kindergartens, and pupils in primary schools, have access to free school lunches, through the subsidy on school meals. Low-income children are defined in terms of the minimum subsistence income and minimum income protection.

For children aged 0-6, healthcare is provided free of charge. Older children are not exempted from co-payments, but they benefit from lower co-payments than those for adults. For older children, vaccinations and the services of general practitioners and infant nurses are free. Lack of effective and free access to healthcare is a serious issue that affects, in particular, children living in marginalised Roma communities. Although the coverage of basic health insurance is comparable for the Roma and non-Roma populations, as is the general availability of healthcare services, Roma use healthcare services to a lesser extent. The reasons include low awareness, inadequate health education, and discrimination.

Low-income households spend less on food than households with higher incomes in general and less on meat, fruit, and vegetables in particular. A limited food budget can affect the quality of food and healthy nutrition. The low adequacy of social transfers contributes to the difficulties of securing healthy food.

Housing allowance is a rather residual part of social protection in Slovakia. It is designed to cover a part of housing costs. The allowance is available only for households receiving minimum income protection (“assistance in material need”) and its level is inadequate. The social housing system is not accessible for some vulnerable groups, including homeless people, because many municipalities examine households’ ability to pay rent and/or define a minimum income level as one of the criteria for eligibility.

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 Slovakia, all six services covered by the ECG are primarily 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.

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**.

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

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
NO	NO	ENT-ALL5years	FREE-POOR2years FREE ALL5years

Note: "ENT-ALL5years" means a legal entitlement for all children from age 5. "NO" in the accessibility column means no entitlement or priority for low-income children. "FREE-ALL5years" means free for all children from the age of five. "FREE-POOR2years" means free for low-income children from age 2. "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.

Children from low-income households do not pay fees for attending kindergartens. Kindergartens can be attended by children aged 2 and over. When using childcare services for younger children, low-income households are not exempted from charges (See Table 1.1).

There is no universal legal entitlement to publicly funded childcare for children under 3 in Slovakia and nor is there for low-income children in this age category. In the older age category (3 or over), children who attend kindergarten within one year of the start of compulsory school attendance (i.e. ages 5-6) benefit from compulsory and free-of-charge participation in pre-primary education.⁷ Compulsory pre-primary education in publicly funded childcare was

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".

⁷ In addition to kindergartens and facilities for very young children (under 3), "children's groups" have also been available since 2022, based on amendment of the Act on Social Services No 448/2008. They represent a new approach to supporting the reconciliation of private and working lives, filling the gaps caused by a shortage of places in formal childcare facilities. A children's group consists of up to four children, and provides care in a home environment for children of pre-school age (0-6). Parents pay fees for the service, and there are no exemptions for low-income children.

introduced by an amendment to the School Act in 2019, with effect from 1 September 2021.⁸ This amendment makes it compulsory to attend kindergarten for one year before the child is compulsorily enrolled in primary school.⁹

The adoption of the amendment was accompanied by major concerns regarding the capacity of existing pre-school facilities. These were so acute that the entry into force of the law was postponed by one year, from the originally planned 1 September 2020 to 1 September 2021.

The underlying concern was not so much about the capacity of kindergartens to enrol children in compulsory pre-primary education as about the capacity to enrol younger children. These concerns were confirmed by the findings of an audit carried out by the National Audit Office of the Slovak Republic (NKU, 2021) as well as other reports (Polackova *et al.*, 2022), which confirmed a reduction in capacity for younger children due to an increase in the number of children aged 5 and over.

The findings of the National Audit Office also highlighted the underfunding of the system, which limits the ability of municipalities¹⁰ to build the necessary pre-school capacity, and the need to ensure the levels of professional staff needed for high-quality pre-school education. There is also a need for external resources dedicated to capacity-building and high-quality pre-primary education.

The lack of resources can be mitigated thanks to help from the European Structural and Investment Funds. In the period between the start of the preparation of the legislation in question and the end of 2022, three calls for projects¹¹ were specifically aimed at increasing the capacity of kindergartens. Within the framework of these calls, the construction or reconstruction of 242 facilities was supported, with a total value of almost €96 million.

However, the findings of individual research reports (Polackova *et al.*, 2022; ÚV SR, 2021) concluded that the scale of the assistance was insufficient; moreover, the implementation of the assistance was complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent unexpectedly high inflation rate, which halted many of the related construction projects.

Inadequate pre-school capacity, but especially the low enrolment rate of pre-school children, is also addressed in the Slovakia's Recovery and Resilience Plan. Component 6 ("accessibility, development and quality of inclusive education at all levels") presents a reform entitled: "*Ensuring conditions for the implementation of compulsory pre-primary education from 5 years of age and the introduction of a legal entitlement to a place in a kindergarten or with other providers of pre-primary education from 3 years of age*".

The aim of the reform is to: "*increase the participation rate of children from 3 years of age in pre-primary education, including children with disabilities and children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds*". In order to meet this goal, a number of sub-objectives need to be achieved, including:

⁸ Act No 209/2019 Coll., amending Act No 245/2008 Coll., on Education and Training (School Act) and on Amendments and Additions to Certain Acts, as amended, and amending and supplementing certain Acts

⁹ It should be noted that a strong motive of those who drafted the law introducing compulsory schooling at age 5 was to increase the participation of precisely those children who suffer from, or are, AROPE, as the explanatory memorandum to the law adopted states.

¹⁰ Despite the strict legal regulation at national level, responsibility for the performance of ECEC (especially in relation to children aged 3 and over) is assigned to local self-governing municipalities. The latter ensure the conditions for its accessibility and affordability. Due to the independence of local municipalities, the conditions vary considerably from locality to locality.

