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Transformations and Persistence of Child Poverty in Portugal

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Abstract

This paper presents the main data on child poverty in Portugal from Eurostat's EU-SILC, in comparison with the European Union and with selected European countries in the period of 2003 to 2020. These data are, first, contextualized by a discussion of the concept of child poverty, reflecting on its potentials and limitations from the framework of childhood and poverty. Secondly, it is Eurostat's own concept of poverty that is discussed, showing its potential and limitations on the data on child poverty. It is underlined that Eurostat statistics tend to underestimate the extent of child poverty in Europe. The data itself shows that child poverty is very relevant in Portuguese society (18.4% of children – average of 2003-2020). This especially affects certain types of families with children and is always higher than the general (at risk of) poverty rate. Portuguese results are not very different from the territories chosen for comparison, being even the least onerous in all of southern Europe. The analysis of the EU-SILC results ends with the demonstration that the social support provided by the state does not have a significant impact on the reduction of child poverty, in contrast to what happens in relation to the elderly, indicating that the social support goes, mainly, to retired people. This is especially relevant in the context of a country where there hasn't been the replacement of generations for a long time (low synthetic fertility index).

Keywords: Child poverty; Portugal and Europe; poverty rates; social policies

1. Introduction

Children are vulnerable considering the way they are embedded in society and their own biological condition. Part of that vulnerability translates into situations of child poverty. The transformations and persistence of child poverty are the focus of this article. However, a first and important question that needs to be addressed when talking about child poverty is: what is child poverty? This concept, as we have been arguing (Diogo, 2010, 2018), results from the juxtaposition of two other concepts,

poverty and childhood. Each of them represents in itself a vast field of research and, at the same time, is at the center of a debate on its polysemy. Furthermore, the very idea of child poverty can be contested as children are not poor per se, but within poor households (Bastos, 2015, Costa, 2015, Diogo, 2010). In this sense, the concept of poor children is the alternative that underlines this other way of looking at children's poverty. In this article the Eurostat concept of poverty is used. Thus, it is necessary to understand it, namely its limitations and potentialities. Different concepts of poverty cut in reality different categories of people with different characteristics. The poor are not a social group, nor a class unto themselves, in the Marxist sense of the term (Diogo *et al.*, 2021). Only a minimal understanding of what is at stake when defining poverty will allow us to accurately read the data. The official data on poverty in Portugal is calculated on the basis of the Survey on Living Conditions and Income (EU-SILC) by INE (the Portuguese Statistical Agency), based on the methodology defined by Eurostat. In Portugal we speak of ICOR and in Europe of EU-SILC.

Eurostat, as well as INE, defines a person as poor when his/her income is below the poverty threshold. This, in turn, is calculated according to the following formula: a person is poor if his or her income is below 60% of the national median income per equivalent adult. It is worthwhile to dwell a little on this definition given its important effect in targeting a specific group of people in poverty.

This definition can be broken down into its various components, starting with the 60 per cent of median national income. It should be noted that this is a relative value variable according to each European Union member state, which means that poverty calculated in this way depends on national income, in the tradition of studies on relative poverty (Stoleru, 1974 and Townsend, 1993). On the other hand, this value contains a good deal of arbitrariness, since setting the cut-off line at 60 per cent is questionable (D'Agostino and Duvert, 2008). Moreover, the work on adequate income in Portugal argues that for there to be a decent income to survive the cut-off line is above this value (Pereirinha *et al.*, 2017).

A third important issue in relation to median income is that it varies not only in space, between countries of the European Union, as we have highlighted, but also over time. It varies according to the economic situation, whether it is one of crisis or of prosperity. This means that the number of poor people varies from year to year because of this statistical effect, for example, the monthly poverty threshold increased from 501 euros in 2018 to 554 in 2020 (INE, 2021). In crisis situations, as median income falls, the result is that individuals who were poor with one year's income cease to be poor the following year with the same income. INE does not ignore this effect, especially important in times of crisis (and its mirror in times of high economic growth) and in relation to the last crisis (2008-2014) it carried out a small exercise that allows a better understanding of the impact of the increase in poverty: the rate anchored to one year (in this case 2009) (INE, 2015 see also Diogo *et al.*, 2021, where this calculation is updated). But questions regarding the Eurostat definition of poverty do not stop there.

