

### Intergenerational transmission of poverty: a challenge for Poland

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**INTERGENERATIONAL  
TRANSMISSION  
OF POVERTY:  
A CHALLENGE  
FOR POLAND**

**W. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska\***



*This article argues that urban poverty pockets emerged in Poland in the course of the system transformation towards capitalism. The main poverty drivers were the three overlapping processes: de-industrialization, 'dewelfareization' and de-institutionalization of the family accompanied by the devolution of social care management from the central to the local government. The enclaves of poverty emerged as a result of better-off residents leaving dilapidated blocks of flats and both spontaneous and deliberate accommodation of poorer citizens in these houses as social housing residents. In these areas, poverty tends to take root and reproduce in subsequent generations. The article is based on a 20-year study carried out in the city of Łódź under the author's supervision. The article summarizes the findings obtained from three sources: 1) narrative interviews held twice — in 1998 and 2008 — among 90 adults belonging to the subsequent generations of a certain extended family residing in a poverty enclave; 2) 73 in-depth interviews with teenage mothers residing in poverty enclaves, 3) a quantitative survey of 500 13-year-old pupils attending schools located in poverty enclaves. The author arrives at the conclusion that poverty enclaves in Łódź resemble neighbourhoods of relegation as conceptualized by Loic Wacquant.*

**Key words:** poverty, enclave of poverty, neighbourhood of relegation, transmission of poverty

**Introductory remarks**

Intergenerational inheritance of poverty has been neglected for many years in scientific discussions and political actions. The conviction that social classes are dead and that it is only individual's agency which matters when it comes to attaining economic and social position has obscured the fact of creeping inheritance of social inequalities and limited advancement opportunities for those at the bottom of social ladder.

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However, the economic crisis, which since 2008 has been affecting developed countries in Europe, evoked fear of spreading poverty and its intergenerational transmission. In several countries, at-risk poverty rate<sup>1</sup> increased and in many ceased to decrease. However, it is hard for ruling elites to admit that poverty exists in developed countries and tends to be transmitted to the next generation. A good example is Poland where both politicians and public at large are not ready to recognize poverty as a challenge that needs serious and coordinated actions. In the National Reform Programme submitted to the European Commission in April 2012, combating poverty is not mentioned among targets to achieve. One of the reasons behind this is the fact that after joining the EU in 2004 substantial decline in poverty rate was registered in Poland. In 2005, 20.5% of the total population was affected by the risk of poverty, whereas in 2011 — the figure was 17.7%. Particularly spectacular was a decrease in poverty among children. In 2005, Poland having risk of poverty rate among children as high as 29% was the country where child poverty was most widespread in EU-25. In 2011, the rate of 22% placed Poland at 17<sup>th</sup> position in EU-27 starting from the country performing the best. In other age groups except the oldest ones, the extent of poverty was limited during the period 2005—2011. However, a deeper analysis shows that decline in poverty took place only until 2008, whereas later, there was a slow increase in poverty among the total population (in 2008 the rate reached 16.9%, in 2009—17.1%, in 2010—17.6% and in 2011—17.7%).

Among seniors (65+ years of age), a slow increase in poverty rate was registered even in the period 2005—2008 (up 0.5p.p.) and a rapid one between 2008 and 2011 (up 6.9 p.p.). Despite opposing tendencies, the youngest and the oldest are best protected against poverty. Poland is still a country where policy is not friendly enough to children. It is hard to accept that more than every fifth child lives in a low income household and even more suffer from different kinds of deprivation. The inequality, or gap, in material well-being among children is large. Poland ranks 21 among 24 OECD countries according to the material inequality gap<sup>2</sup> among children starting from the best performer — Switzerland. Only Hungary and Slovakia perform worse than Poland (UNICEF 2010). The situation is much worse in localities being pockets of poverty constituted in post-industrialized towns during the 1990s. Tendencies and processes lasting there and affecting children's well-being are difficult for quantified documentation because people living there constitute the far margins of the urban population; it does not exceed a few per cent of the total and its members are often designated as 'the others' or 'the leftovers' in representative sample description.