¹¹ The calls are: OPLZ-PO6-SC612-2018-1; IROP-PO2-SC221-2018-35 and IROP-PO2-SC221-2021-67.

- introduction of a legal entitlement to a place in pre-school education for every child from the age of 3 whose parents express an interest, with expected effect from September 2025;
- a change of funding for pre-primary education, replicating the current system of prescriptive funding for primary schools; and
- the provision of free bus transport for children to pre-school settings, including an escort service (see the Recovery and Resilience Plan for more information).

The implementation of the reform should also be accompanied by investment in kindergarten capacity, as sufficient capacity in pre-primary education facilities is a prerequisite for increasing the enrolment of children in pre-primary education. This should be implemented by the end of 2025. The Recovery and Resilience Plan envisages that 12,000 places in kindergartens will be added in the coming years. However, it has to be said that the proposal is little discussed and is a source of great concern in the local government environment.¹²

The introduction of a legal entitlement to publicly funded childcare would represent a positive step. While participation of children in ECEC lags behind the EU average, enrolment rates are even lower among vulnerable groups of children, who benefit most from high-quality ECEC. Children from vulnerable groups have almost half the level of participation in pre-primary education as other children. However, they have more than four times higher representation in special education, and an eight times higher grade repetition rate (Ministry of Finance, 2020). For example, based on the findings of the EU-SILC¹³ survey of marginalised Roma communities, it can be argued that in 2020 only 32% of children aged 3-6 from such communities attended pre-schooling (UV, 2022). One of the reasons for this was insufficient capacity. Among the places with the greatest capacity constraints were several municipalities with marginalised Roma communities (Polačková *et al.*, 2022).

Priority access to publicly funded childcare for low-income children does not have a legal basis in Slovakia. The process of admission to kindergartens is regulated at national level, by the "guideline for the admission of children to pre-primary education in kindergarten for the school year 2022/2023" (MŠVVŠ, 2022), which is issued and updated annually by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport. This is of a rather technical nature and offers methodological support to kindergartens in the process of admitting children. Its contents say nothing about the preferential admission of children from low-income households.

However, each local municipality has the right to supplement the criteria set by the above-mentioned document. It is common for local municipalities, especially those suffering from insufficient kindergarten capacity, to issue guidelines on the preferential admission of children. Based on anecdotal evidence, it can be concluded that preference on the basis of low household income is rare, but that preference for children from single-parent households is relatively common.

In terms of the affordability of ECEC, parents contribute to their children's pre-school education by paying a contribution towards the partial reimbursement of pre-school expenses. Low-income children have free access to places in kindergartens, without paying the partial reimbursement. Parents of children for whom pre-primary education is compulsory (5+) do not pay the contribution either. For low-income children, as well as children in compulsory pre-primary education, the kindergartens receive an education allowance from the state budget.

¹² <https://www1.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/pre-deti-troch-rokov-vznikne-pravny-narok-skolky-tieto-dolezite-veci-ale-nemyslelo>

¹³ European Union statistics on income and living conditions.

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

The Slovak legal system does not recognise the term "low-income child". For the purposes of gaining free access to kindergartens, low-income children are defined as those living in households that receive minimum income protection in the form of assistance in material need. Material need is a condition where the income of the household does not reach the minimum subsistence income established by special legislation, and the household's members are unable to secure income (or increase it) by work, exercising ownership rights or other rights to property, or by exercising claims. Assistance in material need consists of the main benefit, “benefit in material need”, and four supplementary allowances: activation allowance, protection allowance, allowance for a dependent child, and housing allowance. The sum of the benefit in material need depends on the composition of household, with the following six amounts:

- €74 per month for a single adult;
- €140.70 per month for a single adult with 1-4 children;
- €128.60 per month for a couple without children;
- €192.60 per month for a couple with 1-4 children;
- €205.50 per month for a single adult with more than 4 children; and
- €259.40 per month for a couple with more than 4 children.¹⁴

Although the Act on Education and Training explicitly states that children from households receiving assistance in material need do not pay fees, the minimum subsistence income represents the real qualifying criterion. The reason is that it represents a threshold against which household income is assessed when claiming minimum income protection.

The minimum subsistence income represents a “socially accepted minimum level of income” defined by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in the Act on the minimum subsistence income. In effect, it serves as an administrative poverty threshold: households with income below the subsistence minimum are considered to be in “material need” (i.e. poverty). The total sum of the minimum subsistence income for a given household is calculated according to household composition, taking into account the following monthly amounts:

- €234.42 for an adult;
- €164.53 for another adult in the household; and
- €107.03 for a dependent child.

There are also other conditions that need to be met on top of the low-income criterion. As stated above, having low income (below the subsistence minimum) is not sufficient. To be entitled to free access to a kindergarten, a child has to live in a household that receives assistance in material need. While the minimum subsistence income represents the main eligibility criterion for access to this minimum income scheme, a household's property is also examined (in order to find out whether the household can use it to maintain a decent living standard without minimum income benefit), as well as other entitlements of household members (including, for example, entitlement to maintenance payments for a child – alimony benefit).

¹⁴ The allowances may increase the sum of the benefit in material need, depending on the households' situations. Universal child benefit also increases the sum. The overall sum of assistance in material need for a given household is calculated as the difference between the minimum subsistence income, calculated for a household of a given composition, and the sum of all amounts that the household is entitled to within the assistance in material need scheme.

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)

Information on the size of the population of low-income children who attend kindergartens (without fees) is not readily available. It comes from the administrative registers, which are not publicly available and are published only very occasionally. The review of spending on the groups AROPE, prepared by the Ministry of Finance (2020), represents an important source of data in this respect. It mapped the situation in the 2018/2019 school year. While the total enrolment rate of children aged 3-5 was 75%, it reached only 41% among households receiving minimum income protection and 32% in the marginalised Roma communities. To put it in another perspective, children from the households covered by the minimum income scheme represented 3.2% of all children in kindergartens in 2018/2019 (Ministry of Finance, 2020: 57). It is difficult to compare this percentage with Eurostat data on the proportion of children AROPE¹⁵ because: (a) the Eurostat provides data on children under 6; and (b) kindergartens in Slovakia are open to children aged 2 and over.

There is also the second group of children with free access to kindergartens – children who participate in compulsory pre-primary education (the last year/grade in kindergartens), which precedes the start of compulsory education in primary school. The estimated size of this group was 73,011 children in the 2021/2022 school year.¹⁶ Again, a comparison with the number of the AROPE children is hampered by the fact that compulsory pre-primary education includes children aged 5-7.

As the analysis by experts from the Ministry of Finance showed, the enrolment rate among children covered by the minimum income protection was low (Ministry of Finance, 2020). It indicates the presence of non-take-up, which could be caused by several factors. First of all, there are various hidden fees in kindergartens that can discourage their use. In addition, there are non-financial barriers (see also Section 1.2.2), including cultural/language barriers, geographical distance (in particular for children living in the marginalised Roma communities), and limited capacity.

Comparison of the national low-income criterion (the minimum subsistence income) with the national AROP threshold shows a significant gap. The comparison was done for a household of two adults and two children under 14 for 2021, as the AROP threshold is still not available for 2022. The minimum subsistence minimum represented 64% of the AROP threshold. The AROP threshold for this type of household was €889.60 per month, whereas the minimum subsistence income was €569.30.¹⁷

Free access to kindergartens is not guaranteed to all low-income children defined in terms of the AROP threshold. First, there is a gap between the low-income criterion and the AROP threshold. Second, only children in households receiving minimum income benefits may benefit from free access (see Section 1.1.1).

¹⁵ Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023.

¹⁶ Data from the statistics of the Ministry of Education. There were 49,941 children aged 5, 22,482 children aged 6 and 558 children aged 7. The latter two age categories consist of children with a postponed start of compulsory primary education.

¹⁷ In 2021, the following sums of the minimum subsistence income were valid: €218.06 per adult, €152.12 for another adult in the household, and €99.58 for dependent child.

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

1.2.1 Financial barriers

As not all children living in low-income households have free access to kindergartens, the amount of fees is a crucial issue for them. The amount of the contribution for a child's stay in kindergarten varies from municipality to municipality; the amount of the contribution is the subject of a "general application regulation" (*Všeobecne záväzné nariadenie*) approved at municipal level. Comprehensive information on the amount of the contribution has not been identified; on the basis of anecdotal evidence, it is possible to claim that the monthly contribution varies between a few euros up to €55 per month (see, for example, GAR No 1/2023 of the municipal district of the Old Town Bratislava).

In addition to the monthly contribution for the child's stay in pre-school education, parents contribute to the child's meals and face a wide range of unofficial charges (such as contributions to the class fund, and for hygiene supplies). While there are no studies/data on financial barriers, based on anecdotal data it can be argued that the total monthly costs associated with a child's stay in pre-schooling normally amount to €30-100 per month.

In times of tight local government budgets, there is a tendency to increase the monthly fees. However, these tendencies vary from one municipality to another.

1.2.2 Non-financial barriers

According to several sources (ÚV SR, 2021; MŠVVŠ, 2019), one of the main reasons for the persistent low participation of children in pre-primary education is the lack of kindergarten capacity.

However, language and cultural barriers (Markovič and Plachá, 2022) and barriers related to insufficient professional staff also have a particular importance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. children with disabilities or children from marginalised Roma communities). Field research (Polačková *et al.*, 2022) also suggested that travelling distances to nurseries and the absence of public transport are an issue.

The activities of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities, which since 2018 has also implementing the national project entitled "support for pre-primary education of children from marginalised Roma communities", play an important role in efforts aimed at removing cultural and linguistic barriers in the case of Roma children. This focuses on creating an inclusive environment in kindergartens and, through work with families, on increasing the participation of children from marginalised Roma communities in pre-school education and training. Thanks to this project, by 31 December 2022 the professional capacities of kindergartens in 133 municipalities had been strengthened through teaching assistants and other professional staff (most often special teachers or psychologists). Co-operation with families has been strengthened through a new non-teaching position, the parent assistant, whose impact is being tested under the project. The response to the project from the municipalities has been positive. However, there are concerns about the continuation of the activities, which are not systematised and are only implemented as part of the project, which is limited in duration (Polačková *et al.*, 2022).

In relation to the removal of non-financial barriers for other groups of disadvantaged children, such as children with disabilities, the range of activities implemented is relatively modest and implemented mainly due to the dedication of individual parents.

1.3 Free meals provision for low-income children in ECEC

Low-income children have access to free lunches. The details are discussed in Section 3.

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:¹⁸

- 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 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.

¹⁸ Tuition fees charged by private schools are not covered.

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 materials	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	ALL	NO	ALL	ALL	NO	NO	NO

Note: "ALL" means that this category is free for all children. "NO" means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.

Within the system of primary education, books are provided free of charge for all children. Nonetheless, there may be some additional costs related to specific textbooks, in particular for foreign-language textbooks. Basic materials have to be purchased by parents. Primary schools provide the IT equipment that is necessary for learning during the classes in the school. The same applies to sports and music equipment. However, it does not include sportswear and sports footwear. Whether extramural activities, as defined by the ECG Recommendation, are free or not varies across schools and regions. For some types of activities, co-payments may be required (including, for example, fees for travel tickets or entrance fees).

