

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Situation of Large Families in Poland

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to show the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the living situation of large families. The study paid particular attention to the economic and housing problems, as well as the mental condition and challenges related to remote learning. The study was primarily empirical. The article presents the results of quantitative research extended by a catalogue of open questions, together with the results of research conducted by the “Three Plus” Association of Large Families in May 2020. Statistical methods were used to analyse the data. The living conditions (in most of the examined dimensions) of most families with many children deteriorated during the pandemic. The most important problems faced by such families were primarily related to the labour market (employment and running a business), and housing (related to a deterioration of the mental condition of family members). However, the families also indicated closer family relations, caused by forced isolation and slowed-down pace of life (lack of commuting, additional activities, and other activities outside the home). Overall, families with more children, and those living in smaller flats experienced the most difficult situation.

Keywords: pandemic, large families, economic situation.

1. Introduction

The pandemic caused severe disruptions to the functioning of the economy and society. Practically overnight, people had to adapt to new realities: social isolation, work, and online learning, the closure of many sports and cultural facilities, as well as shops and services. There were temporary shortages in supplies and limited admission into shops and churches. An economic slowdown that took place had not been seen in many years. Moreover, there was also the uncertainty of the future and concern for one’s health and the health of loved ones.

A particularly difficult situation was experienced by individuals from the most vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, people without permanent, stable employment, families with children, especially with many children. The temporary closure of schools and kindergartens caused unprecedented problems in families with children with providing care and conditions for remote education (namely, parents became involved in the educational process on an unprecedented scale).

The aim of this article was to show the impact of the pandemic and the related limitations on the functioning of large families. The presented results come from a survey conducted by *Związek Dużych Rodzin "Trzy Plus"* (The Three Plus Association of Large Families) (ZDR 3+) among a sample of over 700 families in May 2020¹. The full study report and the data can be found in Bebel (2020). Particular attention was paid to such aspects as:

- 1) economic situation,
- 2) housing situation,
- 3) psychological condition,
- 4) education (remote learning).

Statistical methods were used in the study, including Spearman's rho and Kendall's tau-b correlations.

2. Definition and situation of large families

One of the basic entities of the economy is the household, rather than the family. The statistics also list the household as a unit, but the presentation of the results shows different types of households, including families with children.

The concept of a large family is not clearly defined, and there are various definitions of this term (Bebel, 2021). Colloquially, a large family is considered to be one with many children. The lowest limit (of the number of children) that determines an allocation to this category is not obvious and changes over time. For example, before the Second World War, it was at least five children (Kopeć, 2020). From the demographic perspective, a large family is a family with at least four children, i.e. a family ensuring the replacement of generations in an extended way (Graniewska, 1980; Kawula, 1980). Currently, however, an increasingly common classification is one resulting from the theory and practice of social policy, according to which a family with at least three children is considered large. This is related to the fact that the financial situation of the family deteriorates after the birth of the third and subsequent children, and consequently this is how families with many children are presented in studies devoted to the economic conditions of families (Bonisławska, 2010; Graniewska, 1980; Rodziewicz, 1978). Therefore, there is no single universal

¹ Closed questions were supplemented with open questions in which the respondents could supplement their answers.

definition of a large family. However, most contemporary sources classify it as a family with at least three children, which is the classification used in this work.

Families with many children are in the group of households with the most difficult financial situation (e.g. Nowakowska, 2000; Tarkowska, 2006) and the most threatened with poverty (regardless of the adopted threshold). In 2020, approximately 6% of individuals in the households of married couples (including informal relationships) with at least three dependent children lived below the minimum subsistence level, while the extent of statutory poverty in this group was approximately 16% (GUS, 2021, p. 21). However, the difficult financial situation is usually associated with a greater number of individuals dependent on the parent(s), as the level of income in such families does not differ from the average income in other types of families (Głogosz, 2015; Kośny, 2012).

Large families are also undoubtedly the greatest beneficiaries of the „Rodzina 500+” [Family 500+] programme – operating in Poland since 2016 – which has undoubtedly improved the living situation of these families and reduced poverty among them (Brzeziński & Najsztub, 2016; Gasz, 2018; Hanusik & Łangowska-Szcześniak, 2018; Krawczyk, 2019; Liszatyński, 2017; Ruzik-Sierdzińska, 2018; Szarfenberg, 2017). However, this decrease was smaller than expected, and some families allocate the entire benefit exclusively to satisfying the most basic needs. Nevertheless, many families (including the poor ones) thanks to additional financial resources, could afford the endlessly postponed renovation of their home, paying for additional activities for children, leisure, and even saving money (Grzybowska-Brzezińska, Dorczyk & Kuśnierz, 2018; Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, 2019; Michalak, Warzocha, & Liminowicz, 2018).

Families with many children are also characterised by lower economic security, i.e. the ability to cope with unforeseen, difficult circumstances (undoubtedly including the outbreak of a pandemic). According to Kośny, a family’s economic security depends on the number of dependent children: in the short term, the more children, the lower the security of the family (Kośny, 2012). The housing situation of large families is also more difficult. Although flats or houses inhabited by large families are on average larger than those of families with few children², after dividing the occupied area by the number of household members, this area decreases significantly³, giving respectively: 1.5 (for large families), 1.2 (for families with 2 children) and 1.0 (for families with 1 child) individuals per one room on average (GUS, 2020, p. 258).

All the above-mentioned issues become particularly important in the face of a pandemic, which forces periodic isolation (lockdown), remote work, and online

² The average area in the case of large families is 98.8 m², while in families with 2 children, it is 88.6 m², and in families with 1 child, 77.3 m².

³ Up to 18.4 m² in large families, 22.2 m² in families with 2 children and 25.8 m² in families with 1 child.

learning, as well as changes in the labor market (company closures and job cuts). The resulting problems particularly affect the economically weakest, e.g. families with low economic security, including those with many children.

However, it should not be forgotten that large families are not a homogeneous group and may face completely different problems. The conditions for the functioning of a family with three children, living in a large city, where both parents remain professionally active, are completely different than for families living in the countryside with a dozen children and one breadwinner (Głogosz, 2015). Such discrepancies are shown, for example, by a study commissioned by ZDR 3+ (ZDR 3+, 2019).

3. The most important research results

The survey was conducted using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) technique between May 9-26, 2020; 732 large families from all over the country took part in the survey. Most of the respondents represented families with three and four children (about 2 out of 3). However, every third respondent had more children. The vast majority of families had underage children (including 82% at least three). There were definitely fewer families with dependent children aged 18-26 (31%). The surveyed families usually lived in single-family houses rather than in flats. The sources of income of the families were primarily contract work, the 500+ benefit and their own enterprise (employing employees and sole proprietorship). Many families indicated many sources of income (including income from the work of adult offspring), in some it was even 5-6 different sources. For the majority of families, however, contract work was the main source of income (78%).

During the COVID-19 pandemic the situation of large families deteriorated in most of the examined aspects. The economic situation was undoubtedly one of the most important factors. More than half of the respondents indicated a change for the worse in this area, and almost one in four – a definite deterioration. An assessment of the economic situation of families after the outbreak of the pandemic is presented in Figure 1.

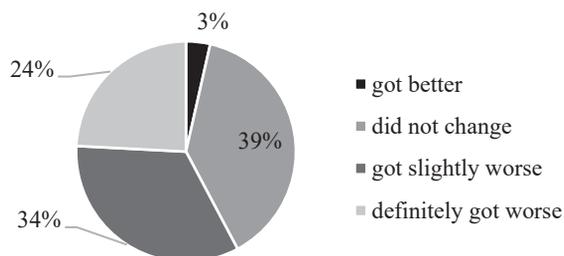


Fig. 1. Economic situation of large families during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

The main reasons for the deterioration of the economic situation were a decrease in income caused by the freezing of the operation of many enterprises that the respondents owned or worked for. Some of the respondents received lower wages on this account, others lost their jobs and became unemployed. A lower income was also related to the necessity to take care of children (after the kindergartens and schools were closed down) and to use the care allowance. Another reason for the deterioration of the financial situation was an increase in expenditure, e.g. due to the necessity to buy computer equipment for children (which was a considerable expense for families with many children) to enable remote education, food expenses, and bills (e.g. electricity). The respondents' comments on the deterioration of the economic situation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comments of the respondents on the deterioration of the economic situation during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Lack of work.
- The government de facto banned economic activity.
- No extra money available.
- Less work – less wages.
- Less income related to staying at home with children.
- Limitations in the performance of paid work, higher food prices.
- High costs of remote education (equipment, bills).
- Heavy spending on medication and bills.
- The need for large purchases and an increase in some prices.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

However, the changes were not unfavourable for everyone to the same extent. For some families, they became an opportunity to earn additional income or increase savings (due to lower expenses for commuting to work, kindergarten fees, extracurricular activities, or spending time outside the home – at the cinema, restaurant or on holidays). However, such responses were definitely less common. The respondents' comments on the improvement of the economic situation are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comments of the respondents on the improvement of the economic situation during the COVID-19 pandemic

- We spend less time outside.
- More good opportunities at work.
- No expenses for fuel, food at school, or travel to school.
- Costs of nursery and kindergarten, additional activities for children, and attractions such as cinema, playroom, swimming pool, and restaurants, are 'gone'.
- We have to work overtime.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

The psychological condition of families also suffered due to the pandemic and its consequences in the form of social isolation and closure of many facilities (schools, cultural institutions, recreation and sports facilities, etc.) or even parks and forests. Six in ten families reported a deterioration in this respect, and in every sixth, the deterioration was significant. The impact of the pandemic on the psychological state of large families is shown in Figure 2.

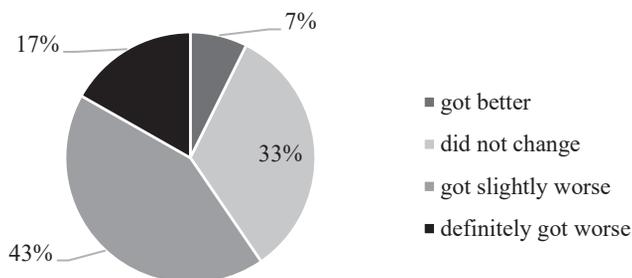


Fig. 2. Psychological condition of large families during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from Bebel (2020).

The main reason for the deterioration of general well-being among the surveyed families was undoubtedly social isolation and its consequences, specifically, too little private space in the apartment or house (due to many household members) and time for oneself, no possibility of meeting the family (living separately) and friends, and children staying long-term at home (without going to school, meeting peers, or additional activities, e.g. sports), which increased tensions and conflicts. These difficulties were also accompanied by concern and the uncertainty of tomorrow, both in the context of health and work, and the further education of children (including the final exams). The respondents' comments on the deterioration of the psychological condition are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Comments of the respondents on the deterioration of the psychological condition during the COVID-19 pandemic

- More home schooling responsibilities.
- Stress from fear for family health.
- Personal and marital problems.
- Children are not allowed to go outside, so there are more conflicts between them.
- Lack of contact with family and friends.
- Noise at home, lack of time for oneself and rest.
- Not knowing whether the exams will be held.
- Threat of job loss.
- Frustration due to uncertainty about the future.
- Children have nowhere to vent their emotions.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

However, the respondents also pointed out the positive effects of isolation on family relationships. Both parents and children finally found time to spend time with one another and play or talk together. The pace of life slowed down considerably, which appealed to some of the respondents. The respondents' comments on the improvement of the psychological condition are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comments of the respondents on the improvement of the psychological condition during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Relationships with children improved, we were able to get to know them again (...) relations between children improved.
- More time for everything, less stress, time at home with children, and unexpected opportunities to continue a career that was not the obvious choice.
- More time together, an opportunity to play games, chat, watch movies together, cook, etc.
- We tried to use this time for what we usually did not have time for.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

Large families were doing fairly well with remote learning. For the majority of them, it was not a major problem, although as far as the previous aspect is concerned, for some families it was associated with a considerable psychological burden. Figure 3 shows how large families dealt with the remote learning of their children.

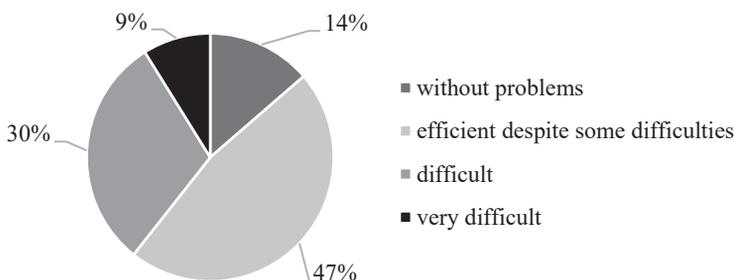


Fig. 3. Remote education in large families during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

The greatest concern of families with respect to distance learning was not enough computers and space for classes and learning and a weak Internet connection. In addition, parents were worried about the excessive use of computers by their children, and felt that both their children and themselves were overburdened by the remote lesson mode (the children were overloaded with tasks to do and the parents were helping their children to learn or arranging their working hours). The respondents' comments on the greatest difficulties with remote learning are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. The respondents' comments on the biggest difficulties with remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Lack of computers and of fast Internet.
- Other students have computers, but our younger son does not, so sometimes he doesn't take part in lessons. He has a backlog of school work.
- Children spend too much time sitting at the computer. They do not understand everything.
- Parents need to be more involved in teaching than normal.
- The quality of teaching is unsatisfactory.
- Young people disturb each other because they share the same room.
- There is too much homework for the children.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

The possibility of borrowing computers from schools was very helpful. Unfortunately, only a few families indicated such an opportunity. Families in which home education was already conducted or was considered for the future, were in a much better situation than those without such experience. The comments of these respondents are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Comments of the respondents who have no difficulties with remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Children were given the opportunity to borrow laptops from schools.
- We are in the home education mode, so learning is as it was before the epidemic.
- We have experience in home education.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

The housing situation of the vast majority of families (84%) was at least bearable (and satisfactory for more than a half). However, one in almost six families considered it burdensome or even unbearable. The housing situation of families during the pandemic is presented in Figure 4.

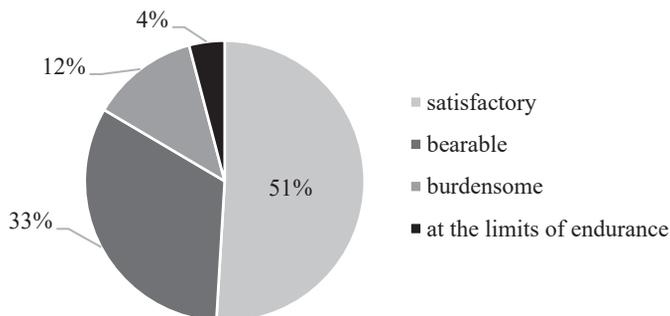


Fig. 4. Housing situation of large families during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

The most difficult problem was the size of the accommodation, which was too small in relation to the number of household members (too high density) and the need to spend a lot of time in it. Another problem was not having one's own apartment or having to share it with others (e.g. other family members). Some families also lacked a garden or even a balcony. The families' comments on the most serious housing problems are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. The respondents' comments on the housing difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Small apartment, oversensitive neighbours.
- We do not have our own home – we share it.
- Expensive rent, no prospects for owning our own flat or house.
- Small area, no garden.
- No balcony.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

Families with larger flats or houses and a garden were in the most favourable situation. Respondents who had changed their place of residence before the pandemic or adjusted it to the needs of the family (e.g. by creating separate rooms for children) expressed satisfaction. Such respondents' comments are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. The respondents' comments on the satisfactory housing situation during the COVID-19 pandemic

- We have a large house and a garden; there is place to take a rest.
- We moved to a large house from a two-room apartment. We managed to do so before the pandemic.
- There is a garden.
- The flat was recently renovated and now the children have their own rooms.

Source: own analysis based on data retrieved from (Bebel, 2020).

On the one hand, the conclusions drawn from the research seem to confirm that large families experienced a more difficult situation after the outbreak of the pandemic than before it. On the other hand, a majority of respondents also indicated fairly effective methods of solving most emerging problems. All the aspects discussed affected one another. Small space, staying at home, and the need to combine remote work with the remote learning of children (with additional hardware limitations) gave rise to frustration and exhaustion. When a loss of employment also occurred (or a potential loss of employment in the near future) or a significant decrease in income, the feeling of fear, helplessness, and insecurity increased even more. These feelings were often additionally reinforced by fear for one's own health and the health of the closest family members.

The study also attempted to find relationships between the change in a family's situation (in all the analysed aspects) and the number of children, in terms of minors

and dependent children aged 18-26 years. The analyses using Spearman's rho and Kendall's tau-b correlations showed a very low (although statistically significant) correlation in several areas. The results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Relationship between the number of children and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on selected aspects of life in large families

		Number of children	Number of children up to 18 years old	Number of dependent children aged 18-26 years
Economic situation	Spearman's rho	0.069	0.136***	-0.125***
	Kendall's tau-b	0.059	0.114***	-0.111***
Psychological condition	Spearman's rho	0.075*	0.020	0.048
	Kendall's tau-b	0.063	0.016	0.043
Remote learning	Spearman's rho	-0.045	-0.063	-0.026
	Kendall's tau-b	-0.038	-0.053	-0.023
Housing situation	Spearman's rho	-0.012	-0.091*	0.064
	Kendall's tau-b	-0.011	-0.078*	0.059

Note. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Source: own analysis.

