

Widespread Child Poverty in Germany

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Although Germany is one of the richest countries in the world, many children live in poverty. This was confirmed by a recent report of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Approximately 10 percent of German girls and boys live in families whose income lies below the poverty line. The benchmark used is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) social measurement, according to which someone is poor if he or she receives less than half the median income. Of 29 participating OECD countries, Germany is ranked eleventh.

At the other pole of society, however, wealth is growing rapidly, thanks to the policies of the government parties in Berlin. According to rankings published in early October by *Manager Magazin*, the assets of the richest top 100 have increased in the past twelve months by 5.2 percent, to a record high of €336.6 billion [\$US 449.8 billion]. There are 135 billionaires living in Germany, and, according to a study by Credit Suisse, some 1.7 million "dollar millionaires."

The UNICEF study summarizes the research findings of several social scientists who have studied the living conditions of those affected between 2000 and 2010. As well as studying the economic and social situation of German children, adolescents and their families, the researchers also considered the effects of poverty on physical and mental health, as well as the individuals' subjective sense of well-being. The scientists investigated the readiness of people to commit acts of violence and crime, the media treatment of adolescents and the consequences this may have.

The study concludes that 8.6 percent of children have long-term experiences of poverty that may seriously affect their entire future life. Over one million adolescents have had to spend more than a third of their childhood and youth in poverty.

"It is disappointing that Germany is not able to significantly improve the material conditions of life for children", commented Christian Schneider, UNICEF Executive Director in Germany.

Lasting childhood experiences of poverty often mean that those affected are dissatisfied with their lives as adults, and have little hope of being able to improve them through their own efforts and abilities.

The situation facing the children of single parents is especially difficult. Their number has increased significantly. Whereas in 1996, one in seven families with children had only one parent, by the time of the 2009 micro-census, the figure was almost one in five. In the great majority of cases, the children grow up with their mothers.

Many single mothers work part-time or even full time. Nevertheless, due to low wages, they are not able to pay for their children to participate in sports or cultural activities, or to finance class trips. They also lack the time to help with homework. Single parents often lack the money for remedial tutoring, which is almost taken for granted in more affluent families in the case of academic difficulties.

Therefore, it is not surprising that on average, children from single-parent families are about half a year behind in mathematics and science by the age of 9 or 10. According to the researchers, the principle reason for the learning deficit lies in the socio-economic situation of the family, and not in marital status by itself.

Because educational success in Germany depends to a high degree upon the income and educational level of the parents, more so than in most other European countries, a greater portion of German children and adolescents are “left behind” in the education system.

The health and health-related behaviour of children are heavily dependent on their social and economic situation. Children from families in which one or both parents are unemployed fare worse in many areas than their peers from better-off families.

The study dispels the media-encouraged myth of a youth violence epidemic. In Germany in 2011, according to police statistics, 6.7 percent of young people between the ages of 14 and 18 were registered by the police for a criminal act. In 1998, the proportion was 8.2 percent. The numbers of both minor offences such as shoplifting and acts of more serious violence have actually declined.

In conclusion, the UNICEF report formulates demands that it places on the incoming German government. Policy-makers must “act decisively against child poverty”; the education system “must include timely and targeted support for disadvantaged children”; the UN Children’s Rights Convention should be fully implemented and the new government should “support the municipalities in becoming more child-friendly”, it says.

The incoming government, of course, will pay no attention whatsoever to these recommendations, as those making them know perfectly well. The austerity measures already adopted and the “debt ceiling” enshrined in the constitution make it certain that the report’s demands will go unheeded. An effective and sustainable improvement in the conditions of vulnerable children is only possible in a socialist society that places the needs of the vast majority of the population above the profit-grubbing of a few.

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