In addition to the school costs mentioned in Table 2.1a, costs for school clubs deserve attention. The school clubs are part of the schools and provide a space for educational and leisure activities for children participating in compulsory education. Use of the clubs is optional and is subject to charges. However, parents of children who receive minimum income protection do not pay fees for school clubs.

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

Basic materials	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	ALL	NO	ALL	ALL	NO	NO	NO

Note: "ALL" means that this category is free for all children. "NO" means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.

As with primary education, books are provided free of charge for children in secondary education. However, foreign-language textbooks and additional background materials for language classes are usually paid for by parents. The same applies to basic materials. With regard to IT, sports and music equipment, and extramural activities, the conditions are the same for both primary and secondary schools. As pupils at the second stage of secondary education do not use school clubs, the question of their costs is not relevant.

Tables 2.1a and 2.1b indicate that basic materials are not free for low-income children. However, this is only partially true. The situation is too complex to be described by a simple "yes" or "no". Some low-income children can benefit from the subsidy on school supplies, including items belonging to "basic materials" mentioned in the tables. The subsidy, provided under Act No 544/2010 on subsidies within the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, is granted to the providers of primary schools, based on their application to the local offices of labour, social affairs and family.¹⁹ There are three target groups of the subsidy on school supplies:

¹⁹ There are 46 offices operated by the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, which is part of the organisational structure of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family.

- children in the last year (grade) of primary school who live in households receiving minimum income benefits (assistance in material need);
- children in the last year (grade) of primary school who live in households with income not exceeding the minimum subsistence income; and
- children in the last year (grade) of primary schools where children from households receiving minimum income benefits represent more than 50% of all enrolled children.

Low income (irrespective of its definition) is not a universal eligibility condition for the subsidy on school supplies. Only children in the last year/grade are targeted by the measure.

It is important to note that the same logic is applied to children in the last year in kindergartens (i.e. children who participate in compulsory pre-primary education). There are the same three target groups, defined by the same criteria.

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

The criteria for defining “low-income children” are the same as in the case of ECEC. For more details, see Section 1.1.1.

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)

Information on the number of low-income children who benefit from the subsidy on school supplies is not readily available. It comes from the administrative registers that are not publicly available and is published only very occasionally. An earlier analysis carried out by the Ministry of Finance showed that the subsidies on school supplies were granted, on average, to 46,206 children monthly in 2018 (Ministry of Finance, 2020). This represented 47% of AROPE pupils in primary schools. However, the subsidy’s design in 2018 differed from the design in 2023: its coverage was wider (it was not restricted to pupils in the last grade). As a result, one can conclude that the coverage of AROPE pupils in primary schools is much lower in 2023 than in 2018.

When it comes to other costs, access is either free for all children or not free for any children.

As the only measure that provides help to meet educational costs – the subsidy on school supplies – is targeted at children living in households receiving minimum income benefits, a comparison of the low-income criterion with the AROP threshold gives the same results as those presented in Section 1.1.2.

There is no information about non-take-up or the over-representation of some groups of AROPE children who lack access to the measure.

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

A significant increase in child benefit²⁰ and the child tax bonus, which occurred at the end of 2022,²¹ was motivated by a desire to offset rising living costs for households with children, as well as costs related to children’s education (in particular those related to school meals, which increased as a result of the rise in energy costs).

²⁰ Child benefit represents a universal family benefit paid to all children irrespective of household income.

²¹ <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23088570/tax-bonus-for-parents-raised.html>

In general, child benefit is intended to help with costs related to raising children, including (explicitly mentioned) school supplies. In addition, some children can benefit from an increase in child benefit that directly addresses the costs of school supplies. It is a one-off increase, targeted at a very limited group of children. Increased child benefit is granted to parents whose children have started the first year of compulsory education (i.e. the first year in primary school). The benefit is usually paid in September each year. In 2022, it amounted to €110 per child.

There are no studies/data analysing child benefit's coverage of costs for low-income children. As no low-income criterion applies, a comparison of the criterion with the AROP threshold cannot be made. There are no indications of non-take-up of child benefit, as it is a universal social transfer.

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

2.3.1 Financial barriers

There is a variety of fees related to school-based activities. As there are no mechanisms of support or compensation for low-income children, it can be expected that financial barriers play a role. However, there are no data or studies that have analysed whether and to what extent out-of-pocket costs represent a financial barrier.

2.3.2 Non-financial barriers

Schools differ significantly in the extent to which they offer activities outside compulsory education. There is only anecdotal evidence that schools with a poorer range of school-based activities are more frequently present in “lagged” districts. In these districts, school segregation may play a role, leading to differences in school-based activities between schools. In 2022, the Slovak Supreme Court found segregation at a primary school in Stará Ľubovňa, where Roma children were discriminated against.²² Earlier, NGOs drew attention to a similar case at a primary school in Šariské Michaľan, where Roma children were separated from other pupils. In 2023, Slovakia has been referred to the EU Court of Justice for failing to address school segregation of Roma children.²³ Although empirical evidence about barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities in districts where discrimination is present is not available, the overall quality and conditions of the educational process differ from those of mainstream schools.

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.

