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Multi-child families in Poland – demographic and social characteristics

Abstract: This article aims to provide a demographic and social overview of multi-child families over the last two decades, based on available data. It will present trends relating to large families and changes to their numbers and structures, based on information obtained from the last three National Censuses (2002, 2011 and 2021). Referring to Bożenna Balcerzak-Paradowska's concept of 'large families as an environmental characteristic', key changes in the situation of multi-child families will be highlighted. Changes in parents' education, income and risk of poverty confirm that multi-child families are evolving in nature and diversity.

Keywords: multi-child family, large family, demography of families

Introduction

The subject of families with multiple children is rarely the focus of academic research, and there is a lack of empirical studies examining the social situation of such families [Köppe, Curran 2025]. The main reason for this is that families with multiple children are treated as a disappearing phenomenon, despite being viewed as a source of Poland's demographic potential just two decades ago [Kancelaria Senatu 2006: 3]. The 2004 'Tenets of Population Policy in Poland' stated: 'From the perspective of increasing fertility levels, families with multiple children are the group that deserves support within the framework of population policy' [RRL 2006: 15].

From a sociodemographic perspective, although multi-child families constituted a minority, a relatively large number of children grew up in them. The conditions in which these children grew up affected the quantitative and qualitative potential of the younger generation and the future state of Polish society. Research carried out by Bożena Balcerzak-Paradowska in the 1990s presented having many children

as a characteristic of the environment. Multi-child families were most likely to be found among families living in rural areas with low levels of parental education and professional qualifications, a different income structure to smaller families (with a higher proportion of income coming from farming and social benefits), and a higher risk of unemployment and poverty [Balcerzak-Paradowska 2004: 130]. The [2014: 32] document 'Recommendations of the Government Population Council [RRL] on the population policy of Poland' also included multi-child families, primarily in the social context as a category of families in need of support due to their difficult situation. Irena Kowalska [2006: 11-26] argues that having multiple children was a factor that hindered the overall decline in fertility or reduced population loss in Poland in the second half of the 20th century. The question arises whether in the current century, large families could be a remedy for extremely low fertility rates. Has the nature of large families changed in recent decades, and are they now more a matter of choice among women with higher education than an 'environmental characteristic'?

This article aims to present the demographic and social characteristics of multi-child families over the last two decades, based on existing data. Using birth statistics from the Central Statistical Office (GUS, now Statistics Poland) and data from the Human Fertility Database (HFD), it will demonstrate how trends in large families are developing. The analysis will include data on large families from the last three national censuses (2002, 2011 and 2021). This is the most important source of statistical information on families. The census survey's methodology and regularity make it possible to trace changes in the number and structure of families in Poland. Additionally, the changes in the socio-economic status of multi-child families will be examined, particularly with regard to the education of parents and the family income situation. This will be based, *inter alia*, on the Household Budget Survey and the European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

The disappearance of the multi-child family

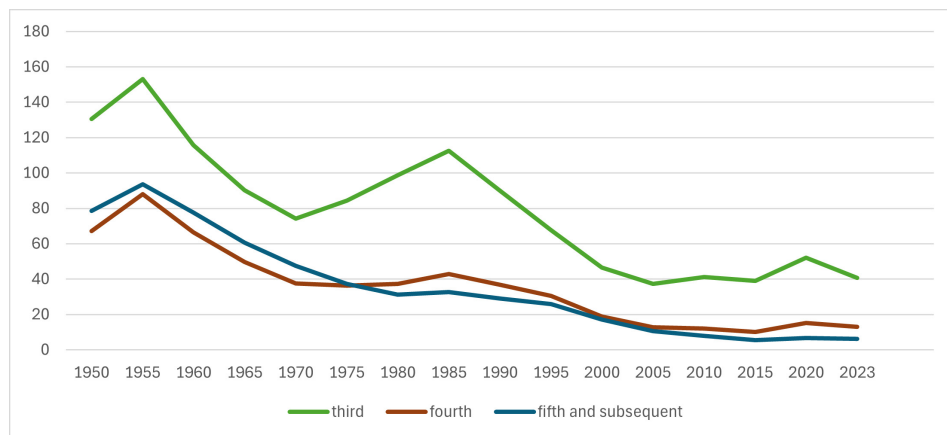
In traditional rural communities, families tended to have many children. Due to the high child mortality rate and prevailing customs and religious norms, marriages were arranged at an early age and couples did not control their fertility. According to demographic transition theory, the decline in the number of children is seen as a result of modernisation processes. As society progressed, the desired family size decreased, and the development and proliferation of birth control meant that couples could limit the number of children they had.

The large number of children in Polish families in the first half of the twentieth century resulted from two factors: more numerous births among rural women and the transfer of this model to urban areas through migration. After the Second World War, promoting large families was one of the elements of the state's pronatalist policy, intended to facilitate the biological reconstruction of society. However, from the mid-1950s onwards, anti-natalist ideas began to emerge, and small families (with three children at most) became the social norm as they were considered easier and cheaper to support [Dzienio, Latuch 1983: 258]. The liberalisation of abortion in the second half of the 1950s, coupled with the lack of other measures to provide social and welfare support to families with children, contributed significantly to the rapid decline in the birth rate. Difficult economic conditions facing multi-child families, including the housing crisis, as well as the increased consumer aspirations of younger generations, reinforced the reluctance to expand a family. However, in Poland, unlike in other socialist countries, decisions on parenthood were influenced more strongly by cultural and socio-economic factors than by legislation on pregnancy termination [ibid.: 162]. As family sizes decreased, the understanding and definition of a 'large family' changed. At the beginning of the 20th century, a large family was one with at least six children. By the 1930s, the term 'multi-child family' referred to families with five or more children. In the first post-war decades, it referred to families with at least four children [Smoliński 1975: 199-215]. From the 1970s onwards, a family was considered to have multiple children if they had at least three, as determined by social considerations. This was because the birth of a third child often meant a significant deterioration in the family's financial situation [Balcerzak-Paradowska 1997]. From a demographic perspective, however, a multi-child family meant expanded generational replacement. Until the 1990s, the term still referred to a family with at least four children.

In demographic literature, families with multiple children are frequently considered from the perspective of the woman, who is essentially the identifying unit of the family. The term 'family size' is replaced by 'birth order'. In this classification, the first, second and third births are considered to be of low birth order, while the fourth and subsequent births are considered to be of high birth order [Pressat 2014: 55]. However, the declining willingness of women to have a fourth or subsequent child means that, currently, higher birth order children are now those born third in the family [RRL 2006]. We can observe changes in family size over the past 70 years by examining birth statistics, such as the number and distribution of births by order (see Figures 1 and 2). In 1955, the peak of the post-war baby boom was reached with more than 790,000 children born, of which more than 330,000 (42%)

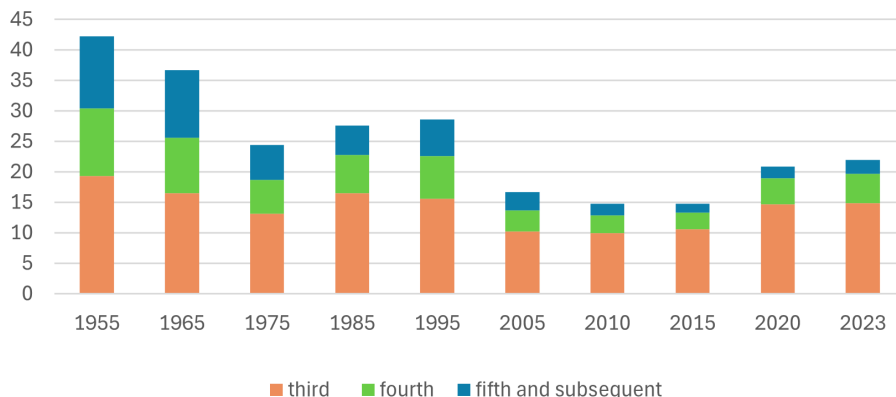
were higher-order births – 19% were third births, 11% were fourth births and 12% were fifth or subsequent births. However, by the second half of the 1950s, the average family size was already decreasing, and the number of third births fell by a third in the following two decades. The reduction in fourth, fifth and subsequent births was even greater (their share was halved). At the end of the 1970s, there was a periodic increase in higher-order births in Poland. This was primarily due to changes in the size and composition of the female population — the larger cohorts of women born in the 1950s were reaching the age at which they would give birth to their third or subsequent child. However, since the mid-1990s, the downward trend has resumed. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, only 15% of births were third or subsequent (10% third, 3% fourth, and less than 2% fifth or subsequent). The increase in higher-order births observed after 2015 is again due to the cohort factor (i.e. births to the baby-boom generation of the late 1970s and early 1980s), but it could also be due to an improved labour market situation or the introduction of the Family 500+ programme [Szukalski 2018: no. 3] (a Polish social benefit offering a non-means-tested 500 PLN per family per child per month, introduced in 2016 and later expanded in scope and level of support).

Figure 1: Number of higher-order births (third, fourth, fifth and subsequent), 1950–2023 (1,000)



Source: GUS (Statistics Poland), 'Table 6: Urodzenia żywe według kolejności urodzenia dziecka u matki w latach 1960-2023'; data for the years 1950 and 1955: [Dzienio, Latuch 1983: 59].

Figure 2: Proportion of higher-order births (third, fourth, fifth and subsequent) in selected years (%)



Source: GUS (Statistics Poland), 'Table 6: Urodzenia żywe według kolejności urodzenia dziecka u matki w latach 1960-2023'; data for the years 1950 and 1955: [Dzienio, Latuch 1983: 59].

The change is primarily evident in the decline of the percentage of women with three or more children (see *Figure 3*). The trend towards a lower number of offspring can also be seen when analysing data on the completed total fertility rate¹ of women who have reached the end of their reproductive period (i.e. aged 44 or over)². The change is primarily related to the decrease in the proportion of women with three or more children (see *Figure 3*). Among women born in the 1950s, one third had at least three children. This proportion fell among subsequent generations, with the most significant change occurring among those born in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s. Among women born at the end of the 1970s, only 15% had multiple children.

According to the researchers, procreation intentions are shaped at a young age and influenced by social norms regarding family size and by the family context, while institutional contexts may influence whether these plans can be realised [Bachrarch, Morgan 2013: 459-488]. Those born in the 1950s often grew up in large families, which influenced their intention to have more children and their choice

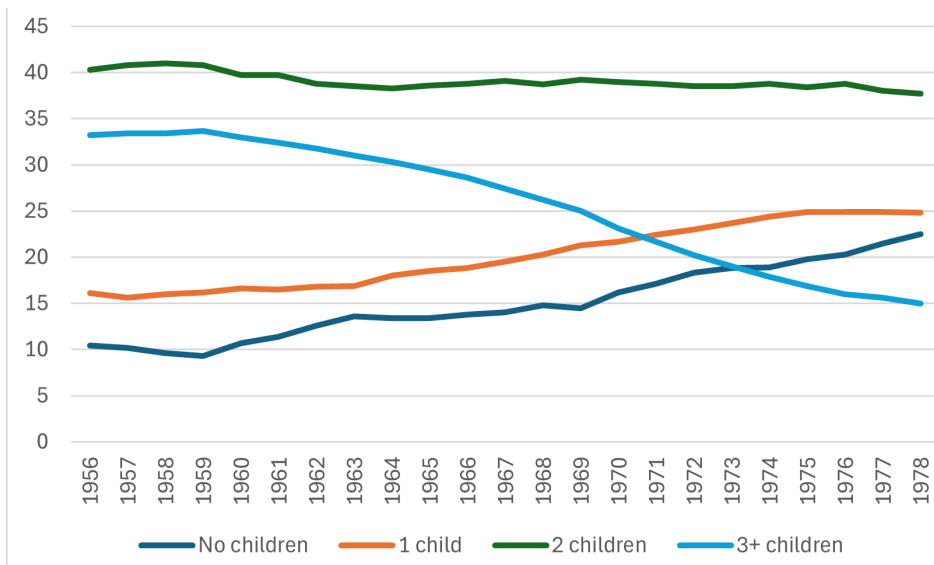
¹ The Completed Total Fertility Rate (CTFR) is a measure showing the average number of children born to a cohort of women by the end of their childbearing years. It is a more reliable measure than the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), which is based on data from a single year.

² Human Fertility Database, <https://www.humanfertility.org/> (accessed 26 August 2025).

to implement the larger family model more frequently. Reflecting the family size norms formed in childhood, one in three women of the 1950s generation chose to have multiple children. The decline in fertility among younger generations may be both a cause of and a consequence of changing cultural norms regarding family size.

Another explanation for the higher prevalence of higher-order children among older generations was unintended multiple pregnancies, which were due to the ineffectiveness of contraceptives at the time. The availability of modern contraceptives for younger generations meant a reduction in unplanned conceptions [Beaujouan, Berhammer 2019: 507-535].

Figure 3: Women in Poland by number of offspring, generations born in 1956–1978



Source: Human Fertility Database, Parity distribution.

Throughout the period under consideration, the proportion of women with two children remained fairly stable at around 40%. Meanwhile, the proportion of women with one child increased, rising from 16% among the 1950s generation to almost 25% among the late 1970s generation. Additionally, the proportion of childless women doubled, rising from 10% among the 1950s generation to 22% among those born in the late 1970s. Whereas the high proportion of women

with many children previously compensated for the birth deficit associated with childlessness or having only one child, today, more than one-fifth of women remain childless, and a further 25% have only one child. Only 15% of women have multiple children.

The [2004: 15] document ‘Tenets of Population Policy in Poland’ attempted to identify the causes of the decreasing number of multi-child families. According to the authors, this was due to changing attitudes towards marriage and parenthood, as well as a preference for having fewer children. Due to increased educational and professional aspirations, women postponed decisions about having children and limited the number they had. Initially, this process applied more to urban areas, but it later extended to rural areas as well. Attitudes towards having many children were influenced by unfavourable living conditions for larger families, among other factors. The decreasing number of families with multiple children is also due to people getting married and having their first children later in life [GUS 2019: 143]. Couples are increasingly postponing the decision to have children until they have achieved professional stability. The average age of mothers at the birth of their first child (which has increased by five years since the 1990s) not only delays subsequent births but also reduces the number of children a woman can have in her lifetime. Nowadays, women give birth to their first child just before their thirties, whereas their mothers had already had their third child by this age on average. The significant postponement of motherhood has also led to an increase in unrealised fertility (unintentional childlessness), which is linked to the decline in fertility in older reproductive age groups. Problems conceiving or carrying a pregnancy to term can prevent women from having their first or subsequent children [Duszczuk, Fihel et al. 2014: 56].

For many years, experts have focused on the issue of childlessness and low fertility rates, searching for solutions to help couples have their first or second child. In contrast, the decline in the number of families with multiple children is less frequently studied and is often taken for granted as an inevitable consequence of social progress and women’s choices. However, the disappearance of multi-child families has consequences that go beyond demographic issues. The sociocultural aspects are equally important. The cultural model of the large family is sustained by both the experience of living in a large family and the presence of such families in society. Although social surveys indicate that Poles most frequently want to have two children (46–47% of respondents), the large family remains an

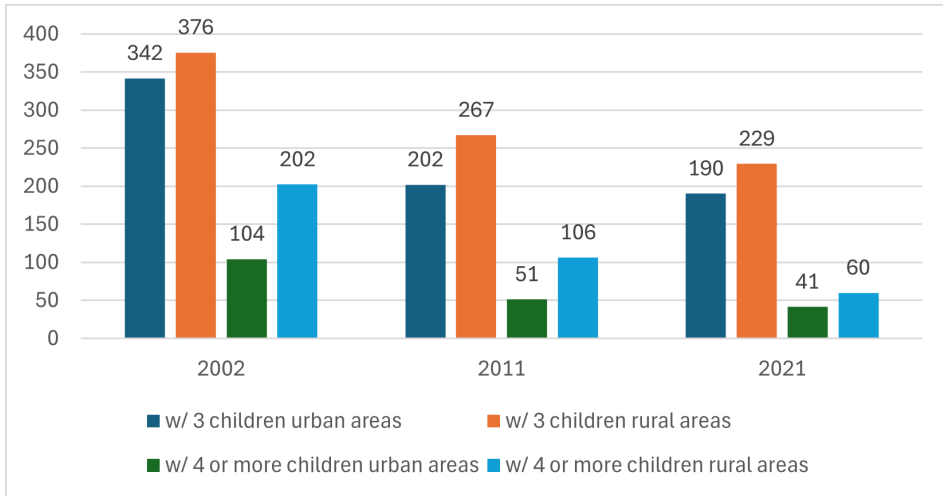
aspiration. More than one-fifth of Poles (22%) want to have three children, while a further 10% want to have four or more [CBOS 2022]. Another survey, which only included respondents under the age of 40, suggests that younger generations are less supportive of families with multiple children, and more supportive of childless families and families with one child [CBOS 2023]. This can be linked to the growing number of childless couples and the increasing number of children growing up without siblings.

Multi-child families, as recorded in population censuses

In the censuses, families with children are recorded in two cross-sections: 1) the total number of children, regardless of their age, and 2) the number of dependent children up to 24 years of age. According to the 2021 National Census [GUS 2023], of the 7.8 million families with recorded children, nearly 90% have one or two children (54% and 35%, respectively). This means that only slightly more than 10% are multi-child families. Of these, there are approximately 830,000 families, almost 80% of which (i.e. 650,000) have three children. There are just over 180,000 families with four or more children. Examining only families with dependent children under 24 years of age (of which there are 4.9 million), we find that 520,000 of these are multi-child families (just under 11% of families in this category). Of these, 420,000 have three children, and slightly more than 100,000 have four or more children. The following discussion will focus on analysing data on families with dependent children under 24, as this group is the focus of family policy.

According to census data, the number of families with multiple children has been decreasing steadily. The sharpest decline was recorded between 2002 and 2011, with the number of such families falling by almost 40% (from 1,024,000 to 627,000). In the most recent inter-census period (2011–2021), the number of large families fell by 17%. Overall, the vast majority of multi-child families (80%) have three children, while the proportion of families with four or more children is decreasing – from 30% in 2002 to 25% in 2011 and less than 20% in 2021. Particularly large declines have been recorded among families with four or more children: in urban areas, their number decreased by 60% (from 104,000 in 2002 to 41,000 in 2021), and by 70% in rural areas (from 202,000 to 60,000). Until 2011, there were twice as many families with at least four children in rural areas as in urban areas. However, by 2021, this gap had narrowed (see *Figure 4*).

