

BACKGROUND PAPER

Institutional Gaps in Child Protection

Child poverty · Education · Child labour · Health care · Housing · Social protection

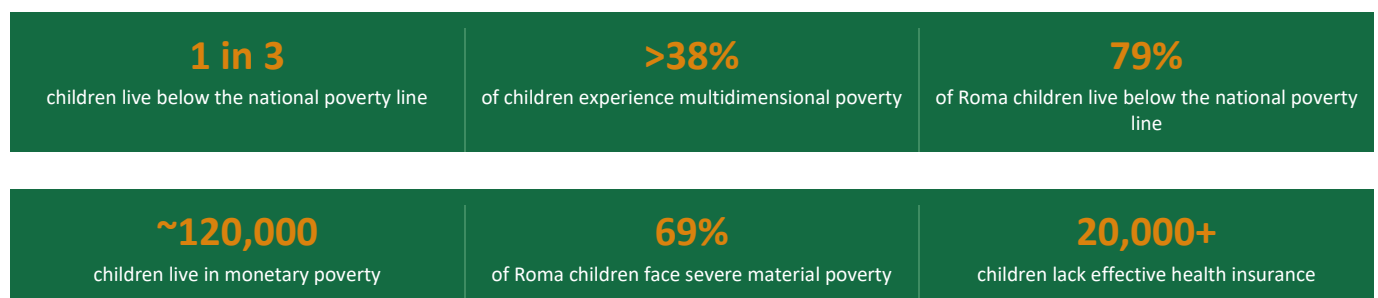
Journalists for Human Rights North Macedonia (JHR) | Natasa Dokovska

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01 Child Poverty and Exclusion — the National Snapshot

Child poverty in North Macedonia is not only a question of household income. It is also reflected in deprivation of education, health care, adequate nutrition, safe housing, protection, early childhood development and opportunities to participate in community life. UNICEF's latest Child Guarantee analysis reports that roughly **one in three children lives below the national poverty line**, while more than 38 per cent experience multidimensional poverty. Roma children face a particularly severe burden: 79 per cent live below the national poverty line and 69 per cent face severe material poverty.



Sources: UNICEF North Macedonia, European Child Guarantee / Child Guarantee analyses (2024–2026); UNICEF Child Poverty; UNICEF Strengthening Child Benefits (2026).

The central institutional challenge is that the existence of services does not automatically guarantee effective access. UNICEF notes that **children living in poverty and exclusion encounter greater barriers because systems are not sufficiently oriented** to systematically identify vulnerable children and their needs, reach out to them, connect them to mainstream and specialized services, and monitor outcomes over time. This is the gap between formal entitlement and effective protection.

02 Fragmented Services and Weak Case Coordination

A child in a highly vulnerable family may simultaneously lack stable housing, regular meals, health insurance, school attendance, documents, transport and access to social benefits. Yet the response is divided across education, health, social protection, municipalities, police, employment and other services. When responsibility is dispersed, the child can be referred from one institution to another without one actor retaining responsibility for the overall outcome.

The Child Guarantee analysis identifies **weak intersectoral coordination as a barrier to effective service integration**, alongside complex administrative procedures, low awareness, geographic inequalities, stigma and discrimination. **A stronger case-management model is therefore needed**: early identification, one individual plan, clear division of responsibilities, referral deadlines and follow-up until the child actually receives the service.

- **Institutional gap**: fragmented sectoral responses rather than one child-centred plan.
- **Operational consequence**: referrals can be made without systematic follow-up on whether the service was received.
- **Needed response**: a designated case holder and multidisciplinary case coordination for children at high risk.

Source: UNICEF North Macedonia, Child Guarantee in North Macedonia (2025).

03 Exclusion from Education

Free and compulsory education does not eliminate the practical costs of participation. Transport, clothing, school supplies, food, digital equipment, a quiet place to study and parental capacity all influence whether a child can attend and remain in school. Poverty therefore becomes an educational risk long before a formal drop-out is recorded.

