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The Effects of the COVID-19 crisis on child poverty and material deprivation in Austria*

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Introduction

This policy brief summarises the key findings of the study on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on child poverty and material deprivation in Austria (Fuchs et al., 2024).[1] Children growing up in poverty face numerous disadvantages related to their material, social, cultural and health situations (Laubstein et al., 2016; Neu & Stichnoth, 2020), which can affect their entire life trajectories (ISS, 2023). There are significant long-term human and economic costs associated with childhood poverty and disadvantage (Bonnet et al., 2022), posing serious challenges not only for affected individuals but also for society as a whole (Laubstein et al., 2016).

We focus on the income situation and the associated risks of (monetary) poverty and deprivation among children. However, child poverty is a complex phenomenon that requires policy action both for prevention and early intervention in childhood, as well as for mitigating its consequences throughout the life course. A key challenge concerns developing integrated approaches using an effective mix of public cash and in-kind support (Eurocities, 2020; Neu & Stichnoth, 2020).

As in other countries, the COVID-19 crisis caused a tremendous labour market shock in Austria (Bock-Schappelwein et al., 2021; Eurostat Database, 2024). The government responded with several measures for employees (short-time work), self-employed (hardship funds), unemployed (one-off payments, increase of benefit level) and families with children (mainly one-off payments), as well as with overall measures within the income tax system (Budgetdienst, 2023).

1 Funded by the Jubiläumsfonds of the Austrian National Bank (project number 18785). In addition to this policy brief, we published the main results of the project in a final report and as a EUROMOD Working Paper at the Centre for Microsimulation and Policy Analysis of the University of Essex, which allows visibility for a broad network of experts including researchers, policymakers and the European Commission. Further publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals are intended.

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Households with children were disproportionately affected by the crisis, given that persons in those households were more likely to be employed before the crisis and, thus, at a higher risk of suffering from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, both automatic stabilisers (e.g., unemployment benefits, social assistance, income tax) and discretionary COVID-19 policy measures helped mitigate, if not completely offset, the tremendous market income losses. Results suggest that particularly low-income groups, such as single parents, were relatively well-protected. This was the case for Austria (see, for example, Budgetdienst 2023; Christl et al., 2022; Gasior et al., 2023) and other European countries (see, for example, Figari & Fiorio, 2020; Gasior et al., 2023; Sanchez et al., 2021).

We contribute to the growing body of empirical evidence on child poverty during the COVID-19 crisis (2020 and 2021) in Austria by presenting and analysing four aspects. First, by employing a secondary analysis of EU-SILC data, we focus on trends in monetary poverty, material deprivation, and related socio-demographic characteristics of affected children. In addition, we assess the effectiveness of the Austrian tax-benefit system in preventing an increase in child poverty and the related hypothetical performance of additional policy measures based on tax-benefit microsimulation using EUROMOD (see Sutherland & Figari, 2013).[2] The following sections elaborate on these aspects.

Trends in monetary poverty and material deprivation amongst children during the COVID-19 crisis

To analyse child poverty trends during the COVID-19 crisis, we focus on both monetary poverty (the at-risk-of-poverty rate – AROP) and material deprivation (severe material and social deprivation indicator; see Box 1 below for definitions).

2 The results are based on EUROMOD model I5.0+. Since 2021, EUROMOD has been maintained, developed and managed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission – previously by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) – in collaboration with Eurostat and national teams from the EU countries. As input data we make use of microdata from the EU Statistics on Incomes and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) made available by Eurostat and Statistics Austria. The results and their interpretation are the authors' responsibility.

Box 1: Poverty and deprivation indicators used

The **at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate** shows the percentage of the population living in households with a weighted (equivalized) disposable household income below 60% of the national median.

The new **severe material and social deprivation** indicator (changed in 2021 revising the list of items) measures the percentage of the population that cannot afford at least 7 out of 13 deprivation items.*

Both are currently key indicators to monitor poverty and social exclusion in the EU.

* List of items at household level: 1 Capacity to face unexpected expenses; 2 Capacity to afford paying for one week annual holiday away from home; 3 Capacity to being confronted with payment arrears; 4 Capacity to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day; 5 Ability to keep home adequately warm; 6 Have access to a car/van for personal use; 7 Replacing worn-out furniture. List of items at individual level: 8 Having internet connection; 9 Replacing worn-out clothes by some new ones; 10 Having two pairs of properly fitting shoes; 11 Spending a small personal amount of money each week; 12 Having regular leisure activities; 13 Getting together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month (Eurostat, 2023).