<sup>1</sup> The **at-risk-of-poverty rate** is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfer) below the **at-risk-of-poverty threshold**, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers. This indicator does not measure wealth or poverty, but low income in comparison to other residents in that country, which does not necessarily imply a low standard of living.

<sup>2</sup> The degree of inequality between children in material well-being is measured as the gap between: the child at the 10th percentile (i.e., the child one point lower than 90% of children in the society) with the child at the 50th percentile (the median position), expressed as a percentage of the median position.

Moreover, in Poland it is very difficult to notice at first glance population inhabiting poverty enclaves, as it is the case in North America and Western Europe, or even in Romania, where ‘ghetto poor’ differ in terms of ethnicity and/or religion from majority of society. Contrary to this, Polish society is very homogenous in terms of its ethnicity and religion. Therefore, the poor are rather ‘us’ than ‘them’. It makes it difficult to think about poverty as a socially produced problem. Poverty is privatized and attributed to individuals. Even children are made guilty and perceived as “trouble makers”. Therefore, qualitative research is of particular importance for getting a deeper understanding of the drivers and maintainers of poverty perpetuation.

Further on, I will provide results of the long lasting study carried out under my supervision in the city of Łódź, the third largest city in Poland. In conclusion, I will refer to Wacquant’s concept of neighbourhood of relegation as a new form of poverty.

### **Urban enclaves of poverty in Poland and process of intergenerational transmission of poverty**

Polish sociologists started to investigate urban poverty in the early 1990s [2; 4; 7; 10—13; 15—18] and still continue the research [1; 3; 5; 6]. The research began immediately after establishing the new economic and political order and was carried out in a deliberately selected large Polish city — Łódź undergoing rapid deindustrialization<sup>3</sup>. It provided evidence that during the first years of system transformation, aimed at reactivation of capitalism in its neo-liberal form, 17 enclaves of poverty<sup>4</sup> appeared in the city, inhabited by more than 59,000 citizens of Łódź, who represented 7.4% of the total population. City quarters with a relatively higher poverty ratio had also a higher proportion of people living in enclaves of poverty. At the same time, there was a higher *ghettoization ratio*<sup>5</sup> in the more highly impoverished quarters. On average in Łódź, every sixth and in the most impoverished quarters, every fourth poor person lived in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. 12 poverty enclaves were located concentrically around the central part of the city delimited by the main street and its continuations, where several thousand or even tens of thousands inhabitants resided. Whereas in enclaves of poverty the poverty rate was as high as thirty per cent, children from poor households represented half of all children living there, and over one-third of their poor inhabitants. In the biggest poverty zone, inhabited by over ten thousand people, the poverty ratio among children exceeds 60%. We described such a situation as *juvenilisation* of poverty. Since then our research team has been particularly focused on child poverty.

<sup>3</sup> In 1993 there were 100 thousands unemployed registered in this city with 750 thousands inhabitants.

<sup>4</sup> Enclave of poverty was defined as composed of at least two street blocks (defined as the space between four intersecting streets), with a share of welfare recipients higher than 30% (twice as high as city average).

<sup>5</sup> Ghettoization ratio is a share of the poor living in a given locality among the total population of the poor.

Three overlapping processes were recognized as poverty drivers: deindustrialization, dewelfareization, (that is, withdrawal of the state from generous subsidizing of housing, transportation, leisure time activities, education, health care etc., increase in payment for electricity, gas and other necessities) and deinstitutionalization of family (increase in one-person households, single-parent families). These processes were accompanied by the devolution of social issues management from the national to local government. Therefore poor management of communal housing became a factor contributing largely to concentration of the poor in some urban spaces.

Tenant houses in street blocks constituting inner-city enclaves of poverty were built mostly at the beginning of XX century when Łódź was thriving as an industrial town. Flats in these houses are small and usually consist of just one room without sufficient sanitary installations. Municipal administration in charge of these buildings allots flats in them as social housing for persons leaving prisons, people evicted from previous apartments because of rent arrears, or those whose apartments burnt in fire. There are also rehoused families, who lived earlier in parts of the city, subjected to gentrification. The emergence of poverty enclaves was also sped up by the re-appearance of the private housing market. Better-off inhabitants of enclaves swap their flats in devastated tenant houses with people living in blocks of flats, very often those who cannot afford to pay their rent. Better off inhabitants offered to repay their debts and give them an additional amount of money. Those who were lucky enough to get and keep a permanent and well-paid job moved out and those who got impoverished moved in. At the end of XX century localities labelled as enclaves of poverty became socially isolated places and their inhabitants got continuously similar in terms of their socio-economic status.

