



Too high to pass

A study on barriers to
accessing public services



Results of a European survey on barriers to accessing public services, experienced by Caritas beneficiaries, and based on data from the Caritas Poverty Observatories in Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia and Malta.



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Published in December 2020 by Caritas Europa, Rue de la Charité 43, 1210 Brussels, Belgium.

Graphic design by: Blush Design supported by Caritas Europa's Leticia Lozano

Cover photograph: © Caritas Czech Republic

This study has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014–2020). For further information please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>.

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Preface

Caritas organisations empower people to find solutions to the poverty and social exclusion related challenges they face. The way in which Caritas does this is, firstly, by listening to people and offering individual counselling, material or financial assistance.

Caritas also compiles quantitative and qualitative data on the challenges faced by people who call on its services. In accordance with this two-pronged strategy, the link becomes clear that many of the challenges they face are rooted in gaps in the country's social welfare or social protection system. This process allows for a structured approach within which the signals given by the people can be linked to the underlying structural cause(s) of the problems they face. Such an analysis enables Caritas to look for solutions that address the root causes, and to advocate for structural change by recommending solutions to the competent authorities at local, regional, national and/or European levels.

This is ultimately the main purpose of the Caritas Poverty Observatories (CPOs), to collect data in a structured way, analyse it and detect where structural change is necessary. Given the fact that the competence for social policy is situated at all governance levels, it is crucially important to continue increasing the national and European compatibility of CPO data collection. Keeping in mind that progress is achieved step by step, this publication marks the initial fruit of this process.

Toward this aim, four Caritas organisations have collected data regarding the challenges related to accessing public services as experienced by people in need of Caritas support. The analysis of the data, both qualitative and quantitative, have brought about a clear link between the causes and consequences of poverty, and the challenges to access public services.

I want to thank, in the first place, all the people who visited our services at grassroots level, relied on Caritas to help them find a solution to the challenges they face, and agreed to share their stories with us. I am also grateful to the colleagues who made it possible to bring the personal and individual stories and statistical data to the European policy level, in particular to Walter Nanni (Caritas Italiana), Martina Veverková and Jiří Vraspír (Caritas Czech Republic), Anna Eizvertina (Caritas Latvia), and Andre Bonello (Caritas Malta), who collected and analysed the data in their respective organisations, and without whom this publication would not have been possible.

Maria Nyman

Maria Nyman
Caritas Europa Secretary General



Introduction

The European Caritas network is made up of 49 national organisations, covering 46 countries. In order to promote coordination between the various national Caritas organisations, the Caritas Europa secretariat in Brussels advocates towards the European institutions, in order to influence community policies in solidarity.

Drawing on data collected by national Caritas, Caritas Europa also produces studies and research on various social aspects and phenomena. Specifically, Caritas Europa promotes and coordinates every two years the preparation of the “Caritas CARES! Report”, a report on poverty in the European continent, which is based on the cross-sectional analysis of the results presented in the national reports prepared by the participating member organisations. The 2019 poverty report¹, included evidence from 16 countries. The specific topic of the 2019 report was “Access to public services”, with particular focus on the difficulties encountered by people in vulnerable situations relying on Caritas services.

In the context of the various activities carried out by Caritas in Europe, the importance of research and analysis cannot be underestimated, particularly as it links to Caritas advocacy methodology, with its *raison d'être* based on the following key actions: to listen/observe, to judge/discern, and to act. Thus, Caritas' style of action always includes a first moment of listening to the person in difficulty; then, a moment of scientific observation of the social reality within which the paths of poverty develop or unfold; this is followed by a phase of discernment and analysis that strengthens the possibility of reaching sound decisions, thanks to the valued principles of Catholic Social Teaching and human rights frameworks; this then finally leads to action and various types of interventions, such as: animation, prevention, promotion, assistance, policy recommendations and advocacy, civic activism, among other forms of “action”.



In the European context of Caritas, “observation” is not done in a homogeneous and constant way: some national Caritas can boast a high degree of experience, having produced reports, studies and research, while other national Caritas, for various reasons, have not constantly committed themselves to this dimension. In order to reach a higher degree of competence on these aspects, Caritas Europa promoted in 2016 a taskforce to focus on research and social policy issues across the European network, which provided several tools for promoting the Caritas Poverty Observatories (CPO). Like all Caritas working structures, this taskforce also based a large part of its activity on the experiences of its member organisations, in particular on existing Caritas organisations' research and data collection systems. For instance, Caritas Italiana's research and data system as an example, which favoured the birth in 1985 of the Poverty and Resource Observatories (OPR), now active in 70% of the Italian dioceses, i.e. the local Italian Caritas.

¹ Caritas Europa, 2020. “Fostering access to services to support people to move out of poverty. A report on poverty and inequalities in Europe”. Brussels, Belgium: https://www.caritas.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Caritas_Cares_Europe_FINAL_Singles_light.pdf