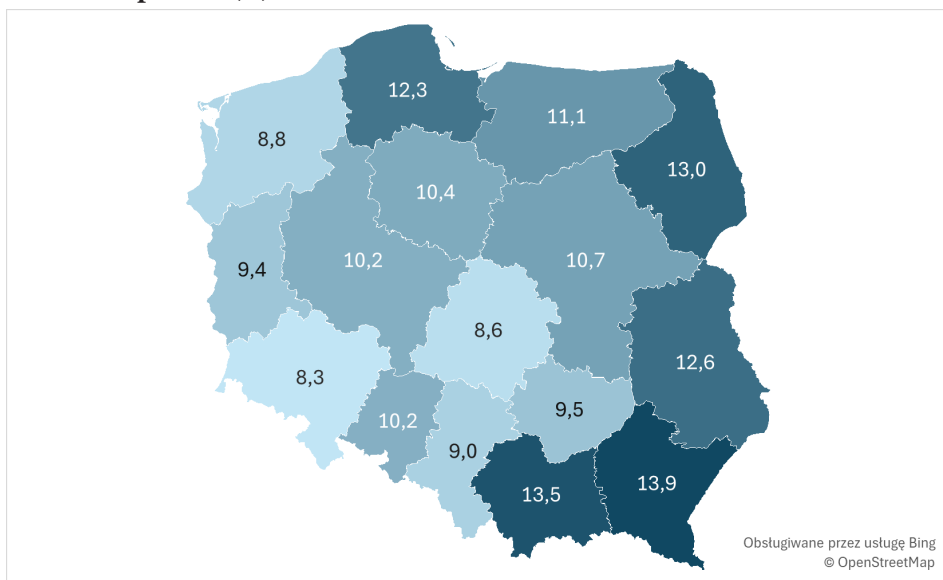
Figure 4: Number of families with 3 children and with 4 or more dependent children up to 24 years of age, in urban and rural areas (1,000)



Source: Statistics Poland (GUS), National Census (NC) 2002, NC 2011, NC 2021.

For many years, significant regional differences in the proportion of large families persisted regionally, mainly due to historical and cultural factors. In 2002, the highest percentage of families with three or more children among those with dependent children up to 24 years of age was recorded in the Podkarpackie/Subcarpathian (24.9%) and Podlaskie (22.1%) voivodeships, while the lowest percentage was recorded in the Łódzkie/Łódź (12.6%) and Śląskie/Silesian (12.8%) voivodeships. By 2011, the Podkarpackie/Subcarpathian (16.3%) and the Małopolskie/Lesser Poland (14.7%) voivodeships had the highest proportions, while the Dolnośląskie/Lower Silesian (8.5%) and the Śląskie/Silesian (8.7%) voivodeships had the lowest. According to the most recent census data from 2021, the highest proportion of large families was again recorded in the Podkarpackie/Subcarpathian (13.9%) and Małopolskie/Lesser Poland (13.5%) voivodeships, and the lowest in the Dolnośląskie/Lower Silesian (8.3%) and Łódzkie/Łódź (8.6%) voivodeships.

Map 1: Families with 3 or more dependent children up to 24 years of age by voivodeship, 2021 (%)



Source: National Census (NC) 2021.

With the general decline in the percentage of families with multiple children, the gap between regions is also decreasing. The eastern and south-eastern voivodeships, which traditionally had a higher proportion of large families (mainly in rural areas), are converging with the rest of the country, which has a dominant model of families with a small number of children. In 2002, every fifth family in these voivodeships was large; in the Podkarpackie/Subcarpathian Voivodeship, it was even one in four families. By 2021, however, only one in eight families in the eastern and south-eastern provinces was large, and in the Podkarpackie/Subcarpathian Voivodeship, it was only one in seven families. These changes are the result of migration and ageing, as well as evolving attitudes and values.

According to census data, the majority of large families (77%) comprise married couples, with more than 400,000 recorded in 2021. Single-parent families, i.e. mothers or fathers raising at least three children alone, accounted for 12.2% and 1.4% respectively. Compared to 2002, the number of single-parent families with many children decreased by 30,000 (30%), and in 2021, there were approximately 71,000 such families, accounting for 14% of multi-child families. Conversely, the number of informal unions with multiple children increased, rising from

approximately 17,000–18,000 between 2002 and 2011 to over 49,000 in the most recent census, accounting for 9% of multi-child families.

According to the 2021 Census, 1.7 million children are brought up in multi-child families, accounting for 21% of all children up to 24 years of age (almost one in five). This figure was 3.6 million (33%, or one in three children) in 2002. If we consider only families with four or more children, there are over 440,000 children raised in those families, constituting 5.6% of the total – in other words, one in every 18 children is raised in such a family. In 2002, this figure stood at almost 1.4 million children, representing 13% of the total – almost one in eight children.

From a demographic perspective, multi-child status is determined by biological children. However, with an increase in divorces and subsequent live-in relationships, including remarriages and informal partnerships, there has been an increase in reconstituted multi-child families. These families comprise children from previous relationships and those born to a new partner. From a sociological perspective, children living in the same family or household are considered. In patchwork families, children are not biologically related but grow up together as social siblings. German researchers refer to these as ‘families with a large number of children’ (*Mehrkindfamilien*) [Bujard, Brehm et al. 2019]. The recorded increase in the number of informal relationships in Poland, including partners raising children (rising from 110,000 in 2002 to over 560,000 in 2021), coincides with an increase in the proportion of couples raising three or more children (rising from 2% to 9% over the same period). Over 730,000 children are being raised in informal relationships, more than one-fifth of whom (163,000) are in multi-child families. However, it is difficult to estimate the scale of multi-child patchwork families from census data, as this is based on the concept of the biological family.

Multi-child families according to EU-SILC data

In light of the census data, it is clear that the number of multi-child families in Poland is declining. However, the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey reveals slightly different findings. In 2024, large families accounted for 13% of EU households with children, including households with three children (10%) and with four or more (3%). It is worth mentioning that, on average, half of European families have children who grow up without siblings. The highest proportion was found in Malta and Portugal (over 60%), and the lowest in Slovenia and the Netherlands (just over 40%). The second most prevalent household type in the EU has two children, accounting for just below

40% of households (the highest proportion is in Slovenia at 46%, and the lowest in Malta at 28%, with Poland at 36%). While the proportion of households with one child in Poland has decreased by over 10 percentage points in the last decade (falling from 54% in 2016 to 43% in 2024), the proportion of families with two children has remained stable, and the proportion of households with at least three children has risen by almost 10 percentage points (increasing from 10.2% in 2017 to 20% in 2024). In addition to Poland, large families are also common in Ireland (19.5%) and Finland (16.8%). The lowest proportions are found in Portugal (5.6%), Bulgaria (7.8%), and Lithuania (8.1%). The highest percentages of families with three children are recorded in Ireland (14.5%), Poland (13.9%) and Finland (12.4%), while the lowest percentages are recorded in Portugal (4.7%), Malta (5.5%) and Bulgaria (5.8%). Among families with four or more children, the highest shares were recorded in Poland (6.1%), Ireland (5%) and Sweden (4.6%), while the lowest were recorded in Portugal (0.9%), Italy (1.1%), Cyprus and the Czech Republic (1.7% each). Poland has seen a rise in the proportion of multi-child households, particularly those with four or more children. This proportion has doubled in the past three years, rising from 3% in 2022 to 6% in 2024³.

Characteristics of multi-child families – selected aspects

Place of residence

Data on the geographical distribution of multi-child families have already been presented, albeit partially, in an earlier section of this article, and are shown in Table 1 below. In 2002, one in four rural families had multiple children; by 2021, this figure had fallen to one in seven. Nevertheless, the majority (56%) of these families still live in rural areas. By contrast, the proportion of families with multiple children in towns and cities increased slightly (by 4 percentage points) during the most recent inter-census period, reaching 44%. This increase was particularly evident among families with four or more children. While only a third of such families had lived in urban areas in the previous census, this figure had risen to over 40% by 2021. The general trend is a decline in the number of multi-child families. A more extreme dynamic of change has been observed in rural areas, continuing the downward trend among younger generations of rural women that was first observed in the 1990s. In cities, the number of multi-child families has decreased by 9% since 2011. In rural areas, the decline was over 22%. It should be noted that the censuses did not take into account the division of rural areas into

³ Eurostat, 'Distribution of Households with Children by Number of Children', EU-SILC, https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LVPH05 (accessed 20 July 2025).

agglomeration and non-agglomeration zones, which could further diversify the territorial distribution of multi-child families. Some families with children have moved to rural municipalities near large cities due to lower housing costs.

Table 1: Number of multi-child families in urban and rural areas (1,000) and as a percentage of all families with dependent children up to 24 years of age (%)

Specification	2002		2011		2021	
	Number (1,000)	%	Number (1,000)	%	Number (1,000)	%
Total number of families with 3+ children	1,024.0	16.8	626.8	11.5	520.8	10.7
<i>Including:</i>						
Families with 3+ children, urban areas	446.2	11.8	253.3	7.9	231.6	8.4
of which families with:						
3 children	341.8	9.0	202.0	6.3	190.2	6.9
4 or more children	104.4	2.8	51.3	1.6	41.4	1.5
Families with 3+ children, rural areas	577.9	25.2	373.5	16.6	289.3	13.8
of which families with:						
3 children	375.7	16.4	267.2	11.9	229.3	10.9
4 or more children	202.2	8.8	106.3	4.7	60.0	2.9

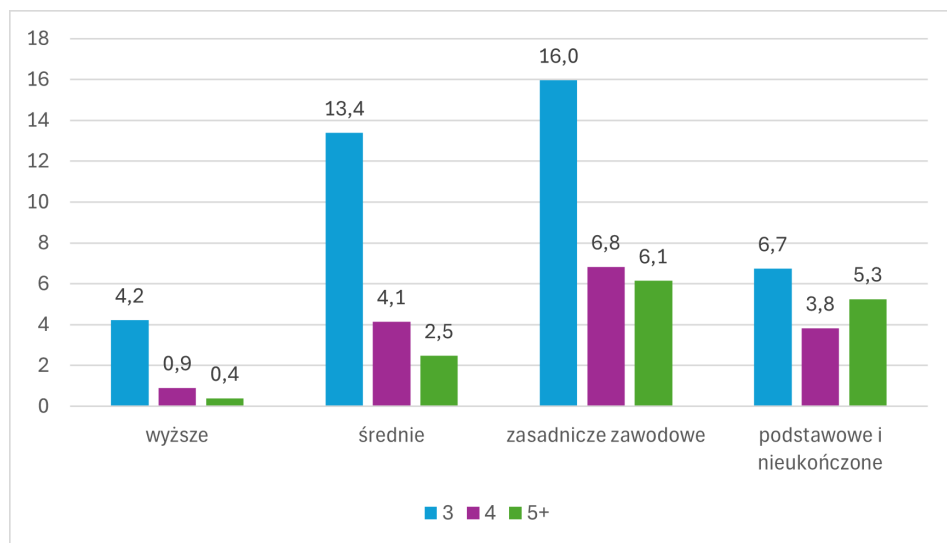
Source: Statistics Poland (GUS); National Census (NC) 2002; NC 2011; NC 2021.

Educational level attained by parents with multiple children

Over the last 20 years, there has been a significant change in the educational background of parents in multi-child families. The education of parents was addressed in the 2002 and 2011 National Population Censuses. The educational level attained by women aged 16–49 who had given birth was surveyed. In [2002], among married couples with at least three dependent children under the age of 24 (of which there were over 900,000, accounting for almost 90% of families in this category), only 10% were couples where at least one spouse had received a higher education. The largest share consisted of married couples with secondary education (41%) and basic vocational education (40%). Slightly over 8% had the lowest level of education (primary or incomplete education). Interestingly, educational heterogamy in favour of women was not uncommon among couples with higher and secondary education (39% and 46%, respectively). According to data from

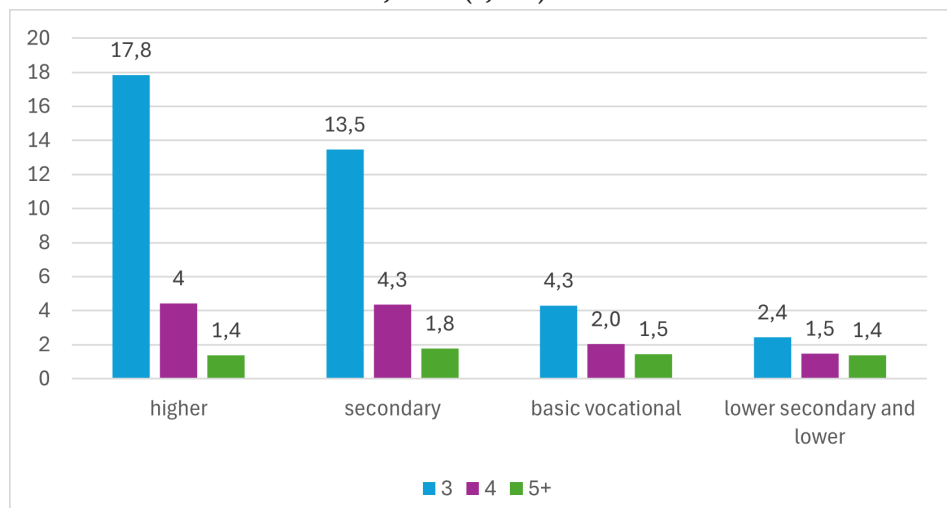
the 2011 National Population Census, only 12% of women aged 16-49 who had given birth to at least three children (895,000 women) had received a higher education. Over 50% had received a basic vocational education or less, and one-third of mothers of three or more children had received a secondary education. The 2021 census did not collect data on parents' education, but birth registers may provide information on this topic. To facilitate comparison, data on higher-order births (i.e. third, fourth, fifth, and subsequent births) in 2002 and 2023 will be examined (see Figures 5 and 6). In 2002, the largest proportion of third and subsequent births (approximately 30,000, i.e. over 40%) was among women with basic vocational education, while the smallest proportion of higher-order births (5,500, i.e. 8%) was among women with higher education. In 2023, the highest number of third and subsequent births was among women with higher education (approximately 24,000, i.e. over 40% of births), whereas among women with vocational education, there were only 8,000 higher-order births (i.e. 14%). Over the past two decades, the proportion of higher-order births among women with secondary education has remained relatively stable (approximately 20,000, accounting for around 28% of births in 2002 and 35% in 2023). Additionally, the number of such births among women with the lowest level of education decreased significantly (falling from 16,000, or 22% of such births in 2002, to 5,000, or 9%, in 2023).

Figure 5: Higher-order births (third, fourth, fifth, and subsequent children) by the mother's level of education, 2002 (1,000)



Source: Own elaboration based on Statistics Poland (GUS), Demography Database (2002), Table 23: 'Births by birth order, mother's age, and level of education'.

Figure 6: Higher-order births (third, fourth, fifth, and subsequent children) by the mother's level of education, 2023 (1,000)



Source: Own elaboration based on Statistics Poland (GUS), Demography Database (2023), Table 23: 'Births by birth order, mother's age, and level of education'.

The educational boom among younger generations since the 1990s has resulted in a growing proportion of women with higher education giving birth (currently accounting for half of all births), and has also changed the educational profile of mothers with multiple children. This increase in educational attainment among mothers of multiple children has also impacted the age at which women give birth to higher-order children, with the average age at first and second birth rising the most over the last two decades (by 5.3 and 4.4 years, respectively). The median age at which women give birth to their third child has increased by three years, and by slightly over two years for their fourth child (in 2023, these ages were 33.2 and 34.8 years, respectively) [GUS 2023: 285].

Household income

Apart from the parents' level of education, another factor that confirms a family's social status is its financial situation. The more family members there are, the lower the household income tends to be. Having a larger number of children means higher living expenses, but it also means a longer period during which they require care (which may prevent both parents from working). Household available income has increased fourfold over the last two decades,⁴ and the income disparity

⁴ According to the 'Local Data Bank' of Statistics Poland, the average monthly available income per person increased from PLN 664 in 2002 to PLN 2,678 in 2023 [GUS 2023].

between multi-child families and those with fewer children has narrowed. In 2002, the disposable income in families with three children was almost half (46 %) that of families with one child (PLN 424 and PLN 790, respectively). The disparity was even greater for families with four or more children, at 60% (PLN 312 compared to PLN 790, respectively) [Balcerzak-Paradowska 2003: 132]. In 2023, the disposable income of families with three or more children was one-third lower than that of households with one child (PLN 1,885 and PLN 2,871 respectively; see Table 2). The income structure in multi-child families also changed; the proportion of income from work increased. In 2023, income from paid employment accounted for almost 79% (64% from hired work and 15% from self-employment), compared to slightly over 60% in 2011 (51% and 10%, respectively) [GUS 2023; GUS 2014: 148]. Furthermore, the proportion of income from farm work decreased from almost 14% in 2011 to just 1.4% in 2023[ibid.].

Table 2: Average monthly income per person in different types of families with children in 2023 (PLN)

Specification	Married couples with dependent children			Income of married couples with 1 child =100	
	1 child	2 children	3 or more children	2 children	3 or more children
	Polish zloty (PLN)			%	
Disposable income	2,870.64	2,452.00	1,885.14	85.4	65.7
including:					
income from hired work	2,077.94	1,684.35	1,199.08	81.1	57.7
income from self-employment	458.76	410.36	286.77	89.4	62.5
income from a private farm in agriculture	55.41	62.71	26.29	113.2	47.4
income from social benefits	95.14	32.03	27.26	33.7	28.7
income from other social benefits	143.46	226.51	317.19	157.9	221.1
including:					
child-raising benefit	121.42	200.84	271.10	165.4	223.3

Source: Statistics Poland (GUS), *Budżety gospodarstw domowych w 2023 roku. - tablice wynikowe za 2023 r. Household Budget Survey in 2023 - data tables for 2023*, Warszawa 2024, Tabl.20, Przeciętne miesięczne przychody na 1 osobę w gospodarstwach domowych według typu biologicznego, Table 20. Average monthly receipts per capita in households by biological type of household.

