

Adapting to an Ageing Society: Meeting the Care Challenges in Poland¹

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Demographic Transitions and Changing Care Needs in Poland

The Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, and as well Poland is facing serious demographic challenges (Hoff, 2011, Botev, 2012). In the context of decreasing fertility rates and consequently the declining number of children to older people (Vanhuyse, Perek-Białas, 2021), as well as longer life expectancy, citizens' health condition does not always improve to the same extent (which means that the health status of older population of CEE is significantly below the EU average).

Over the course of three decades, from 1990 to 2020, the proportion of Poland's population aged 65 and above saw a considerable uptick, surging from 9.95% to 18.22%. Simultaneously, the sheer number of individuals within this age bracket experienced a substantial growth, rising from 3,785,663 to 6,916,746. These demographic shifts transpired while the overall population of the country remained relatively steady, oscillating around the 38 million mark throughout the 30-year interval. Contrarily, the trend in the population of children has been markedly different. Using the age group of children up to three years old as an illustrative example, in 1990, they constituted 6.17% of the population, translating to 2,347,449 individuals. However, by 2020, the share of this young age group in the total population had reduced to 4.08% amounting to a total of 1,547,514 children (Vanhuyssee, Perek-Białas, 2021).

According to the most recent data from Eurostat in 2021, Poland ranks 18th in terms of Healthy Life Expectancy (HALE) and 21st for overall Life Expectancy (LE) at the age of 65. For Polish males, HALE at 65 is 7.7 years, while it stands at 8.9 years for females. Similarly, the total LE at 65 is 14 years for males and 18.4 years for females. In simpler terms, individuals who reach the age of 65 in Poland can generally expect that about 51% of their remaining years will be spent in good health.

¹ Part of this document is prepared thanks to the previous work on the topic in Vanhuysee, Perek-Białas (2021), Perek-Białas, Raław (2013), Perek-Białas, Slany (2014), Perek-Białas, Ruzik-Sierdzińska (2023, forthcoming) and recently thanks to the collaboration with WHO (under the AFCC program) in the Center for Evaluation and Public Policies Analysis in the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland with support of Maria Varlamova. It should be noted that this document serves as an internal resource prepared specifically for the meeting scheduled for the 29th-30th of May, 2023, in Toruń. This expert's document is not intended for further utilization or dissemination without prior communication with the author.