AROP rate

EU-SILC descriptive: at-risk-of-poverty and material deprivation of children increased, especially in 2020.

At almost 20%, the proportion of children (<18) at risk of poverty in 2020 was 1.4 percentage points higher than before the crisis in 2019 and showed only a small decrease in 2021. This increase among children in 2020 was considerably larger than that among the total population, indicating that children were disproportionately more affected in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 1).

Table 1: AROP rate of children and the total population; 2019, 2020, 2021 (%)

	2019	2020	2021	percentage point change 2019-2020	percentage point change 2019-2021
children (<18)	18.4	19.9	19.2	1.4	0.8
Total population	14.0	14.7	14.8	0.7	0.8
Difference, children relative to total	4.5	5.2	4.4	0.7[a]	0.0[a]

Notes: [a] Change in the percentage point difference between children and the total population. Years refer to the income year and not the survey year. Values are rounded to one decimal place. Source: Own calculations based on EU-SILC.

AROP rates by household type reveal that households with children faced an increased poverty risk between 2019 and 2020/21 (from around 15% to 17%) and

were more severely affected compared to households without children (2019-2021: stable around 13%), a finding also confirmed by multivariate analysis accounting for confounding variables.

Yet, families with children were not equally affected. Single-parent households had the highest relative poverty rate among families with children already in the year before COVID-19 (around 32% in 2019) and saw further increases during the pandemic (around 35% in 2020, around 36% in 2021). Similarly, couple households with three or more children faced a very high poverty risk in 2019 (around 31%) and were the most likely, after single-parent households, to experience poverty during the pandemic – albeit at a slightly lower level in 2020/21.

Material deprivation

Turning to severe material and social deprivation, during the COVID-19 crisis, the percentage of children living in such households rose from 4.4% in 2019 to 5.5% in 2020 before falling below the pre-pandemic level in 2021.[3] The increases observed in 2020 were more pronounced among children than among the general population (see Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of children and total population affected by severe material and social deprivation; 2019, 2020, 2021 (%)

	2019	2020	2021	percentage point change 2019-2020	2019-2021
children (<18)	4.4	5.5	2.7	1.1	-1.7
Total population	2.7	3.0	1.8	0.3	-0.9
Difference, children relative to total	1.7	2.5	0.9	0.8[a]	-0.8[a]

Notes: [a] Change in the percentage point difference between children and the total population. Years refers to the survey year. Values are rounded to one decimal place. Source: Own calculations based on EU-SILC.

Households with children experienced increased economic strain during the crisis-period, particularly struggling with unexpected financial expenses. In addition, slightly more families reported difficulties with payment arrears (mortgage or rent and utility bills) and replacing worn-out furniture compared to the year before the pandemic.

3 The latter finding is surprising. Given that items related to material deprivation are based on subjective assessments, a potential explanation could be that the scores for 2021 (compared to 2019) are somewhat skewed downwards due to the perceived improvement in the situation compared to 2020.

Socio-demographic characteristics of affected children

A myriad of factors influence child poverty and material deprivation. EU-SILC data facilitates an analysis of the relationship between child poverty and household characteristics such as household type, number and age of children, work intensity of the household, education level, or migration background. Hence, we can also identify "drivers" of poverty and material deprivation. Moreover, from both an academic and a policymaking perspective, it is essential to understand whether the groups of children that have the (highest) risk of living in poverty or being materially deprived remained the same during the pandemic or whether this unprecedented situation created new groups of particularly vulnerable children. For example, Eurostat (2022) concludes that self-employed people in the EU were most affected by the pandemic, while more generally, the lower middle class (Heitzmann & Staudinger, 2023) were disproportionately hit by the lockdown and its consequences.

EU-SILC regressions: The effects intensified for traditionally vulnerable children: children from single-parent families and large families (AROP), those living in households with unemployed individuals (deprivation), children from non-EU migrant backgrounds and in households renting from the private market (both AROP and deprivation).

Regression analyses focusing on households with children reveal that single parenthood and a higher number of children in the household were strongly associated with an increased poverty risk, with these effects intensifying during the crisis years. While low work intensity and primary education levels remained the strongest predictors of relative poverty among households with children, their influence somewhat decreased during the COVID-19 crisis. Self-employment was significantly associated with households with children being at risk of poverty in 2019. However, this association also appears to have somewhat weakened during the pandemic.[4] Other consistently significant factors related to poverty risk were non-Austrian-born family members and renting housing at private market prices – with the latter showing a notable increase in 2021.

Severe material and social deprivation patterns largely mirror the findings for AROP. Still, unemployment – rather than low work intensity and low education – emerged as the key contributor during the crisis years 2020 and 2021. The results also show that families with non-EU immigrant members faced heightened deprivation during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, households renting on the private market were significantly more likely to experience deprivation in 2021, a pattern that may also reflect the early effects of the global energy and inflation crisis. Contrary to at-risk-of-poverty rates, there was no significant relationship related to single-parent status, number of children or self-employment status.

4 A potential explanation might be that specially introduced crisis-related programmes like the hardship-fund for self-employed were relatively successful.

Effectiveness of the Austrian tax-benefit system in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on child poverty

To assess the effectiveness of the Austrian tax-benefit system (i.e., automatic stabilisers and discretionary crisis-related policy measures) in counteracting the decline in disposable family incomes and the increase in child poverty caused by pandemic-related labour market shocks, we apply a decomposition analysis following Bargain & Callan (2010), Paulus & Tasseva (2020) and Raitano et al. (2021). This analysis allows us to decompose changes in the income of families with children and child poverty between 2019 (before the crisis) and 2020 and 2021 into four effect sources (see Box 2).

Box 2: Decomposed effects

The **gross market income/population effect** relates to changes in income and poverty due to changes in market income – (self-)employment, capital income, private pensions, etc. – as well as changes in the composition of the population (demographic changes, variation in the survey samples used for different periods, etc.). It estimates the outcomes of the COVID-19 labour market shock on disposable incomes and poverty rates.

The **policy effect** measures the contribution of discretionary crisis-related policy changes by the Austrian government. Specifically, it indicates the impact of all taxes and benefits introduced in 2020 and 2021, as well as changes to policy parameters and benefit levels that deviate from the development in CPI.

The **automatic stabiliser effect** represents the contribution of changes in benefit eligibility, benefit amounts or effective tax rates due to changes in market incomes. It captures, for example, becoming eligible for a means-tested benefit or paying less taxes due to a decline in market income.

The **nominal effect** is a scaling effect and reflects the change in price levels between the observation periods. It interprets the other effects in real terms.

The results indicate that the Austrian tax-benefit system partially mitigated the COVID-19 labour market income shock for families with children. From 2019 to 2020, a 4.6% drop in market incomes was transformed into a 2.0% rise in disposable incomes. This was achieved through an almost equal contribution by discretionary policies (+3.4%) and automatic stabilisers (+3.2%). As a matter of fact, the latter were most impactful for households with the largest market income declines. Furthermore, the system reduced the potential 2.5 percentage point

rise in monetary child poverty caused by the labour market shock to only 0.2 percentage points.

EUROMOD: COVID-19-induced policies and automatic stabilisers were partly effective in preventing an increase in child poverty

Comparing 2019 with 2021, households with children faced a relatively modest decline in average market incomes (-0.6%), which was fully offset by the tax-benefit system on average. Discretionary policy measures played the most significant role in this outcome. However, the tax-benefit system was less effective in curbing an increase in child poverty. A potential 2.0 percentage point rise in the child AROP rate due to market income declines was only slightly mitigated after policy interventions (1.8 percentage points; see Table 3).

Table 3: Changes in the income of households with children and the child AROP rate; 2019 vs. 2020, 2019 vs. 2021

	2019 vs. 2020	2019 vs. 2021
Equivalised market income	-4.6%	-0.6%
Equivalised disposable income	2.0%	0.0%
Child AROP-rate based on market income	2.5pp	2.0pp
Child AROP-rate based on disposable income	0.2pp	1.8pp

Note: Changes in disposable income are calculated as changes in market income plus income changes due to discretionary policies and automatic stabilisers. Source: Own calculations based on EUROMOD outputs

A detailed analysis revealed that the limited effectiveness in 2021 was linked to insufficient compensation for market income losses in the second income decile, a key group related to the AROP rate: automatic stabilisers were less impactful in this segment, and the role of child-specific benefits diminished by 2021. The lack of inflation adjustment eroded their value over time, and compared to 2020, one-off child-related payments were reduced.[5] Still, these measures remained essential in supporting low-income families with children.

