



An index to measure child poverty in European cities: City of Vienna case study*

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Background and introduction

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About 15.9 million children below the age of 16, or almost one out of five children, were at risk of poverty in the European Union in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021a). In most of the EU states children face a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion than the general population (Eurostat, 2022). In 2021, the European Member States committed to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty and material deprivation by five million until 2030 (European Commission, 2021). The risk of child poverty has fluctuated over the past years and increased in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Children growing up in poverty are impacted in many ways and often remain in poverty across the length of their life.

Keywords:
child poverty, material deprivation, cities, index

Child poverty in most EU cities is higher than the national average, urban poverty is caused by specific challenges and deprivations

Child poverty in most EU cities is higher than on the national level (Eurocities, 2020). Children and their families face specific urban challenges that increase the poverty risks, such as higher living and housing costs. In addition, urban areas are often segregated, and there are neighbourhoods with a concentration of families with low socio-economic status (low income, migrants, etc.). Children residing in deprived areas are often exposed to multiple risk factors. These problems require a place-based approach that specifically targets those areas and offers prevention, early intervention and systemic support to children and their families to improve the overall living situation of families (e.g. labour market integration, adequate income and housing).

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This policy brief aims to present an EU-SILC based index designed to capture multidimensional child poverty in European cities and discusses the results for Vienna.¹ Based on a primary questionnaire, it also presents opportunities and good practices implemented by the City of Vienna to enhance the support for children to fulfil their potential and to end the cycle of poverty. The policy brief was drafted based on the results of a comparative study commissioned by the city of Vienna on [Indicators for measuring child poverty and its combating in European cities](#).

Approach, methods, and data

Monetary child poverty and index of material deprivation and social exclusion

Poverty is not a directly observable phenomenon but is rather based on a discrete and normatively defined concept

Given data availability, the most common way of measuring poverty in a comparable way is the concept of relative income poverty. The at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate is calculated using equivalised disposable household income following the modified OECD-scale (1 for the household head, 0.5 for each household member aged 14+ and 0.3 for children under 14) (Hagenaars et al., 1994). The at-risk-of-poverty threshold is usually set at 60% of the national median of the equivalised disposable household income. If a household's equivalised disposable household income is below this line, the household and its members are to be considered at risk of poverty.

However, the risk of financial poverty is just one aspect of poverty. "Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and the amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average family that they are in effect excluded from the ordinary living patterns, customs, and activities" (Townsend, 1979, p.31). This definition emphasises all the key components of understanding the phenomenon of poverty. In addition, many families, although above the monetary poverty threshold, cannot afford basic goods and services or maintain an adequate standard of living (Stadt Wien, 2015). Therefore, we broadened our analysis by compiling an index of material deprivation and social exclusion of households with children.

¹ Urban-specific child poverty is difficult to measure. In the EU-SILC dataset cities can be identified by the NUTS-region (DB040) or the combination of the NUTS-region and the population density (DB100). However, due to confidentiality and data protection rules EU-SILC data provided by Eurostat includes only information on NUTS 1 level. On this level, only three cities (Vienna, Brussels, Helsinki) could be identified. With the support of national statistic institutes that provided city IDs or complete national EU-SILC datasets, we were able to analyse four additional cities, Tallinn (Statistics Estonia), Barcelona (Instituto Nacional de Estadística), Bucharest (National Institute of Statistics) and Milan (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica). For Vienna, we used national SILC data provided by Statistics Austria.



The child poverty index is constructed based on EU-2020 indicators and the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (UNDP/OPHI, 2020). The original methodology relates to the Alkire Foster methodology which considers both the spread of poverty (headcount) and its intensity (Alkire & Foster, 2007). The index is adapted from the information available in EU-SILC and shows a full distribution of multidimensional poverty among children, thus identifying problematic areas where further policy intervention is needed. The index is composed of several indicators that measure (or are proxies for) specific aspects of material deprivation and social exclusion. The indicators – not necessarily but in part specific to cities, e.g., domain housing and local environment quality – are distributed across six domains:²

The child poverty index for cities illustrates a full distribution of material and multidimensional poverty among children