Section One

Research objectives

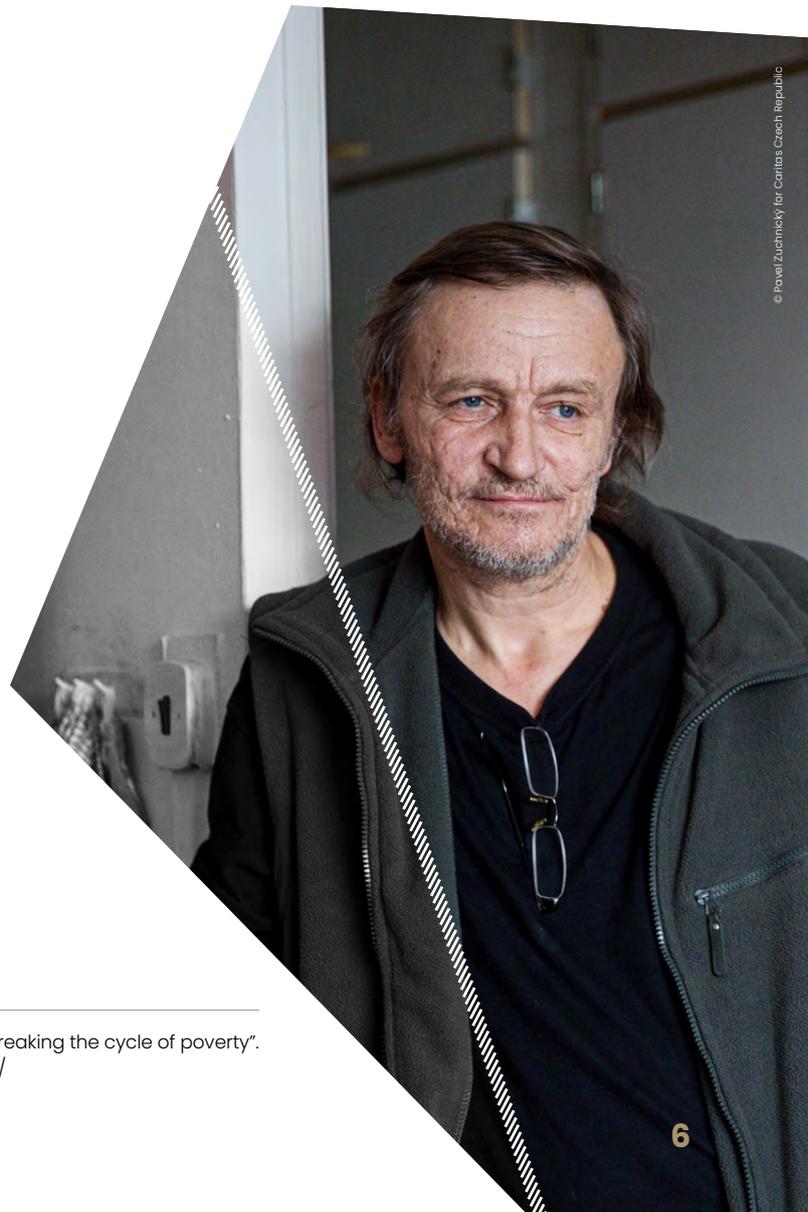
The informal CPO task force carries out a survey every two years linked to the main theme of the Caritas CARES! Report. Based on data gathered in 2017, the working group published a study on the topic of educational poverty in 2018, which saw the collaboration of four countries (Germany, Greece, Italy, and Portugal).²

The theme of the 2019 CARES! Report was on access to public services by people in difficulty who turn to Caritas for support. The data for this topic was gathered by each national Caritas through the use of an open questionnaire, enabling input to a series of questions aimed to assess the barriers that prevent many people in difficulty from accessing social and health services at the national/local level. The social policy experts of each national Caritas provided qualitative and quantitative answers to this tool. At the same time, always in relation to the theme of the CARES! Report, a structured questionnaire was prepared that addressed two fundamental cognitive purposes:

- 1) to highlight the social profile of Caritas users in Europe (personal, family, human and social capital aspects, etc.); and
- 2) to highlight the level of use of public social services and, in the event of non-use, the reasons that impeded use or made its uptake impossible.

It is important to underline that this study on access to public services is unique in the context of Caritas studies, since it relied on a shared data collection system, created in real time and based on users who turn to Caritas for support. The data was collected within a one-month time period in the four countries involved in the survey: Italy, Malta, the Czech Republic, and Latvia.

This is not a real statistical sample survey, since for various reasons the road of random statistical sampling is not easy to operate in the Caritas' dimension, also due to the lack of complete and exhaustive registry lists on the total amount of users in the four countries. We therefore opted for a quantitative survey carried out at some listening/assistance centres, which were selected based on various parameters, such as: territorial representation; good quality of data collection; and empathy and ability to go deep into users' life stories. In fact, the questions asked in the questionnaire refer to various aspects of fragility and vulnerability, something not all Caritas service users like to speak about, and which presuppose a mutual relationship of trust and confidence.



² Caritas Europa, 2019. "Study on educational poverty - Education: key to breaking the cycle of poverty". Brussels, Belgium: <https://www.caritas.eu/study-on-educational-poverty/>

Section Two

Respondents and the sample structure

The survey was carried out at the end of 2018 (between September and October) in more than 30 Caritas centres in the four countries involved. As can be seen in table 1, 1,413 people were contacted during the sample month, which were considered as heads of family or reference persons in the household unit.

While we counted with the 1,413 survey respondents, in actuality, our data extended to a total of 3,381 people cohabitating with the respondents. The data collected are therefore not representative of personal situations, but must be considered in a broader and more inclusive way, as they refer to a much more extensive audience (i.e. it is evident that many of the problems investigated in the survey concern not only the individual respondent, but also the whole family or household).

The largest share of users was interviewed in Italy (726 people, equal to 51.5% of the total), followed by the Czech Republic (504 users, 35.7%), Malta (121, 8.6%) and Latvia (62, 4.4%). The size of the sample was dependent on the number of people attending the counselling centres during the sample month. In other words, the survey was administered to all the people who contacted the Caritas centres during this observation window. The sample includes both old and new users.