5 The results on the development of market and disposable incomes during the crisis years are relatively similar to those by Budgetdienst (2023) and Gasior et al. (2023), also employing the model EUROMOD, according to which automatic stabilisers and discretionary crisis-support measures have more than compensated market income losses for (families with) children, particularly in 2020. However, results on poverty rates based on tax/benefit-microsimulation in Table 3 somewhat differ from those based on secondary analysis of EU-SILC-data in Table 1, where a respective increase for children took place in 2020 rather than in 2021. Differences could be due to deviating poverty lines according to original EU-SILC data vs. according to simulated policies in EUROMOD. As a consequence, disposable incomes of "vulnerable households" could be slightly above or below the respective poverty lines, thus influencing specific results on poverty rates.

Additional hypothetical policy measures to mitigate child poverty during the COVID-19 crisis

To test how additional policy measures might have (further) mitigated child poverty over the COVID-19 crisis, four policy reforms were simulated using EUROMOD. The simulated reforms stem either from policy proposals that have been part of the Austrian policy discourse but remain hypothetical, or from measures implemented in Austria only after the COVID-19 pandemic (see Box 3 below, and for more details Fuchs et al., 2024).

Box 3: Hypothetical policy measures

Policy reform 1: increased replacement rate for unemployment benefit (70% instead of 55-60%) and proportionally for unemployment assistance, incl. an increase in family supplements (€2 instead of €0.97 daily).

Policy reform 2: monthly transfer of €60 for every child aged below 18 in low-income households (as introduced in July 2023).

Policy reform 3: higher amounts (incl. negative tax) within the family bonus tax credit (as effected in 2022).

Policy reform 4: increase in the universal family allowance (by 117%, incl. age supplements).

The starting point of the analysis is the effective increase in child AROP rates based on disposable income in the crisis years compared to 2019, i.e. 0.2 percentage points in 2020 and 1.8 percentage points in 2021 (see Table 3). Of the four simulated policies, the family allowance reform (3 to 5 percentage points additive reduction) and the transfer for children in low-income households (more than 1 percentage point additive reduction) would have had the most substantial potential to reduce child poverty during the COVID-19 crisis further. The other two reforms would have had a more limited impact, showing only modest additive poverty reduction for children: higher unemployment benefits (0.3 to 0.5 percentage points additive reduction) would have supported low-income households, but not specifically those with children. The family tax credit reform (1 percentage point additive reduction in 2021) would have benefited employed families in the middle- and higher-income deciles more but would have still been less targeted at low-income families.

EUROMOD: of the additional reforms, transfer to children in low-income families most cost-effective

In terms of budgetary costs, the means-tested transfer to children would have been by far the most cost-effective additional measure for addressing child

poverty. Universal benefits like the family allowance would have provided broad support, but at a much less favourable cost-benefit ratio (costs per percentage point of poverty reduction; see Table 4).

Table 4: Hypothetical reforms: additive effect on the child AROP rate and budgetary costs[6]

	2020		2021	
	Change AROP-rate (from +0.2pp vs. 2019)	Costs per pp reduced AROP rate (in total) in Mio. €	Change AROP-rate (from +1.8pp vs. 2019)	Costs per pp reduced AROP rate (in total) in Mio. €
R1: Unemployment benefits	-0.5 pp (to -0.3pp)	2,074 (1,037)	-0.3 pp (to +1.5pp)	2,727 (818)
R2: Transfer low-income children	-1.2 pp (to -1.0pp)	240 (288)	-1.1 pp (to +0.7pp)	250 (275)
R3: Family tax credit	+0.1 pp (to +0.3pp)	- (635)	-1.0 pp (to +0.8pp)	614 (614)
R4: Family allowance	-3.1 pp (to -2.9pp)	1,148 (3,559)	-5.1 pp (to -3.3pp)	764 (3,898)

Notes: The starting point is the increase in child AROP rates compared to 2019 based on disposable income in Table 3. Then, the additive effects of the hypothetical policies are added. When comparing the budgetary costs, it must be kept in mind that R2 only affects children below 18 years, while R3 and R4 also affect children above 17 years. R1 is generally unspecific when it comes to (the age of) children. Source: Own calculations based on EUROMOD outputs.