UNICEF's Child Guarantee snapshot estimates that around **14,000 children do not attend primary education and more than 22,000 do not attend compulsory secondary education**. The inequality is especially visible among Roma children: only 56 per cent complete primary education, compared with 94 per cent in the overall population. Around 40 per cent of children from the poorest families do not transition to compulsory secondary education.

- **Institutional gap:** insufficient early-warning, re-entry and drop-out prevention mechanisms.
- **Institutional gap:** educational support is often separated from the family's housing, food, health and income problems.
- **Needed response:** outreach, school-family mediation, learning support and coordinated social assistance.

Source: UNICEF North Macedonia, *Child Guarantee in North Macedonia (2025)* and *European Child Guarantee snapshot (2024)*.

04 Child Labour, Street Work and Begging

Child labour is closely connected to poverty, exclusion from education and family vulnerability. The U.S. Department of Labor's 2024 findings identify **children in North Macedonia working in agriculture, construction, textile factories, vending, domestic work and street work, including cleaning vehicle windshields**. The report also identifies forced begging, forced domestic work and commercial sexual exploitation among the worst forms of child labour.

The same report highlights legal and enforcement gaps, including the fact that minimum-age protections do not cover all children who are self-employed or working outside formal employment relationships, and that the minimum age for work is lower than the compulsory education age. These gaps matter because children in informal or street-based activities are among the hardest to identify through conventional labour inspection.

- **Institutional gap:** A child who begs or works on the street should first be approached as a child at risk and potentially a victim of exploitation.
- **Institutional gap:** Removing a child from the street without addressing family income, housing, education and protection risks repeated return.
- **Needed response:** coordinated child protection, social work, education, police and specialized NGO involvement.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, *2024 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor — North Macedonia*.

05 Access to Health Care

Universal rights do not always translate into effective access to health care. UNICEF has estimated that approximately 20,000–21,000 children lack effective health insurance. For low-income families, additional barriers include documentation, co-payments, medicines, transport, limited information and difficulties navigating administrative procedures.

Children who are not regularly visible to schools or social services may also be missed by preventive health systems. This is why the Child Guarantee approach emphasizes effective access rather than formal eligibility alone, including stronger home-visiting, immunization and outreach mechanisms.

- **Institutional gap:** the system often waits for vulnerable families to approach services rather than reaching them proactively.
- **Needed response:** outreach identification, assistance with insurance and documents, preventive care and rapid referral.

Sources: UNICEF North Macedonia, *European Child Guarantee (2024)*; *Child Guarantee in North Macedonia (2025)*.

06

Homelessness and Inadequate Housing

Child homelessness is broader than sleeping on the street. It includes unstable, overcrowded, unsafe or temporary housing, frequent moves between relatives, lack of water and sanitation, and households at risk of eviction. **Housing insecurity affects school attendance, hygiene, health, sleep, safety, emotional stability** and the ability to maintain contact with institutions.

Roma children are particularly exposed to material and housing deprivation. UNICEF’s latest analysis reports that more than half of Roma households lack adequate housing. A family-centred response therefore needs to treat housing as a core child protection issue, not as a separate problem to be addressed only after other interventions.

- **Institutional gap:** limited integrated housing support linked to child protection and family case management.
- **Needed response:** emergency stabilization combined with longer-term housing, documentation and social support.

Source: UNICEF North Macedonia, *European Child Guarantee Summary* (2026).

07

Social Protection — Rights on Paper vs. Access in Practice

Cash benefits and social services can reduce the depth and duration of child poverty, but their impact depends on coverage, adequacy and accessibility. UNICEF’s 2026 analysis of child benefits identifies structural limitations in the current system, including limited coverage, declining adequacy and design features that can underestimate the needs of larger and vulnerable households. The analysis estimates that **well-designed reforms could reduce child poverty by up to 6% points**.

