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### **DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN – BETWEEN POVERTY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

*Gabriela NEAGU*

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# DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN – BETWEEN POVERTY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Gabriela NEAGU<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Children from disadvantaged socioeconomic and family backgrounds are one of the categories most severely affected by COVID-19. In this article, we analyze the impact of the pandemic on two categories of disadvantaged children: children living with their family of origin and who are the beneficiaries of day center services (DCS) and children living in family-type residential centers (FRC). The data analysis also reveals how public institutions (schools, administrative institutions) and private institutions (NGOs, business areas, representatives of cults, and national minorities) can work together to identify solutions and take action to support disadvantaged children. From the methodological point of view, we opted for qualitative research. Research results reveal that the pandemic affected both categories of children (difficult access to basic needs, and services, risk of dropping out of school, difficulties in the process of family reunification) but also that the intervention and inter-institutional collaboration reduced the negative effects on children, families and the community.

Keywords: COVID-19, family-type centers, daycare centers, poverty, children.

## Introduction

The priority of the authorities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is to maintain a balance between protecting the health of the population and the functioning of society and its systems at a level as close as possible to normal. At the same time, the population is making efforts to adapt to the new living conditions in which mobility restrictions and social distancing become an integral part. But the ability to cope with the new conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic is not the same for all categories of the population. Children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are those most exposed to the negative effects of the

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<sup>1</sup> Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy, Bucharest, ROMANIA.

E-mail: gabi.neagu@iccv.ro.

COVID-19 pandemic due to the specific characteristics of this age: dependence on family or various public or private institutions in terms of financial and material resources, access inequalities to and in educational success, vulnerability to the psycho-physical abuse by adults, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the visibility of another category of children: - the institutionalized ones - especially because many institutions caring for these children, in numerous countries, have become foci of infection with the new coronavirus. But beyond the medical problems, this category of children has to face other social, family, economic, and psychological inconveniences. Isolation, fear of moving further away from the family of origin, and concern for the situation of their families are likely to give rise to or exacerbate certain mental health conditions such as depression, or facilitate the development of anti-social behaviors like running away from care centers or from aggression. The implications of a crisis, whatever its nature, are far greater when it comes to vulnerabilities. For example, in countries where the share of children without parents, those abandoned and taken over permanently or for a limited period by the institutions with responsibilities in child protection is higher, the level of vulnerability to social, economic, and health crises is higher, as well. The objective of this article is to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on two distinct categories of children: those living with their families of origin who are the beneficiaries of day center services (DCS) and children living in family-type residential centers (FRC).

## **Theoretical and methodological framework**

### *Literature review*

Disadvantaged children are the category of the population whose social, family, economic, and psychological balance is affected by the occurrence of a difficult situation (e.g. lack of income, strained relationships between family members, poor health) that they cannot solve with their own resources. In most countries, one of the most common ways to intervene in support of disadvantaged children is the intervention of institutions specializing in welfare and social protection. The intervention of these institutions can take the form of supervision for a determined period based on a social investigation regarding disadvantaged children and their families and providing support for their needs, or of removing children from family and proceeding with their integration into a specialized center. In some former communist countries, as is the case of Romania, the second type of intervention is still dominant today because a very extensive system of institutionalization of children has been inherited, but especially a mentality favorable to institutionalization. Research has concluded that both, the general population and staff working in welfare and social protection, consider institutionalization to be a more effective measure to protect children than to

keep them in the family. So, the family is considered a risk factor for a young person especially when faced with poverty (Shelton *et al.*, 2018) or if they have disabilities (Tobis, 2000; Tomescu-Dubrow, 2005). Moreover, the analysis of the profile of institutionalized children led researchers (Stănculescu *et al.*, 2016) to identify *source communities*. These are marginalized communities, in which the population lives in extreme conditions and in which families consider the best solution for their children is to entrust them temporarily or permanently to welfare and social protection. Also, at the community level, another important feature is *the power of the antecedent* (Stănculescu *et al.*, 2016): families who have left a child in the care of the welfare and social protection institutions are prone to repeat the gesture and, moreover, other families in the community are susceptible to replicating this behavior. In times of crisis, disadvantaged (source) communities tend to become much larger (Fisher *et al.*, 2020). To assist children and to change the behavior of the population in Romania - in the sense of reducing the risk of children being separated from their family of origin and protecting children - encouraging the development of DCS and FRC. The aim of DCS is to prevent the institutionalization of children through a continuous presence in the community and through a holistic intervention (LaMont, 2014) that responds to the many and complex needs of the disadvantaged population (lack of income, housing, family conflicts, problems health, criminal history, risk of dropping out of school, etc.). FRC is the ultimate solution for children who are abandoned by their families or for whom remaining in the family is a risk to their life and health. Children living in FRC liaise with the family of origin and are encouraged to meet the family of origin. If the situation permits, they are helped to return to their family. Complexities of being a disadvantaged child are reflected in the approach perspective: explaining the deprivation in the socio-economic family by lack of social cohesion and social capital in the society, community, and family (Bynner, & Ashford, 1994; Kačerauskas, 2019; Škobla, 2016), or by theories of stress that analyze the effects of the disadvantaged socio-economic family and environment on the mental health of adults and children, as well as on the balance of family life (Creasey, & Reese, 1996; Deater-Deckard, 2004). In the case of children in welfare and social protection institutions among the most common approaches are those that focus on the relationship between the crisis response of beneficiaries and particularities such as the age at which they entered the system, the period of time spent in the system, the reasons why they were institutionalized. (Benedict, & White, 1991; Akin, 2011) These perspectives will support us in our analysis. However, knowing the fact that we are facing a systemic global crisis, in order to understand how certain categories of the population are more affected than others and how they manage to cope with the pandemic, we need a comprehensive analysis model. Also, given the objective of the article but also the type of target group analyzed, the situations that will be analyzed best integrate Bronfenbrenner's bioecological meta-model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994). This model is comprehensive and built around the idea that the protection factors

used by the population in crisis situations, but also the stress factors they have to deal with, result from the permanent interactions that occur at (a) the macro level where the dominant and specific values are of a space/time to which the population refers; (b) at the meso-level are the organizations, institutions with which the population interacts and which need to provide formal support to it, in particular in times of crisis (c) at the exosystem level representing the informal groups (family, for example) to which the individual belongs; and (d) at the micro-level that reflects the individual's personal characteristics, relationships/immediate interactions. Using this model as the main framework of analysis will help us to explain how society (macrosystem), formal support (mesosystem), and informal support (exosystem) influence disadvantaged children, both those living in the family of origin and those who are in welfare and social protection institutions to prevent exclusion or deterioration of social relations (microsystem). In this case, the macro level will be represented by the community to which the disadvantaged children belong; the mesosystem will be analyzed through the NGOs providing residential services and the schools attended by the two target groups. By analyzing the opinions of the parents of children who are beneficiaries of residential services but also those of employees working in the organization and who take over parental responsibilities for children living in FRC, we will analyze the exosystem (informal support). The personal characteristics, relationships, and interactions of children, and their effects on medium and long term are limited to the microsystem (social relationships) that will be analyzed based on discussions with the two categories of target groups.

### *Method*

Data were collected through focus groups (FG) and semi-structured direct interviews and analyzed through subsequent content analysis. FG and interviews were organized around open questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on the current situation - the COVID-19 pandemic - and its impact on their way of life and lifestyle, relations between them and their families, or between them and other members of society. Each FG and the interview were structured on the four levels of the bio-ecological meta-model: macro-, meso-, exo-, and microsystem. In order to analyze the impact of the health crisis on the macro and mesosystem (community, school, NGOs), we asked questions such as: *What changes have you seen in the community where you live, the neighbors, and the people in general; What changes in behaviors and attitudes were generated during the pandemic in children?* I approached the topic of education with questions such as: *How did you manage the lessons during the time when schools were closed; What are your expectations from the new school year in terms of participation, dropout, and educational performance?* Analyzing the exo- and micro-levels has guided the discussion by asking questions like *What are the main sources of income and*

*which of them did you benefit from during this period; How did you keep in touch with your family during the pandemic?*

The content of the discussions was transcribed in Romanian and subjected to a detailed analysis in order to identify the themes and sub-themes that were included in the system of categories for analysis.

### *Selection and Participants*

The research included the participation of 37 people (*Table 1*) with different socio-demographic and professional characteristics:

*Table 1.* Characteristics of focus group participants

	FG1	FG2	FG 3	FG4	FG5	FG 6
No of participants	7 children (4 F and 3 M)	8 children (5 F and 3 M)	8 employees of FRC (8F)	6 teachers (6F)	8 parents (8 F)	7 volunteers (2 M and 5 F)
Age	12-15 years	12-17 years	20-52 years	40-55 years	21-50 years	19-60 years
Education	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 5-8	ISCED 5-8	ISCED 0-2	ISCED 4-8
Workplace/ studies	Schools	Schools	NGO	Schools	6 housewives 2 employees	Entrepreneurs, volunteers, NGO leaders

