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Local Large Family Cards: Tools to Enhance Family Wellbeing



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Introduction

The changes taking place in the family model have led to the formation of a small or even childless family model in many parts of the world. The decline in the fertility rate of women is reflected in the aging of societies in many countries. The increase in the share of older people in the overall population brings specific problems for entire societies and governments. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the major role of large families in alleviating the problem. It is precisely large families that are our hope

for maintaining an appropriate social structure, conditioning the further economic and social development of countries. Consequently, their importance for society is enormous. From a demographic perspective, they represent a populational potential and provide young generations (Dyczewski, 1994, p.160). Almost all European countries struggle with dramatically low fertility rates, the vast majority of which remain below the replacement level (OECD, 2011). Moreover, people who have few siblings (and those who have no siblings at all) decide not to have more children themselves. Thus, an increase in the fertility rate among a population without numerous siblings is unlikely (Kravdal, 2010, p. 668).

The family is also the environment for the growth and development of the young generation. In families with many children (especially very many children), socialization is different than in families with an only child or two siblings. Such a family is a natural environment in which children acquire social skills, including cooperation, responsibility, compassion, caring for others, the ability to make choices, and patience (Downey & Condrón, 2004).

The importance of large families in terms of transferred family norms and values is also considerable. This is because such families are more durable than others (they show lower rates of divorce and single parenthood). Therefore, families with many children can be considered exceptional, as they decide to have another child at the cost of a worse financial situation. Having a large family very often means foregoing a high standard of living and having to reduce the needs of the whole family to a minimum.

Research shows unequivocally that families with many children are in the group most at risk of poverty and social marginalization in most European countries. The situation of a large share of such families is very difficult and worsens with each subsequent child, in line with the principle: "the more children, the lower the standard of living" (Bradshaw, et al., 2006).

A low economic status of the family may lead to the deprivation of needs and impoverishment of cultural, educational, or social life, and consequently, limit or prevent normal functioning in society. Limited access to material and cultural goods and leisure opportunities leads to the disintegration of social ties and the weakening of the sense of unity with society, and as a result, to social marginalization (exclusion).

The Large Family Card

Material support for large families raises fierce controversy and is met with extreme opinions. The Large Family Card (LFC), on the other hand, is not intended to help families maintain children, but rather, their development. It focuses on enabling access to culture, sport, and recreation. Its purpose is to provide families with many children access to services and entertainment that they cannot afford on a daily basis, and to facilitate access to the services of private entrepreneurs who



join the program.

The LFC is a general term used for different programs intended for families with many children. Such programs can be launched at the national, regional, or municipal level. The idea behind them is to create a positive image of a large family (a family with many children) and to support its functioning, development, and wellbeing.

The idea is not new. The first such program was launched in France in 1921 at the national level and continues to this day. There are also similar programs in Austria, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Hungary. Poland issues national, regional, as well as local cards, with many similarities but also differences between them.

The programs involve providing family members with LFCs entitling them to a number of discounts, rebates, or free access to facilities related to culture, education, sports, recreation, and health. They may also entitle them to discounted or free travel by public transport (e.g., air, rail, bus, or city), lower utility charges (e.g., water, electricity, or waste management), priority access or lower fees in nurseries, kindergartens, and schools, as well as discounts in private enterprises related to, among others, trade or services (e.g., groceries, clothing stores, stationery stores, hairdressing salons, or restaurants). The program is addressed to all large families from a given locality, region, or country, regardless of their income. Equal access to the card for all large families can prevent division into the rich and poor (as with subsidized lunches in some schools), and using the card is not embarrassing or humiliating for the children.

The LFC allows families to spend their free time in an active, diverse, and attractive way, and by creating more opportunities to spend free time, it improves the quality of life of such families (free time is considered an important indicator of the quality of life). Joint and entertaining spending of free time also strengthens family ties and integration with the local environment. The LFC may also entitle holders to free additional vaccinations, preventive examinations, and other forms of health care (going beyond free basic health care), as well as support the intellectual development of children from large families by offering free compensatory tutoring or additional classes (development of talents and interests).