**Table 1 - Size of the sample
(Caritas beneficiaries interviewed)**

COUNTRIES	N	%
Czech Republic	504	35.7
Italy	726	51.4
Latvia	62	4.4
Malta	121	8.6
TOTAL	1.413	100.0

Caritas Europa Poverty Observatories

This section describes the social profile of the people who turn to Caritas in the four countries involved in the survey data collection. What is important to remember is the individual story behind these figures. The people described are not numbers, they are people who have faces, names, stories, and need to be treated as such.



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“

“My name is Martina, I am a young single mother, with a four year old daughter. I live in a big town in Sicily, in a disadvantaged suburb, not well connected to the city centre by local transportation. My family of origin was involved in small local criminal activities, and my mother was a single parent too, at the same age as I am now. Now I live in a community, run by the local Caritas, whose expenses are also supported by the municipality.

The main problem for me is the low level of education I attained: I stopped going to school when I was 14 years old. I have never had a permanent job and I have always lost job opportunities and assistance because of my incapacity to find the way within the welfare and employment system.

Before going to the community I used to live with my former boyfriend, my daughter's dad, but we broke up and I lost my home because I could not keep up with the legal procedures for paying outstanding bills.

My main challenge is finding an orientation for my future, and identifying targets to reach, for me and for my daughter. One opportunity is getting involved in a training course, with the aim of finding a stable job.”

Martina, aged 25, assisted by a diocesan Caritas in Sicily, Italy

”

Women and men

First, the distinction by sex sees the prevalence of females almost everywhere: this peculiarity is more evident in Latvia, where 80.6% of the users who completed the questionnaire were female. The other three countries follow with gradually decreasing values. It is good to underline that the female/male prevalence is not strictly related to the presence of

gender-influenced problems. Rather, this trend is much more likely linked with the women's ability to come forward and request help, also on behalf of the other family members, who for various reasons may be more reluctant or cannot turn to the social care independently.

Table 2 – Sex of Caritas beneficiaries (% within each country)

COUNTRIES	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
Czech Republic	36.1	63.9	100.0
Italy	45.2	54.8	100.0
Latvia	19.4	80.6	100.0
Malta	54.2	45.8	100.0
TOTAL	41.5	58.5	100.0

Age

As for the age group, the sample is composed mainly of young adults. It is interesting to note the different weight of the elderly, almost irrelevant in Italy (9%), while they constitute a large portion of users in other countries. In Italy, the low number of elderly people (9% of the sample) is due to the importance of social protection and social security measures in the country that limit

the phenomenon of absolute poverty among the elderly (the latter figure is also confirmed by the main data from both the Italian Statistics Institute and Eurostat). Based on the sample, the oldest beneficiaries are in Latvia (average age of almost 60 years), followed by the Czech Republic (53.8 years).

Table 3 – Age classes of Caritas beneficiaries (% within each country)

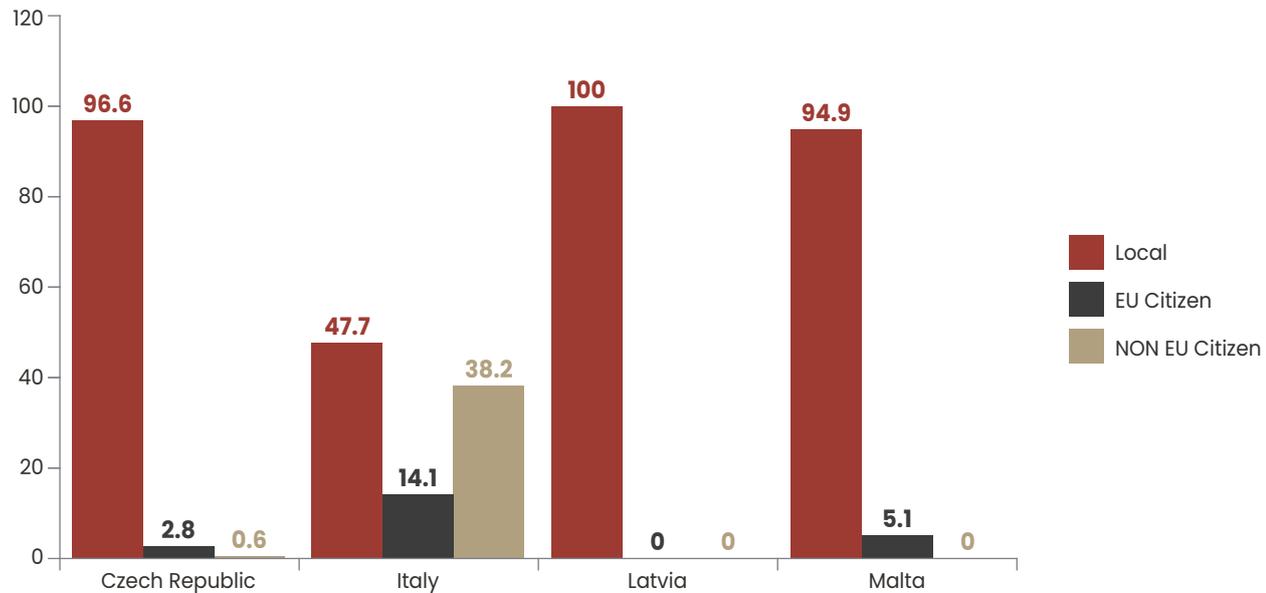
COUNTRIES	UNDER 18	18-29	30-49	50-64	65 AND MORE	TOTAL	AVERAGE AGE
Czech Republic	6.2	11.6	31.1	13.9	37.3	100.0	53.8
Italy	0.3	13.0	47.1	30.6	9.0	100.0	45.7
Latvia	/	1.6	32.3	32.2	33.9	100.0	58.8
Malta	/	10.3	43.1	21.6	25.0	100.0	49.0
TOTAL	2.4	11.7	40.3	23.9	21.7	100.0	49.5

Citizenship

As regards citizenship, it is interesting to note that in three of the four countries (with Italy being the exception), the users composed mainly of nationals. In

Italy, we observe a subdivision of the sample into three categories: Italians (47.7%); non-EU foreigners (38.2%); and other EU citizens (14.1%).

Table 4 – Citizenship of Caritas beneficiaries (% within each country)

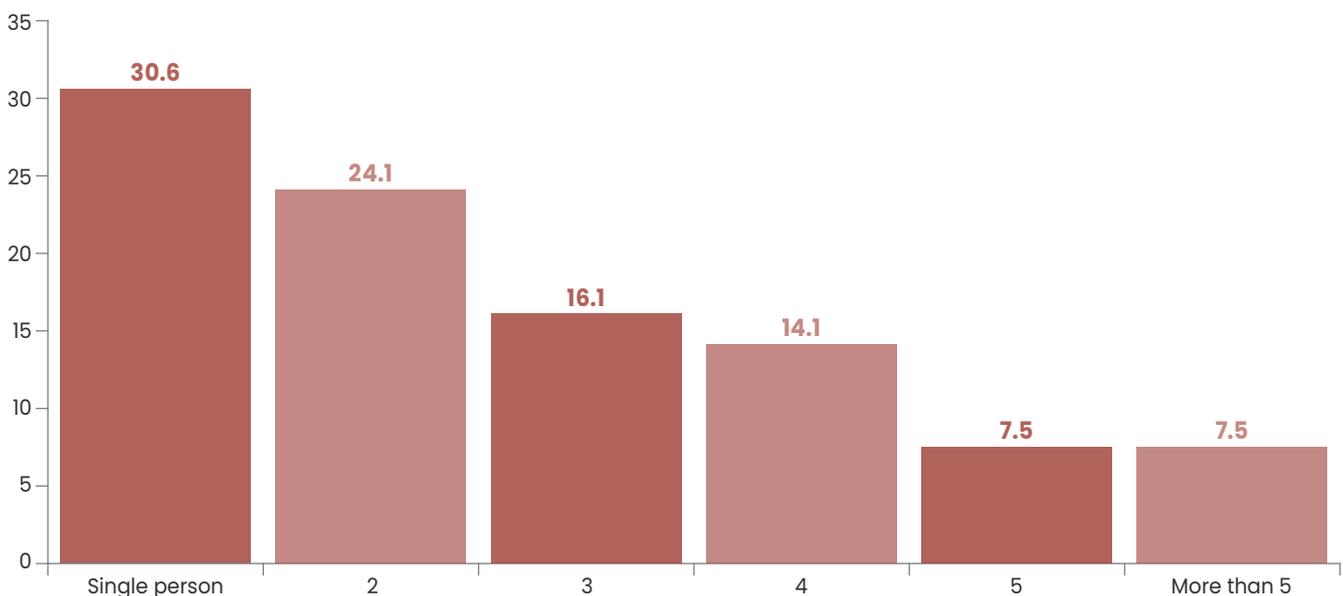


Family/Household size

Contrary to public statistic data, which see a prevalence of poverty among large families, the average number of family members in this survey was equal to 2.7 people per household. The most frequent households instead

represent single adults and cohabiting couples. Families with five or more members are not so widespread; they are particularly numerous in Latvia (22.5%), while they reach the lowest record in Malta (5.4%).

Table 5 – Household size of Caritas beneficiaries (% within each country)



Section Three

A social profile of Caritas' service users

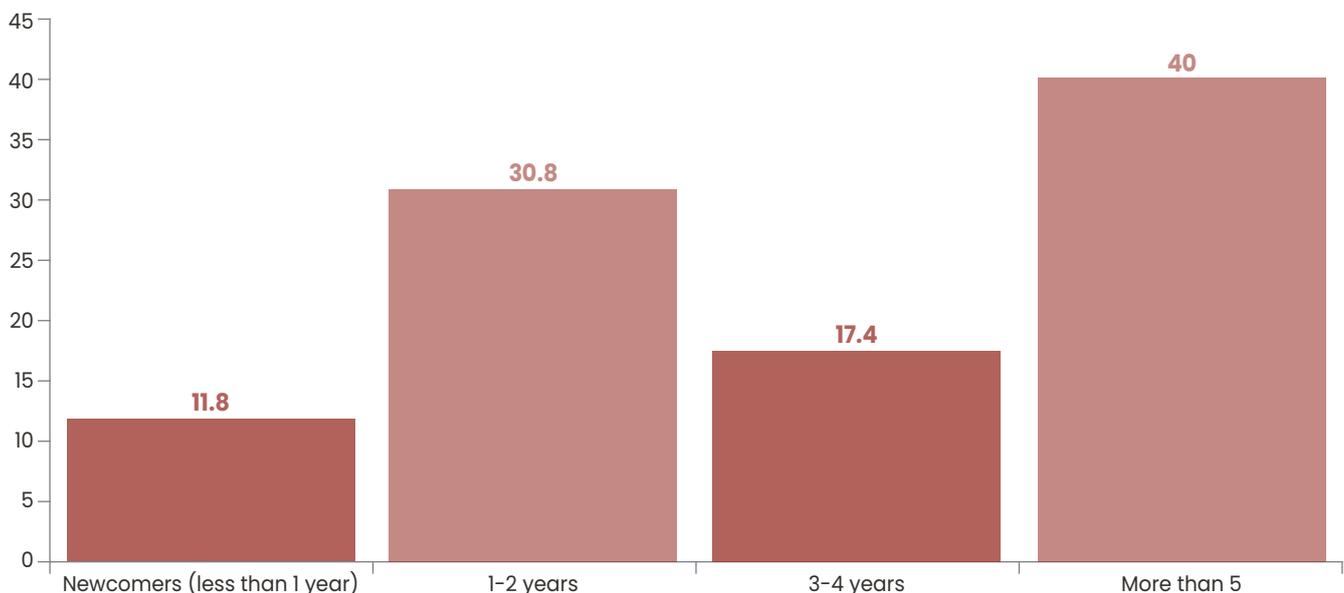
The survey questions included items that aimed to contribute to better understanding of the social typology and level of social unease and exclusion experienced by the survey respondents and their family members, who as a result sought support from the Caritas organisations.

Vulnerability

A first aspect refers to the level of frequency of need among the users. This dimension was verified by asking the interviewees the following question: "How many years have you or your family been in contact with Caritas for help?" By examining the answers provided by the interviewees, it turns out that the average duration of support needed is 4.5 years. The peak of "chronic" users (i.e. repeat users in need of support for more than 5 years) was registered in Malta (41.9%), while the lowest level is recorded in the Czech Republic (10.1%). New

users, who turned to Caritas for the first time during the survey year, are very significant in Italy (15.6%). It should be emphasised that during the economic-financial crisis of 2008-2013, there was a strong surge in new users whose economic conditions worsened in a very short time, turned for the first time to Caritas (or other social assistance entities). After this historical phase, the number of "new poor" gradually decreased with a return to pre-crisis levels, characterised instead by high levels of frequent needed support.

Table 6 – Frequency of needs level of Caritas beneficiaries (% within each country)



* number of years from the first assistance

Another type of information refers instead to the presence in the family of weak or particularly vulnerable members: the elderly, children and non-self-sufficient people (affected by long durations or frequent need of support, people with disabilities or other forms of limitations to daily life, excluding under age and elderly people, already accounted for in the previous questions).

Out of 100 users, the largest presence of vulnerable family members regards Latvia, where 45.2% of users have an indicated some form of non-self-sufficiency,

37.1% have at least one child in the family, and there is an equal percentage for those indicating at least one senior aged 65 and over. The significant proportion of children within the families who turn to Caritas in the four countries under scope warns an element of concern, since the dire condition of minors should activate an immediate response by the public social services. In the event that public social services are activated for this reason, it clearly does not meet the needs of the families, who are forced to turn to Caritas despite this to meet some of their primary needs.

Table 7 - Vulnerable members in household (% on total users)

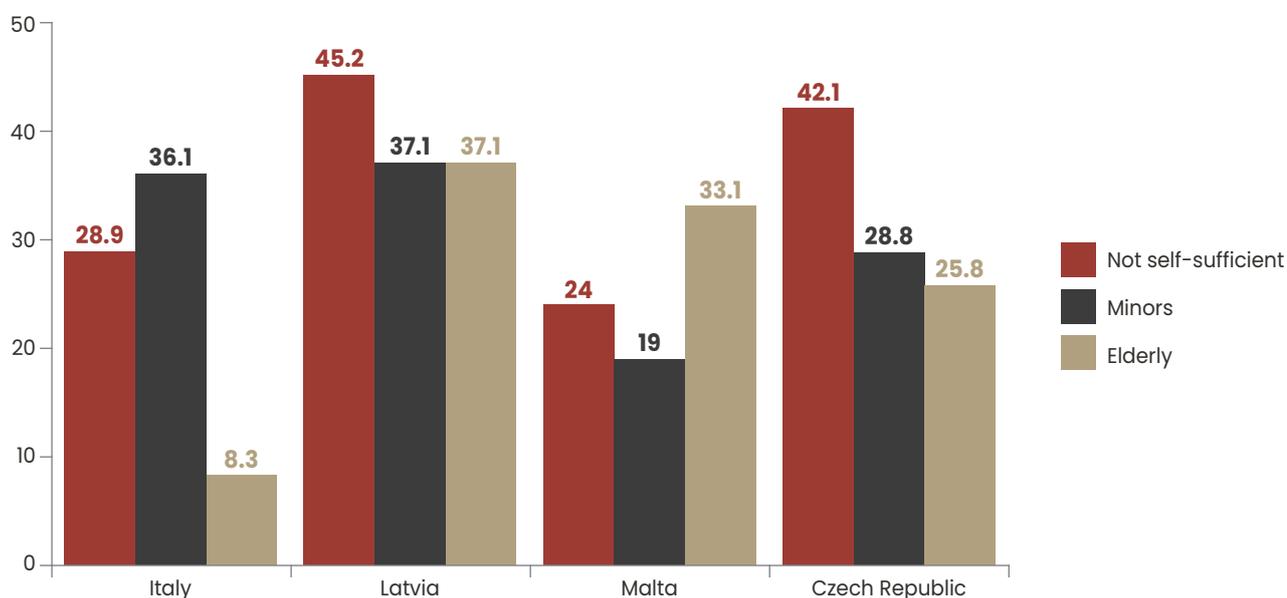
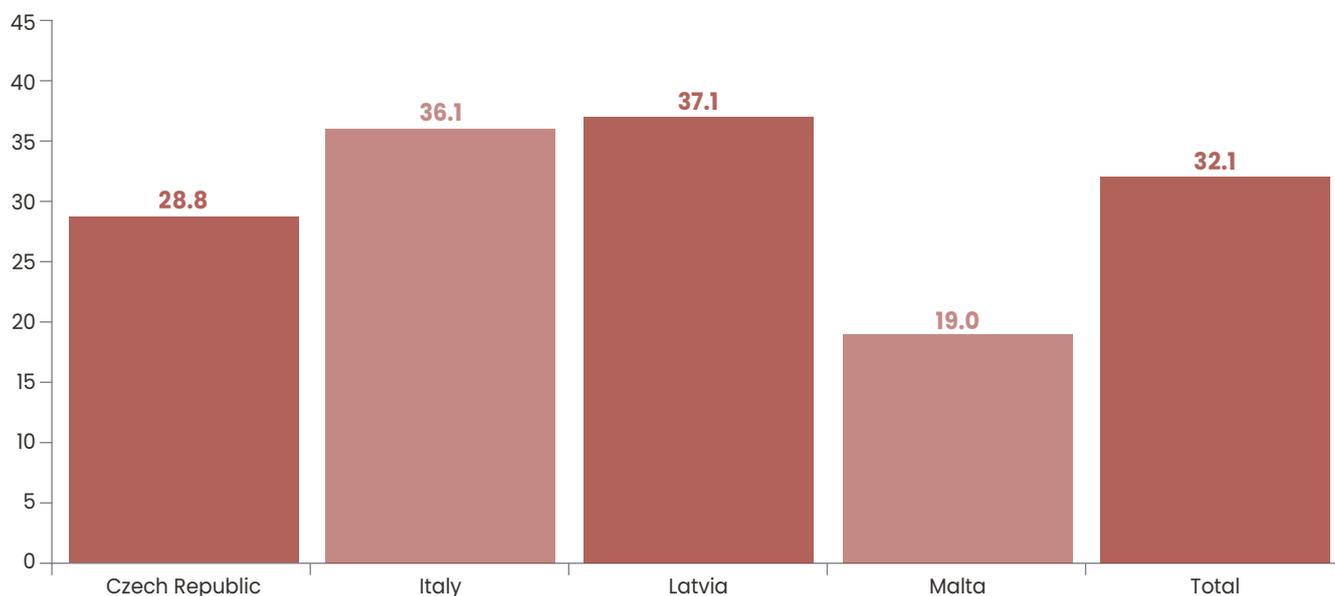


Table 8 - Vulnerable members in household, younger than 18 years of age



Income

Information on the Caritas survey respondents' sources of income highlights a situation characterised by strong elements of concern. Specifically, respondents were asked to answer two questions:

- Do you have a job/income that ensures a monthly income?
- Does anyone else in the family/household have a job/income?

By crossing the answers provided to the two questions, four group clusters are obtained, summarised in Table no. 7. The "protected" correspond to those households who can have at least two forms of income, one referring to the interviewed person, and a second referring to other family members. On the other side, the "Without Income" cluster group corresponds to those who find themselves completely absent of any form of stable income. There are also two intermediate situations in which there is only one source of income in the family. It is clear that the available information from the two questions cannot exactly define the unstable income situation in these families, as information on the amount of disposable income is not available (it is also possible that despite the presence of one or more incomes, the volume of needs to be met is so large that it does not allow for an adequate quality of life).

Based on this classification, it emerges that the largest category among the respondents refers precisely to that attributable to the most vulnerable group, the so-called "Without Income": 419 people/households belong to this group, equal to 56.7% of the total. The families in an acceptable situation in terms of income security, as holders of at least two different forms of income (the so-called "Protected"), are the least numerous (47 families, equal to 6.4%). The classification of Caritas users in the four cluster groups will be taken up later when analysing the use of public services in order to highlight the different levels of access to services according to the different income situations of the families.

Table 9 – Income situation of the Caritas beneficiary units (% of total sample)

		OTHER INCOMES IN FAMILY	
		YES	NO
Income Caritas user interviewed	YES	6.4% (protected)	8.7% (vulnerable)
	NO	28.3% (vulnerable)	56.7% (without income)

Comparing the situation of the four countries, Latvia and Czechia have the same share of households totally without income. This is a very significant share: almost two out of three families are taken care of by Caritas in these two countries and are in situations of extreme financial vulnerability. In Malta, on the other hand, a slightly less worrying situation is observed (45.9% "without income").

Section Four

The use of public services

The analysis of the levels of public services use by Caritas service users has been carried out with reference to five different types of services:

- **Early childhood services (0-5 years)**
- **Home-care assistance**
- **Health services**
- **General social services**
- **Centres for employment / job search**

Users were asked if they needed each of these types of public services and if they had relied on Caritas for it during the year. In case of use, respondents were also asked if the service had been more or less useful/effective. The information relating to access to the services therefore excludes unnecessary responses and missing data.

On a general level, the analysis indicates a very high use of health services: 93.2% of the users who had declared they needed a health service actually benefited from some form of intervention in the medical sector. For this type of service, the level of service support perceived by the users is quite high, with a 97.1% satisfaction rate. According to the analysis, homecare is the type of service least used or even neglected: for every 100 users who would have needed it, there are almost thirty who have not been able to make use of the requested services.

The average exclusion rate for the entire sample is 17.8%. By calculating the effective use of each type of public service used by each Caritas customer, we learn that 21.9% of users were unable to use any type of public service. Besides, there are several situations in which families could not take advantage of more than one service during the same year; this number is progressively lower as the number of missed services increases. In summary: 170 groups of people had to give up the only public service deemed necessary; 89 had to give up two services; 35 three services; 13 four services; and 2 families had to renounce all five types of services covered in the survey.

Table 10 - Use of public services by Caritas beneficiaries (% within each type of service)

	YES	NO	% USEFUL
Health services	93.2	6.8	97.1
Centres for employment / job search	87.1	12.9	58.9
General social services	81.5	18.5	89.0
Early childhood services	77.1	22.9	95.2
Home-care assistance	71.9	28.1	95.6
TOTAL AVERAGE	82.2	17.8	87.2

* Excluding No answers + Not applicable cases

The level of use of the different types of public services can be better assessed if compared to specific problem situations. For example, by focusing on those without any income, and who are assumed to need strong support from the public employment services, we learn that 59.5% of "No-Income" people could not access these forms of public service. In this case, the exclusion rate is significantly higher than that recorded overall (12.9% in the general sample). Furthermore, among

those who were able to make use of the employment services, only 17.2% of the "No-Income" positively rated the public service received (overall, among general sample, the level of satisfaction is much higher, equal to 58.9%). In summary, the hypothesis that those who need the public service the most remain excluded from it, or receive little benefit, which is in fact supported by the available data.

Section Five

The causes of non-use of public services

The failure to use public services can be attributed to various reasons. In fact, only in a few cases does non-use derive from the total absence of the service in the territory considered. In the majority of cases, however, potential service users are faced with barriers that, in different forms, prevent full access to public services, which are nevertheless available/active in the geographic area.

By aggregating all the answers provided by the interviewees, at least eight different types of motivations for non-take-up of services emerge. The most popular reason is the lack of access to the service, which alone covers a quarter of the given reasons. Two different sets of reasons follow with similar values: the complexity of the procedure to access the public service (10.5%) and the lack of knowledge of the existence of the service (10.2%). As previously mentioned, the total absence of the service in territory ("The service does not exist in the area where I live") only covers 7.9% of all causes of non-use.

Table 11 – "Why didn't you use the public service?" (% of total replies)

	%
I didn't have the requirements	25.5
The access procedure is too complex	10.5
I am not aware of the existence of the service	10.2
The service does not exist in the area where I live	7.9
Service is overpriced	6.0
The service is too far	5.7
The service does not accept new users	4.5
The opening hours are not adequate	4.5
Other reasons for non-use	25.2
TOTAL	100.0



Section Six

The causes of non-use of public services

A final section of the survey referred to the presence of a series of services and goods of public utility in the neighbourhood of residence and within the family.

In regard to the first of the two aspects, respondents were asked to indicate whether the following nine types of services were available in their territory of residence, within an easy walking distance: supermarkets, shops and small commercial outlets, banks, pharmacies, doctors, post office, bus stops, social and health consultants, libraries.

The hypothesis behind the question is that populations characterised by low economic resources tend to be positioned in "poor" neighbourhoods from the point of view of limited services and social and administrative infrastructures available, but which are more advantageous in terms of affordability of the housing market.

This hypothesis appears to be substantiated based on the data: examining the answers provided by the Caritas users, there is an infrastructural weakness in the territories where these subjects live: in fact there are significant numbers of people who declare that there are not various basic services available, such as medical and social and health counselling centres (65.9%), pharmacies (42.2%), bus stops (40.8%). With the exception of banks, it is interesting to note that services of a private and commercial nature, are generally more widespread than those of a public nature.

Table 12 - Services present in the territory of residence (% within each country)

	YES	NO	TOTAL
Supermarkets	58.0	41.5	100.0
Shops	60.7	39.1	100.0
Bus stops	59.2	40.8	100.0
Pharmacies	57.7	42.2	100.0
Post Offices	57.1	42.7	100.0
Doctors	52.4	47.5	100.0
Banks	47.8	52.2	100.0
Libraries	43.0	57.0	100.0
Surgeries/social-health counselling centres	34.0	65.9	100.0

Access to the Web

The absence of some forms of public service could be partially mitigated by the respondents' availability of a computer and access to the Internet. In this regard, the data collected indicates that in the majority of cases, and with the exception of Malta, the families of Caritas users generally do not have a personal computer available. The peak of this deficit is recorded in Italy, where almost 80% of the families helped by Caritas do not have a computer available. Internet access appears to be more widespread, although without a computer, it never affects the majority of Caritas users.

It should be noted among those respondents indicating Internet access availability, in the absence of a home computer, this could reflect the existence of smartphone data traffic. However, it should also

be underlined that this form of Internet access does not fully replace the network performance that would otherwise be accessible by computer.

For families living in a socially marginalised situation, limited access to the Internet represents a further deficit regarding active participation in social life: in the current multimedia context, the absence of available and good quality Internet connections results in risking further marginalisation and exclusion from many common activities (exacerbated further since the spread of COVID) such as participation in school, work, communication exchanges, etc. In addition, this absence also impairs access to much useful information, including health updates, etc. in different areas of social life.

Table 13 – Access to Personal Computer

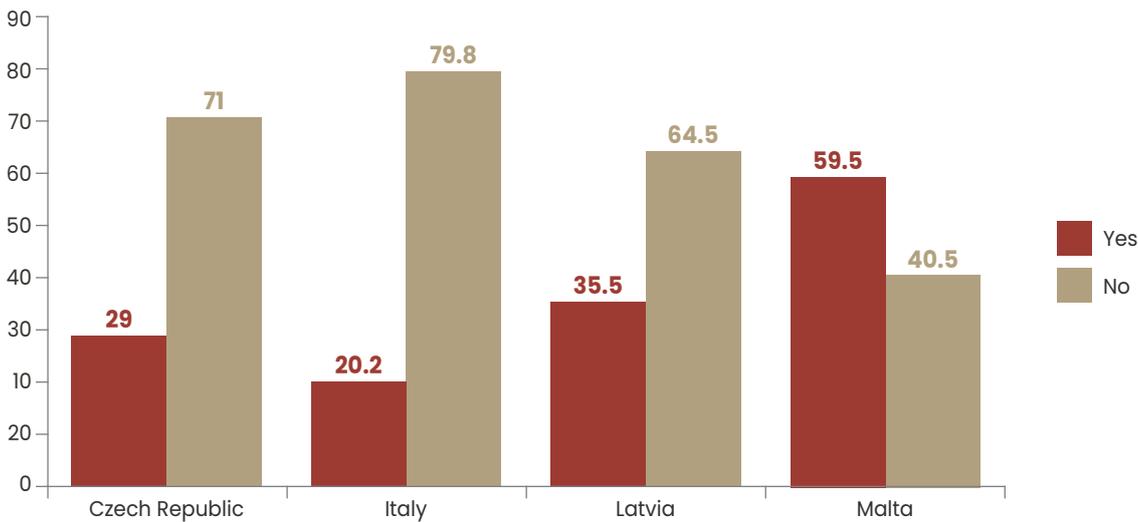
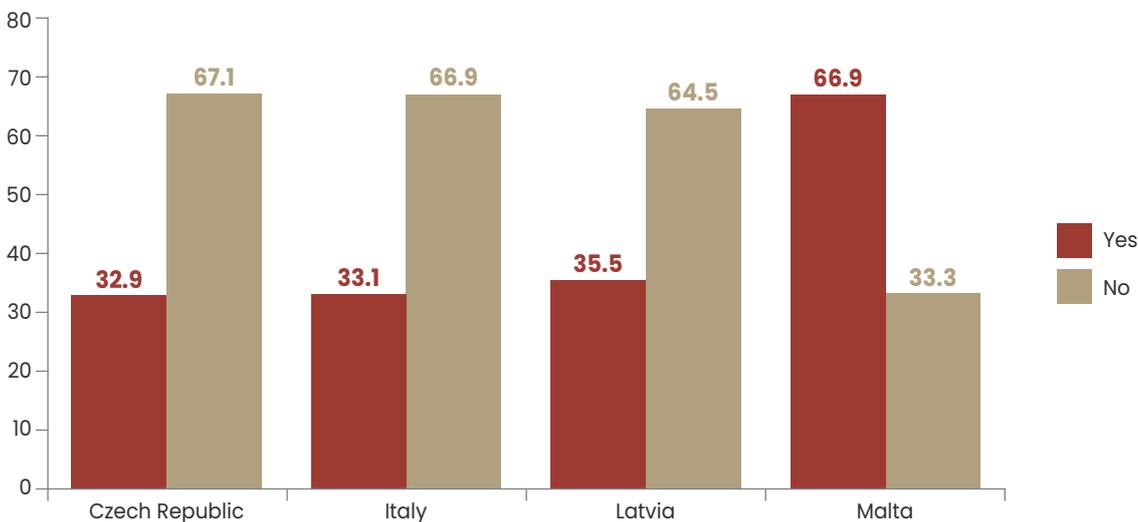


Table 14 – Access to Internet



Conclusions

In summary, 56% of the interviewed Caritas service users live in a household without any source of income and 32% of the households have children. 22% have not used any of the five analysed services. The main reasons for not accessing one or more of the services are linked to the complex procedure for accessing services and limited knowledge about the existence of the service. This is partly related to the fact that a majority of the interviewed people do not have access to a computer and/ or Internet.

It is clear that some of the barriers that hinder the enforceability of social and welfare rights cannot be resolved through an intervention of voluntary or third sector organisations: just think, for example, of the gaps in the procedural aspects of public services, on which only the activation of reorganising and remodelling services by public administrations appears appropriate.

Other types of barriers can be partially overcome by carrying out accompanying and service user-oriented actions; these allude to types of activities that Caritas services and assistance centres carry out in a systematic way, with particular regard to those most in need, with low social and cultural capital, and who are least likely to be able to access other public service offers. In any case, even if it is not possible to directly address the barriers that prevent one's full access to services, Caritas denounces such challenges and advocates for structural change. Our positions are based on research and reliable data from the people in need, such as is presented here, and which can help to build a cultural and political atmosphere that is more attentive to the conditions of people in situations of marginalisation and who are disadvantaged in our social system. For this reason, we have formulated the following recommendations toward this aim.



Recommendations

- Services play an important role in addressing poverty and social exclusion. It is therefore of crucial importance that people are systematically informed about the existence and availability of such services. To ensure that those hardest to reach are aware of the existence of services, cooperating with Caritas services can be truly helpful; many people find their way to Caritas' low threshold services, where they receive information about which service to rely on and which provider to turn to. Hence, government funding for Caritas services should continue and awareness raising efforts about service offers should be broadened.
- Complex procedures for accessing services is another challenge that needs to be addressed. The user friendliness of services has to be improved in order to ensure easier and non-discriminatory access and use of the services, particularly applicable for those most in need of said services. This can be done, for instance, online by simplifying the homepage of the service, with easy to access menu, etc.; physically this can be done by ensuring a reception desk, allowing for people to make an appointment for a meeting with a staff member, or bringing them directly in contact with the responsible staff member. Information about the service should also be publically available in several languages.
- Access to computer and Internet needs to be improved. Not only should spaces be foreseen for people to use a computer (e.g. public libraries, public buildings) free of charge, and alternative solutions should be sought during COVID-19 public lockdowns, but equally, computer and internet literacy should be stimulated by offering free courses. Simultaneously, it is necessary that services operate an easy to access helpdesk, by telephone and in physical offices, open to people who do not manage to complete the service access procedure online.
- Public employment services have to better adapt their service provision to the individual needs and competencies of the service user. This requires a tailor made approach, whereby the individual competencies and preferences of the service user are assessed, heard and taken into account. The offered service then has to be designed in dialogue with the service user and set up to meet as much as possible the individual needs of the service user.





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