For families in deep poverty, application procedures themselves can become a barrier. **Lack of documents, limited digital access, low awareness of entitlements and difficulties communicating with institutions** can prevent families from obtaining support. The most excluded families are often the least able to navigate a complex application-based system.

- **Institutional gap:** insufficient outreach to families who do not independently enter the social protection system.
- **Needed response:** proactive identification, administrative assistance and simplified access to benefits and services.

Source: UNICEF North Macedonia, *Strengthening Child Benefits: Options to Enhance the Impact of Cash Benefits for Children* (May 2026).

08

GNEZDO — a Practical Bridge between the Child and the System

The Day Center GNEZDO was developed within the project “Empowering Futures — Children on the Street, Child Poverty and Families Affected by Poverty in North Macedonia”, implemented by Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) in partnership with ECPAT Austria and funded by the by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. The experience of the Center demonstrates why **vulnerable children need an integrated point of support rather than a sequence of disconnected referrals**.

GNEZDO combines direct material assistance with education, psychosocial support, health and housing assistance, work with parents, outreach and referrals. This model does not replace public institutions. Its value is in connecting children and families with those institutions, identifying barriers early and helping ensure that a referral becomes an actual service.



Additional support has included food and hygiene donations, assistance to maintain housing for vulnerable families, educational and professional-development support for parents, sports and cultural activities, a volunteer club, study visits and cooperation with social workers. GNEZDO is a state-licensed provider of social services.

Source for GNEZDO figures: JHR project records, October 2024 – September 2026.

09 What the GNEZDO Experience Shows

One child — one integrated plan.	Education, health, housing, food, protection and social security should be addressed together.
Outreach is essential.	The most vulnerable children cannot be protected by a system that depends only on families submitting applications.
Referral is not the end of a case.	Someone must verify that the child actually received the service and that the risk has decreased.
Child labour requires a family response.	Removing a child from street work is not sustainable unless the economic and social causes are addressed.
Housing is a child-rights issue.	A child cannot be expected to attend school regularly or maintain health and hygiene without a safe place to live.
Civil society can bridge gaps, but cannot substitute for the state.	Project-based models should inform permanent, financed and accountable public systems.

10 From a Project Model to a Systemic Response

North Macedonia's Child Guarantee process provides an opportunity to move from fragmented responses to a permanent multisectoral model. **The GNEZDO experience supports the development of local integrated child-support hubs or equivalent coordination mechanisms** that connect Centres for Social Work, schools, health institutions, municipalities, relevant ministries, police where necessary, and licensed civil-society service providers.

RECOMMENDED MEASURES

- Establish a designated case holder for every child assessed as being at high risk.
- Use one multidisciplinary individual support plan with measurable actions and deadlines.
- Introduce stronger early-warning and re-entry mechanisms for children outside education.
- Link street outreach and child-labour interventions with family income, housing and social protection support.
- Ensure effective health coverage and proactive outreach for children outside regular institutional contact.
- Strengthen municipal-level data sharing and referral protocols, with safeguards for privacy and child rights.
- Provide sustainable public financing for licensed community-based services that demonstrate effective outcomes.

SYSTEMIC MESSAGE

***“A child should not have to go from institution to institution.
Institutions should organise themselves around the child.”***

HOME • FOOD • HEALTH • EDUCATION • PROTECTION • SOCIAL SECURITY

A1 Annex — Selected Sources

- UNICEF North Macedonia. *European Child Guarantee in North Macedonia: A pathway to end the cycle of poverty and exclusion*. November 2024.
- UNICEF North Macedonia. *Child Guarantee in North Macedonia: Policies to end the cycle of poverty and exclusion*. May 2025.
- UNICEF North Macedonia. *Ensuring a Fair Start for Every Child / European Child Guarantee Summary*. 2026.
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- Journalists for Human Rights (JHR). *GNEZDO project records, October 2024 – September 2026*.