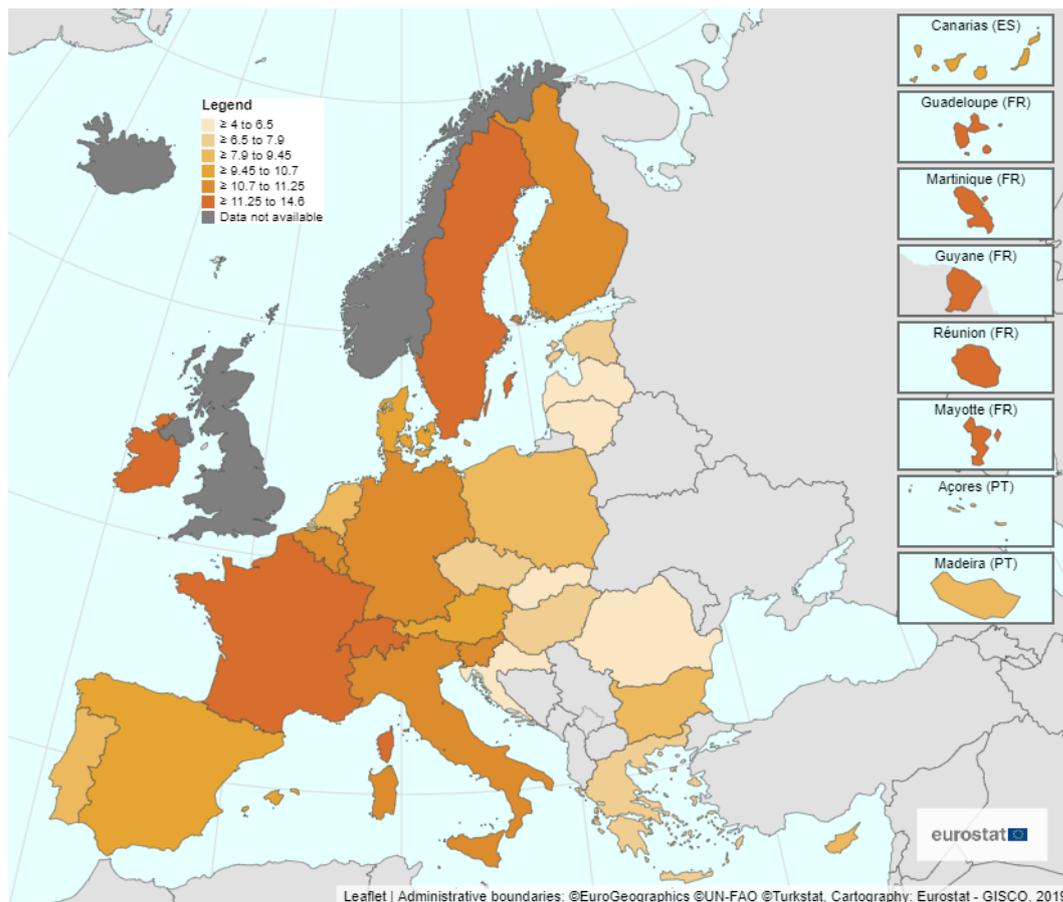


Figure 1. Healthy life expectancy at the age of 65 in 2021 by county, Eurostat.

With the shifting demographic landscape in Poland, the focus of care and support services is now tilting towards the older persons. Historically, due to their greater numbers, children were the primary recipients of both financial and non-financial care and services. However, an increasing trend of older individuals requiring care has been observed over the years. The projections indicate a continued growth in this need for care, necessitating a more diverse approach. This includes everything from at-home services to more intensive types of support, adapting to the varying needs of this rapidly expanding age group.

Predicting the duration and intensity of care required for older individuals presents a greater challenge compared to children. For the latter, it is generally presumed that intensive care needs typically span up to 3 years, or until they enter the formal school system around the age of 6 or 7. In contrast, care for the older people can vary greatly in both duration and intensity due to factors like health status, living conditions, and support networks. Moreover, the very necessity of care for older individuals and the point at which it becomes required are not certainties.

The Changing Landscape of Institutional Care in Post-Socialist CEE Countries

The provision of care for disabled and dependent older individuals in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries has traditionally relied mostly on families and if lack of such support and the situation of care is too challenging on specialized institutions (Perek-Białas, Raclaw, 2013). As the care for older dependent persons remains primarily a family responsibility, given that public services often fall short in terms of quality, accessibility, or both. This situation places the weight of LTC predominantly on the shoulders of informal caregivers, who are predominantly women (Perek-Białas, Raclaw, 2013, Perek-Białas, Slany, 2014).

However, the economic transformations in the post-socialist nations during the 1990s, marked by the adoption of neoliberal models, brought about significant changes. This shift towards privatization, deregulation, decentralization, fiscal austerity, and reductions in the welfare state had profound implications for the provision of institutional care (Mladenov, Petri, 2020).

For CEE countries the sustainability and reach of publicly funded care services became increasingly challenging. Financial constraints forced many countries in the region to reduce funding for care services, resulting in a decline in both the availability and quality of institutional care. To address these financial burdens, cost-sharing mechanisms were introduced, placing a greater share of the cost on individuals (care expenditures mostly covered by families).

The combination of economic system shifts, reduced funding for institutional care, and the reliance on family caregiving underscores the need for comprehensive policies and reforms in CEE countries, as in Poland. It is essential to address the challenges faced by both institutional and family caregivers, ensuring the availability of high-quality care services while supporting families in their caregiving roles. As populations age, it becomes increasingly important to reassess and strengthen LTC policies to meet the evolving needs of disabled and dependent older individuals, with a focus on promoting dignity, quality of life, and sustainable caregiving practices.

CEE countries typically spend relatively little on LTC from public funds and have fragmented, tax-based LTC systems. Eligibility for support is primarily determined through means-testing. For instance, Poland spends only 0.8% of its GDP on LTC (OECD database). This trend has remained consistent for over a decade. As such, in Poland, professional homecare services for adults aged 65 or older are not common. A mere 2.3% of people within this age bracket use such services in Poland (based on EU-SILC data). In stark contrast, estimates indicate that about 20% of the total population in Poland serve as informal caregivers (EQLS data). Alarmingly, 35.9% of individuals aged 65 or older in Poland reported a lack of necessary assistance with personal care (Eurostat database). But, the research of Abramowska (2019) showed that living jointly with an older parent increased the likelihood of retirement for women which may be a proxy for providing care to a dependent adult. As such caring

obligations have significant impacts on pension systems. Moreover, in this research it was also found that caring for grandchildren increases the probability of retirement (Abramowska, 2019).

Recognizing the invaluable role of informal caregivers and implementing programs to support them is crucial. These caregivers play a vital role in providing essential care and support for their loved ones, often sacrificing their own well-being and personal lives in the process. However, their contributions often go unrecognized and unsupported, leading to challenges such as burnout, financial strain, and limited access to resources. While institutional care is important and necessary for certain individuals, it is equally essential to establish a diverse range of services that prolong the agency and independence of older persons and support family caregiving. This ensures that older persons have all the opportunities to stay in their preferred living environments, if they so choose. By offering comprehensive support services, including home-based care, respite care, caregiver training, and financial assistance, we can empower both informal caregivers and older individuals to navigate the challenges of long-term care while maintaining dignity, choice, and quality of life.

Supporting Families and Older Persons: Selected Programs and Solutions for Caregiving from Poland

At the national level

Social Policy for Older People 2030. Safety. Participation. Solidarity (2018-2030, Ministry of Family and Social Policy). It encompasses various areas, including promoting positive perceptions of old age, facilitating social participation in cultural, artistic, and sports activities, supporting active participation in the labour market, promoting health, preventing diseases, ensuring physical security, fostering intergenerational integration, and providing education for older people and care personnel. This program aims also to create favourable conditions for the provision of assistance and care services to support the functioning of older people. It includes measures such as regulating the risk of dependence and implementing telemedicine services tailored to individual fitness. The program also emphasizes the importance of universal design and research on housing adapted to the needs of dependent individuals. Additionally, it introduces specific actions to reduce dependence, ensure access to health and care services, establish a network of environmental and institutional services, and provide support to informal caregivers.

Care 75+ (2018 - ongoing, Ministry of Family and Social Policy)¹: This program specifically targets individuals aged 75 and above living in communes with up to 60,000 residents. The program supports self-governments in implementing social assistance tasks, including the development of care services, including specialized ones, in smaller localities. It caters to both individuals using care services for the first time and those already utilizing them, allowing for increased hours of service as needed.

Care and Residential Centres (2021 - ongoing, Ministry of Family and Social Policy): Care and residential centres aim to provide a combination of independent living and support from qualified staff to assist individuals with disabilities in performing basic activities of daily living. These centres enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities, enabling them to live independently and with dignity. The services include round-the-clock or day stays. The implementation of tasks for these centres received an allocation of PLN 30 million in 2022. Municipalities and districts submit applications to the relevant regional authorities for establishment and functioning.

At the regional level²

Social Assistance and Support: Polish regions have recognized the importance of social assistance and support for older people. Initiatives such as financing older people's homes and care facilities provide essential care and accommodation options for those in need. Additionally, programs promoting safety, awareness, and well-being among older residents are implemented to address specific concerns related to ageing. The establishment of daycare homes and community service centers aims to enhance social engagement and ensure that older people receive the necessary support and care to maintain a high quality of life.

Health and Care Services: Regions prioritise the health and care needs of older people. Specialized support is provided to older individuals with specific conditions such as dementia or disabilities. Occupational therapy, rehabilitation, and medical care are offered to enhance their well-being and independence. Day Care Homes play a crucial role in providing care, support, and cognitive activities, while also offering respite care for caregivers and family members. By ensuring access to comprehensive healthcare and support services, regions strive to improve the overall health and quality of life for older residents.

Day Care Homes for older people with dementia (e.g. Lubelskie, Mazowieckie): Day Care Homes for older people with dementia, such as those in the Lubelskie and Mazowieckie regions, are specialized facilities that offer care and support for individuals with dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. These homes have a primary focus on enhancing the cognitive, physical, and emotional well-being of their residents through a variety of activities and services. In addition to catering to the needs of older adults with dementia, the homes also provide respite care to caregivers, offering them much-needed support and relief.

In Mazowieckie, just recently there have been opened six Day Care Homes operating throughout the year, providing a comprehensive range of support in physical, intellectual, cultural, and educational domains. Residents can participate in personalised activities like occupational therapy, physiotherapy, social gatherings, and cultural outings, which encourage active engagement in social life. Caregivers and families are offered respite care, counselling, and support groups tailored to their specific requirements. The dedicated staff members of these Day Care Homes demonstrate their commitment by organising a diverse array of activities such as ludotherapy, yoga, art workshops, and language learning, all of which contribute to maintaining cognitive function and positively impacting the daily lives of the residents. The program has received positive evaluations, as it effectively supports older people with dementia while offering much-needed respite and assistance to their caregivers and families.

² Source: based on evaluation of (CEAPP, UJ, 2021, 2022) and <https://mcps.com.pl/na-mazowszu-rozrasta-sie-siec-wsparcia-dla-osob-z-choroba-alzheimera-ponad-317-mln-zl-pomaga-samorzad-wojewodztwa/informacje-prasowe/>.

Centers of Support Informal Caregivers (e.g. Małopolska) – in 2019-2021, the Municipal Care Center for the Older, Chronically Disabled, and Indigent Persons of Krakow undertook a significant initiative known as the "Support Center for Informal Caregivers and Care for Dependents at the Municipal Care Center of Krakow." This project was subsidized through the funds of the Regional Operational Program of the Małopolska Voivodeship for 2014-2020. The project encompassed various activities, including support for informal caregivers of dependent persons and the establishment and operation of institutions providing day care and activation for dependent persons. The primary goal of the project was to enhance the availability and quality of services for dependent persons and informal caregivers in the Municipality of Krakow and Wieliczka.

Telecare. Besides of that there are more and more options for using the telecare communication systems (e.g. Łódzkie, Kujawsko-pomorskie) as a communication system that utilizes technology to provide emergency assistance and support to older people. Through the system, older individuals receive devices, such as wristbands or applications, that enable them to make emergency calls or receive monitoring calls. This system enhances the safety and well-being of older people, allowing them to live independently while having access to immediate assistance when needed.

At the local level. Case Study of Supportive Care Programs for Older Individuals in Szczecin

The city of Szczecin has implemented several programs and solutions to support families in the care of older persons. These initiatives encompass a wide range of services, including nursing homes, daily support departments, care services for older people, and targeted programs such as the Older Person's Centre and the "Care Voucher: Alzheimer 75" program. These programs are designed to enhance the availability, quality, and accessibility of care for older individuals, ensuring their well-being and supporting their families in the caregiving process.

Nursing Homes. Szczecin is home to three social welfare homes, providing a total of 560 places for individuals requiring round-the-clock care due to illness, disability, or other reasons where appropriate assistance cannot be provided through regular care services. These social welfare homes not only offer residential facilities but also provide meals and organize various supportive and educational activities for the residents.

Daily Support Departments - "Daily DPS". The city of Szczecin operates four Day Social Welfare Centres, which serve as important community resources. Additionally, there is a dedicated Department of Environmental Forms of Semi-Stationary Assistance for People with Alzheimer's Disease. The primary responsibilities of these departments include providing care services, conducting rehabilitation activities, and facilitating therapeutic, cultural, and recreational programs for individuals in need. These centers play a crucial role in supporting the well-being and social engagement of older individuals in Szczecin.

Care Services at Home. Care services for older people are delivered directly to individuals' residences when they require support that cannot be provided by their families. These services may also be extended to those who need assistance but do not have access to family support. The range of services primarily includes support with everyday activities such as shopping, apartment cleaning, personal hygiene, and meal preparation. Furthermore, individuals receive assistance with official matters and have opportunities for social interaction. The number of service hours and the specific scope of support are tailored to the individual's needs. These benefits are provided free of charge to individuals whose income falls below the income criterion and are also available to individuals over the age of 95, irrespective of their income level.