Unmanageable debts and arrears	Measures the occurrence of arrears on mortgage or rental payment, utility bills and hire purchase instalments or other loans payment. Given the survey structure in SILC, each of the indicators is taken as a deprivation if the situation occurred twice or more during the last 12 months.
Financial capacity	Measures the economic situation by distinguishing three sub-domains: 1) general self-evaluation of the financial capacity, 2) the capacity to face unexpected financial expenses with own resources, and 3) the ability to make ends meet and the financial burden of the total housing costs.
Health	Covers the vitally important aspects of health status and access to necessary health services. The protein consumption is also taken into account. The accessibility of health care in terms of medical treatment and dental care is also considered.
Social interaction and personal relationships	Evaluates the magnitude of the deprivation of social contacts. Included indicators measure the abilities to afford a get-together with friends and family once a month and to spend at least one-week holidays per year outside of the usual place of residence plus the ability to invite friends and have a celebration on special occasions.
Housing and local environment quality	Measures the minimal dwelling quality, the overcrowding, and the local environment quality, presented in terms of noise, pollution, and crime/violence/vandalism problems.
Education and care	Is one of the most important areas to break the vicious circle of poverty reproduction in society. Educational items (goods and services necessary for the education) are not presented in EU-SILC. Availability of books, leisure activities, indoor and outdoor equipment, capacity to afford school events and the availability of an appropriate place for homework can be estimated on the basis of secondary variables.

² Further information on the full list of indicators can be obtained from authors upon request.



The domain value ranges from 0 to 1, reflecting what percentage of constraints (from all possible constraints) a given household is experiencing. The higher the value of the domain, the stronger the deprivation. For illustrative purposes, the study considers a family to be deprived if a domain's calculated value exceeds a certain threshold and distinguishes between the thresholds 0, $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$. The share of families whose index value exceeds a given threshold is calculated. An index value of 0 means that no problems were reported. If the domain value exceeds the threshold 0, a family is confronted with some sort of deprivation. Families with a value higher than $\frac{1}{3}$ we call *rather severely deprived* while those with a value higher than $\frac{1}{2}$ are *severely deprived*. A fully deprived household would have the value 1.

Following the EU-SILC practice, children are understood as individuals under the age of 16. Ideally, the index would be based on individual child data, but due to the structure of the survey that does not envisage separate questions for children, household-based indicators and parents' individual questionnaires are used as a substitute. The results ought to be interpreted with caution since they rely on a rather small sample size representing families in Vienna. Additionally, sample weights available in EU-SILC might not capture Viennese families to the best possible extent.

Poverty combating measures

City level child poverty combating measures within five pivotal domains were collected via a questionnaire distributed to city authorities

To collect existing poverty combating measures on the city level, primary data on relevant policies was collected. For that purpose, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to city authorities. The questionnaire provides a systematic approach to understand the availability and effectiveness of child poverty-related policies and programmes in a city. It includes direct and indirect measures within five pivotal domains important from a child poverty combating perspective (see for example Bäckér, 2019; Deutsche Bundesregierung, 2017; Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 2016; Neu/Stichnoth, 2020):

- Economic status, work intensity;
- Income and financial capacity;
- Education and care;
- Health;
- Housing and infrastructure.³

³ While the six domains for the index were defined according to available items in the EU-SILC data, the pivotal domains for combating poverty were chosen based on the literature.

The questionnaire asked for the evaluation of respective policy measures on the national, regional and city-level based on a traffic-light system,⁴ related comments and the description of good practices. The information from the questionnaire was complemented with findings from the Fourth City Survey on childcare and support for children conducted by Eurocities in 2020.

In addition, measurements and indicators related to the outcomes of child poverty combating policies and programmes were taken into account on the basis of objective and subjective perception indicators. However, apart from the objective indicator AROP before and after transfers (EU-SILC) as well as the subjective indicator whether for young families the respective city is a good place to live (Urban Audit) the vast majority of available indicators (e.g., Urban Audit, OECD tax benefit data portal) does not directly relate to families with children or does not relate to the city level.

Results for Vienna

Monetary child poverty

Children are more likely to be at risk of poverty than adults

AROP rates for children and families (i.e. households with children)⁵ are considerably higher than that for the total population. This means that children are more likely to be at risk of poverty than adults. This can be explained by the fact that households with children are on average larger and parents' (in most cases mothers') labour market participation is often limited.

AROP rates in Vienna are clearly higher than national AROP rates both for the total population and for children and families with children. This is also no surprise as for several reasons, poorer people tend to be more concentrated in larger cities, and urban poverty is caused by specific challenges and deprivations (Table 1).

⁴ Evaluation key: Green light: existing policies are suitable for achieving the goal of preventing and combating child poverty in the respective policy field. Yellow light: existing policies are partly suitable to achieve the goal of preventing and combating child poverty in the respective policy field. Red light: existing policies are rather ineffective or insufficient to prevent and combat child poverty in the respective policy field. Black: there are no policies in the respective policy field on the respective regional level.

⁵ In the case of children an individual perspective is taken (share of children living in poverty), whereas in the case of families a household perspective is taken (share of families living in poverty).

Vienna city level of child at-risk-of-poverty rate is higher than the same indicator at national level

Table 1: At-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rates, based on national median income, 2017

Analysis-Level	AROP		
	Total population	Children	Families
Austria	14.4%	21.7%	19.5%
Vienna	21.9%	36.7%	32.0%

Data source: EU-SILC data 2018, own calculation

Families with low work intensity⁶ are most exposed to be at risk of poverty in Vienna. On the other hand, being a single parent, a health limitation, a migration background, and the number of children below three years in the household does not significantly increase the likelihood of being at risk of poverty.

Child poverty index

To calculate the child poverty index for Vienna we used national SILC data provided by Statistics Austria. Compared to SILC data provided by Eurostat, this allowed for a more detailed calculation of the index as more indicators could be considered in the calculation. More than 50% of the families are at least somewhat deprived in the domains **housing and local environment quality** and **financial capacity**, around 30% in the domains **education and care** and **social interaction and personal relationships**, and less than 10% in the domains **unmanageable debts and arrears** and **health**. Severe deprivation is mostly to be found in the domains **social interaction and personal relationships** and **education and care** (3% each) and **financial capacity** (2%).

The domain of **unmanageable debts and arrears** is one of the least pronounced domains. About 10% of households with children have unmanageable debts and arrears in at least one area. Only 1% each is either rather severely deprived or severely deprived. Most of the expressed problems are related to rent payments which occur in 9% of families.

On the contrary, issues regarding the **financial capacity** are highly present among families in Vienna. 52% of families are confronted with some sort of deprivation, 10% experience rather severe deprivation and 2% of families experience severe deprivation. Indicators that are reported to be associated with the most difficulties are those categorised as self-evaluation: ability to cover unexpected expenses (44%), ability to spend a small amount of money on themselves (37%), ability to make ends meet and financial burden of total housing costs (22% each).

⁶ SILC-variable work intensity (wi): 1 household without employment participation (w=0), 2 household with low work intensity (0<w<=0,2), 3 household with higher or full employment participation (w>0,2).



Health, again, is a domain with less deprivation. About 8% of families reported some related problems, while 6% are rather severely deprived. The widest spread problem is the capacity to afford a meal with meat, fish, or a vegetarian alternative every second day which is the case for 6% of families. Unaffordability of dental care (3%) is a larger problem than unaffordability of medical care (1%).

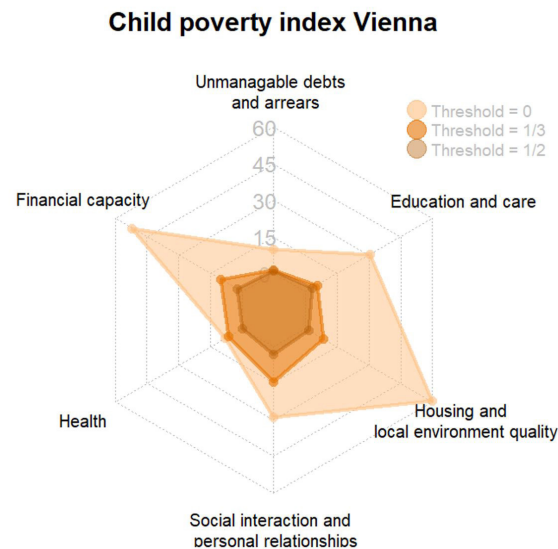
About 29% of households with children registered at least some deprivation in the domain **social interaction and personal relationship** (15% feature a domain value of more than $\frac{1}{3}$, and 3% are in severe deprivation). 21% of families cannot afford a week of vacation away from home at least once a year. In 14% of family households, members feel being squarely or rather excluded from society. 12% of families cannot afford get-togethers with friends and family and about 11% report that it is not affordable to invite friends or relatives at home for dinner once a month. In 4% of households, children state that they cannot invite friends due to financial constraints.

Deprivations in Vienna are most widespread related to the housing and local environment quality as well as financial capacity

In the domain of **housing and local environment quality** 60% of households state one or more problems, but the depth of related deprivation is rather low: 9% indicate to be rather severely deprived while 1% is severely deprived. Major problems affecting between 11% and 18% of families are overcrowding, pollution, noise and crime in the neighbourhood, and darkness in the dwelling, which can be defined as typical city-related, as well as a leaking roof or rot in window frames and replacement of worn-out furniture.

Within the **education and care** domain in total, 31% of households experience some constraints, with 6% experiencing rather severe and 3% severe deprivation. It is the only domain, where the maximum value of 1 is reached: 1% of the Viennese households are fully deprived. In other words, for those households there is not a single item in terms of education and care where they do not state deprivation. As already mentioned above, educational items (goods and services necessary for the education) are not presented in EU-SILC. Available items rather point to social exclusion related to extracurricular activities, leisure equipment and participation in school events. Amongst the common problems faced by families with children in this domain is the inability of children and parents to participate in leisure activities regularly (24%, while children reported the same in only 9% of households), unaffordability of outdoor sports and leisure equipment for children (4%) and to participate in extra curricula school activities and excursions (3%).

Figure 1: Child poverty index for Vienna (national SILC), 2017



Threshold 0 = no deprivation; threshold 1/3 = rather severely deprived; threshold 1/2: severely deprived

Data source: EU-SILC 2018, own calculation

Families with health restrictions and single parents are deprived in the majority of domains

Families with a low work intensity tend to be deprived regarding their financial capacity and regarding health. Single parent families and those with health limitations face more deprivation in the domains financial capacity, health, and social interaction. With the exception of health, this is also the case for families with a migration background. Families with health limitations are also likely to be deprived in the domain of housing.

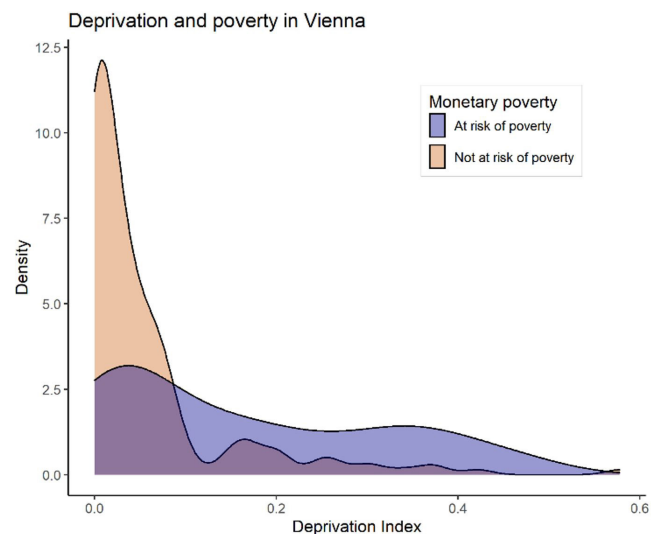
Comparing monetary poverty to material deprivation

Density plots assess to which extent monetary poverty and material deprivation overlap.

The x-axis of the density plots below shows the domain value of the overall index combining all six subindices discussed above. The y-axis shows the density i.e., how often a value is found in the population. The blue curve represents families that are not at risk of poverty, while the yellow curve captures families at risk of poverty. If both indicators, the AROP-rate and the deprivation index, would measure the same aspects of poverty, the curves would not overlap. The plots show that there are families that are not at-risk-of-poverty but face high levels of deprivations and vice versa, that there are income-poor families that are not deprived.

In Vienna material deprivation and monetary poverty are moderately correlated (0.39). The vast majority of non-AROP families ranges low on the deprivation index and only a small share is affected by higher levels of deprivation. On the other hand, when assessing families at risk of poverty we see that they are represented at different levels of deprivation from (almost) 0 deprivation to rather severe and severe deprivation. In other words those families are far widely dispersed on how much material deprivation they face.

Figure 2: Spread of material deprivation (x-axis) of non-AROP- and AROP-families, Vienna 2017



Data source: EU-SILC 2018, own calculation

Measures to prevent and combat child poverty

Most cities apply an integrated approach addressing the entire family and/or a territorial or place-based approach to address the specific needs of children in deprived neighbourhoods

In general, designing measures to prevent and reduce child poverty is challenging due to the complexity of the phenomenon as well as the difficult coordination between national and city level measures and the coordination of a large variety of stakeholders and service providers (Eurocities, 2020). Poverty reduction measures specific for cities focus on the overall improvement of the family situation as well as on creating individual opportunities for the child. Most cities apply an integrated approach addressing the entire family and/or a territorial or place-based approach to address the specific needs of children in deprived neighbourhoods and combine national and city funds. Outreach field work by local social services is key to identifying children and families at risk and to referring them to appropriate support systems in an urban setup. Low-threshold contact points and schools as mediator for local social inclusion programmes represent further important features (Eurocities, 2020; Stadt Mönchengladbach, 2018).

The City of Vienna has an array of measures and initiatives designed to prevent and combat child poverty, initiated at national or city level.

Given that employment of parents is one of the most important strategies to combat child poverty, reconciliation of family and work life is at the centre of city policies in the area of **economic status and work intensity**: Kindergartens are provided with flexible hours to match the parent's work schedules (Eurocities, 2020). Support is almost exclusively under the Cities' competence and of high quality and quantity. However, certain bureaucratic hurdles make it difficult for families in need to make use of corresponding tools and support. In addition, the City of Vienna provides free counselling and support before and after parental leave, workshops, peer-group-meetings, information, and financial support for professional training, especially for young parents.

The city of Vienna has an array of different measures to prevent and combat poverty, including measures to reconcile work and family life, financial support, improving access to education and affordable housing

Another measure, however, targeting youth until 18 years, is the national *Training Guarantee programme* that provides a continuous offer for young people entering the labour market. Apprenticeships, further qualification trainings or counselling are granted in case of need. Furthermore, in a unique cooperation providing a one-stop-shop for the clients, the *Viennese Department for Social Welfare* and the (national) *Public Employment Service* offer the U25 Vienna Youth Support Service in one and the same location. Target group are recipients of Minimum Income Benefit aged 15 to 24 years (approximately 10,000 people). Strategic goals are to empower them, enhance the quality of service and support structures, reduce drop-out-rates and the time-period in which support is needed.

In the area of **income and financial capacity** the City of Vienna provides the highest standard rate for children in the country within the Minimum Income Benefit scheme. Single parents are entitled to increased benefits. The city also grants subsidies to low-income households in exceptional circumstances (Eurocities, 2020). There is also a relatively high level of national family and child benefits. However, deprivation related to the financial capacity is still relatively common among families in Vienna.

In the area of **education and care**, the attendance of municipal and private elementary educational institutions is exempted from contributions or significantly reduced for all children until the beginning of compulsory schooling (six years), as the City of Vienna subsidises parental contributions. Access to schools in Austria is free of charge.

To improve access to education, the City of Vienna offers a variety of benefits (subsidised or free school meals, free tuition, high quality of accessible public

Extracurricular activities, sport and leisure equipments as well as participation in school events seem to be very important measures which might need intensification

schools, reduced or free schoolbooks, free transportation to and from school, etc.) for school children, especially for those from families in need.

Also, the city provides a wide range of free *after school and holiday programmes* for children like weekly camps, youth centres, childcare and street work in public places and parks, well-equipped playgrounds, free access to public swimming pools, etc. Persons with low income have access to the *Mobilpass* which provides free (or reduced) access to libraries, public swimming baths, etc. Given related deprivation in extracurricular activities, sport and leisure equipments and participation in school events, these seem to be very important measures which still might need intensification.

