

## Covering child poverty in Berlin, Germany

I gathered and analyzed data from the city regarding child poverty resulting in a map of the most affected areas and a line graph showing the number of children depending on social welfare (both visualizations can be seen in the original post, link below).

### More than just tutoring

Children from poor families rarely manage to climb the economic ladder in Germany. When they do succeed it is usually due to the work of individuals.

Salim\*, 17 years old, a little fuzz already showing above his lips and on his cheekbones, is bent over an orange book: 'The Physicist' by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. He is supposed to write an analysis on it, all other tables are vacant. It is the last day of school before the Whitsun holidays in late May. Salim is not the first in his family to be sitting at one of these tables: More than ten years ago, his big brother was here to get help with his homework. Now Salim is spending his afternoons in the youth institution LeLeKie in Berlin-Wedding.

From elementary school to high school graduation, LeLeKie (short for 'Life and Learning in the neighborhood') helps everyone who comes through the beige door, a laughing sun glued to its glass pane. Some even continue to come during their first years of college. 'Homework is the ticket,' says Evelyn Blaschke, a woman in her early 60's, her hair is curly and gray and she is wearing a turquoise blouse. She is a social worker and the boss. The society was founded in 1980 by a couple who helped children from the area with their homework. In 2006 Blaschke took over management. She lives in Wedding. The neighborhood is something special, neighbors help each other out, it almost feels as though there is a family togetherness about it. That's Wedding, she says. But Wedding also stands for impoverished children. In Berlin, the poorest children live in Mitte – Wedding is a part of the borough.

### Child poverty has been high for years

In November 2016 around 26,700 underaged children in Mitte lived in families that depended on social welfare. One of its most notorious programs in Germany is known as 'Hartz IV'. Families get a set amount of money each month and have to report to their local job center. Only the district of Neukölln has similarly high numbers. In both boroughs almost every second child was part of a Hartz-IV-family. In total, more than 170,000 children and adolescents live in poverty in Berlin, 77,500 of these kids are being raised by a single parent. In December 2016, around 1.7 million children under the age of 15 were financially supported by Hartz IV throughout Germany. This is almost 100,000 more than three years ago. The number of affected children has been at this high level for many years, and keeps rising. 'We see that equal opportunity in Germany is not getting worse, but it is not getting any better either', says Reinhard Pollak from the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB). He wrote his dissertation on equal opportunities through education.

Social disadvantage has far-reaching consequences, particularly children with a migrant background are affected by educational inequality. Yet a good education would help many to move into the middle class. According to Pollak 'Germany is comparatively rigid in terms of educational advancement. Educational inequalities are very pronounced. Parents have a great

influence on their children's education. Also, in Germany, academic degrees play a crucial role in one's future life.'

An analysis by the Federal Statistical Office in 2016 concluded that the parents' education played a crucial role in their children's future academic successes. The children's chance to go to a secondary school preparing students for college is in direct correlation to the educational level of the parents. The lower their education is, the less likely it becomes for their children to visit a preparatory school, such as a grammar school. This relation is evident at all educational levels. While initiatives like the LeLeKie in Wedding can help reduce inequality, their capabilities are limited.

### **The idyll is deceptive**

In the Malplaquetstraße where the youth center of Evelyn Blaschke is located the social classes mix. Mothers push expensive strollers, on the corner is a hip burger shop and a coffee shop with colorful bicycles in front of it. Adults in bomber jackets and rolled-up, tight jeans sit in front of it and sip Coke. But there's also the German Child Protection Association in the same street. Blaschke has been there several times when she needed help for a case of child endangerment. The problems that children from the neighborhood face, range from difficult school assignments over arguments with parents or friends and petty crime to abuse, forced marriage and fleeing from their own family. LeLeKie tries to give children a different perspective with the aid of education, but the means are limited.

Evelyn Blaschke is the only one employed in the society, there is one additional freelance position. The rest of the colleagues work voluntarily, most of them are students. Her requests for more money or additional job postings have always been rejected, she says, even though they have many more students looking for help than they technically have room for: 60 children were in the facility at once at peak times, usually there are around 30. 'Then I have four children at a table, one paints, the second is currently learning to write, the third does 12<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics and the fourth is learning geography at an eighth grade level', says Blaschke. The 32 hours she is paid for never suffice, she laughs loudly. Blaschke has a hard and strong laughter, the long nacre earrings are constantly jingling when she speaks. She knows why she is so committed to this cause. Again and again she has seen that with a little support children achieve way more than parents and teachers thought they were capable of. They are successful in grammar school or got a college degree.

### **A first contact**

Blaschke and her staff are often the first Germans the children meet, in addition to their teachers. The majority comes from Turkish, Arab, Kurdish and Bulgarian families. The facility is a protected space for them and, to some, a second home. Danaa\* says that often. The 26-year-old, jeans, long hair, heavily mascaraed eyelashes, permanent make-up, visits Evelyn today for no particular reason, just to talk. She has been coming to the club for 17 years, every day, often several times a day. And Salim says 'When I'm not at school or at home, I'm always here.'

Institutions like the society in Wedding can be a way to help economically disadvantaged children but ultimately the city, the state and the federal government need to be held accountable. Apart from more targeted support in schools, the school system must be more

open, says Pollak. He has observed that children tend to switch from top to bottom rather than rising from lower school to a higher school. Meanwhile, Evelyn Blaschke does her utmost. If necessary, she tutors a young woman for an upcoming big exam for several weekends. Meanwhile she has extended the opening hours of the facility until 9 pm ‘because I’m already working overtime anyway’.

*Note: \* The names have been changed but are known to the editors.*

See original text (German): <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2017-05/kinderarmut-hartz-iv-deutschland-projekt-berlin-ausbildung/komplettansicht>