Furthermore, supporting the education and health of the youngest generation is an investment in human capital. This is because the quality of human capital is influenced by both knowledge and skills as well as physical condition. This capital is, in turn, an important factor of economic growth. Among individual beneficiaries, support for investment in their skills and education creates greater opportunities for good education and a well-paid job. Thus, it prevents the transfer of a difficult financial situation to the adult life of a given person. In large families, investing in human capital is particularly expensive, as including each child totals up to several times greater expenditure than in families with fewer children. The situation is similar with the time spent with children, which, divided by the number of children, gives a much smaller amount than in small

families (Becker, 1994, p.22). Therefore, it is also necessary to support large families in investing in human capital.

Large Family Cards in Poland

The introduction of LFCs in Poland was a completely new approach to supporting large families.

The programs offer a number of discounts or free access opportunities:

On the national level, access to national parks, national museums and rail transport;

On the local level, access to swimming pools and cinemas; in general, venues related to culture, education, sport, recreation, and health, or even public transport, utility charges, and priority access and lower fees in nurseries, kindergartens, and schools;

There is also a wide range of offers issued by private enterprises (discounts in restaurants, groceries, hairdressers, and so on), which are available in most programs.

Cards are also issued regardless of the family income and are available to families with children up to the age of 18, or longer if they are still learning (up to 24, 25, or even 26 years, depending on the program). Most often, each family member receives their own card. In some local programs, more options are given to families with at least four children – most often in the form of parallel 3+ and 4+ cards.

Offers

The offers of the local programs vary considerably depending on the municipality. Some programs only provide discounts, others also free admission for large families. Furthermore, the offers

change over time within a given program, depending on the expectations of the families or the possibilities of a given municipality. The most common benefits are:

- Sports and recreational options (including swimming pools, ice rinks, gyms, tennis courts, sports activities, zoos, and camps)
- Cultural offer (theaters, operas, cinemas, museums, cultural centers, and concerts);
- Educational offer (additional/extra-curricular activities – e.g., language courses, libraries, and bookstores);
- Public transport;
- Childcare (e.g., lower fees for nurseries, kindergartens, and admission preferences);
- Lower fees for waste disposal, parking lots, etc.;
- Health care (pharmacies, rehabilitation, sanatoriums, and vaccinations);
- Offers of private entities (shops: grocery, clothing, footwear, and stationery, but also restaurants and guesthouses, and services: hairdressing, cosmetics, photocopying, driving license courses, and insurance).

Program service

Local governments are responsible for the implementation of

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programs (the local ones). The programs are mainly operated by municipal offices and Municipal Social Welfare Centers. There are also programs coordinated by non-governmental organizations. Occasionally, several institutions cooperate in the implementation of the program (e.g. the Municipal Family Support Center, the Public Transport Authority, and an NGO). Sometimes, the program is operated by one or more employees delegated exclusively to this task; other times, it is an additional activity of a given department or employee (especially in small towns). Some programs operate based on agreements between municipalities.

Some local government authorities, apart from implementing the program in their town or city, actively promote the development of the initiative and its extension to new local governments (e.g., by participating in conferences and meetings of local government officials). Others, on the other hand, do not allow the development of the program or even its creation. Non-governmental organizations, especially the Large Families Association "3Plus", also play a major role in the creation and implementation of programs. The success of cooperation with organizations depends to a large extent on a favorable attitude of the authorities.

Empirical research – main results

In 2013 and 2014, 15 local programs were studied. In total, more than 1,300 respondents from different cities took part in the questionnaire survey, and six focus group interviews were carried out.

The main aim of the research was to determine whether these programs support families and what can be done to improve them.

It is important to note, however, that at the time of research, there were very few programs supporting large families (or rather, families with children in general). Currently in Poland, there are many tools to support families: a program called "Family 500+," which provides every family with 500 zlotys every month per every underage child, free school coursebooks, and more. Consequently, the situation of large families is now significantly different than it used to be.