Older Person's Centre. Established in June 2019, the Older Person's Centre in Szczecin aims to address the diverse needs of citizens aged 60 and above residing in the Municipality of Szczecin and their families. The center offers a wide range of informational, educational, supportive, integrating, and initiating activities. It conducts various courses and workshops, operates an information point for older people and their families, and actively promotes intergenerational integration. Additionally, the center conducts research and analysis to better understand the social needs of older individuals and their families in the community.

"Care Voucher: Alzheimer 75". The "Care Voucher: Alzheimer 75" program was launched in Szczecin in 2018, providing support to caretakers residing in the Municipality of the City of Szczecin who assist individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. To be eligible, caretakers must be at least 75 years old and covered by health benefits. The care voucher, totaling PLN 3,000 per year, is granted to caregivers in three installments of PLN 1,000 each. These funds can be utilized to assist individuals with Alzheimer's disease and their relatives, such as purchasing suitable equipment for their living arrangements or hygiene products. Szczecin stands as a pioneer in Poland by implementing this type of support program, and during the first edition, 486 caregivers received a favorable decision to grant the benefit.

Recommendations

Improving care for older persons in Poland (but also in other countries also beyond CEE region) requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that goes beyond the provision of care itself. It involves addressing various interconnected factors such as social, economic, and environmental aspects that impact the well-being and quality of life of older individuals. Policies and programs should be developed with a holistic perspective, considering the unique needs and preferences of older persons in different settings.

Strengthening Long-Term Care Services. One key recommendation is to enhance and strengthen long-term care services in Poland. This can be achieved by increasing investment in care infrastructure, improving the working conditions and training of care providers, and expanding the availability of home-based care, community-based services, and residential care facilities. Efforts should be made to ensure that older persons have access to high-quality and person-centered care that meets their individual needs and preferences.

Promoting Family and Informal Caregiver Support. Recognizing the significant role played by family and informal caregivers in providing care for older persons, it is crucial to develop programs and initiatives that support and empower these caregivers. This can include providing training and education, respite care services, financial assistance, and psychosocial support. By recognizing and supporting the vital contributions of family caregivers, the overall quality of care for older persons can be improved.

Enhancing Age-Friendly Environments. Creating age-friendly environments is essential for promoting the well-being and independence of older persons. This involves ensuring accessible transportation, housing, public spaces, and healthcare facilities that meet the needs of older individuals. Additionally, promoting social inclusion and combating ageism in society are important aspects of creating age-friendly environments. Efforts should be made to engage older persons in decision-making processes and ensure their voices are heard in policies and programs that affect them.

Strengthening Social Support Networks. Creating a supportive environment for older persons involves strengthening social support networks. This includes fostering social connections, promoting intergenerational activities, and combating social isolation and loneliness among older individuals. Community-based initiatives, such as senior centers, social clubs, and volunteer programs, can play a crucial role in facilitating social engagement and providing a sense of belonging for older persons.

Enhancing Geriatric Care and Health Services. Developing specialized geriatric care and health services is crucial for meeting the unique healthcare needs of older persons. This includes increasing the number of geriatric specialists, improving geriatric training for healthcare professionals, and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration in the care of older individuals. Efforts should also be made to integrate primary care, acute care, and long-term care services to ensure continuity of care and effective management of chronic conditions.

Addressing Financial Security and Pension Reforms. To ensure the financial security of older persons, it is important to address pension reforms and ensure that pension systems are sustainable and adequate. This may involve measures such as adjusting the retirement age,

linking pension benefits to life expectancy, and promoting private pension savings. It is crucial to prevent older persons from facing an increased risk of poverty and ensure that they can maintain a decent standard of living during their retirement years (especially those who are alone, and could be without family or other support and have had caring obligations over their life course which limited their pension savings).

Promoting Active and Healthy Aging. Encouraging active and healthy aging is vital for older persons' overall well-being. Policies and programs should be developed to promote physical activity, mental well-being, and social engagement among older individuals. This can include initiatives such as providing access to age-appropriate exercise programs, promoting lifelong learning opportunities, facilitating volunteer and employment opportunities, and combating age discrimination.

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Data sets/surveys

European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS) <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-quality-of-life-surveys>

Eurostat database <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

OECD database <https://data.oecd.org/>

EU statistics on income and living conditions

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions>