



In Poland, fighting poverty is a subject of concern not just for local governments, but also for NGOs. The best known one is the Polish Humanitarian Organization, which collects money for ensuring that school children get enough to eat

East News

# Polish Poverty

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**Poverty in modern Poland differs in many regards both from its forms in earlier times, as well as from the types of poverty that are now seen in other, both post-Communist and Western countries. Polish poverty most frequently affects rural residents, children, women, the unemployed, and the “working poor”**

Modern-day poverty in Poland manifests certain specific characteristics. First and foremost, Polish poverty is a rural type of poverty. It is also a protracted, chronic phenomenon, one that is even passed down from one generation to the next (socially “inherited”). Poverty and the related negative phenomena that can lead to social isolation (such as unemployment, poor education and qualifications, etc.) are

concentrated in certain regions and locations on the social map of Poland. Another characteristic trait of Polish poverty is its “juvenilization,” i.e. poverty among children, among families with multiple children, unemployment among the young generation, etc. A certain particular form of the “feminization” of poverty is also observed in Poland. Finally, while poverty is largely derived from unemployment in Poland, the “working poor” phenomenon exists as well.

Note that the ethnic factor, one so significant in the case of modern-day poverty worldwide, does not play as significant a role in Poland as it does in other countries.

These analytically distinguishable traits and phenomena in practice often reinforce each other, overlap, and accumulate, leading to complex forms of poverty, with potentially ominous consequences.

In view of these particular traits and dimensions of Polish poverty, this present overview will draw upon the extensive existing body of knowledge, the results of the present author’s own research – including involvement in international projects (e.g. *the Social History of Poverty in Central Europe* project led by Júlia Szalai and *the Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Transitional Societies* study led

by Iván Szélényi), and studies by others, primarily the results of the research team in Łódź under Wielisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska.

### Rural poverty

Poland being an agricultural country, its poverty has always been a rural poverty. The so-called “new poverty” is also associated with rural areas and agriculture; all the available statistics and research, including from Poland’s Central Statistical Office and the World Bank, show that residing in rural areas or in a small town functions as a determinant of poverty. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that rural poverty is itself a diverse phenomenon – correlated with high rural unemployment caused by the collapse of former Communist-era state farms on the one hand, and with inadequate private agriculture sector reform and the insufficient profitability of agricultural activity on the other. It is also related to rural communities’ different lifestyle and different strategies for coping with poverty.

### The time and geographical dimension

Research has shown that the “new poverty” in Poland is frequently a protracted condition, and is even becoming a chronic and permanent status among certain communities (enclaves of permanent poverty in Silesian towns and settlements in the vicinity of now-disbanded state farms) or among certain types of families, where “inherited” poverty can be observed. “Inherited” poverty, unemployment, and other negative phenomena passed down from one generation to the next comprise a particularly dangerous phenomenon. It is evident both on the macro scale (inheritance of social position at the two extremes of the social ladder – among the most wealthy and best educated groups on the one hand, and among the least wealthy and most poorly-educated groups on the other) and on the micro scale of families and individuals.

Another salient trait of present-day poverty in Poland is that it is concentrated in both urban zones and rural areas, both on the macro scale (in terms of regions) and on the scale of local communities, individual towns, neighborhoods, and villages. Old downtown areas in such industrial towns as Łódź, Wrocław, and Katowice are becoming true ghettos of poverty. Poor neighborhoods are conducive to the further entrenchment of poverty. The accumulation of various negative phenomena in a given area – such as poverty, unemployment, a shortage of jobs, a poor level of education, few prospects for young people, limited mobility, obstacles to communication with the outside world, and relative isolation – increases the danger of the so-called “vicious circle of poverty,” of “lasting marginalization” and an “emerging underclass.”

### The “feminization” and “juvenilization” of poverty

One of the most characteristic traits of modern-day poverty in Poland is the young age of those affected.

Children and young people are statistically overrepresented among the country’s poor. The likelihood of living in poverty increases the more children there are in a family – families with multiple children in Poland being more at risk of poverty than single-mother families, which are among the poorest in Western Europe or the United States. The conditions faced by young people are further exacerbated by the almost doubly high unemployment rate among them and the lack of jobs for graduates of various schools and levels of the education system.

“Feminization,” in turn, represents one of the characteristic traits of poverty in the modern world, yet opinions remain divided as to the existence and scope of this phenomenon in Poland. Symptoms of the feminization of poverty can be perceived in various domains of social life, i.e. the conditions faced by women (1) on the job market (higher unemployment among women, more permanent unemployment, and difficulties in returning to the job

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market), (2) in terms of income (women’s earnings being 20% lower than those of men), (3) in terms of pensions (women’s pensions being 30% lower than those of men), (4) in connection with single motherhood, and finally (5) on the micro-level of the family and household, where various forms of the feminization of poverty are hidden, invisible, and unknown, although nonetheless significant.

Poverty in Poland is very closely correlated with unemployment (although on the other hand the “working poor” phenomenon exists as well). The problems of unemployment are well-known. Yet there are also sources of a special nature in Poland: autobiographical materials dubbed the *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, which portray the less-known, subjective and individualized aspects of the jobless experience, the varied ways in which this difficult challenge affects people, and the various ways in which people cope with it. This approach, one greatly valued and sought-after in the modern social sciences, represents an important contribution to the extensive existing body of knowledge about various aspects of poverty in Poland. ■

#### Further reading

- Tarkowska E. (2002). Intra-household gender inequality: hidden dimension of poverty among Polish women. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 35.
- Korzeniewska K., Tarkowska E. (eds.) (2002). *Lean Years, Years of Plenty. Looking at Poverty in Local Communities* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN.