

THE NUMBER AND SITUATION OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN IN SLOVAKIA AND THE FACTORS INFLUENCING THEIR PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes socially disadvantaged children in Slovakia, focusing on current statistics and factors influencing their engagement in sporting activities. Drawing on recent data, the study highlights the prevalence and distribution of socially disadvantaged groups among children in Slovakia. It also investigates the multifaceted factors impacting their participation in sports, including the roles of parents, peer groups, coaches, and other socio-cultural influences. By examining these factors, the research aims to understand the barriers and facilitators to sports participation among socially disadvantaged children. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of the intersection between socio-economic status and sports engagement, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners seeking to develop targeted interventions and programs to promote sports inclusion and equity among disadvantaged youth in Slovakia.

Keywords: *sports participation, poverty, disadvantaged children, Slovakia, sports activities*

INTRODUCTION

The societal and economic changes of the 21st century increasingly highlight the importance of equal opportunities and an inclusive society. Within this context, a comprehensive understanding of disadvantaged children's situations, needs, and opportunities is particularly crucial. Like many Central and Eastern European countries, Slovakia faces unique challenges in reducing social inequalities and ensuring quality education and leisure activities are accessible to all children. In this regard, participation in sports activities is not only relevant for maintaining health but also serves as a means to promote social integration, enhance self-esteem, and encourage participation in teamwork. The evolution of the number and situation of disadvantaged children and the examination of factors hindering their participation in sports activities is a pertinent and relevant topic in Slovakia. This is because identifying and overcoming obstacles in early childhood is crucial for promoting social integration and mobility. Research of this nature can contribute to informing policymakers, decision-makers, and civil society actors, enabling them to develop targeted measures and programs to support the affected groups. The potential benefits of the research can be multidimensional. Firstly, it can



provide fundamental data and insights into the current status of the number and situation of disadvantaged children, highlighting specific areas where intervention is most needed. Secondly, identifying factors hindering their participation in sports activities can reveal concrete obstacles and challenges, the overcoming of which could improve these children's quality of life, health status, and social integration. Additionally, the research results can serve as a basis for developing new, innovative interventions and programs aimed at expanding sporting opportunities and facilitating access to them for disadvantaged children.

In summary, this topic is current and relevant in present-day Slovakia and vital for directing future generations toward a healthier, more integrated, and fairer society. Research conducted among disadvantaged children and the resulting data is of fundamental importance in understanding their specific challenges and the opportunities available to overcome them. In Slovakia, as in many other countries, disadvantage often correlates with economic status, access to education, ethnic background, or even health issues. Therefore, addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a more equitable society and ensuring the well-being of future generations.

According to data, the rate of child poverty in Slovakia is higher than the European Union average. Eurostat data indicates that in 2020, the proportion of individuals under 18 at risk of relative poverty in the country was 19.8%, while the EU average stood at 20.1%. Although this rate is close to the EU average, it is essential to note that certain groups, such as children living in Roma communities, are disproportionately exposed to the risk of poverty at significantly higher rates (EUROSTAT, 2020). Significant inequalities also exist in access to sports activities. According to a 2019 UNESCO report, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate in regular physical activity, partly due to high costs, lack of adequate facilities, or limited leisure opportunities. Additionally, children living in disadvantaged areas often face a lack of physical access to sports opportunities, further exacerbating health and social inequalities (UNESCO, 2019).

Another important outcome of research could be a better understanding of the positive effects of sports activities on social integration. Sporting activities promote teamwork, fair play, and individual development while reducing social exclusion and strengthening community cohesion. This can be particularly crucial for disadvantaged children, as sports can provide opportunities to improve self-esteem, form new friendships, and develop social skills. Research of this nature and the data it generates inform policymakers and relevant organizations and offer specific proposals on how to improve the situation. Targeted interventions, such as free or subsidized sports programs, infrastructural developments, and inclusive sports events, can enhance disadvantaged children's social integration and overall well-being in Slovakia.

Children experiencing difficulties often lack social and cultural stimulation, grow up in linguistically diverse communities, or belong to Roma families living in disadvantaged or deep poverty conditions, impacting their development of skills and special abilities. These children are frequently labeled "unready for school" and perform below average. Several



studies (FARKAŠOVÁ, 2007; HENNELOVÁ, 2007; DOČKAL et al., 2007) highlight obstacles encountered by students in school tasks who had limited opportunities for socio-cultural stimulation before enrollment or did not attend kindergarten.

Recognition of income or socially disadvantaged groups is crucial in the targeted development of social policies in countries striving for social inclusion, aiming to ensure the well-being of as many citizens as possible. The most important indicator used to monitor the poverty and social exclusion goals of Europe 2030 is the rate of individuals at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The AROPE indicator encompasses three factors: the risk of poverty, severe material deprivation, and low work intensity, which can be defined as quasi-unemployment (ŠOLTÉS et al., 2023). Peña-Casas et al. (2019) found that between 2012 and 2017, workplace poverty in Slovakia increased by 0.2 percentage points, although it decreased by 0.8 percentage points in the entire population. The significant increase mainly affected households with single parents and at least one child (13.2 percentage points), single-person households (7.3 percentage points), and households weighed down by low work intensity and unemployment (14.3 percentage points). Härkönen (2017) argues that low educational levels and single-parent families often lead to remarkably high risks of poverty. NIEUWENHUIS and MALDONADO (2018) also confirm in their research that the risk of poverty is significantly higher among single-parent families compared to complete families. In their study examining workplace poverty, Filandri and Struolino (2019) found that risk factors include young age, low educational level, and households with a low number of earners and a high number of children.

These studies are significant because if parents are at risk of poverty, children growing up in such families also have a higher exposure to poverty due to their disadvantaged circumstances.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NUMBER OF DISADVANTAGED INDIVIDUALS IN SLOVAKIA

According to data from Slovakia, in 2022, approximately 12.3% of the population, or approximately 660,000 individuals, were threatened by income poverty. These figures confirm an increasing trend, as this data is 45,000 individuals higher than that recorded in 2021 (NOVINY.SK, 2022).

"According to the current EU SILC 2021 data in Slovakia - which take into account the entire year of 2020 - they show the effects of the first year of the pandemic on income poverty. Following five years of improvement, the risk of poverty increased by 0.9 percentage points, reaching the level of 2018," said Róbert Vlačuha, director of the Population Statistics Division of the Slovak Statistical Office (ŠÚ SR).

The statistics indicate that the first year of the pandemic did not increase the proportion of those threatened by poverty. The situation improved slightly year by year, particularly in households with three or more dependent children and in single-parent or multiple-



child families. However, in both households, more than one-third of the population is at risk of poverty. In households with multiple dependent children and single parents, this proportion is 36.3% and 33.6% of the population, respectively. Poverty is less common in childless households, with the most typical occurrence being among single elderly individuals aged 65 and above, where more than one-quarter lived below the poverty threshold, although their proportion increased slightly compared to the previous year. Their situation has significantly worsened over the past five years, as in 2016, only 9% of the elderly suffered from poverty.

In terms of age groups, children under 18 are the most vulnerable, with nearly one-sixth of them living in households below the poverty threshold. The pandemic increased the proportion of children at risk of poverty from 17.0% to 17.6% annually. "Almost twice as many children lived below the income poverty threshold as pensioners. Children make up more than one-quarter of the total number of people threatened by income poverty in Slovakia," said Vlačuha. The most significant deterioration occurred in the age group of 18 to 24-year-olds, with their number increasing by 1.6 percentage points; approximately every sixth individual in this age group was at risk of poverty. The proportion of older adults living in poverty reached 10.3% of the total population, nearly doubling since 2016 (SLOVAK STATISTICS, 2021).

In Slovakia, nearly 800,000 people were affected by poverty or social exclusion, but this proportion continuously decreased. Over the past decade, the number of individuals threatened by this issue has decreased by more than 300,000. In 2020, these factors threatened 14.8% of the population or slightly less than 800,000 individuals. Their number and proportion decreased by 1.6 percentage points in 2020 compared to the previous year. In 2019, 16.4% of the population, approximately 80,000 more individuals, were exposed to poverty and social exclusion than the following year. These data were provided by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic within the framework of the EU SILC 2020 income and living conditions survey, which still needed to reflect the social impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. "Poverty is a multidimensional problem that cannot be reduced to a single factor. Therefore, in the EU, we measure it with an index that encompasses three different dimensions, showing the proportion of the population threatened by at least one of these risks," explained Ľudmila Ivančíková, Head of the Social Statistics and Demography Department at the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

"This index identifies individuals threatened by at least one form of poverty: either living in income poverty, experiencing severe material deprivation indicated by at least four different material lacks, or residing in households with extremely low labor intensity.

"This pivotal index delineates the population affected by at least one aspect of poverty—be it income poverty, severe material deprivation affecting at least four out of nine possible indicators, or living in households with extremely low labor intensity." (SLOVAK STATISTICS, 2021). The most vulnerable group comprises individuals affected by poverty and social exclusion across all three dimensions. According to the EU SILC 2020 survey data, this group constitutes 1.6% of the Slovak population. Taking this risk group into account is crucial in the fight against poverty.



IMPROVING TRENDS IN SLOVAKIA'S POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION LANDSCAPE

Over the past decade, the proportion of the Slovak population at risk of poverty or social exclusion has shown a declining trend, with 20.6% of the population affected by this issue in 2011. This decreasing trend was only interrupted by a temporary increase during the economic crisis between 2010 and 2011 when over 1.1 million people in Slovakia were threatened by poverty due to all three dimensions of poverty indicators.

Low income remains the most prevalent issue among people. In Slovakia, the most significant number of individuals are threatened by what is known as income poverty among the three dimensions of poverty and social exclusion. This refers to individuals whose income does not reach the nationally defined poverty threshold. According to last year's data, around 11.4% of the population, approximately 615,000 people, lived below the income poverty line, representing a slight decrease compared to 2019 figures.

The second dimension, severe material deprivation, was experienced by 5.9% of the population, or about 318,000 individuals, who simultaneously experienced at least four out of nine examined material deprivations. Among the most common deprivations are the inability to afford a week-long holiday away from home (experienced by 34.8% of the population), lack of ability to cover unexpected expenses (26.1%), and difficulty providing a meat-based meal every other day (11.8% of the population).

The third dimension, low work intensity, affected 3.3% of the population last year. This refers to households where members used less than one-fifth of their annual work capacity. This ratio has been showing a declining trend for some time.

The following figure illustrates (Figure 1) how the number of people living under poverty risk has changed in some areas of Slovakia between 2019 and 2020.