As a rule, inhabitants of poverty enclaves (just like the poor in general) were excluded from the formal labour market most frequently due to the liquidation of businesses they used to work for. Some were confronted with reduced possibilities of finding a job after maternity leave, or after leaving prison. That does not mean, however, that they were not gainfully employed at all. They participated in the informal labour market, tapping opportunities offered by their immediate environment. They sold agricultural produce in open-air markets for a 'commission' paid by farmers who hired them; they cleaned the market site and carried heavy goods. For the inhabitants of poverty enclaves located near municipal dumps, the recovery and sale of discarded objects was also a way to earn money. Living close to a cemetery was taken as an opportunity for the production and sale of long lasting lamps constructed from the remains of old lamps that were no longer in use. Women cleaned houses of the more wealthy, illegally sew clothes for entrepreneurs who sold them in open-air markets; in summer and autumn they worked on horticultural farms or picked up forest fruit in order to sell it; they worked as au-pair or were hired to look after elderly people. This gainful employment was not registered and was kept secret from finance offices and social workers for the fear of being disqualified from receiving social benefits. Since such benefits were insufficient to make ends meet, it was necessary for recipients to supplement this meagre source of income. The only

alternative to jobs in the informal sector was criminal activity, in which some inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods became involved. Thus, it was not the lack of job that was the problem for people in poverty enclaves but rather the lack of legal employment providing a regular and sufficient livelihood. People living on social assistance could not count on such employment. They had become redundant in the formal labour market because of de-industrialization and modernisation of the production process. The majority of them used to work legally for several years during the communist period, but many did not work long enough to obtain a decent pension after reaching retirement age.

Since no firm wanted to hire them legally because they lacked the requisite skills, or because of their appearance, age etc., it was impossible for them to supplement the dole with legal employment, which would qualify them for pension insurance and old age pensions in the future.

Tracing the poor being trapped in poverty enclaves in the city of Lodz, *family life stories* were collected from at least two and, in some cases, three generations of the same extended family. This study is unique and there are few examples in research literature providing knowledge about intergenerational transmission of poverty, described by adults belonging to different generations of the same family. Narrators were selected among social assistance recipients in their forties-fifties living in an enclave of poverty whose mother/ father or adult son/daughter accepted our invitation to take part in the research. 90 narratives were collected covering 40 families. Narratives on experience of poverty during childhood and later stages of life presented by representatives of the old (65+), the middle-aged (45—55) and the younger (20—25) generations enabled to distinguish factors making people slip into poverty in different historic time (Warzywoda-Kruszynska, 1999). For each generation there were different structural factors driving poverty like structural rural unemployment before the Second World War, urban unemployment during the system transformation in the 1990s, malfunctions of institutions (schools) as well as dysfunctions in their family of origin, health problems, irresponsible mate selection etc. It occurred that each generation in the study suffered from poverty, however at different stages of life. The older one suffered from poverty only in their childhood before World War Second, the middle-aged — in adulthood, the young — in their childhood and early adulthood, what means the whole previous life. There was only one family among 40 extended families whose younger generation were relatively better off. The study provided evidence showing that for the older generation the decisive factor for breaking poverty chain was post-war industrialisation. It provided young low skilled people with work and vocational training in state-owned factories. Older women in the study cumulated long employment records during the communist period and, in most cases, were the only ones in extended family having permanent income — their old-age pension. They were key supporters and a last resort for their grandchildren for whom, just like for their parents, jobs were in short supply. The middle-aged generation slipped into poverty because of unemployment and insufficient financial support from their parents; the young — because of

lack of any kind of financial support from the parental generation and dearth of legal secured work.