In 2024, a further improvement in the financial situation of households was recorded. This was primarily due to continued wage increases, including an increase in the minimum wage, as well as an increase in child benefit from PLN 500 to PLN 800. The increases were accompanied by a slowdown in the growth rate of prices for consumer goods and services [GUS 2025b: 26]. The disposable income of families with at least three children increased by 22% to PLN 2,303 per person. This was mainly due to a hike in child benefit.

In multi-child families, the proportion of income derived from social benefit is higher. In 2002, this accounted for 14% of income in families with three children and 22% in families with four or more children {Balcerzak-Paradowska 2004: 132}. In 2011, family benefit accounted for just over 6% of the income of families with at least three dependent children. This was the highest proportion for all types of family households [GUS 2014: 149]. The decline in the proportion of families receiving benefit observed in the first decade of the 2000s was not only due to increased income from work, but also to a reduction in the number of people eligible for such benefit. The low-income criterion (PLN 504) and its lack of indexation between 2004 and 2011 meant that some families exceeding the set thresholds lost their benefit as wages rose. This situation improved slightly in 2016 with the introduction of the 'zloty for a zloty' principle, whereby family benefits were no longer withdrawn once the income threshold was surpassed, but instead reduced proportionately to the increase in income. Following the introduction of the Family 500+ programme in 2016 and its extension to include the first child in 2019, the proportion of social benefits in family income increased again, as did the child benefit, which rose from PLN 500 to PLN 800. By 2024, social benefits accounted for nearly 21% of multi-child families' disposable income, around 19% of which was child benefit (compared to 17% and 14% in 2023, respectively). This benefit is proportionately higher in larger families than in smaller ones (less than 6% in families with one child and 11% in families with two children), confirming that it is an effective tool for reducing income disparity based on family size [GUS 2025].

Changes in families' economic situations are also reflected in their spending habits. In 2005, families with four or more children spent less than half as much as those with one child. For families with three children, the difference was slightly below 40%. Multi-child families were most burdened by food expenditure, which limited their ability to make other purchases and meet the cultural, sporting, and recreational needs of children and adolescents. In 2005, families with four or more

children spent over 38% of their total expenditure on food, compared to 33% for families with three children [GUS 20-7: 55].

In 2023, the total monthly spending of multi-child families amounted to PLN 1,220 per person, which was slightly over 30% lower than that of families with one child (see Table 3). The structure of expenditure did not differ significantly from that of families with few children (the major costs were food and housing, at 27% and 17% respectively). Notably, the proportion spent on education, recreation, and culture increased significantly; these were areas in which it was particularly challenging for large families to meet the needs of children and young people 20 years ago. The greatest disparity in 2023 was in health spending, which was 40% lower in large families than in families with one child. However, in 2002, this difference was as high as 60–70% [Balcerzak-Paradowska 2004: 133].

Table 3: Average monthly expenditures per person in different types of families with children in 2023 (PLN)

Specification	Married couples with dependent children			Spending of married couples with 1 child =100	
	1 child	2 children	3 children or more	2 children	3 children or more
	PLN			%	
Total expenditures	1,789.01	1,524.56	1,220.20	85.2	68.2
including:					
food and non-alcoholic beverages	453.78	390.07	329.17	86.0	72.5
clothing and footwear	85.69	78.30	61.07	91.4	71.3
housing usage of flats or houses and energy carriers	322.10	247.59	209.67	76.9	65.1
health	77.38	62.15	47.02	80.3	60.8
transportation	175.65	157.68	119.29	89.8	67.9
recreation and culture	136.77	124.08	101.92	90.7	74.5
education	34.95	37.20	36.98	106.4	105.8

Source: GUS 2024, Table 31. Average monthly outgoings per capita in households by biological type of household.

Data for 2024 indicates that the overall level of monthly spending per person in multi-child families increased by around 18% (to PLN 1,436). Compared to 2023,

the largest increases were in education and health (approximately 40%), as well as recreation and culture (35%) [GUS 2025b].

Poverty risk and income support

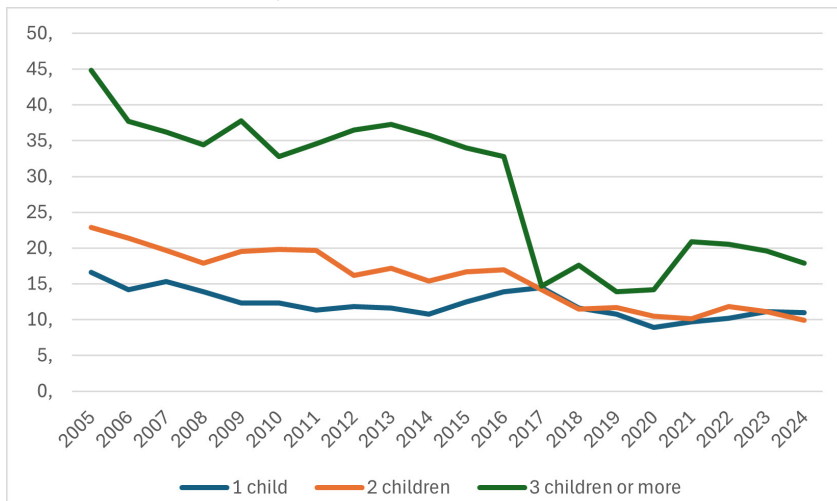
In terms of household types, single-parent families and large families with three or more children are more likely to be in poverty than couples with one or two children. This increased risk of poverty is referred to as *economic vulnerability* [Riederer, Młynarska et al. 2017]. However, it is not so much the number of children that increases this risk, but rather that these families often rely on a single income. Mothers with several children are more likely to be economically inactive for longer due to their increased childcare responsibilities. In this situation, households with multiple children are characterised by lower labour intensity.