Interestingly, the number of underaged offspring was positively correlated with the economic situation of the family, and for children aged 18-26 years, this correlation was negative. However, the correlation between the number of minors and the housing situation was negative, yet such a correlation did not appear in the case of older children. Moreover, the number of children had a fairly positive effect on the mental condition of the family (although the strength of this relationship was negligible).

It can be surprising that there is no statistical significance of the correlation between most examined aspects of life and the number of children. This can be explained by the fact that all the respondents were from large families, while the differences would probably occur between small and large ones.

4. Conclusions

A significant problem for large families during the pandemic was the loss of employment or bankruptcy of the employer's enterprise. Some families also experienced a reduction in salaries and the inability to take up additional work. The difficult situation on the labour market affected both parents and adult offspring from large families. On the other hand, some families experienced a decline in expenses, mainly those related to education (e.g. extra-curricular activities, accommodation fees) and spending time outside (e.g. going to the cinema or restaurant).

Despite the positive effect of isolation on family relationships and a slowdown in the pace of life declared by some families, most of them experienced a deterioration of well-being. This was mainly related to the enforced isolation (the inability to maintain social contacts) and children being cut off from school and extracurricular activities (and their friends), which created conflicts and tensions. Difficult living conditions and the lack of space for remote work and study were an additional problem in some families, and for large families was their concern for the health of the family and its financial situation at the onset of the economic crisis.

The opinions of families regarding remote education were divided. Some respondents praised the handling of the situation on the part of schools and the high level of lessons, while others felt exhausted due to the entire burden related to education being shifted onto the parents. The main problems faced by families in this respect were hardware limitations (not enough computers, problems with Internet access, etc.) and the need for increased participation of parents in their children's education. The general unpreparedness for remote forms of education was emphasized, both on the part of teachers and children or their parents. However, most of the families had the hardest time already behind them, and over the study period they were able to handle their children's education increasingly better. Some families had already conducted home education, so they did not feel any change. Conversely, other families considered taking up home education in the following years – the period of isolation was found to be a good time to learn about this issue.

Families with many children demonstrated great resourcefulness and the ability to cope with various crisis situations. The surveyed families often indicated the need to look for creative and unconventional solutions and the satisfaction that comes from finding them. Although large families coped with the pandemic as best as they could, they felt loneliness and a lack of state support, e.g. as part of the anti-crisis shield (those that ran a business), in buying a flat and replacing it with a larger one, and ultimately, in supporting the remote education of children (e.g. by borrowing computers from schools).

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Wpływ pandemii COVID-19 na sytuację rodzin wielodzietnych w Polsce

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie wpływu pandemii COVID-19 na sytuację życiową rodzin wielodzietnych. W badaniu zwrócono szczególną uwagę na sytuację ekonomiczną, mieszkaniową, a także kondycję psychiczną i wyzwania związane ze zdalną nauką w szkołach. Praca ma charakter przede wszystkim empiryczny. Prezentuje wyniki badań ilościowych rozszerzonych o katalog pytań otwartych. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań przeprowadzonych przez Związek Dużych Rodzin „Trzy Plus” wśród rodzin wielodzietnych w maju 2020 roku. Do analizy danych wykorzystano metody statystyczne. Sytuacja życiowa (w większości analizowanych wymiarów) większości rodzin wielodzietnych w okresie pandemii uległa pogorszeniu. Wśród najważniejszych problemów, z jakimi zetknęły się takie rodziny, były przede wszystkim: problemy związane z rynkiem pracy (zatrudnieniem, prowadzeniem przedsiębiorstwa) oraz sytuacją mieszkaniową (co z kolei powodowało pogorszenie kondycji psychicznej członków rodziny). Rodziny wskazywały jednak także na zacieśnienie relacji rodzinnych spowodowane przymusową izolacją i zwolnieniem tempa życia (brak dojazdów oraz zajęć dodatkowych i innych aktywności poza domem). W najtrudniejszej sytuacji były rodziny posiadające większą liczbę dzieci oraz mieszkające w mieszkaniach o małej powierzchni.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia, rodziny wielodzietne, sytuacja ekonomiczna.