Child poverty continues to grow in Germany

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Almost 2 million children and young people grew up in poverty last year in Germany. Children are considered in poverty if their parents are dependent upon social welfare under the social welfare code II, better known as Hartz IV.

The percentage of children under the age of 18 in families claiming Hartz IV rose to 14.7 percent, 0.4 percent more than in 2011. The main centre of child poverty is Berlin. No other city has as many impoverished children or young people. This is based on findings published Monday in a Bertelsmann Foundation study.

The poverty rate in Berlin declined marginally over recent years, from 33.7 to 32.2 percent. “But at the same time, the total of poor children grew because more children moved to the capital city,” according to the study’s authors. Almost one in three children under the age of 18 lives in a family claiming social welfare.

The data for the study was taken from statistics from the federal agency of labour and a long-term study on the impact of poverty on children and young people.

If one considers the regional poverty levels, there continue to be significant disparities. The poverty-stricken eastern parts of Germany maintain much higher levels. Although the poverty rate dropped there since 2001 by 2 percentage points, it still stood at 21.6 percent. This means one in five children lives in poverty here.

In the western German states, the rate of Hartz IV claims rose to 13.2 percent from 12.4 percent in 2011. “The sharpest rise came in Bremen (plus 2.8 percentage points), Saarland (plus 2.6 percentage points) and North Rhine-Westphalia (plus 1.6 percentage points).” Even in the states with the lowest levels of child poverty the rates grew, in Bavaria by 0.4 percent, in Baden-Württemberg, 0.6 percent, and in Rhineland-Palatinate, 0.9 percent.

Other cities along with Berlin have high levels of children under 18 living in poverty, including Bremerhaven (40.5 percent), Offenbach (34.5 percent) and Halle (33.4 percent). Bremerhaven had the highest rate of children reliant on social welfare, followed by Gelsenkirchen in the Ruhr region, at 38.5 percent. But close by in other cities in the Ruhr the picture is not much better. In Essen, the percentage of children living in poverty is 32.6 percent, in Dortmund, 30.3 percent, and in Duisburg, 30 percent.

According to the Bertelsmann study, children with only one parent or with two or more siblings are especially likely to live in poverty.

“Of the total of children reliant on state welfare benefits, 50 percent live with a single parent and 36 percent live in families with three or more children.”

For many children, poverty is a permanent state of affairs. Fifty-seven percent of children aged 7 to 15 claimed social welfare benefits for three years or more.

This has wide-ranging consequences for children. A metastudy co-authored by the Institute for Social Work and Social Pedagogy (ISS) showed, “Compared with children of the same age in families with a secure income, impoverished children are more frequently socially isolated, lacking in material resources and are in poorer health.”

They often do not have their own room to relax in or complete schoolwork undisturbed. Poor children eat less fruit and vegetables and have poorer health in general, particularly with regard to the health of their teeth. There is rarely money available for monthly passes on public transport, let alone extracurricular activities or hobbies like sport associations or music classes. A holiday is a luxury.

It is no surprise that the education prospects for poor children are much more challenging. “The longer children live in poverty, the greater the risk that their fate will be negatively influenced,” said Annette Stein from the Bertelsmann Foundation. Children from

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households claiming Hartz IV seldom make it to university.

The Bertelsmann Foundation and many media outlets have pointed out that the growth in child poverty does not fit with reports of economic growth in Germany and an increase in the number of people in work.

The Bertelsmann experts account for this by referring to missing data. “Due to missing data, we cannot explain why, in spite of growth in the economy and employment figures, increasing numbers of children rely on Hartz IV,” said Sarah Menne, project head of family policy at the foundation.

This is absurd. Firstly, there are a number of studies demonstrating that higher employment figures do not result in a rise in gross economic output—i.e., the available work is divided up among more people; poorly paid, part-time jobs are expanding.

Secondly, the “economy” is not directed towards reducing poverty and meeting the needs of the population for education, health care and leisure. The major concerns seek profits and look out for interests of their shareholders. And here the rule applies: the smaller proportion of turnover received by the workers, the greater the profit. The wealth of shareholders at the one pole of society determines the poverty at the other pole.

The increase in child poverty is also not a result of “mistaken or bad family policy,” as those responsible for the study at the Bertelsmann Foundation or in the opposition parties claim. Sabine Zimmermann from the Left Party said, “The problem of child poverty has been known for years, but the federal government remains inactive.” The social policy spokesperson for the Green Party parliamentary group, Wolfgang Strengman-Kuhn, raged, “It is a scandal that 2 million children in Germany are reliant on Hartz IV.”

This is disingenuous. Child poverty is the result of a deliberate policy of redistribution from the bottom to the top in which the Left Party and Greens have been deeply implicated. The Hartz laws and “Agenda 2010,” which the federal SPD/Green government of Gerhard Schröder and Deputy Chancellor Joschka Fischer implemented 14 years ago with the full support of the trade unions, introduced the greatest social attacks in Germany since the Second World War.

The Hartz laws have now become a model for the whole of Europe. In France, the Socialist Party government is in the process of imposing a comparable labour reform, which was also drafted with the assistance of Peter Hartz.

That Berlin is the main centre of poverty is the result of the policies pursued by the SPD/Left Party state government from 2001 to 2011. The government cut wages, privatised public assets and hived off state-owned properties to investors.

The reaction of federal families minister Manuela Schwesig (SPD) to the study was just as cynical as that of the Left Party and Greens. Schwesig pointed to some of the alms handed out by the government in recent times. She included the increase in the child allowance for low-earning parents, the introduction of the minimum wage (of €8.50 per hour) and the parental allowance plus (parents who work part-time after the birth of a child can extend the period of entitlement to parental allowance).

But neither the parental allowance nor the parental allowance plus benefits the poorest. Families claiming Hartz IV have the allowance included in their benefit, so get nothing. The same applies to child benefit, which Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble is considering raising to €2 (per month!)

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