Individual Risk Factors for Poverty and Social Exclusion 2020

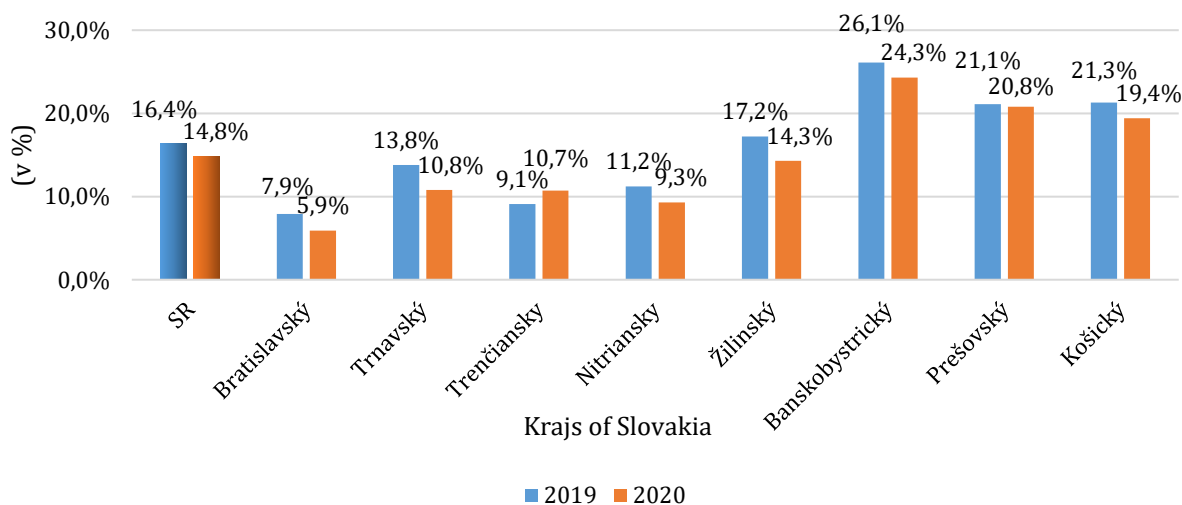


Figure 1: Individual Risk Factors for Poverty and Social Exclusion in 2019-2020



Source: Slovak Statistics (2021)

In the Nitra region, the most significant decrease in the percentage of vulnerable residents is observed. The number and proportion of residents at risk of poverty or social exclusion vary significantly among different regions of Slovakia. The highest vulnerability rate is observed in the Banská Bystrica region, where 24.3% of the population is affected (this ratio was 26.1% in 2019), meaning one in every four residents. The Prešov and Košice regions also show rates exceeding the national average, with values of 20.8% and 19.4%, respectively. In contrast, the ratio remains below the national average in five other regions. The population of the Bratislava region is the least vulnerable, with only 5.9% of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The situation has improved in every region yearly, except for the Trenčín region, where the proportion of vulnerable residents increased from 9.1% in 2019 to 10.7% in 2020. The most significant improvement was recorded in the Nitra region, where the proportion of vulnerable residents decreased by three percentage points to 10.8% of the population. The EU-SILC survey provides a detailed picture of Slovakia's poverty, social exclusion, and living conditions, using the same methodology as in all EU member states. This survey allows for the international comparison of Slovakia's situation within the EU and provides a basis for analyzing the social status of Slovak households. In 2020, data from the EU-SILC were collected through questionnaire-based field surveys in 6,500 randomly selected households.

Figure 2 illustrates how the proportion of children struggling with poverty in Slovakia compares to the EU list. It can be noted that there are countries where child poverty rates are higher, such as Romania and Bulgaria. However, many countries, such as Slovenia and Croatia, have more favorable data than Slovakia. Slovak data show values similar to the EU average.