A final issue regarding the definition of concepts that deserves our attention is that of the age range considered by INE and Eurostat: children are all individuals aged between zero and seventeen years old. This age range is based on the definition of a child found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It is also a period in which human beings undergo intense physical, cognitive and psychological transformations. These transformations, which are largely natural but also have an important social charge, make the problems affecting a five-year-old very different from those affecting a fifteen-year-old. A difference certainly greater than that which distinguishes a thirty-year-old from a fifty-year-old. Moreover, this age group, in its upper limit, intersects with other social categories, distinct from childhood. Immediately adolescence, youth and even adulthood (Almeida, 2009; Diogo, 2010, 2018).

2. Child Poverty from a Child's Perspective

If the experience of situations of poverty in childhood, as we have been arguing, has impacts on different dimensions of children's lives (Diogo, 2010; Sarmento, 2010; Sarmento, Fernandes &

Trevisan, 2015, Sarmento & Trevisan, 2017), several studies have highlighted this persistence of inequality both in childhood and in the possibilities for adult life. School, and the different social aspirations of children in the near future (for example, in the decision to continue studying or to follow a profession and quickly enter the labour market) are strongly conditioned by the family contexts in which they live. As Ridge (2011) notes, in a study that sought to hear from children about poverty, reports of the economic and material effects they experienced fall into three broad areas: the adequacy of family income; a deficit in available material resources, and a lack of key material and symbolic indicators of childhood inclusion (for example, access to certain branded products). These perceptions may refer to several fundamental material goods, such as food, clothing, but also to opportunities to attend different social and recreational activities with peer groups, which imply a certain type of payment. On the other hand, some family realities where children live in, their vulnerabilities are characterised by the existence of serious problems for a long period of time where there are scarce material and emotional resources to mitigate them (Dinis 2011). These families, usually referred to as problematic or challenged families, face problems that cannot be reduced to the material deprivation of economic resources or to the little support from social policies (Sousa, *et al.*, 2007). As we have stated in recent studies (Diogo, *et al.*, 2021), and although we do not advocate a "fatalistic" or "inevitable" view of the condition of poverty in childhood, the truth is that different studies (Attree, 2006; Ridge, 2002; Main, 2017, among others) highlight the persistence in life of the effects of poverty in childhood and the conformity of expectations it generates. On the other hand, as Attree (2006) has observed, different studies suggest that a disadvantaged childhood situation may lead to the perception that economic and social constraints are natural and normal, hence impacting on children's life expectations (Middleton *et al.*, 1994; Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002).

3. Analysis of Quantitative Data on Child Poverty (Portugal and EU)

Notwithstanding the caveats and limits to the definition of child poverty implied by Eurostat data, the data allows for comparison between different territories, and for different years, and results from (relatively) clear and simple definitions of concepts. We are therefore in a position to proceed with an empirical analysis of the available data. The first arising question is how extensive poverty is in Portugal and how it compares in the context of the European Union.
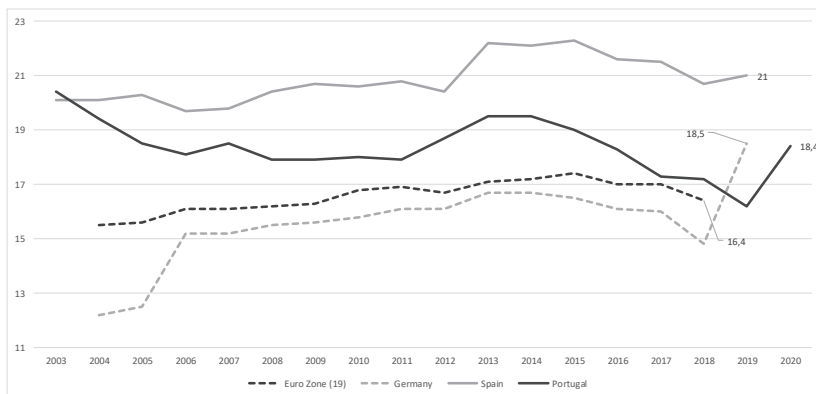

Chart 1. At-risk-of-poverty rate, selected countries (2003-2020), %
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2021)[1]

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[1] *Data to 2020 is only available for Portugal.*

What we can observe is that poverty in Portugal is above the European average. However, if this is true in comparison with Northern European countries like Germany, in relation to Southern countries, represented here by Spain, the Portuguese poverty rate is lower[2]. A more detailed analysis allows us to observe that there is a clear relationship with the economic cycles. Thus, in the period 2003-2008, and for Portugal, the poverty rate gradually falls, but the trend reverses between 2009 and 2014, and from 2015 the downward direction is resumed, but only in 2017 do we return to values similar to those before the crisis. The latest available data is for 2020 (published in 2021), and shows the impact of the pandemic crisis on poverty. What is certain is that, despite the oscillations, the poverty rate in Portugal, in the 21st century, has remained close to 20% of the total number of residents (18.4% in the average 2003-2020). Next, we break down the poverty rate by age groups to understand how the child poverty rate compares with the overall rate and that of other age groups.
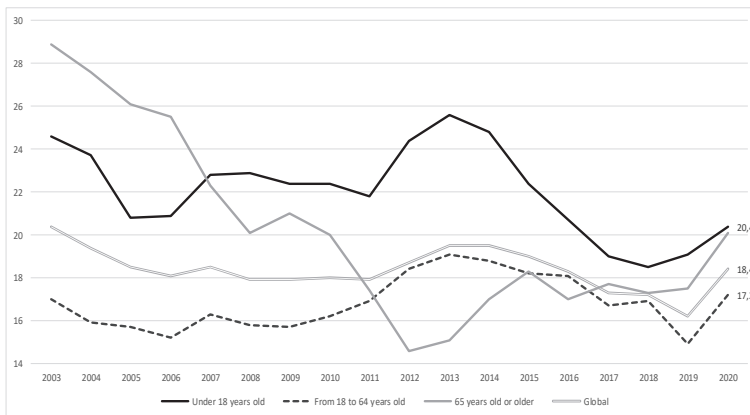

Chart 2. Poverty rate by age groups (2012-2020), % Portugal
Source: INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2015, 2020 and 2021) and Eurostat, November 2018 [ilc_li02] (in Diogo *et al.*, 2021)

What we can observe is that the child poverty rate (0-17 years) is persistently higher than the general rate. On average, over the 18 years considered, this difference stands at 3.7 percentage points. A second important finding is that the poverty rate for the elderly (65 and older) shows a consistent downward trajectory, having moved from values well above the overall rate to values below. It should be added that, in 2016, children (0-17 years old) corresponded to 19.5% of the poor population, a figure that is entirely similar to the older population (65 years and older) in the same circumstances, with 19.6% (Diogo *et al.*, 2021). This is despite the fact that there are more elderly than children in the country (Pordata, 2021d), corresponding in 2019 to 18.9% and 22.1% of the resident population, respectively[3].

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[2] *We choose Germany and Spain considering the work of Esping-Andersen (1990) and its adaptation to poverty studies as done by Bruckmeier & Rhei (2019), Papanastasiou & Papatheodorou (2019), Tejero (2017) or Jenkins & Kerm (2011). In this case, Germany represents the continental welfare state (and is also a country with many Portuguese immigrants) and Spain is, as Portugal, a country within the rudimentary, or South European, model (and the unique country with whom Portugal have a frontier). These two countries are also the main importers and exporters from/to Portugal.*
[3] *The data for the child age group is over-represented because it includes 18- and 19-year-olds in this calculation, given the way it is presented in the source.*

Table 1. Evolution of the poverty rate by age groups (index number), Portugal

Age	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	100,0	95,1	90,7	88,7	90,7	87,7	87,7	88,2	87,7	91,7	95,6	95,6	93,1	89,7
Under 18 years old	100,0	96,3	84,6	85,0	92,7	93,1	91,1	91,1	88,6	99,2	**104,1**	100,8	91,1	**84,1**
From 18 to 64 years old	100,0	93,5	92,4	**89,4**	95,9	92,9	92,4	95,3	99,4	108,2	**112,4**	110,6	107,1	106,5
65 or older	**100,0**	95,5	90,3	88,2	77,2	69,6	72,7	69,2	60,2	**50,5**	52,2	58,8	63,3	58,8

Source: Eurostat, November 2018 [ilc_li02]. Authors' calculations. From Diogo, *et al.*, 2021.

Through an index figure, a closer look at these data allows us to see this effect very clearly (between 2003 and 2016). In 2016, the child poverty rate rose to 84% of its value in 2003. The trend is better than the overall rate, since in 2016 it stood at 90% of its value in 2003. But it contrasts sharply with the rate for older people, which in 2016 stood at 59% of its value in 2003. It is therefore clear, in this statistical exercise, the very different behaviours of the child poverty rate and the elderly poverty rate.
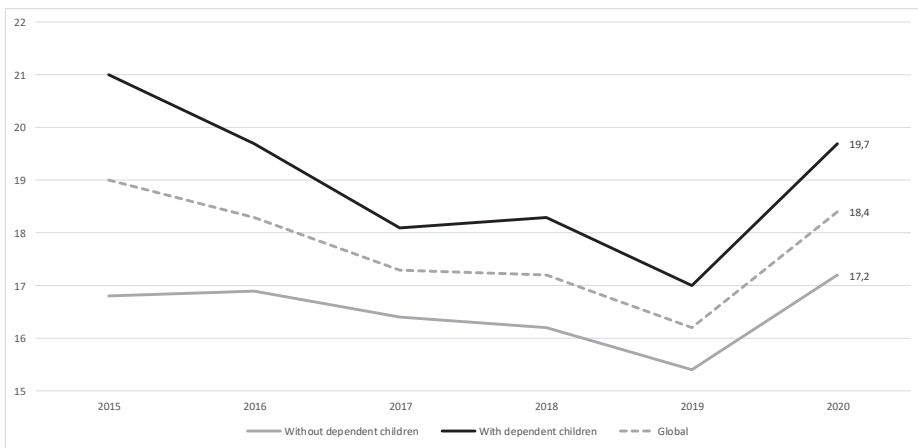

Chart 3. Poverty rate in households with and without children (2015-2020), % Portugal
Source: INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2020)

Another way of looking at child poverty has to do with the households where there are children and their different types, using the typology provided in ICOR/EU-SILC. A first approach allows us to divide households between those that do have children and those that do not. The finding is consistent with the previous one: households with children have a poverty rate above the overall rate, in sharp contrast with households without children where the recorded poverty rate is lower than the rate for the whole population (global rate). Throughout the period, from 2015 to 2020, there are no significant changes, despite some fluctuations. The period we are analysing is characterised by the continuous improvement of the indicators with a sharp decline in 2020, as already seen, but the relationship between them remains relatively constant as can be seen in the chart[4]. Following we will look at the data for the different types of households with children in more detail. But first we compare Portugal with other territories with regard to the poverty rate for households with children.

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[4] *This type of analysis has been done by Amélia Bastos, for example in Bastos, 2015.*
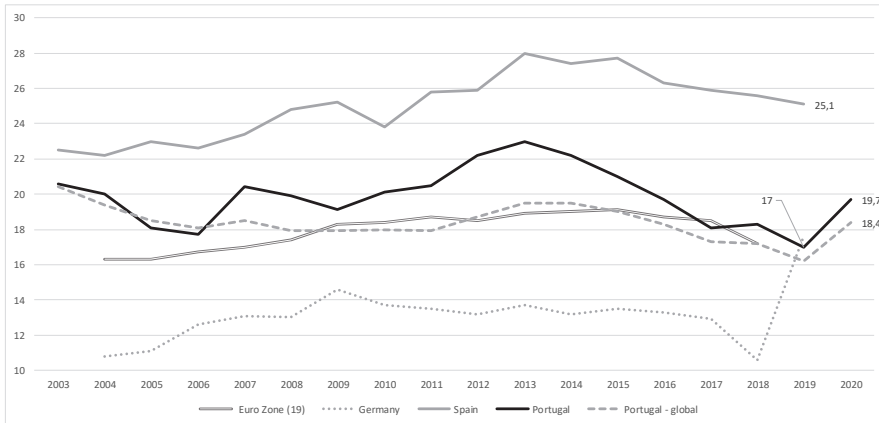
Chart 4. Poverty rate in households with dependent children, (2003-2020), %
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2020)

So, regarding the poverty rate for households with children, what we can observe is that the situation is similar to what we saw for the overall rate. That is, Portugal presents values above the European average, and well above Germany, but lower than the remaining southern European countries, in the chart represented by Spain. Let's remember that children (and young people) are not poor in themselves but within poor families. Eurostat and INE allow us to understand the different poverty rates by different types of households. The data in question, which we will present below, allows us to understand in which type of households there are more children in poverty, mainly according to their structure.
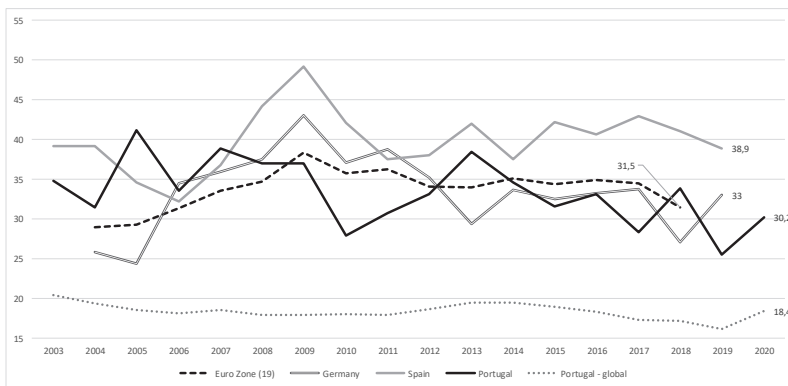

Chart 5. Poverty rate in households with one adult with at least one child (single parent), (2003-2020), %
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2020)

A first type of households consists of one adult with at least one child, that is, single-parent households. The results show that this type of family is particularly affected by poverty. In the European comparison, all countries (and the euro zone) show values above the overall Portuguese rate, even Germany. In fact, for some years, in this variable, Germany presents values above the European average. In the specific case of Portugal, for the last year for which data is available (2020)

the figures are 11.3 percentage points higher than the global rate, even so, a value below the average for the period (2003-2020), which is 15.0 percentage points. In other words, in 2020, one in three single-parent households was living in poverty in the country. Without data to discriminate the results by gender, based on the literature (Capucha, 2005 and Pereirinha *et al.*, 2008), it is not difficult to see that most of these households are headed by women. In fact, INE statistics show that in 2020 female single-parent households represented 84,7% of all single-parent households (Pordata, 2021a). To get a better idea of the magnitude of the numbers, it should be noted that in 2019 single-parent households corresponded to 11.6% of all households, in absolute value there were 459 344 (Pordata, 2021b).
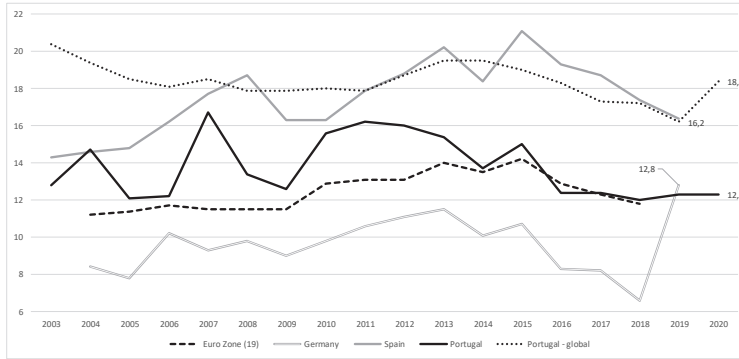

Chart 6. Poverty rate in households with two adults with one child, (2003-2020), %
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2020)

A second type of household considered concerns what we can identify as a classic family in the sense that it is one of the most common family types in Portugal. Couples with children (regardless of the number), correspond to 35.2% of the total resident households in 2020 (Pordata, 2021b). Thus, in the territories analysed, we can verify that only Germany presents similar values, even slightly above in some years, to the Portuguese overall rate. Portugal, specifically, presents for this type of family poverty rates below the overall rate. In fact, for the period under analysis (2003-2020), on average this rate is 4.6 percentage points below the overall rate, although in 2020 this difference is higher, 6.1 percentage points.
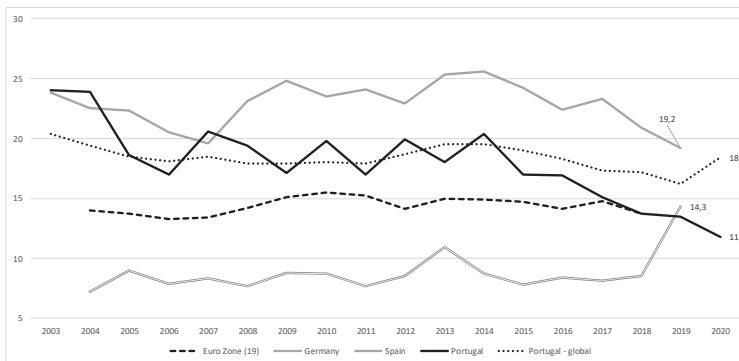

Chart 7. Poverty rate in households with two adults and two children, (2003-2020), %
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2020)

The other type of household that is generally identified with the traditional family concerns two adults with two children. Here, the situation is relatively similar to the previous one. Germany resumes its position as the country with the lowest rate below the European average. Portugal continues to show figures below those of Spain, but above the average. When comparing the poverty rate for households with two adults and two children with the overall poverty rate in Portugal, we can observe that the former is below the latter in almost all the considered period. However, the consequence of the existing fluctuations, on average for the 18 years under consideration, is that there is no difference between the rates... nevertheless, for the last year in question (2020) the difference is 6.6 percentage points. Since 2015, the poverty rate for households with two adults and two children is consistently below the overall rate.
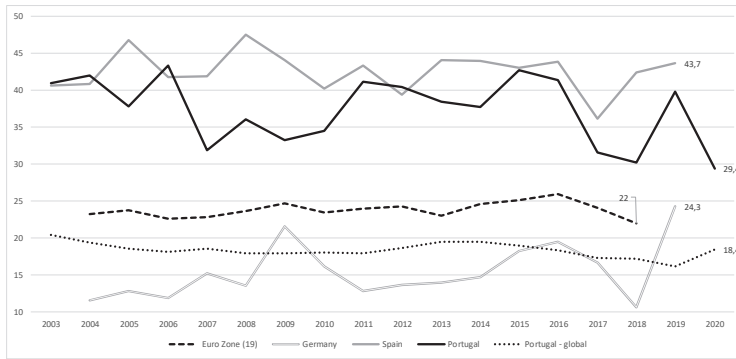

Chart 8. Poverty rate in households with two adults and three or more children, (2003-2020), %
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2020)

In cases where the households consist of two adults with three or more children the situation changes radically. In all considered territories the figures are very high. From the structural point of view, the main characteristics of poverty by type of household that we have been observing remain: Germany presents figures below the EU average and Spain figures above the Portuguese ones. However, it can be observed that for this type of household the Portuguese values are close to the Spanish ones, although in 2020 the values for Portugal decreased sharply (and we still don't have a reason for that). Looking at the Portuguese situation, two observations can be made. The first is that the rate is higher than the global rate and the second is that almost three in every five families with three or more children are in poverty. On average, and for the period, this difference stands at 19.0 percentage points, having risen significantly from 2018 to 2019, from 13 to 23.6 percentage points, but decreasing in 2020, remaining nevertheless at 11.0 percentage points of the global poverty rate. If the average size of Portuguese families in 2019, 2.5 persons (Pordata, 2021c), makes one assume that this type of families is not very numerous, this does not prevent it from being particularly affected by poverty. In fact, if we look at the different variables and categorical variables presented by INE (Diogo, *et al.*, 2021) we can observe that there are not many more categories that present poverty rates of this magnitude.
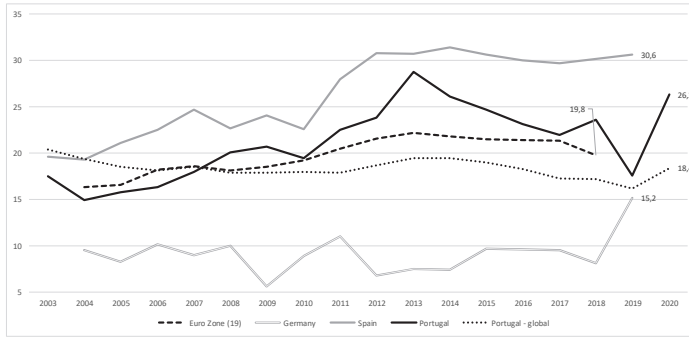
Chart 9. Poverty rate in households with children and other compositions (2003-2020), %
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2020)

A final type of household with children is the one represented in the other category (families with children and at least three adults). In this case, the differences between this rate and the overall rate are relatively small, although they had a peak associated with the 2008-2014 crisis. In 2020, we can see a stark increase in the poverty rate of this category of family.

Then, what factors explain the higher incidence of poverty among individuals aged 0 to 17 years? This is a question that we will address hereafter, in the conclusion. However, before that we would like to present one last piece of data that we believe partly explains the problem, we refer to State social transfers.
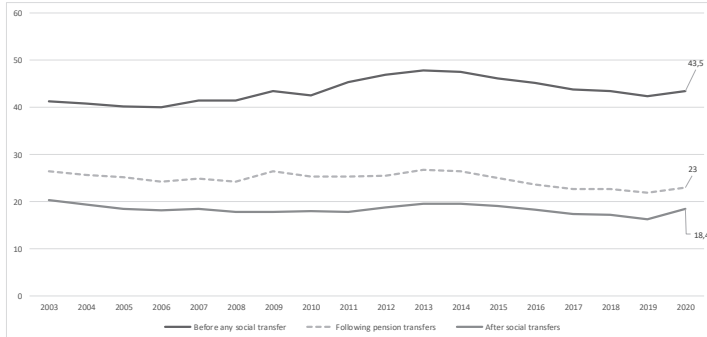

Chart 10. Poverty rate and social transfers (2015-2020), % Portugal
Source: Pordata INE, (ICOR, 2004-2021)

Thus, we can see that the bulk of the State's social transfers with an impact on poverty reduction is in the form of pensions benefiting those aged 65 and older. For the year 2019 (Pordata, 2021e), the last year for which data is available, poverty reduction through social transfers by age group is as reported below:
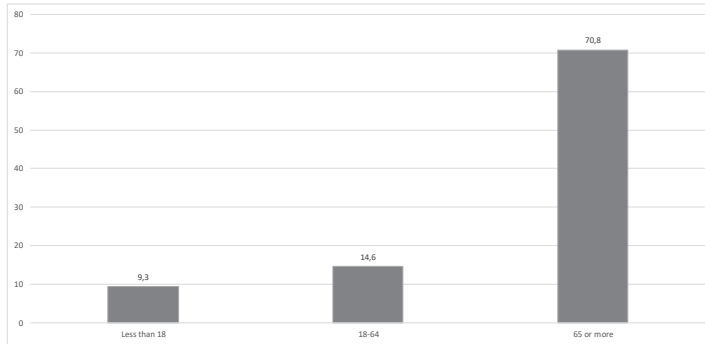
Chart 11. Poverty rate and social transfers (2019), % Portugal
Source: Pordata, INE, ICOR/EU-SILC (2004-2019)

The data in this last chart allow us to confirm the idea already indicated in the previous one that social transfers in Portugal are basically directed to the elderly and in the form of pensions. In contrast, it is clearly the youngest who benefit least from this type of transfers. Similarly, there remains a prevalence of an increased risk of poverty in households with children.

4.   Conclusion

Summing up, we believe that the statistical data shows that children are particularly affected by poverty in Portugal, something that is a reality for the European Union as a whole. In this paper we have not seen the specificities that can be found between European countries, but only the general trend. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that existing data underestimates the number of children experiencing poverty. This is especially so given the issue of social minority that frames children. As children are not poor per se because they are, by definition, non-income holders, we made an effort to understand how family poverty is constructed. This allowed us to confirm several issues highlighting the importance of child poverty within the context of poverty in Portugal. In that sense, a first important finding is that it shows that families with children are more affected by poverty than those without. However, despite everything, the difference is relatively small. It is when we start to break down the types of families with children that we are able to find results that show us how child poverty is constructed within the family. Indeed, there are two types of families with children that stand out as having poverty rates well above average, single parents and families with two adults and three or more children (the same is true in 2020 to households with children and other compositions though we are speaking about a small category). The remaining family types have poverty rates below or similar to the overall rate.

These data allow us to question the reasons why this type of households is particularly vulnerable to poverty. In this sense, there are several reasons associated with the production of poverty and its reproduction, throughout individuals' lives and across generations. We have recently made an effort to systematise these reasons, having identified the three Ds of poverty (Divorce, Unemployment and Disease)[5] associated with context effects (labour market organization, state social support and conjuncture effects) (Diogo, *et al.*, 2021 moreover, following previous important studies of this type, in addition to those aforementioned, we would add: Bastos and Nunes, 2009, Batista and Perista, 2010, Diogo, 2007, Pereira, 2010, Pinto *et al.*, 2010 among others).

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[5] *In the work of Diogo et al., 2021 we have found the three D's of poverty. In Portuguese language, Divórcio (Divorce), Desemprego (Unemployment) and Doença (Disease).*

The generic reasons for the production and reproduction of poverty we have discussed apply to children and families with children. We understand, however, that there may be some specificities that help explain the higher incidence of child poverty. Among these specificities we highlight one that is associated to the three D's of poverty, which is the Divorce[6], as it leaves an adult - usually, but not exclusively, the mother - to bear all the household expenses, something that was previously supported by two adults. This, notwithstanding the fact that judicial demands for the family contribution of both spouses in the feeding and education expenses of the children are common, being, however, frequent the non-compliance especially on the part of the father of the so-called "alimony". Even with the State replacing the defaulting parent, this additional amount may not be enough to lift a single-parent family out of poverty. While divorce has several impacts on the lives of individuals, the existence of children increases the number of people among whom one must divide the shrinking income and, therefore, the likelihood of the family being or falling into poverty.

A second specificity is associated to State social support, two kinds of which have a particular impact on children. First, the issue of schooling, either through the support to School Social Action or the support to school success. If the latter is not visible in the poverty numbers, we believe that it is more important given that, as we have mentioned, a situation of failure and dropping out of school, embodied in a low level of schooling, has long-lasting impacts throughout the life of individuals. They may, in fact, partially explain the persistence of poverty throughout individuals' lives and across generations identified in several studies (Costa *et al.*, 2008, Alves, 2015, Diogo *et al.*, 2021).

A second area of government support where some explanation for higher child poverty may be found is associated with work-family reconciliation support. These should enable the adults in a given household to harness their full productive potential, and thus maximize family income. There is a high possibility that one of the adults, usually the mother, will have to take care of the children and therefore not contribute financially to the household. Mobilizing the family as a provider (particularly the caring and educational role of grandparents or other relatives) has important limitations, since it is not within the reach of most individuals and is something that is seen as a gift rather than a right (cf. Diogo and Roque, 2002 and Diogo *et al.*, 2021).

But the most important factor is clearly, in our view, the direction of the State's social transfers, which are very much focused on pensions and very little on other things, such as family allowance, School Social Action or work-family reconciliation. Regarding family allowance, we recall the work of Karin Wall's team who identified this social support measure as one of the most affected by the budget cuts imposed by the troika (Wall, *et al.*, 2015), but also Sarmento *et al.*, 2015. On the reduction in social benefits because of this crisis (2008-2014), see Rodrigues, Figueiras and Junqueiro (2016). Moreover, Sarmento *et al.* (2015), regarding the same crisis, note that children were particularly vulnerable to its effects.

Finally, one should not forget the various ways in which adult household members relate to the labour market, where the issues of unemployment, precariousness, informality, and carousel employment trajectories, as well as low wages, including for those who have long been permanent employees, stand out (cf. Diogo *et al.*, 2021). These issues have an impact on wages and, through wages, on the incomes available to all members of each household. But this is another matter altogether.

We end by alerting to the contrast between the poverty figures and Portugal's condition as a country where there are few children (as we have done before, Diogo, 2018). A country where generations are not renewed, where the synthetic fertility index in 2019 was 1.43 children per woman when the replacement of generations required at least 2.1. It is a paradox that the high child poverty figures coincide in a country where it can be claimed that there is a lack of children. But the paradox is the very condition of childhood in contemporary society (Qvortrup, 1991)...

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[6] *In D for divorce, we include the break-up of de facto unions, since for all intents and purposes it is identical to divorce.*

In order to overcome this tendency, we need to improve social and public policies targeting child poverty. A fundamental issue is universal access to quality early childhood education and care (o to 3 years old), considering life-long impacts on individuals lives. Another concern when building social policies targeting child poverty is a particular attention to the low income of families where these children are raised in, namely the need to increase and integrate social transfers, and the development of the Decent Work Agendas, especially on family-work balance. A third policy trend is a territory-based policy, namely in the scope of the European Child Guarantee, allowing a proper diagnosis and intervention that comprises on target responses to children living in poverty and their specific problems.

5. Funding

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