The research has shown that families are very interested in the program and its further development. The families were very eager to take part in the questionnaire survey and focus groups. Their experience in using the program was very valuable and allowed us to capture the main advantages and shortcomings of the programs.

Most respondents (over two in three) were satisfied or very satisfied with participation in the LFC program.

Even more believed that participation in the program had a rather favorable or strongly favorable influence on their family.

The situation was slightly different, however, when they were asked about the actual use of the program offer.

The respondents who were asked to specify how frequently they used the card rarely pointed out to an offer they benefitted from at least once a week (mostly the swimming pool and public transport). What is more, in many cities, there were no healthcare services, cinemas, public transport, or even theater and museums included in the offers. Other facilities were, in fact, not very attractive or varied, or still too expensive to use

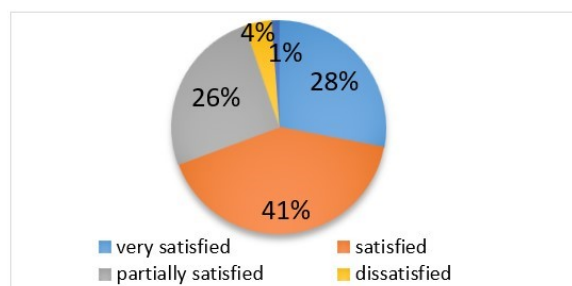


Figure 1 Level of satisfaction with participation in the LFC program.

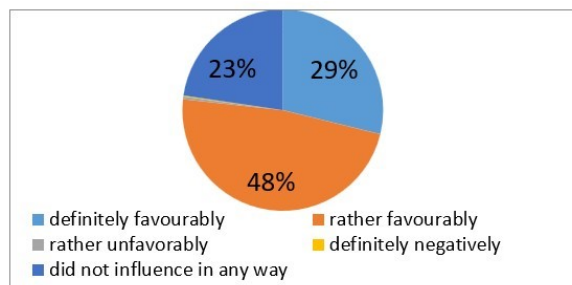


Figure 2 How participation in the LFC program affects family.

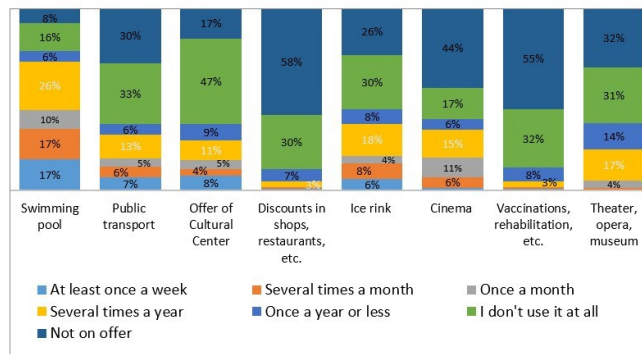


Figure 3 The frequency of using the offer².

more often than a few times a year. The poor offers of the program were also confirmed in other questions.

Among the offers available in the programs, undoubtedly the most desired and frequently used by the families were those connected with:

- sports and recreation - swimming pools, gyms, ice rinks, zoos, and sports activities;
- culture - cinema, theater, museums, cultural events, and workshops;
- public transport – free or with a 50% discount.

Offers of this type were especially important for large families. Without the card, many of them would have to give up their activity in those areas due to financial barriers. These offers made it possible to organize the children's free time in an active and valuable way, and they improved the integration of the family (for example, joint weekend trips to the swimming pool or zoo). Offers in the area of education and health were rated much lower. This was likely because almost all of the programs either lacked such benefits or the benefits they provided were completely inadequate and unattractive for the respondents. Families also appreciated that every member received their own card (because they knew that some programs only provided a single card for the whole family).

