



Vulnerability in Times of Family Diversity – A Practitioners' View

Key messages:

- Practitioners can provide valuable insights into the situation of today's vulnerable families and help delineate areas where policy interventions are essential.
- No family configuration inevitably leads to vulnerability, but some are more "at risk" than others. Decisive for family wellbeing is the ability to combine family life with paid employment.
- From the practitioners' perspective, policy measures to support families in need and to prevent the "reproduction of vulnerability" from one generation to another should focus particularly on education and the reconciliation of family and working life.

Authors:

Monika Mynarska
Bernhard Riederer
Ina Jaschinski
Desiree Krivanek
Gerda Neyer
Livia Oláh

Editor:

Ann Zimmermann

› Family diversity and vulnerability

In recent decades, European families have undergone tremendous change that has resulted in a greater diversity in family forms and relationships. Although the married couple with one or two children – among families with minor children – is still the most common family form, nowadays children are raised in many different family settings, e.g. with unmarried parents, single parents, stepparents or same-sex parents. Within this increasing variety and complexity of family forms, a special focus should be placed on vulnerable families. Who are these families today? How might various future developments affect such families? What factors might be crucial for the wellbeing of vulnerable families and what prime areas for policy interventions arise from these?

› The *FamiliesAndSocieties* Project

This policy brief is based on research from the collaborative *FamiliesAndSocieties* Project funded by the EU's Seventh Framework Programme (www.familiesandsocieties.eu). The project investigates the diversity of family forms, relationships and life courses in Europe. It assesses the compatibility of existing policies to family changes and thereby aims to contribute to evidence-based policy-making. Within this broader scope, one approach was to use focus group interviews with policy makers and other societal actors involved in family-related issues to identify the most important areas for future policy measures to help improve the situation of vulnerable families in Europe. Five focus group interviews were conducted in different European countries, namely Austria, Belgium, Poland, Spain and Sweden (Mynarska et al. 2015).

› A qualitative field perspective

Similar to other qualitative methods, focus group discussions are particularly useful for exploring complex phenomenon like vulnerable families from a field perspective. They are a combination of semi-structured interviews with an emphasis on a well-defined topic and a discussion between several participants facilitated by a moderator. This allows for "brainstorming" in a group setting, which may reveal topics that might not have necessarily been discovered otherwise. As in real life, where people do not act in isolation from each other, the debaters are challenged by additional information, alternative ideas and divergent opinions. Thus, researchers may collect a variety of views and additional insights, especially because arguments have to be clearly articulated in cases where discussants

are in disagreement. However, it should be kept in mind that generalising the results of focus group interviews is problematic because they do not provide a representative sample, but rather data from a social interaction of actors with their own agenda in a particular setting. Nevertheless, such discussions with experts enrich knowledge about an issue, reveal details and ambivalences, and put them into specific contexts. To widen the perspective on vulnerable families, policy makers and stakeholders were included in the focus group discussions. Since they are experts who are working on concrete problems and practical issues, they are able to draw the attention of researchers to different topics and highlight the complexity of relevant issues that could have otherwise gone unnoticed.

› Vulnerable families

The experts agreed in the discussions that economic hardship is a central aspect of vulnerability, and they also emphasised the importance of social context (e.g. social exclusion, stigmatization or a lack of social support). Vulnerability was also perceived in more general terms as a lack of balance and stability in the lives of families. Families affected by vulnerability were described as those who experience extreme time pressures and stress, and who are overburdened, but also those experiencing high levels of conflict linked to their specific circumstances or divorce. While some experts argued that no family configuration inevitably leads to vulnerability, there was a general consensus that some types are more "at risk". Overall, single parents and families with many children were perceived as the most vulnerable. The special vulnerability of orphan and adoptive/foster families, migrant families and families with members in need, especially those with disabled children, was also discussed. Families simultaneously belonging to more than one category (e.g. a single parent with a migrant background with a disabled child) were perceived as being particularly vulnerable.

› Reconciliation is key

The link between paid work and family life appeared to be central for the concept of vulnerability as it conveys economic, social and emotional dimensions. The inability to reconcile the two spheres of life is likely to lead to serious economic problems. Parents can become trapped in precarious jobs or they may feel forced to limit their working hours which, in turn, substantially reduces their income. In extreme cases, they might need to leave the labour market altogether. Consequently, they would no longer be able to meet the financial needs of their family. Being out

of the labour market can also reduce the social contacts parents have, limiting their social embeddedness. Facing substantial difficulties regarding the reconciliation of work and family, parents might choose to greatly reduce quality time with their offspring for the sake of economic safety. This may have a negative impact on their relationships with their children and on their children's emotional wellbeing. Problems with the reconciliation of work and family life are also related to time constraints and high stress levels. Overall, the experts identified the ability to combine family life with paid employment to be the decisive factor for a family's wellbeing.

