

Child Poverty in Portugal: Recommendations from the RESPUBLICA Project

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Executive Summary

Child poverty is one of the most consistent factors of disadvantage in human development, with effects that extend throughout the life course and reproduce across generations. This phenomenon undermines children's well-being, limits their potential, and perpetuates structural inequalities, posing a central challenge to social cohesion and sustainable development. Although the last 20 years have seen a decline in child poverty in Portugal, progress has been modest and irregular, with child poverty rates consistently exceeding the overall poverty rate. This trend reinforces the challenge of meeting the United Nations' 2030 goal of reducing poverty by half.

To contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in Portugal, the RESPUBLICA project analysed policies and practices to combat child poverty in the Northern region, integrating the perspectives of professionals, families, and children. The results reveal the absence of a truly multidimensional view of poverty, one that goes beyond income and includes dimensions such as housing, health, and education. Particular emphasis was given to the need to integrate indicators of subjective well-being and participation (e.g., degree of children's involvement in identifying indicators of well-being, poverty, and inequality). The study also found persistent intergenerational poverty, associated with trajectories of exclusion and limited social mobility, as well as weaknesses in the articulation between research, public policy, and frontline practice. Support services, such as the Family and Child Support Centres (CAFAP), face resource constraints and institutional overload, which compromise the effectiveness of their interventions. The findings call for an integrated, multisectoral political commitment, strengthening coordination between ministries and local authorities, creating comprehensive indicators embedded in a child poverty monitoring system, and valuing children's participation in shaping policies. It is essential to consolidate structural measures that improve family income, regulate the housing market, and ensure equitable access to education and healthcare. Combating child poverty in Portugal requires a sustained, evidence-based strategy that places children's rights at the centre as a national priority.

Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security; Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation; Ministry of Economy; and Ministry of the Presidency.

Introduction

Child poverty constrains human development from an early age, paving the way for inequalities that persist throughout life and reproduce across generations. This phenomenon undermines children's well-being, limits their potential, and perpetuates structural inequalities, representing a central challenge for social cohesion and sustainable development [1,2,3,4,5,6,7]. It is also at this stage of development that poverty appears to be most detrimental, as child poverty rates consistently exceed those of the general population.

In Europe, it is estimated that around 19.5 million children live in poverty or at risk of social exclusion [8]. In Portugal, in 2023, 17.8% of children and young people were living in poverty, corresponding to an overall decrease of 7.8 percentage points since 1994 [9]. Despite the progressive decline, around 379,000 children remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion, 40,000 more than in 2022 [9]. This figure illustrates the complexity of the challenge in meeting the United Nations' 2030 goal of reducing poverty by half. It also reflects the importance of investment in, and the outcomes of, policies aimed at protecting children and families. Notably, despite the limitations of redistributive policies, the child poverty and social exclusion rate would rise to 30% in the absence of social transfers [10,11].

Addressing child poverty requires acknowledging the complex, dynamic and multidimensional nature of the construct, in a dialogical process that articulates supranational

directives, national reality and local contexts. To this end, generating knowledge that is close to the lived experience of children, families, and frontline professionals who support families through challenges and adversity, becomes essential. At the same time, within a field rich in scientific and technical production, there is a pressing need to identify and synthesise gaps in research, intervention, and policymaking.

In this context, the RESPUBLICA project aims to contribute to the development of knowledge that can enhance the effectiveness of policies to combat child poverty in Portugal. It does so through the critical analysis of policies and support services targeting children and families experiencing social and economic vulnerability. Focused on the Northern Region, one of the most unequal regions, with levels of overall and child poverty above the national average [12,13], RESPUBLICA sought to understand the emerging dimensions of child poverty, the meaning of poverty from children's perspectives, and the scope of mitigation measures and social responses delivered locally by Family and Child Support Centres (CAFAP). RESPUBLICA is structured around three pillars: analysis of existing knowledge on child poverty and public policies, contributing to the identification of gaps; active participation of professionals, families and children, fostering the articulation between actors and recognising the role of research as a tool for social justice; and the production of policy-oriented knowledge to support the design and implementation of more effective and equitable evidence-based public policies.

Analysis / Key Findings

The methodological approach combined a diachronic perspective, centred on families' retrospective narratives regarding poverty and social and economic disadvantage, with a synchronic perspective based on professionals'

accounts of current experiences and challenges. Within an integrated, multisectoral framework, a participatory, multi-method and multi-informant methodology was adopted, including: 28 semi-structured interviews with

adults with a family history of poverty or socioeconomic disadvantage; 5 focus group discussions (FG) with 31 CAFAP professionals from the Northern region, representing around 80% of all operating CAFAP services, allowing the mapping of emerging challenges and potential indicators for practice evaluation; and 4 FGs with 29 children, using storytelling methods. Particular attention was given to ensuring the participation of children experiencing heightened social vulnerability (e.g., children from Roma communities, with disabilities, from rural areas, or in socioeconomic deprivation) [16], thereby ensuring the inclusion of perspectives often overlooked in decision-making processes and recognising their views as vital for the success of measures to combat child poverty (as expressed in documents such as the National Strategy Against Poverty 2021–2030; the European Child Guarantee; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child). While the qualitative nature of the studies does not allow statistical generalisation, it enables the problematisation of structural dimensions of child poverty in Portugal.

A review study was also conducted, mapping 48 scientific studies and 85 grey literature documents on child poverty in Portugal, enabling the identification of knowledge gaps and recommendations for public policies [14].

Ethical considerations were addressed thoroughly, particularly regarding the participation of children and the collection of sensitive data (favourable opinion from the Ethics Committee – Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto – Ref. 2024-10-18c). The project was further supported by a multidisciplinary advisory board composed of experts from academia and civil society, who contributed to evaluating the process and co-constructing knowledge applicable to public policies, reinforcing the practical relevance and potential for impact of the findings.

Synthesis of Key Results

The results highlight four dimensions that should be prioritised in efforts to combat child poverty in Portugal:

1. Production of comprehensive indicators (quality and multidimensionality)
2. Coordination between research, practice, and policy
3. Assessment of the resilience and responsiveness of social protection systems
4. Relevance of macro-structural dimensions

1. Production of Comprehensive Indicators (Quality and Multidimensionality)

“The numbers we see are not representative of reality [...] We know that, unfortunately, people—workers—today, families who are not recipients of social insertion income but earn the minimum wage also live in poverty.” (Professional 1 – FG5)

One of the main findings of the study concerns the lack of a truly multidimensional perspective on child poverty and the absence of evaluation of integrated and cross-sectoral public policies. It is therefore essential to:

i) Integrate structural indicators that consider both material and immaterial poverty. The analysis reveals that material poverty has traditionally dominated poverty assessments, despite efforts to include immaterial dimensions (e.g., the at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion rate). This approach, based on the national median income, often excludes vulnerable groups, such as children in residential care, and underestimates the impact of rising housing and food costs on the financial strain experienced by families with children. It is also important **to consider the absolute poverty rate**—which is generally higher than relative poverty among children and young people—and **to disaggregate data by age group (<18**

years). Special attention should be paid to dimensions that can contribute to a comprehensive characterisation of the impact of child poverty, particularly **education, health and housing**. In the project, particular emphasis was placed on indicators of subjective well-being and **participation** (e.g., degree of children's involvement in identifying indicators of well-being, poverty, and inequality), as well as the **quality of family and community support networks**. The importance of **access to cultural goods and services** was also highlighted.

ii) **Align local, national and international indicators.** Evaluations of anti-poverty policies often prioritise international comparability (EU, OECD), but this perspective can obscure **Portuguese contextual specificities**. For example, while Portugal ranks 11th in the at-risk-of-poverty rate, the median income (EUR 7,588/year per adult in 2023) places the country 19th (Pordata, Eurostat, INE). In 2022, the purchasing power of people at risk of poverty in Portugal was, on average, three times lower than in Luxembourg, despite the slightly higher poverty threshold in that country [18].

Poverty also manifests differently across territories—urban or rural—making it essential **to produce local indicators that are context-sensitive**, characterise the phenomenon, and monitor the impact of public policies. Local Child Guarantee Hubs (NLGPI) can play an important role in identifying and tracking these indicators. Ensuring that teams can engage in close-proximity work aligned with indicator development is therefore crucial for effective monitoring.

2. Coordination Between Research, Practice and Policies

Understanding and mitigating child poverty requires effective **coordination between multidisciplinary research, frontline practice, and public policy**. Persistent challenges include the absence of a specific focus on child poverty, methodological variability in constructing child poverty measures, the dispersion of indicators, and the

lack of longitudinal data and intersectoral approaches [14]. A particularly noteworthy result concerns the need to create conditions for the participation of children and families in evaluation and monitoring processes [14]. It is therefore essential to ensure the development of funding streams and working groups that bring together professionals from academia, social intervention, policymaking, and representatives of families and children—particularly those in situations of social vulnerability.

3. Resilience and Responsiveness of Social Protection Systems

In a country characterised by low wages and high inequalities, **pressure on social protection systems is intense**. Even small variations in poverty rates lead to an increase in risk situations and overload services [19]. The capacity of CAFAP services is often constrained by waiting lists, judicial pressure, and resource shortages, affecting the effectiveness of interventions and efforts to prevent intergenerational poverty. Professionals highlight the direct impact of the housing crisis on rising family stress and the growing complexity of cases. A stronger articulation between the effects of the housing crisis and risk indicators is essential to reinforce the importance of measures in this area. Although poverty is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for child neglect or risk [19], it is a determining factor shaping how families live, face constraints, and perceive their life opportunities.

Intergenerational poverty emerges as one of the most difficult dimensions to mitigate, crystallising trajectories of exclusion and limiting children's prospects. Families reported impacts on the quality of relationships, sense of belonging, and the perceived value of school and work as pathways to social mobility. Professionals stressed the importance of long-term intervention and trusting relationships with services, which are fundamental to counteracting narratives of hopelessness. It is therefore crucial to develop **monitoring systems** that integrate information on family

history, structural factors that sustain poverty, care trajectories, and effective practices for breaking intergenerational cycles. Such evaluation is vital for understanding the phenomenon and intervening in processes that maintain cycles of exclusion and persistent poverty.

The “**culture of hopelessness**” associated with the perpetuation of exclusion cycles emerges as one of the greatest social challenges, grounded in indicators revealing the fragile connection between education, employment, and social mobility. Notably, for around half of children in poverty, parental education does not extend beyond basic schooling, and for many, parental employment does not guarantee quality of life, since 46.2% of people living below the poverty line in Portugal are employed [12].

The effectiveness of CAFAP services appears constrained by structural factors and the absence of **systematic evaluation indicators** that account for the impact of poverty on family dynamics. When practices focus exclusively on developing parenting skills, as several CAFAP professionals note, they tend to overlook the socioeconomic context and structural barriers affecting family well-being.

4. Macro-Structural Dimensions

i) Access to decent work

“Clara’s father got a job—I think it was only because of the prayers. Because she prayed the Our Father so he could find work.” (Child – FG2)

Unemployment, low wages and high cost-of-living pressures constitute structural factors of impoverishment. The rise in the minimum wage has been relevant but insufficient to offset inequalities. Family impoverishment is often linked to the lack of public services in health and education, labour market rigidity and the burden of caregiving, particularly on women.

Policies promoting inclusive employment and strengthening mental health, disability and psychosocial rehabilitation services are essential to prevent impoverishment and promote autonomy and active citizenship.

ii) Housing:

The housing crisis is one of the most pressing issues, directly affecting family and child well-being. Overcrowding, poor housing conditions and high rental costs were identified as critical risk factors. Children’s accounts reveal the emotional impact of inadequate housing: *“The house had dark walls (...) they ate mouldy bread.”*

Exclusion is also reinforced by stigma and unequal access to employment and services, particularly among communities such as the Roma community.

“They say I’m not useful for the company. I’ve heard this so many times. Even though I work hard (...) they don’t value it. They only see that I have to miss one day a week or almost every week. (...) They don’t see that I’m a single mother and have two children who are always in hospital. That’s one of the biggest difficulties I feel: managing being a mother and working.” (Interview 9)

iii) Social inclusion, equality, and combating stigma

Social exclusion goes beyond material deprivation, reflecting **structural inequalities and stigmatization dynamics**. Children reported persistent barriers in accessing opportunities, especially among marginalised groups. Families with children with disabilities face higher costs and reduced labour participation, exacerbated by the limited availability of universal and free public services—particularly in rural or low-density areas.

Recommendations

These recommendations can be organised into three fundamental dimensions, which articulate research, policies, and practices.

A. Understanding the Nature and Scope of Child Poverty

Child poverty remains invisible in many analyses, dominated by adult-centred approaches and monetary metrics, with a lack of harmonised concepts, adequate indicators, and integrated monitoring systems. In addition, there is a shortage of disaggregated, longitudinal data, and of data collected directly from children, limiting rigorous assessment of the impact of public policies.

Proposal for the Creation of a Permanent Working Group

It is recommended that **a permanent working group be established**, integrating representatives from public bodies, academia and civil society. Its work should focus on synchronous and diachronic indicators and on developing an integrated data system capable of evaluating and monitoring interministerial public policies, fostering a collaborative and sustained approach.

The initial challenge is to build consensus on the **indicators to be adopted**, ensuring an integrated, multidimensional and contextual vision capable of responding to national and global challenges and centred on children's rights.

It is equally essential that this **monitoring system** enables the assessment of emerging intervention needs and the development of evidence-based policies. This investment must be continuous, **ensuring national and**

international comparability of data. This proposal should be preceded by identifying currently available indicators and existing gaps, enabling deeper capture of child well-being and human rights dimensions.

Strengthening Research and Knowledge Production

The need to invest in applied and longitudinal research is reinforced. It is therefore recommended to establish a multi-year research funding line dedicated to understanding child poverty and well-being, forming the basis for the work of the permanent group and for public policy evaluations. Research priorities should include:

- **identifying indicators that contribute to an integrated multidimensional system covering material, immaterial, circumstantial and persistent dimensions**, already monitored among families and children across ministries (education, health and social protection);
- **addressing current gaps**, particularly in the collection of **longitudinal and process-oriented indicators**, enabling the monitoring of situations over time; articulating quantitative indicators with qualitative methodologies that foster the participation of children, families and professionals. Participatory methodologies, besides being empowering, may be more sensitive to emerging indicators and to understanding the processes of impoverishment and their impacts.

Additionally, **indicators produced should be available in national open-access repositories**, privileging the publication of disaggregated indicators by age, territory, gender, and socioeconomic profile, while

ensuring strict compliance with data protection standards.

High-quality, consistent indicators will allow **monitoring** the cost-effectiveness of public policies, **directing investments** to sectors with the greatest impact on reducing persistent poverty and promoting social mobility and intergenerational equity—especially among groups exposed to greater economic vulnerability.

“I don’t think there’s any mother who can handle everything alone. There always has to be support, even if just from a grandmother, a grandfather, a father, a crèche, a school. And that was my case. He didn’t have a father, but he had the crèche.” (Interview 4)

B. Integrated and Multisectoral Political Commitment to Combating Child Poverty

Despite the efforts of **the National Strategy for Combating Poverty**, significant limitations remain in Portugal’s approach to child poverty, marked by institutional fragmentation and the absence of an **integrated, interministerial strategy**. Responses still tend to prioritise remedial, short-term actions over early and structural prevention. Additional challenges include:

- Lack of coordination between policies and services, resulting in duplicated and unsustainable initiatives, exacerbated by discontinuity in social intervention projects;
- Absence of territorial coordination mechanisms and integrated practices;
- Limited technical capacity, shortages in human resources, and discontinuity in funding, undermining continuity, evaluation and evidence-based intervention;
- Limited participation of children and families in decisions affecting their well-being. It is essential to create spaces and traditions of participation, involving service users in identifying indicators of effectiveness.

These gaps highlight the need for a sustained political and technical commitment, operationalised through increased resources and conditions for continuous work, integrating universal, selective, and indicated prevention levels, and ensuring coherence and continuity in the public response to child poverty.

“We’re going to take another type of intervention here: increasing this family’s income by 20%. And we will see how their communication changes, how anxiety levels go down—because this is the truly structural dimension that families need.” (Professional 6 – FGD3).

i) Universal Measures

The effects of poverty cannot be dissociated from the social and economic inequalities that perpetuate it. It is essential to consolidate a stable and intersectoral policy framework that:

- Ensures continued increases in the national minimum wage, mitigating in-work poverty and strengthening employment as a pathway to social mobility;
- Ensures housing market regulation, given its direct influence on family well-being, parental stress and overcrowding;
- Ensures access to essential goods by reducing the cost of the food basket;
- Strengthens active labour market policies, including support for hiring people living in poverty or at risk of impoverishment;
- Reinforces territorial cohesion, ensuring equitable access to essential

education, health and housing services;

- Integrates the childhood perspective in all public policies, ensuring that economic and social decisions have measurable positive impacts on children's living conditions.

structures for coordination, diagnosis and integrated monitoring of at-risk families, ensuring they are adequately staffed and resourced.

ii) Selective Prevention Measures

Selective prevention should focus on contexts and groups at greater risk of impoverishment, promoting early and multidimensional interventions. Recommendations include:

- Identifying structural factors that exacerbate poverty risks or contribute to poverty persistence (the study identified: families with children with disabilities, mental illness or chronic physical illness; minority groups such as the Roma community; single-parent families; and those facing social isolation);
- Strengthening support for caregivers, including economic compensation mechanisms and work–care reconciliation measures;
- Expanding access to education and health services (particularly early childhood education) in rural and low-density areas, ensuring equal opportunities and preventing cumulative exclusion;
- Strengthening the role of Local Child Guarantee Hubs (NLGPI) as territorial

iii) Indicated Prevention Measures

Indicated prevention should focus on situations where poverty is already established or persistent, ensuring continuous and articulated intervention. Recommendations include:

- Expanding criteria used to identify risk of poverty, incorporating dimensions of persistent and intergenerational poverty;
- Promoting integrated and territorialised practices, strengthening coordination between education, health, social security, local authorities and civil society organisations;
- Ensuring sustainability, scalability and monitoring of actions, with systematic evaluation of medium- and long-term results and impacts;
- Building capacity among professionals and interdisciplinary teams to act based on evidence and with a child-centred approach;
- Ensuring effective participation of children and families in designing, implementing and evaluating policies and programmes.

Conclusions

"The choices in the end are political"

(Jonathan Bradshaw, 2002 [20]).

Combating child poverty requires a multisectoral and sustained political commitment, with structural, selective, and territorially coherent interventions. Collaborative governance, evidence-based and child-centred, is essential to achieving lasting

reductions in child poverty and strengthening social cohesion in Portugal.

Developing a deep understanding of the phenomenon, its specificities, and the profiles of children and families makes it possible to design integrated and evaluated practices capable of addressing both circumstantial situations and intergenerational cycles of

poverty, guaranteeing rights and promoting equal opportunities.

Making child poverty a “national priority” (ENLCP) requires a political commitment that

positions equality and social cohesion as central pillars in fulfilling human and child rights. This commitment has never been more important—as a safeguard of democracy and civilizational progress.

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