Two decades ago, large families were the group most at risk of poverty, particularly those with four or more dependent children. By 2005, around 44% of families with at least four children and around 22% of those with three were living below the minimum subsistence level. In subsequent years, the incidence of extreme poverty among multi-child families decreased somewhat [GUS 2006]. In 2014, it affected 27% of families with at least four children and 11% of those with three children [GUS 2015]. Despite their formal entitlements, multi-child families did not, in reality, receive sufficient support to guarantee decent living conditions. Neither the family allowance system nor the social assistance system enabled these families to reach the minimum social threshold, due to the low-income criteria for entitlement to benefits and the low amounts of support provided. Between 2004 and 2015, the amount of family allowances for three children in families meeting the income criterion increased from approximately PLN 200 to PLN 370 per month, while the amount for four children increased from PLN 290 to PLN 530. These amounts also included child benefit for families with multiple children: PLN 50 was granted for the third and subsequent children, and from 2007 this increased to PLN 80 (after 2016, this allowance increased further and is currently worth PLN 95). However, the family benefits system has not been adapted to changing economic realities. Consequently, as wages increased, some families lost their entitlement to benefits because they exceeded the income threshold.

The financial situation of large families only improved significantly with the introduction of the Family 500+ programme. Information on this subject is provided by the European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey (see Figure 7).

According to the At Risk of Poverty Rate (AROP) indicator,⁵ the poverty level of multi-child families in Poland was one of the highest among EU Member States in 2005 (45%, compared to an EU average of around 27%). Over the next decade, the situation improved slightly, but the AROP rate for households consisting of two adults and at least three dependent children remained high, at 34% in 2015. This rate was not only higher than the EU average for this type of household (27.4%), but also significantly higher than the average poverty rates for the Polish population (17.4%) and all households with dependent children in Poland (20.5%). Following the introduction of the 500+ benefit, the rate fell to 14.7% in 2017 and to 13.9% in 2019, when the programme was extended to include the first child. Following the pandemic, however, the rate rose again, reaching 20.9%. A further hike in the benefit to PLN 800 per month prompted a decrease to 17.9% in 2024. This remains well below the average AROP rate for EU countries, which is over 27%. Although the difference compared to households in general, or households with children, has decreased markedly, multi-child families remain at a higher risk of poverty than smaller families. By way of comparison, the average poverty rate for the Polish population in 2024 was 13.3%, compared to 12.9% for all members of households with dependent children.

Figure 7: At Risk of Poverty (ARP) indicator for households consisting of two adults and children, by number of children (%)



Source: Eurostat, 'At-risk-of-poverty Rate by Poverty Threshold and Household Type', EU-SILC, https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LI03 (accessed 27 July 2025).

⁵ According to the *At Risk of Poverty* (ARP) indicator, a family/household is considered to be at risk of poverty if its income is less than 60% of the median income in a given country. This indicator takes into account income after social transfers.

Clearly, money transfers have improved the situation of multi-child families compared to families with one or two children, as in 2017, the poverty rate was very similar for both types of family (around 15%). However, the significant increase in the poverty rate among multi-child families after 2020, coupled with the ongoing disparity compared to smaller families in subsequent years, suggests that even substantial child benefits may not adequately protect these families in periods of high inflation and rising living costs.

National data on economic poverty in Poland also suggests an improvement in the financial situation of families. However, households with a large number of dependent children are still at a higher risk of extreme poverty.⁶ In 2024, the extreme poverty risk rate was 3.6% for families with at least three children, while in households with two children it was 2.5% and 1.6% for those with one dependent child. In 2023, these figures were 6.9%, 3.4% and 2.1%, respectively, for large families, families with two children and families with one child. This suggests that the higher child benefit reduced both the extent of the risk of extreme poverty for families with children and the differences determined by the number of dependent children [GUS 2025a].

An important form of financial support for families raising children was the family tax relief introduced in 2007. In the case of multi-child families, the adoption of the principle of scaling the amount of relief according to the number of children in the family in 2013 was significant. Since 2014, this has been set at PLN 2,000 for the third child and PLN 2,700 for each subsequent child. Additionally, the option to offset the tax deduction for children against paid social security contributions was introduced. However, the amount of the deduction has not increased since then. However, as part of the Polish Deal (Polski Ład) programme, a PIT-0 deduction was introduced for families with four or more children in 2022. Taxpayers with at least four children are entitled to a tax-free income exemption of up to PLN 85,528 per tax year, which either parent can claim. In 2022, 65,000 taxpayers took advantage of the relief, and this figure increased to approximately 69,000 in 2023. Unfortunately, the statistical information published by the Ministry of Finance [2023] does not include data on the family structure of those benefiting from tax relief.

⁶ Since 2017, studies by Statistics Poland (GUS) on the results of the Household Budget Survey have included data on multi-child families only in the category of households with at least three dependent children.

Conclusions

This article aimed to present the demographic and social characteristics of multi-child families over the last two decades, based on existing data. The review reveals significant changes in the number and composition of such families in Poland. National census data confirm that, since 2002, the number of multi-child families has halved, with rural areas being particularly affected by the decline. While large families currently represent just over 10% of households with dependent children under 24, they account for over 20% of children in Poland. The vast majority (77%) of multi-child families consist of married couples, although there has been an increase in the number of non-formalised relationships with more children. Based on the available data, it can be concluded that the characteristics of these families are changing and becoming more diverse. Multi-child families can no longer be considered a social or environmental feature, nor can they be equated with poor rural families with low levels of parental education. The number of such families in urban areas (44% in 2021) and in rural agglomeration areas is growing. The level of education among parents has increased too, with half of women giving birth to their third or fourth child now having completed higher education. In addition, the income of these families has improved, with a fivefold increase in disposable income at least. The improved living conditions of multi-child families are primarily the result of wage increases (including the minimum wage) and a shift in the system of family benefits, which has moved from being selective and based on low-income criteria to a generous, universal system of support for families with children.

Although the selectivity of family benefits was intended to perform an egalitarian function with regard to multi-child families – to improve their income situation in relation to families with fewer children – it instead became a factor that stigmatised these families. The current, more universal system has not eliminated income differences related to the number of dependent children, nor has it found tangible solutions to compensate mothers with many children for lost income during childcare. Based on the review of the data, it should be noted that a comprehensive database on families in Poland is lacking. The information on the Central Statistical Office/Statistics Poland (GUS) website is scattered and fragmented, and is often outdated. Furthermore, statistical analyses do not always reflect family structures, including multi-child households. Understanding the real living conditions of large families requires moving beyond stereotypes, a focus that should be adopted in future research. As Stephan Köppe and Megan Curran have noted, social policy research should mainstream family size and consider it both as a key sociodemographic variable and a potential risk factor for inequality and poverty among children [Köppe, Curran 2025].

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