The respondents declared their willingness to use most of the potential offers and services that could be found in the new program offer. The most desirable ones were those that provided a better quality of life for their children and help with everyday expenses, such as payment for rent and utilities. Equally popular, and also the most popular up to that point, were cultural and sport offers.

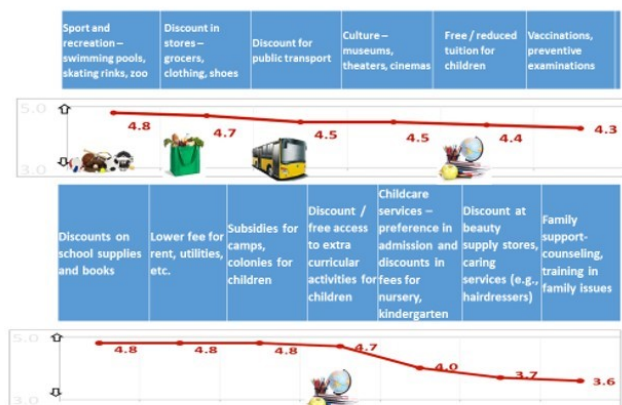


Figure 4 Willingness to use new offers³

Weaknesses of the programs

Polish social assistance centers are fairly familiar with the problems experienced by families and show much better sensitivity and understanding for families and the programs they implement. However, such centers evoke some negative associations (because many people connect them with pathology and different social problems), and the implementation of the program by such centers is a source of humiliation for many families. This was a frequent reason for opting out of participation in the program. On the other hand, implementation in municipal offices, although devoid of negative connotations, is associated with assigning the program-related duties to employees who do not know the specificity and needs of large families. Therefore, success of the program depends to a large extent on the involvement of its coordinators. The solutions used in two of such programs constitute a compromise in this respect. The programs are supervised by social welfare centers, but applications for cards and their collection take place in another institution (the Municipal Office or the Public Transport Authority).

More examples of good practices and the most common shortcoming are presented in the table.

However, it is important to note that since these declarations, supplied almost a decade ago, much has changed in Poland with

respect to families and the programs: e.g., all textbooks at school are now free, the cards are valid for much longer (parents do not have to extend them every year), and, for example, public transportation in Wroclaw is now for free for every school child.

Conclusions and recommendations

To sum up, the idea itself of introducing the Large Family Card in Poland and many Polish cities should be considered successful. However, it is difficult to clearly assess the functioning of the individual programs.

Apart from its positive impact on the diversification of sports and recreational activities, it played a rather small role in supporting the condition of the family.

The program was perceived by Polish families as a supplement, rather than real help. Now, however, when families also receive financial support, their assessment may have changed significantly. Undoubtedly, the program has a potential that is worth using. However, the opinions of families and their expectations regarding the program and its further development should be taken into account.

More examples of good practices and the most common shortcoming are presented in the table.

Elements that determine the success of the program	The most common shortcomings
Public transport offer (free, daily) Lower waste collection fee Sport and recreational offer (free or 50% discount): swimming pool, ice rink, courts, gym, zoo Cultural offer (cinema, MDK, concerts, theater) – access to interesting cultural events Discounts in selected stores (grocery, footwear, restaurants, doctor's offices, dentist, ophthalmologists, optician, language schools, sports activities) Other elements: no income criterion, a separate card for each family member, trips, day camps for children, education support (purchase of textbooks, travel to schools)	Small discounts in shops (5–10%), often expensive ones Few tickets for interesting events Small or unattractive offers of shops, not adjusted to the needs (e.g., jeweler, massage parlor) Overlooking basic educational needs (e.g. co-financing of textbooks, travel to schools, lunches) Frequency of card renewal (every year) Lack of attention from the implementers: no response to reported needs Offer is not suitable for children of different ages

One method, which is used in certain cities, is to include NGOs representing the interests of families in the program. Among the 15 programs examined, only five declared any cooperation with NGOs, and only in two of them the cooperation was stable and successful – but it was these programs that received the highest ratings from the respondents.

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