²² <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23133661/supreme-court-rules-school-in-eastern-slovakia-segregates-roma-children.html>

²³ <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23159342/slovakia-referred-to-eu-court-over-roma-segregation.html>

3.1 Mapping free provision of school meals

Low-income children in kindergartens, and pupils in primary schools, benefit from the subsidy on school meals,²⁴ which is provided according to Act No 544/2010 on subsidies under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. It is aimed at supporting a healthy diet and reducing parents' costs for school food. The subsidy is granted to all providers of kindergartens and primary schools,²⁵ based on their application to the local offices of labour, social affairs and family. Five categories of children attending kindergartens and primary schools are entitled to the school lunch subsidy:

- a) children who live in households receiving minimum income benefits;
- b) children who live in households with incomes not exceeding the minimum subsistence income;
- c) children attending kindergartens or primary schools where children from households receiving minimum income benefits represent more than 50% of all enrolled children;
- d) children in the last year in kindergarten, or children attending primary school, who live in households whose adult members did not apply for the child tax bonus; and
- e) children who have fled Ukraine since the start of war and who live in households whose income does not exceed the level of the subsistence minimum income.

As regards the target groups of the school meal subsidy, one additional explanation is needed. There are two types of assessment of household income in terms of its relation to the minimum subsistence income – one that is applied to the households of Slovak citizens, and a second one to the households of Ukrainian refugees. While the situation in the six previous months is taken into account in the former case, only the previous month is assessed in the latter. We suppose that this is because the situation of Ukrainian households is volatile and can change from month to month. In addition, it would be difficult to apply a six-month rule because of the circumstances under which they had to leave their country.

In April 2023, the amount of subsidy was €1.30 per child per day when a child attends kindergarten or primary school. This also applies to children who participate in “individual education”, without an obligation to attend school regularly. If a school cannot provide a diet recommended by the child's doctor, the school provider pays a subsidy to the child's parents (on condition that the child has been registered for school lunches).

The design of the school meal subsidy, described in the previous paragraphs, will be changed from May 2023. In February 2023, parliament approved an amendment to the Act on Assistance in material need, which extends the coverage of the subsidies for school meals to all children in the last year in kindergarten before entering primary schools and all pupils in primary schools.²⁶ In addition, provision of subsidised meals to all low-income children in kindergartens (living in households that receive minimum income benefits or have income not exceeding the subsistence minimum) will continue. The same applies to children attending kindergartens, where children from households receiving minimum income benefits represent more than 50% of all enrolled children (in these kindergartens all children have access to subsidised meals, irrespective of household income).

²⁴ In ordinary language as well as in media language, this intervention is referred to as “free lunches”.

²⁵ Children aged 2-16 attend kindergartens and primary schools.

²⁶ This step represents, to a great extent, a revival of the system of universal free lunches that existed in 2020 and was cancelled in 2021.

The amendment addresses the rising living costs of households with children, including the costs of energy and food.²⁷ At the same time, it reflects the increasing costs of school canteens due to higher prices of energy and other inputs. The amount of subsidy will increase to €1.40 per day per child in kindergarten, to €2.10 per day per child in the primary stage of primary education, and to €2.30 in the second stage. Although it is supposed that increased subsidies will cover the increased costs of food preparation, it is possible that parents in some schools will make certain co-payments, because the subsidies cover the costs of food but not other costs (including energy consumption, and the salaries of school canteen workers), which have increased recently²⁸ and are paid by the school providers. As result, it is expected that school providers will ask parents to pay a certain (small) sum in order to cover real costs.²⁹ As the costs of school canteens vary among schools, it is not clear yet how this fact affects low-income children. In this respect, it is important to note that low-income children do not have an entitlement to free lunches. Rather, they have entitlement to subsidised meals (from May 2023, all pupils in primary schools and pupils in the last year of kindergartens will have this entitlement), where a subsidy is intended to cover all costs for school canteens and reduce potential co-payments to a minimum level or zero. If inflation continues to rise and subsidies remain unchanged, this may cause problems for parents (irrespective of income). Municipalities, which are a major school provider in the country, as well as other private providers (such as church providers), can remit the fees for low-income households.

Furthermore, the universality of the amended measure is challenged by experts (Ostertágová and Rehůš, 2023). Parents of children included into the subsidies programme from May 2023 will have to apply for the subsidy, declaring the interest to the school. This administrative requirement may hamper use of the measure.

So-called “free lunches” have become a subject of public and expert discussions in recent years (Gerbery, 2020). The analyses showed that they have a positive impact on kindergartens’ enrolment rate of pre-school-age children living in marginalised Roma communities. Moreover, according to expert estimates, an extension of lunch subsidies to all children in kindergartens would increase their enrolment rate, from 48% in 2020 to 57% (Ministry of Finance, 2020: 62). In 2023, as result of the move towards quasi-universal coverage of free lunches, there have been discussions about the positive impact of universal measures on the experiences and socialisation of children in a socially and culturally mixed environment.

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

When it comes to free school lunches, the same criteria for defining low-income children apply as for free access to ECEC. First, a low-income child is a child that lives in a household with income that does not exceed the minimum subsistence income. Second, a low-income child is a child who lives in a household receiving guaranteed minimum income, called assistance in material need.³⁰ More details are provided in the Section 1.1.1.

²⁷ <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/656277-obedy-zadarmo-sa-vracaju-vyjde-to-na-110-milionov-eur/>

²⁸ In addition to the costs of various inputs that are necessary for the preparation of lunches, the salaries of school employees, including non-pedagogical staff, will rise as result of newly adopted legislation.

²⁹ <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23131638/free-meals-in-schools-are-back-how-much-will-parents-pay.html>

³⁰ One of the eligibility criteria is low income – the household’s income must be below the minimum subsistence income threshold. The question may arise whether there is a difference between the first and second criterion for identifying a low-income child. The difference is that having income below the minimum subsistence income does not lead automatically to entitlement to assistance in material need. Other factors may also influence the eligibility of claimants, as the minimum income scheme is a complex system.

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 December 2022,³¹ 65,069 children had access to subsidised lunches based on the school subsidies programme.³² Most of them were aged 5-15. The latest available information on the AROPE population of children refers to 2021 and covered children aged 6-15: there were 106,000 children AROPE.

Another perspective on the relation between children with free access to lunches and AROPE children is offered by the analysis of expenditure on vulnerable groups prepared by the value for money unit at the Ministry of Finance. Using administrative data, the experts estimated that school lunch subsidies were provided to 30% of children AROPE who attended kindergartens in 2018. In primary schools, 49% of children AROPE benefited from the measure. The design of the subsidies in 2018 differed from the current one, but both programmes share some main features (Ministry of Finance, 2020: 69).

There is no information on non-take-up among low-income children entitled to free lunches. No groups of children (significant in size) were identified that are over-represented in the AROPE population but lack free access to lunch. As free access to school meals for low-income children is targeted at children living in households receiving minimum income benefits and children in households with income below the subsistence minimum income, a comparison of the low-income criterion with the AROP threshold gives the same results as those presented in Section 1.1.2.

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

3.2.1 Financial barriers

There are no barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children – under conditions where the amount of the subsidies covers the costs of food preparation and no additional co-payments are required. It is municipalities (as well as minor providers) that can waive such co-payments for low-income households.

3.2.2 Non-financial barriers

There is anecdotal evidence, produced mainly by the media,³³ that there are schools without school canteens and schools with inadequately equipped school kitchens. Children and pupils in some municipalities do not have access to a “warm lunch” and have to rely on (rather unhealthy) alternatives. However, more systematic evidence on the extent of this phenomenon and the number of affected children is not available.

³¹ The latest available data.

³² According to the estimate of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, the planned extension of the coverage from May 2023 will increase the number of beneficiaries by 490,000 children. This group of children will consist of low-income children as well as children from better-off households.

³³ <https://index.sme.sk/c/22434701/ziaci-v-starej-lubovni-maju-len-suche-obedy-dodavatel-je-z-vedenia-mesta.html>

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

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

Vaccination	GP	Infant nurses	Specialist care	Dental care (not orthodontics)	Prescribed medicines
ALL (compulsory vaccination)	ALL	ALL	ALL (on request from GP)	ALL (0_6years)	ALL (0_6years)

Note: "ALL" means that all services/products in the category are free for all children.

Universal and free-of-charge access to a basic package of health services is guaranteed in Slovakia. The basic package includes mental healthcare and part of dental care. However, dental care is covered by health insurance only to a limited extent and depends on having had regular dental examinations in the previous year. A significant part of the cost of dental care is covered (partially or fully) by patients. All citizens are obliged to pay health insurance contributions, except for specified inactive groups,³⁴ including children, for whom insurance is paid for by the state.

For children aged 0-18, healthcare is provided free of charge (see Table 4.1). Services of specialists are free of charge, if requested by a GP. Prescribed medicines are free for children aged 6 or under. Older children are not exempted from co-payments, but they benefit from lower co-payments than those for adults.

4.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a "low-income child"

Not applicable.

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)

Vaccination, GP, infant nurses – not applicable, access is free for all children.

In the case of specialist care, dental care and prescribed medicines, only the youngest children have free access. Low income is not applied as a criterion for free access.

³⁴ Dependent children, students, people on parental leave, registered unemployed people, people on long-term sickness benefits, pensioners, carers and personal assistants to severely disabled citizens.

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

There are no cash benefits that are intended to help meet healthcare costs in Slovakia. Health insurance companies offer various in-kind benefits for children, but they do not take into account the income situation of the household they live in.

There are no maximum billing mechanisms designed to help meet health costs for low-income children.

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

Effective and free access to healthcare is a serious issue that affects, in particular, one specific category of low-income children – children living in marginalised Roma communities. In general, health outcomes of the marginalised Roma population are much worse than the majority in Slovakia. For example, the Roma infant mortality rate is more than three times higher than for the non-Roma population (Bednárík *et al.*, 2019). The Roma population suffer more frequently from infectious diseases and chronic illness (Bojko *et al.*, 2018). Although the coverage by basic health insurance is comparable for the Roma and non-Roma populations, as is the general availability of healthcare services, Roma use healthcare services to a lesser extent. This is reflected in the difference in average healthcare expenditure, which is 30% lower for Roma citizens than the majority population (Bednárík *et al.*, 2019: 32). The reasons behind this include low awareness, inadequate health education, and discrimination (Bojko *et al.*, 2018).

In addition to the non-financial factors hampering effective and free access to healthcare, financial barriers also play an important role. They include transport and medical costs. In particular, people in remote segregated settlements face significant transport costs, which are difficult to cover (Bednárík *et al.*, 2019).

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

In general, low-income households spend less on food than households with higher incomes in Slovakia (Statistical Office, 2020). While the average food expenditure of households in the lowest income quartile represented €767 per person per year in 2019, it was €1,144 in the highest quartile. This expenditure represented 18.8% of all consumption expenditure in the former case and 26.2% in the latter. Low-income households spent significantly less on meat, fruit, and vegetables. It can be supposed that a limited budget on food affects the quality of food and healthy nutrition. This holds true in particular in a period of high inflation.

The low adequacy of social transfers contributes to the difficulties of securing healthy food. Minimum income protection in Slovakia provides inadequate support (Ministry of Finance, 2020), which is below the AROP poverty threshold. On the other hand, a marked increase in

several family benefits took place in 2022 and 2023, which brought additional financial resources into households with children, including those with low income.

On the other hand, there are free lunches that ensure access to a high-quality and healthy diet.³⁵ The quality of school lunches is regulated by the state – the ministerial decree on school canteens, produced by the Ministry of Education, puts an emphasis on healthy nutrition and quality control. However, rising prices of energy and other commodities that are crucial for food preparation in school canteens represent a serious challenge for the canteens to maintain the quality of the food, as they cannot pass the higher prices of commodities on to the state (for low-income children) or parents (for non-low-income children).

5.1.2 Non-financial barriers

Eating habits represent an important factor affecting healthy nutrition of children. Previous research showed that the eating habits of marginalised Roma³⁶ communities differed from those of the majority, with more frequently reported unhealthy eating habits (Hijová *et al.*, 2014). This difference can be attributed to lower health literacy or the limited availability of some types of food in marginalised environments.

Reduced opportunities to buy food in certain areas, reflecting their uneven distribution across the regions in Slovakia, also represent a barrier to a healthy diet. These “food deserts” have attracted growing attention in Slovakia. The term refers to localities with very limited access to healthy and financially accessible food (Bilíková *et al.*, 2017). A lack of opportunity to buy food undermines any effort to maintain healthy nutrition. Food deserts can be found in rural areas with very low urbanisation and population density. In addition, they (and the inhabitants who live there) can be characterised by lower earnings levels, limited mobility and unhealthy nutrition (Bilíková *et al.*, 2017). According to experts, food deserts are present in 106 municipalities in Slovakia, of which 62% have fewer than 250 inhabitants.³⁷ It is estimated that 21,000 people live in these municipalities.

5.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy nutrition

There are no measures supporting access to healthy nutrition for low-income children. There is a scheme of food distribution among poor households under the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, but there is no emphasis on healthy nutrition.

³⁵ The Act on the subsidies, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, explicitly states that the aim of the subsidy is to support the upbringing of children that focuses on healthy dietary habits.

³⁶ We use the term marginalised Roma communities to describe the Roma population living in marginalised settlements and concentrations, which may be part of towns or villages or may be geographically separated from them, and which suffer from serious social risks, including poverty and social exclusion.

³⁷ <https://www.biznis.sk/article/aj-slovensko-ma-svoje-potravinove-puste-zije-na-nich-az-21-tisic-ludi-za-potravinami-putuju-kilometre/627b497ec3dad1619ce4974>

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 allowance is a rather residual part of social protection in Slovakia. It is designed to cover a part of the housing costs of low-income households. The allowance is available only for households receiving minimum income protection (assistance in material need). To be entitled to the housing allowance, a claimant must be eligible for assistance in material need (for details see Section 1.1.1). Further, the claimant must not have rent arrears and must have “a relationship to the dwelling”, in which they live. The latter means that they must be the owner or tenant of the dwelling. The allowance is also granted to people living in facilities where various forms of services are provided (including old people’s homes, social services facilities, emergency housing facilities, and homelessness hostels). However, there are categories of people who – based on the logic of legislation – are not entitled to the housing allowance despite the fact that they face housing exclusion or housing insecurity. For example, people who rent a shared room or live in “illegal” dwellings – such as some members of the marginalised Roma communities, who live in deprived housing conditions without a legal relationship to their dwellings and the land surrounding them. In 2021, 26,836 households received housing allowance on average (per month), representing approximately 46% of all households covered by assistance in material need (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, 2021). More than half of minimum income recipients, who do not receive financial support for housing costs, have to cope with housing costs with only low levels of benefit (as well as covering all other household needs).

Housing allowance is low. Single-adult households can claim €63.90 per month, and households with two or more members €101.40 per month. Given the fact that only people on minimum income can claim it, by definition they have no other resources with which to supplement the housing allowance amount in order to pay rent (Ministry of Finance, 2020). This is even more true for households who – due to lack of public rented housing – have to rely on the commercial rented sector. The NGO “OZ Vagus”, which works with homeless people and people at risk of housing exclusion or insecurity, described the situations of several clients where housing allowance “does not work”.³⁸ For example, a single mother with one young child received³⁹ benefit in material need (€130.90) and housing allowance (€89.20). When the mother started to work in a low-paid part-time job with a net monthly salary of €375, she lost entitlement to minimum income protection as well as to housing allowance. However, her low wages were not enough to cover her rent (€400) in Žilina, one of the regional capitals in Slovakia. One solution would be to live in hostels, but she would still be struggling to cover other basic needs after paying rent without the help of housing allowance.

³⁸ <https://dennikn.sk/blog/2789998/prispevky-na-byvanie-skutocne-pomahaju-na-slovensku-vsak-nefunguju-spravne/>

³⁹ The sums in the example refer to the year 2022, when the piece was published.

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

6.2.1 Mapping the provision of social housing

Social housing is defined as housing acquired (constructed or bought) with the use of public funds for people who are unable to acquire housing from their own means. It is expected that social housing ensures adequate and decent conditions, which means that it meets all essential functions of housing. Social housing mainly takes the form of housing with a regulated rent. The income situation of a household represents a primary criterion for eligibility for social housing. However, it is also combined with other criteria, including disability or the vulnerability of the family/social situation. Eligible people include:

- people who live in households with monthly incomes not exceeding three times the minimum subsistence income;
- people who live in households with monthly incomes not exceeding five times the amount of the minimum subsistence income, subject to the condition that they live in a one-parent household, a household with a disabled member, or a household where at least one member aged under 30 has left institutional, foster or alternative personal care; and
- people living alone with a monthly income not above four times the minimum subsistence income.

Social housing development is the responsibility of municipalities; the state only establishes a general framework and support mechanisms. Two instruments can be used to acquire social housing in Slovakia: (a) loans from the State Housing Development Fund; and (b) housing development subsidies from the Ministry of Transport. The State Housing Development Fund is an organisation under the responsibility of the Ministry of Transport. It provides financial support for acquiring a house – both rented and owner-occupied housing. It also supports the refurbishment of dwellings. Municipalities, higher territorial units (regions), NGOs and individuals can apply for the financing. Although successful applicants have to pay interest, municipalities in the most lagged regions are exempt from this duty. Financial loans for rented housing intended for low-income households can reach 100% of the acquisition costs, subject to the condition that the income of the tenants does not exceed quadruple the minimum subsistence income.

The subsidies from the Ministry of Transport support municipalities, higher territorial units and NGOs in procuring rented housing. The amount of subsidy depends on the type of dwelling. In general, a distinction is made between “lower standard”⁴⁰ apartments and “standard form” apartments. In the former case, the subsidy amounts to 75% of the procurement costs. In the latter case, the subsidy ranges from 35 to 40% of the procurement costs, depending on the size of the dwelling.

Lower-standard dwellings are supported due to their lower acquisition costs, which translate into lower regulated rents. For example, in the period 2017-2019, the acquisition costs for lower-standard apartments were 41% lower than the costs for standard apartments (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

⁴⁰ Apartments built according to lower standards have to meet only basic, minimum criteria defined by the law. For example, housing area/space in the apartments must be at least 12 m² per tenant, with a “useable” area of at least 15 m², and apartments must have technical infrastructure allowing them to connect to a water supply (not the connection itself).

Municipalities used to combine the subsidies from the Ministry of Transport with loans from the State Housing Development Fund. However, the use of the funds for procuring social housing has remained inadequate. Municipalities focus more on the refurbishment of existing dwellings (*ibid.*).

6.2.2 Main barriers to effective access to social housing

6.2.2.1 Financial barriers

The social housing system is not accessible for some vulnerable groups, including homeless people. Access by the most deprived people, including homeless people, is limited because many municipalities examine a household's ability to pay rent and/or define a minimum income level as one of the criteria for eligibility. Furthermore, the eligibility criteria often include conditions of permanent residence or the absence of debts/arrears to the municipality. All these conditions worsen the accessibility of social housing for homeless people, including children and young adults (Ondrušová *et al.*, 2016).

A survey of public rented housing in the Slovak district towns (Fico *et al.*, 2019) showed that regulated rents significantly varied across the towns. But, in general, yearly rents could not exceed 5% of the acquisition costs for a rented apartment/flat (paid for by the municipality). The monthly rents ranged from €184 in Bratislava to €35 in Spišská Nová Ves. The rent in public rented housing was significantly lower than that for commercial sector housing. As the survey showed (Fico *et al.*, 2019), the differences between rents in public and private apartments was €280-620.

Despite the lower price level of public rented housing, it still may not be accessible for some vulnerable groups – in particular if they rely on minimum income protection. In most of the district towns, the amount of the assistance in material need represented approximately 100% of total housing costs within public rented housing (*ibid.*). This meant that after paying the rent households would be left without any other financial resources and would become unable to secure other needs.

6.2.2.2 Non-financial barriers

In general, Slovakia shows one of the lowest levels of housing availability among EU Member States, measured as the number of flats per 1,000 inhabitants. Further, the supply of public rented housing is one of the worst in the EU (Ministry of Finance, 2020). There is a significant lack of rented dwellings that could fulfil the role of social housing. According to a survey of public rented housing, there were 27,833 flats for rent under the administration of district towns in 2019 (Fico *et al.*, 2019). When applying for a municipal rented flat, people had to register on the waiting list. While the average waiting time was 36 months, it ranged from two months (Veľký Krtíš district) to 60 (Bratislava, the capital city) and 88 months (Púchov district). Municipalities apply various rules when establishing eligibility conditions for public rented housing. According to experts (Ministry of Finance, 2020), this “independence” can create room for discrimination and limit access for some vulnerable groups.

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

The Act on social services recognises “crisis intervention” social services, which can be divided into three categories as follows.

- Field crisis intervention services, aimed at identifying people who need a crisis intervention, provide social counselling, assistance in exercising their rights, and food. In terms of the ETHOS (European Typology on Homelessness and Housing

Exclusion)⁴¹ classification, crisis intervention covers especially categories ETHOS 1 and 11.

- Low-threshold centres, community centres and integration centres provide a similar range of services, which are supplemented by support for personal hygiene, social rehabilitation, development of work skills, and preventive and leisure activities. This group of services covers mainly homeless people in categories ETHOS 1 and ETHOS 2.
- The provision of overnight stays, and temporary and emergency housing, covers categories ETHOS 2, 3 and 4.14.

However, these services – while extremely helpful – cannot be considered as measures supporting access to adequate housing. The same holds true for “support” social services for people in housing need, which focus on personal hygiene centres, canteens and laundries.

Taking into account the extremely vulnerable living conditions in marginalised Roma communities and their low take-up rate of the housing allowance (Ministry of Finance, 2020), legalising the land/plots on which the Roma dwellings stand represents a key intervention. It allows them to legalise property relationships and obtain various permits that are necessary for adequate housing (official electricity and water connections, for example). Further, legalisation subsequently allows inhabitants to ask for the housing allowance, as one of the eligibility criteria is to have an “officially declared and authorised” relationship to the dwelling.

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family provides financial support (subsidies, grants) for the organisations working with homeless people or people at risk of housing insecurity that apply the “housing first” approach. This approach has attracted a lot of attention from experts and policy-makers in recent years. The housing first approach is now applied in the two largest cities in Slovakia – in Bratislava and Košice. In both cities, families with children who face housing exclusion and difficulties caused by low incomes represent a major target group, from which new users of social housing within the housing first projects are recruited (Ondrušová *et al.*, 2022). The second phase of the evaluation process is now under way, carried out by experts in the field.

⁴¹ <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>

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