The study demonstrated that there were differences in patterns of getting and staying poor between men and women living in poverty enclaves. It also enlarged knowledge about gender specific intergenerational transmission of poverty. For men, growing up in poverty enclaves resulted in poor school achievements, early school dropping out, alcohol addiction and criminal records, which contributed to poverty perpetuation [2]. For women, the main factors pushing them into vicious circle of poverty were the following ones: malfunction of their family of origin (father/mother alcohol addiction), peer rejection and neglect, and irresponsible mate selection [7].

Ten years later a new research was carried out in the enclaves of poverty. The main objective of the study was to get a better understanding of the process of poverty perpetuation. Therefore we met again with the same families to investigate changes which occurred to them in the span of time. Several respondents who belonged in 1998 to the oldest generation died in the meantime, they were replaced in the sample by their grandchildren who in 1998 were minors and as adults were ready to tell us their family life story. In addition, separate investigations were carried out among deliberately selected groups of poverty enclave inhabitants: people in their twenties and pupils attending grammar schools located in enclaves of poverty.

The most important results concern:

- 1) transformation of enclave of poverty from ‘place’ to ‘space’ [9]. It means that people living there do not feel any longer their belongingness to any ‘community’ and, therefore, feel unsafe and not protected
- 2) deterioration in health
- 3) teenage motherhood as a way to ‘heal’ self-esteem
- 4) low self-esteem of pupils as a predicting factor for further poverty perpetuation.

Spontaneous processes of reprivatisation of communal estate and ‘revitalization’ of buildings in the inner-city poverty enclaves made many former inhabitants move either to other municipal buildings in the same enclave or to another enclave located farther from the city centre. Steady increase in rent and galloping indebtedness of the poor pushes people to leave their flats and search for temporary accommodation shared with other people. Such accommodation is offered in devastated buildings in enclaves of poverty by those who still stay there. Newcomers are often alcohol addicted and violate informal rules that existed before, e. g. spontaneous help among neighbours. Respondents reported feeling fearful and unsafe in both their family and their neighbourhood. It resulted from alcohol abuse in their parental house and close surrounding. Violence against mothers, arguments and fights between parents, police interventions — all these have become common practice and experience of people growing up in poverty enclaves in the XXI century. What is more, many of them report suffering from physical and psychological illnesses. Some young people even tried to commit suicide. It is striking that health problems perpetuate among members of subsequent generations of the same family, determining their school career. Even

if not suffering from any illness, respondents report that as children they had difficulty with concentration. They did not have all the necessary school manuals, proper school uniform and were bullied by peers. Informal “relegation” from school mates’ circles pushed pupils growing up in poverty enclaves to search for peers similar to them in terms of their socioeconomic status and shared experiences — their neighbours. They offered a possibility to “heal” respondents’ self-esteem and became the most important „reference group”. Respondents referred to them as „society”; they preferred “enjoying themselves” instead of being in school where they were labelled “troublemaking students”. For teenage girls it was not shameful in “society” to get pregnant. Neither was shameful for teenage boys to be incarcerated.

The subsequent generation living in enclaves of poverty, represented in our study by teenagers (13 years old), has no promising life prospects either. It is not only because they are strongly underinvested; rather because of the low self-esteem they manifest. They consider themselves to be poor pupils and poor school mates and do not believe in any form of success in the future. It may occur to be a self-checking prediction.

### Conclusions

Research findings seem to support the claim by Wacquant that a new form of poverty has been evoked by the on-going fragmentation of the wage labour relationship, the functional disconnection of dispossessed neighbourhoods from the national and global economies, and the reconfiguration of the welfare state in the polarizing city [9]. He argues that poverty perpetuation in neglected neighbourhoods, called by him ‘neighbourhoods of relegation’, results from changes induced by globalized capitalism. Contemporary capitalism has created a specific form of poverty being *advanced marginality* which emanation is *neighbourhood of relegation*. Such neighbourhoods are characterized by 1) territorial stigmatization, 2) transformation from being “the place” of residence as a form of collective life modus to “space” where individuals are disconnected and 3) having no viable hinterland. Territorial stigmatization also affects activities of public services and can be seen in application of measures unacceptable in other, more affluent residential areas. To keep the poor silent and to force them to work for low pay, two forms of control (performed by police and by social workers) intermingled though they used to be separate. The rich get richer and the poor get to prison, as Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton once wrote (2009).

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