Recommendations for research and data provision as well as for policymaking

Based on the results and findings presented above, the following recommendations can be derived for further research and data provision as well as for policymaking, particularly in times of crisis:

- Different reference years in the EU-SILC-data represent a problem in times of crisis (COVID-19, inflation, etc.): Related to the COVID-19-crisis, for example, SILC 2020 data include incomes for 2019 (pre-crisis), but deprivation items and socio-demographic characteristics like family type or overall employment status for 2020. Thus, items related to deprivation also represent more timely available indicators in times of crisis compared to AROP rates. Although it

6 When comparing the budgetary costs, it has to be kept in mind that R2 (transfer for children in low-income households) only affects children below 18 years, while R3 (family tax credit reform) and R4 (family allowance reform) also affect children above 17 years. R1 (reform of unemployment benefits) is anyway unspecific related to the age of children.

would be helpful to harmonise reference periods between incomes and other items in the survey, this would further increase the time lag of the EU-SILC data.

- Compared to the severe material and social deprivation indicator (based on the standard Eurostat indicators) used in this policy brief, the child-specific material deprivation indicator by Eurostat (Guio et al., 2018) includes items related to children, providing an extra dimension to the analysis of their material deprivation. This is especially important because the indicator addresses aspects such as social interactions and leisure activities outside of the home, which children were likely denied due to the physical restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the first year of 2020. In addition, identical items can be compared between adults and children (e.g., are resources in the event of shortages rather used for children?). However, given the lack of respective EU-SILC data on the child-specific material deprivation indicator for the years 2015 to 2020, we have no information on pandemic-specific developments and can compare the situation in 2021 only with that in 2014. Since 2021, respective data has been collected at least as part of a three-year rotational module. However, this shorter interval is still too long for tracking specific developments during short-time crises like COVID-19.
- Guio et al. (2018) recommended that only individuals lacking an item for affordability reasons (and not by choice or due to any other reasons) should be considered deprived of this item. However, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and the unique situation of lockdowns, etc., it might be useful for certain deprivation-related items like health or education to focus the analysis not only on the financial dimension but also on other reasons.
- We found that automatic stabilisers and discretionary policies partially prevented child poverty during the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, unlike trends observed in other EU countries (for the UK, see, for example, Edmiston et al., 2020), we did not find evidence that new groups of children – for example, those with self-employed parents – were adversely affected. This also proves that specially introduced programmes like short-time work or hardship fund for the self-employed were quite successful.
- However, both monetary poverty and material deprivation of families with children increased during the pandemic. In addition, families affected by unemployment were significantly more likely to be severely materially deprived during the pandemic than before. This also suggests that the lack of targeted compensation measures and the absence of indexing for family benefits during that period (introduced in 2023) meant that policies only partially succeeded in protecting families with children.

Trade-offs in policy design: means-tested vs. universal benefits

- The analysis of hypothetical additional policies to counter child poverty during the crisis period revealed that the transfer to low-income families (actually launched in July 2023) would have been the most promising in further reducing child poverty, balancing cost and impact: Around € 250 million of public spending on this measure would be needed to reduce the poverty rate by one percentage point, as against € 600 million up to more than € 2,000 million in case of the other tested policy measures. These findings also hint at trade-offs in policy design, namely that universal benefits, while reducing poverty more broadly and quickly (no extra administrative efforts required for establishing a reasonable means-test), are also much costlier (per percentage point of reduction). Conversely, while targeted payments might be more cost-effective, they may weaken work incentives due to strict eligibility requirements or may increase inequality within the broader "poorer" population, also by reinforcing perceptions of who deserves public support and who does not (see Roantree & Doorley, 2023; Heitzmann & Staudinger, 2023).
- Also, in a European comparison, the well-being of children below 18 years in Austria during the COVID-19 crisis presents a mixed picture. While AROP rates upsurged consistently beyond the EU-27 average (2019/20 +1.4 vs +0.3 pp, 2019/21 +0.8 vs +0.1 pp), the increase in severe material and social deprivation was above the EU-27-average in 2020 (2019/20 +1.1 vs +0.7 pp) but also its decrease in 2021 (2019/21 -1.7 vs -0.1 pp; Eurostat Database, 2024). The lack of more targeted policies still caused an increase in monetary poverty and to some extent, in material deprivation. This finding points again to the above-mentioned trade-offs between means-tested and universal support, which will remain a challenge for policymakers not only in times of acute crisis.

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