› Drivers of family wellbeing

The experts considered various directions of macro level developments and named numerous forces that might improve or worsen the wellbeing of families — particularly vulnerable ones — in the future. These forces were mostly related to work-life balance. The experts discussed changes in institutional childcare provision, changing gender roles (women's higher participation in the labour force and the higher engagement of fathers in the care of their children), as well as the role of the "culture of the workplace" and employers' attitudes towards employees' family responsibilities. Other drivers possibly important for the future of vulnerable families were also named, such as general economic development (crisis versus growth), cultural and social shifts in intergenerational relationships, and a possible weakening of social ties.

› The ambivalence of future developments

The consequences of some future developments were ambivalently assessed in the discussions. For example, in regard to economic growth, it was perceived as necessary to sustain low levels of unemployment and to ensure decent levels of wages, as well as to maintain substantial public support for families, which reduce poverty and thus vulnerability. However, it was pointed out that economic development might create more pressure on families if not accompanied by more general changes in the workplace culture (e.g. if employers are not considerate of parental duties) and lifestyles in general (e.g. if individuals neglect interpersonal relationships because of focusing too much on work).

A similar ambivalence was visible in how the experts spoke about the consequences of increasing female labour force participation. On the one hand, higher engagement of women in paid work has a positive impact on family

incomes and improves women's situation in terms of financial independence, also with regard to their future pensions. On the other hand, several experts pointed out that the pressure imposed on women should not be overlooked. Without family-friendly workplaces and sufficient childcare, and without changes in the role of men, women may run the risk of being overburdened given the increased pressure to do their best both as a mother and an employee. These ambivalences about possible economic and cultural developments need to be carefully considered, as they may require different policy measures.

› Policy Recommendations

The experts were asked to discuss various policy measures that, in their opinion, would be crucial to improve the situation of children in vulnerable families and that would specifically prevent the "reproduction of vulnerability" from one generation to another. In all focus groups, the importance of education was strongly emphasised. Education was broadly defined and consisted of education for children, parents and other important societal actors, in particular employers. For instance, schooling of children should promote equal chances as adults, counselling for parents should support them in coping with their parental roles, and raising awareness of employers — and the society at large — should help enhance understanding for parental issues.

In addition, the experts emphasised that in order to ensure a good future for children, parents need to be able to spend enough time with their offspring. Yet, as mentioned earlier, parental participation in the labour market is necessary for the financial provision for a family. This underlines the importance of reconciliation policies, which were intensely discussed, specifically the overall need for policy measures that allow for flexibility. This would include the choice about when to return to the labour market, but also various childcare options (e.g. institutional (public) childcare, nannies or childcare facilities in companies). A higher flexibility of policy measures was also called for because of the increasing diversity of family forms, cultural changes and new ways of living (e.g. children's "alternating residence" in case of shared physical custody).

Concerning those in the worst situation — the poorest and most troubled families and children — a number of services were highlighted, like psychological support (mediation services, counselling and therapy for children and their parents, etc.). Also special needs of particularly vulnerable families were addressed, such as the need to provide assistance to children and/or parents with disabilities so

that they can equally participate in all activities of everyday life and lead a free and independent life. Moreover, it was emphasised that families in need should be given support without being stigmatised. The state should not decide for families or dictate how they should live, but rather show them perspectives, offer options and support. Preventative actions and early support were also seen as indispensable to help families before any serious problems occur.

Direct and indirect financial transfers to vulnerable families played only a minor role when the experts discussed actions that might break the cycle of the reproduction of vulnerability in families. Economic measures discussed were tax policies (including VAT-related regulations to allow for lower food prices), direct financial transfers, as well as investments in free healthcare services. The experts, however, agreed that monetary transfers and investments alone do not suffice in preventing or alleviating families' vulnerability. Instead, economic and financial support should be embedded in a broad political strategy including education and the creation of a family-friendly society. These additional aspects were seen as crucial to prevent the reproduction of vulnerability. Overall, it was emphasised that there is a need for a comprehensive strategy and complementary policies: single measures have to go hand in hand with each other in order to solve the urgent needs of vulnerable families, but to also break the vicious circle that children of disadvantaged families often face. Therefore, policies should first and foremost support families to sustain themselves.

The discussions with policy makers and stakeholders provided valuable insights into the situation of vulnerable families and into factors important for their wellbeing in the future. They offered new perspectives and drew our attention to aspects that are not commonly considered in demography studies. Future population research should incorporate these insights and, in turn, provide improved evidence-based policy recommendations to policy makers and stakeholders.

References

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Imprint

Publisher: Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Sciences on behalf of the collaborative network "Population Europe"

Editor: Ann Zimmermann (V.i.S.d.P.)

Technical Coordination: Aimie Bouju, Emily Lines

Layout: The Brettingshams GmbH, Berlin

Photo Credit (Cover Page): ©Kamaga - iStock

Print: Blueprint Berlin GmbH, Berliner Str. 13-14, 10715 Berlin

Contact: Population Europe Secretariat, Markgrafenstraße 37, 10117 Berlin, Germany

Phone: +49 (0)30 2061 383 30, **Fax:** +49 (0)30 2061 383 50

Email: office@population-europe.eu

Web: www.population-europe.eu

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The Population Europe Secretariat is hosted by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research.



FamiliesAndSocieties

This policy brief is based on research from the Project FamiliesAndSocieties, funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 320116 (www.familiesandsocieties.eu).