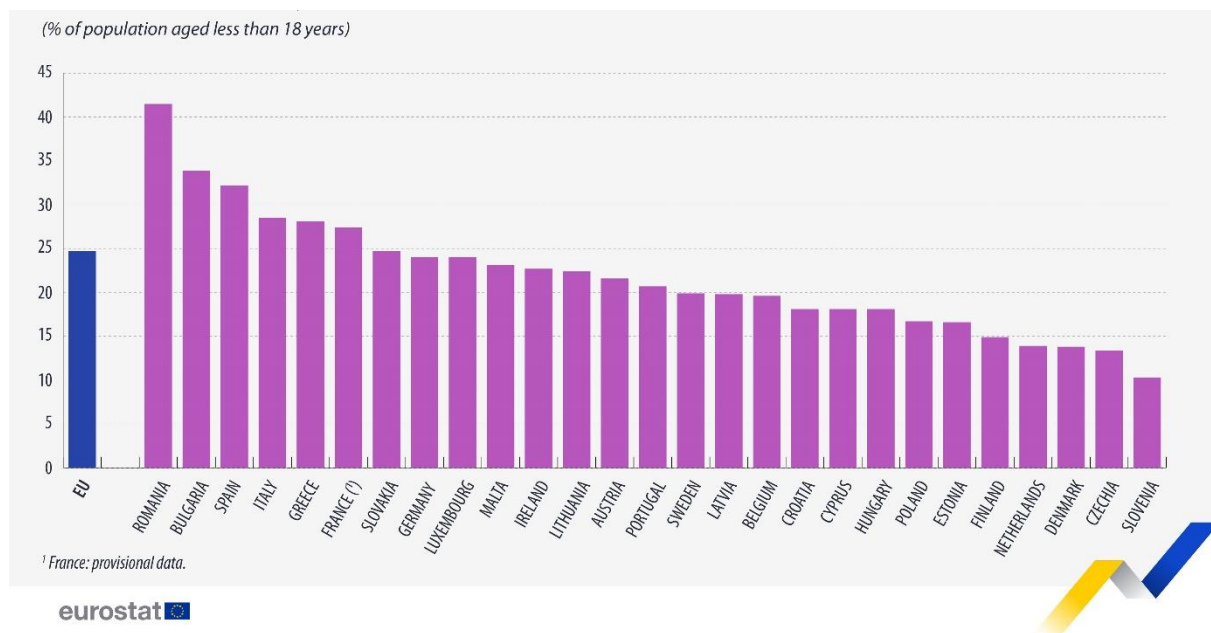


Figure 2: Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022

Source: Eurostat (2022)

The guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic under the reference number 2013-12192/36264:2-914, which were



issued on 6 August 2013, titled 'Procedures of Pedagogical and Psychological Counseling and Prevention Centers in the Assessment of School Abilities and the Integration of Socially Disadvantaged Children into Primary Schools,' it details the conditions under which a child is considered to be socially disadvantaged, based on Section 2, paragraph p of Act No. 245/2008.

The environment adversely affecting the child is mainly characterized by the combination of the following factors:

1. The child's family does not fulfill the essential functions - socialization, upbringing, emotional, and economic functions.
2. The poverty and financial needs of the child's family.
3. At least one parent of the child has been unemployed for a long time and belongs to the disadvantaged applicants seeking employment.
4. Inadequate education of the legal guardians - at least one parent still needs to complete primary education.
5. Inadequate living and hygiene conditions for the child at their residence - needing more study space, bedding, electrical connection, drinking water, and toilet facilities.
6. The language of instruction at school is different from the language used in the home environment.
7. The child's family lives in a segregated community.
8. Social exclusion of the child's community or family from the mainstream society.

The formation of sporting habits, choice of sports disciplines, and the development of sports consumption habits are determined by numerous factors, which various domestic and international literature reports on. Most scholarly literature emphasizes the role of family members such as parents, peers, friends, and physical education teachers and coaches. However, several studies focusing primarily on people with disabilities and disadvantaged groups highlight the presence or absence of opportunities that influence sports consumption. As a value-conveying and communication channel, the media also influences the formation of sporting habits and values among young people and adults. See these factors and their counterparts in Table 1.

Table 1: The factors influencing the sporting activities and the choice of sports for children

Influencing factor	Effect on sporting activities	Literature Parents
Parents	' sporting habits and supportive attitudes significantly influence the child's activity level and interest in sports.	CÔTÉ – HAY, 2002; HERPAINÉ, 2021; HERPAINÉ et. al. 2017; KERESZTES et. al. 2005; BARTUSNÉ-SZMODIS et. al. 2023; KOVÁCS – NAGY, 2020; BEREZCZ et. al. 2015
Peers	Peer group pressure and role modeling strongly influence an individual's inclination toward sports, especially during adolescence.	WEISS – SMITH, 1999; KERESZTES et. al. 2005; KOVÁCS, 2012; MARKOS, 2013
Friends	Support from friends and engaging in sports activities increase the frequency of sports participation and enjoyment.	BEETS et. al. 2010; KOVÁCS, 2018; FERENCZI – LENTÉNÉ, 2022; DARLOW – XU, 2011; STUIJ, 2015
PE. Teachers	The attitude of physical education teachers, their motivational skills, and the positive experiences they provide are decisive factors in students' attitudes toward sports participation.	MORGAN – HANSEN, 2008; KOVÁCS – MORAVECZ, 2019; BEREZCZ et. al. 2015
Coaches	The coaches' expertise, motivational abilities, and relationship with the athlete directly influence the athlete's commitment and performance in sports.	JOWETT – COCKERILL, 2003; HERPAINÉ, 2017; BENGOCHEA et. al. 2004; SOLDOS, 2017
Opportunities, accessibility	The availability of sports facilities, equipment, and programs significantly shapes the opportunities for sports participation.	EIME et.al. 2013; LAOUES 2021a; b; LUKÁCS – LENTÉNÉ, 2022; FERENCZI – LENTÉNÉ, 2021; BALATONI et. al. (2023)
Media	Increasing interest in sports events and athletes conveyed by the media and presenting role models in sports positively influence motivation	TUGGLE, 1997; FINTOR, 2014; KÓSA, 2006; HERPAINÉ 2017

