



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter April 2016

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The Impact of the Deep Economic Recession on Child Wellbeing in Greece

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The Greek economic crisis and austerity measures implemented since 2010 have resulted in a high rate of unemployment, poverty, racism and social injustice. Social welfare and the health insurance system have almost collapsed as a result of the reductions in public expenditure. A significant number of families have experienced uncertainty and poor living conditions with tremendous impact on children's upbringing and wellbeing.

Poverty, Uncertainty and Family Instability

It was reported that one in four pupils, during the school year 2012-2013, was threatened by hunger, with many accessing group kitchens in their schools⁷. NGOs such as *Kivotos tou Kosmou* and *Hamogelo tou paidiou*, replacing the inadequate response of the Greek authorities, provided food and social support to homeless mothers and their children⁵. Some financially weak families even chose to place children in institutions such as *Agios Stelianos* to ensure that the children's needs will be met. Furthermore, parents' unemployment led to lack of access to health care for children and consequently many parents applied to the NGO *Hamogelo tou paidiou*, for treatment of their children's health problems. Poor employment opportunities for adolescents had an impact on their self-perception and financial independence from the family.

Unemployment, heavy taxes, lack of social insurance and poor welfare provision rendered a significant number of parents living in Greece insecure and uncertain of the family's future⁹. Children experienced the same feelings. Moreover, many parents having lost their self-esteem and capacity for self-control due to unemployment became intolerant and cruel and less likely to share funny and happy moments with their children. Last but not least, more families moved abroad as a last chance of improving their living conditions, and so children's lives were affected as they lost touch with friends and had to change schools.

Mental Health and Low Socioeconomic Conditions

According to research findings, the economic crisis led to an increase of suicides, drug and alcohol abuse and general psychiatric disorders³. In addition, a nationwide cross-sectional epidemiological survey, conducted by the University Mental Health Research Institute, found out that 1 in 6 Greeks aged 18-70 developed clinically significant psychopathology and one in 12 (600,000) severe psychopathology, while 75% of them did not receive adequate treatment¹. Children, consequently, run a high risk of growing up with depressed parents, while there has

been clear evidence that the number of children with psychosocial problems and visiting Mental Health Centers escalated within the last few years².

Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect

Cases of child abuse and neglect have increased. According to the annual report of the Greek SOS villages, it was estimated that “28,000 children, 7,500 of whom are under 5 years old, are maltreated and deprived, every year”¹⁰. Inadequate staffing of child protection centers, resulting from cost-cutting under the austerity, also violated the children’s right to protection.

Effects of the Recession on Education

“Recent data showed that approximately 30,000 students drop out of school in Greece each year. The majority are junior high school students who never go on to finish high school. The highest high school dropout rates are taking places in the Dodecanese islands of Greece and in Rhodope, part of the region of East Macedonia and Thrace. Dropout rates in those two parts of the country are over 8%. While these school dropout rates may not seem particularly high in comparison to high school dropout in other advanced countries around the world they are quite high for Greece as Greek parents have high educational goals for their children. Most of the kids forced to drop out of high school come from extremely poor families, and the choice to leave school in order to seek work is one based on pure survival needs”⁸.

Reduction of public funds for education worsened the school’s functionality and the climate in classrooms and has even resulted in closure or merging of schools. In 2015 large numbers of Greek regular and special needs schools remained closed because of laid-off teachers and a chronic shortage of textbooks and supplies⁴. According to the Children’s Ombudsman “Individual and collective problems in school settings troubling students are apparent and are caused by parents’ unemployment and lack of welfare provision”⁹. Furthermore, a significant number of secondary students were found to be drug users, while there had been an escalation of incidents of school bullying and racism in both primary and secondary schools².

The Future

Experience from child policies in other countries experiencing economic crisis show that the current conditions for children in Greece require effective policies which are targeted to children’s vulnerabilities, while preventative culturally approved forms of care could be beneficial. And finally, in times of crisis, critical social work action can play a crucial role both in establishing appropriate school, family and community interventions and in pressing the government to end the austerity policies and social inequalities.

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