To improve access to **healthcare**, the *Mother and Child Health* national programme was designed to secure the health of mother and child starting during pregnancy and continuing until pre-school age (followed by examinations by school medics).

In the area of **housing and infrastructure** Vienna offers well balanced *housing policies for its inhabitants*. Families and persons with income below a certain level have access to municipal, cooperative, and subsidised private housing. In addition, there are programmes supporting vulnerable groups like single parents or young people under the age of 30. Vienna also provides support for families with children in case of upcoming eviction (Eurocities, 2020). All those measures make the housing problem less virulent compared to other cities.

Finally, persons with low income have access to the already mentioned Viennese *Mobilpass* which also provides free (or reduced) access to public transport.

Impact of measures

Unfortunately, the impact of policy measures on material deprivation of families with children is hardly measurable. Thus, we can only provide narrow “tests” of their impact on AROP-rates and an overall subjective indicator whether the city is a good place to live for young families with children.

The outcomes of (essentially national) monetary child poverty combating policies can be estimated by comparing AROP-rates before and after social transfers. Although, the drop in AROP-rates is most pronounced for the total population related to the tremendous impact of old-age pensions, AROP-rates for both children and families also highly drop due to social transfers. Thus, it can be assumed that they represent a significant poverty relief for families in Vienna.

Table 2: At-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rates before and after social transfers, based on national median income, 2017

		AROP		
Analysis-Level	Transfers	Total population	Children	Families
Austria	Before	43.4%	43.1%	38.2%
Austria	After	14.4%	21.7%	19.5%
Vienna	Before	46.2%	52.8%	49.3%
Vienna	After	21.9%	36.7%	32.0%

Data source: EU-SILC data 2018, own calculation

Considerably lower poverty rates after social transfers

As a general measurement of the impact of support measures for families and the available infrastructure for families, the subjective perception of inhabitants whether the city is a good place to live for young families with children is available as survey item within Eurostat's Urban Audit (2021b). For Vienna, 79% of respondents approve this question.

Conclusions

Cities represent an important stakeholder in combating child poverty and providing equal opportunities for children. To do so, they employ comprehensive strategies and measures. Cities usually allocate own budgets and resources for the poverty prevention and poverty reduction measures and complement available policies on the state or regional level. They often combine a universal approach of family support with means-tested measures to comply with the multiple demands of vulnerable families.

Cities also combine child-centred measures with family-centred measures, at the same time place-based approaches are common, with a focus on specific disadvantaged urban areas. However, cities often lack the necessary competences to encompass the multitude of issues linked with child poverty. They struggle with setting and supporting expanded collaborations between sectors and providers to achieve an integrated approach.

As in many other cities, in Vienna child poverty is higher than the national average, and children are more exposed to poverty than the total population. The highest risk is faced by children from families with low work intensity. Still it can be assumed that social transfers represent a significant poverty relief for families in Vienna. AROP-rates for both children and families highly drop due to monetary benefits.

When we look at child poverty from a multidimensional perspective, we see that deprivations are mostly pronounced in the housing and local environment quality as well as in the financial capacity domains. At the same time, it is important to note that the intensity of these risks is rather low in Vienna. Material deprivation and monetary poverty are moderately correlated.

The City of Vienna has an array of measures and initiatives designed to prevent and combat child poverty, initiated at the national or city level. To name exemplary promising practices, it offers free counselling and support before and after parental leave; workshops, peer-group-meetings, information, and financial support for professional training, especially for young parents; it provides the highest standard rate for children in the country within the Minimum Income Benefit scheme; the attendance of municipal and private elementary educational institutions is exempted from contributions or significantly reduced for all children until the beginning of compulsory schooling; and families and persons with an income below a certain level have access to municipal, cooperative, and subsidised private housing.

In general, there are no individual policies or measures that would have an immediate and significant impact on reducing child poverty in the cities, but the entity and interplay of policies and measures matter. Some of these measures might diminish the probability to fall into poverty, others focus on creating opportunities and work as long-term strategies to fight chronic and intergenerational poverty. At the same time, city level innovative and comprehensive practices and measures have been identified such as an integrated approach targeting the entire family or place-based approaches to address the specific needs of children and families in deprived neighbourhoods.

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