Source: Own editing (2024)

Numerous factors influence the development of physical activity and sports consumption habits among disadvantaged children:

The factors influencing the physical activity habits of disadvantaged children are diverse and complex, manifesting within individual, familial, and societal contexts. These



constraints significantly differ from the opportunities and habits of other social groups' children. The primary barriers include:

Access barriers: Many disadvantaged children face difficulty accessing sports opportunities, attributed to infrastructure inadequacy, financial constraints, or the location of sports facilities. These constraints hinder their regular participation in physical activity or sports (LAOUES, 2021; BALATONI et al., 2023).

Financial constraints: Due to a higher prevalence of poverty in these communities, families often cannot afford sports equipment, travel expenses, or club fees, limiting children's sports opportunities (GOMBÁS, 2017; LAOUES, 2021; LUKÁCS – LENTÉNÉ, 2022; KATONA, 2019).

Social and cultural factors: The physical activity habits of disadvantaged children may be influenced by social and cultural norms and values within the community and attitudes toward sports and physical activity. Community cohesion and identification may sometimes be more important than participation in sports activities (FARKAS 2013, STUIJ, 2015).

Discrimination and prejudices: They may face discrimination in sports opportunities, hindering their full integration into the sports scene. This may include perceived or actual harmful discrimination from their peers or coaches, reducing participation willingness and self-confidence (SOMERSET HOARE, 2018; TINTORI et al., 2021; KATONA, 2019).

Health conditions: Children living in lower socio-economic conditions are more likely to face health issues, including nutritional deficiencies, obesity, or chronic illnesses, which can affect their sporting abilities (NAGY et al. 2018; BENDÍKOVÁ 2008).

Despite these challenges, the positive effects of sports and physical activity—such as improving health, strengthening the sense of community, and promoting personal development—are equally applicable to all children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, it is essential to develop and support inclusive and accessible sports programs that consider the above barriers and provide opportunities for all children to participate in sports and enjoy its benefits.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Research and experiences clearly indicate that sports participation plays a crucial role in disadvantaged children's physical, social, and emotional development. Through sports, their self-confidence improves, anxiety decreases, and they integrate better with their peers. However, numerous barriers hinder their access to sports opportunities: financial constraints, access issues, lack of awareness about available opportunities, and often, the absence of parental support. Overcoming these barriers requires strategic steps.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Provision of free programs: Local governments, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector need to collaborate in establishing free or discounted sports programs, with particular consideration for disadvantaged children.

Equipment and facility support: The lack of sports equipment and appropriate facilities often poses a barrier. This obstacle should be reduced through targeted fundraising and support.

Information and advocacy campaigns: Informing parents and children about available opportunities and strengthening advocacy efforts is crucial for expanding sports opportunities.

Development of tailored programs: Tailored programs should be developed to meet the needs of children facing various disadvantages, considering their age, culture, and other specific requirements.

Involvement of educational institutions: Schools play a crucial role in children's physical education. School sports programs, especially for disadvantaged students, should be strengthened.

Community support and involvement: Engaging local communities as supportive and incentivizing forces is vital for the sustainability and success of programs.

Long-term commitment: The development and support of sports programs cannot be a one-time initiative. Long-term commitment and continuous funding are necessary to achieve and maintain results.

Supporting sports participation for disadvantaged children is a complex task that requires a comprehensive approach and collaboration across different sectors. Implementing the strategic steps mentioned above can make sports accessible and enjoyable for every child, which is their fundamental right and essential for their overall development.

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