*Source: author*

The selection of children who participated in the research took into account the following criteria: respect for gender equality, equal opportunities, minimum age of 12 years, and beneficiaries of organization services. Also, the participation of children in the research was conditioned by the written consent of the parents or legal representatives. FG1 consists of children who come from disadvantaged socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and are enrolled in public mass education but in different schools in urban areas. FG2 consists of children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and live in FRC. Children study in two types of schools and live in different FRC: some FRC are located in rural areas and children attend school in rural areas, while others are located in urban areas and children are enrolled in urban schools. The group of NGO employees (FG3) consists of social workers, psychologists, educators, social workers, and medical staff. The teaching staff who participated in FG4 is made up of teachers from urban and rural schools, teachers who teach both at the primary level and at the gymnasium level, and teachers with management positions (school principals) or without management positions. The group of parents who participated in FG5 consists of single mothers, mothers in a consensual relationship, or women who are married

but in many cases spouses have emigrated abroad in search of a job for at least one year. Each of these women has at least 3 children and, in most cases, all children in the family benefit from the RCD. FG6 included people from the business areas as well as representatives of other NGOs who analyze the situation from the perspective of those who offer jobs, and the possibility of social-professional integration of young people. The semi-structured direct interviews were conducted with one of the representatives of the FRC management (women, 45 years old, ISCED 5-8) and with a representative of the rural community because there are most FRC (men, 40 years old, ISCED 5-8).

### *Data collection*

In qualitative research, the trustworthiness and credibility of the data are influenced by a series of factors related to both individual characteristics of the researcher and those of the participants, the relationships between those involved in the data collection process (interactional factors) but also of the place and the period in which the research takes place - contextual factors. (Krippendorff, 2004; Vicsek, 2010). In the current research, the most important factors are the individual factors that mainly concern the children participating in the research. Next to the fact that it is the first time they are involved in such an activity, we must also consider their psycho-social characteristics (children abandoned by their families, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, with very low levels of self-confidence and trust in others). Regarding the adults, we must take into account the fact that the parents participating in the FG (especially FG5) are members of poor, marginalized communities. According to studies (Putnam, 1995; Emler, & Frazer, 1999), this category of people shows less trust in institutions and authorities, they are rarely or not at all involved in activities outside the community to which they belong and have less trust in other members of society. The second category of factors - the period, that is the time when the data collection was carried out - the organization of the FGs immediately after the movement restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic were lifted, can produce effects on the respondents and on their opinions. The interactional factors refer to the situation in which the phenomenon of social conformity can occur at the level of a group (Eagly, & Chaiken, 1993). In the present case, this risk exists due to the socioeconomic, educational, professional, etc. characteristics. of the participants in the FGs.

The professional experience of the moderator, the fact that the FG took place in locations with which the participants are familiar, and the diversification of the institutions the participants come from (different schools, public and private institutions, different responsibilities, and socio-professional positions) are all elements that support trustworthiness and credibility of the research. The first part of each FG was dedicated to getting to know the participants in the discussions, including the moderator, and explaining the research objectives. For each FG, the moderator adapted his explanations to the level of understanding of the participants

(children versus adults, for example). Also, the moderator made sure that all participants understood the message correctly and gave them the opportunity to ask additional questions related to these aspects. Each FG began with a brief presentation of the purpose of the meetings, a presentation of all the participants including the moderator, and an explanation of how a focus group is conducted. It was also explained to the participants how to ensure the confidentiality of the data, and how the research data will be used. It was also very important for the participants in the FG to understand that all the opinions expressed are important, that it is natural for these opinions to be different without meaning that they are wrong and that they can intervene in the discussion when they consider that they have a comment, observed by done so that they can ask questions in turn.

At the end of the discussions, the moderator asked the participants if they wanted to bring additions to the discussions that took place and if there were questions that they would consider to ask or discuss but which were not caught by the moderator so that they now have the opportunity to add them.

### *Ethical Consideration*

In developing the research tools, the moderator consulted with the management team of FRC and also with specialists in the field of social research. Each FG lasted between 1 hour and 2 hours and the direct interviews took between 1 hour and 1 hour and 30 minutes. For the involvement of children in the FG, written consent was requested from the parents or guardians in advance. All the participants were informed that the discussions would be audio recorded and they were asked to give their verbal consent to be recorded.

## **Exploring the data**

The results of numerous studies on the family (Pinquart, 2017, for example) have demonstrated the importance of the family environment on the well-being of children. In the current context, other researchers have concluded that those families who adopt the attitude “we are all together at this time” (Fisher *et al.*, 2020, 250) have the best chance of coping better with the crisis. For children living in FRC, family members are often visitors they see according to a well-established schedule that abides by, in accordance with regulations of national law and by the organization’s rules. Some of the biggest challenges during the isolation period were the ones of managing relations with family members and visiting program for the children from the FRC, but also for the organization’s staff to:

*“I talked to my mother on the phone ... she was not allowed to come to me ... it was hard ...” (girl, FRC).*

Visits by family members or outings based on temporary leaves of children from the center with the family were interrupted during this period. This and this situation caused some children to show inappropriate behaviors (threats to leave the center, non-compliance with the program at the center) and for staff it meant difficulties in imposing discipline, and in setting limits:

*“We were a little scared at first ... because they threatened to leave the center ... but we talked, and we allowed them access to information to understand that our decision is justified.” (Social worker, FRC)*

For children living with their family of origin, the pandemic has highlighted the difficulties they and their families face, even if being in difficulty is normal and not an exception for this category of the population. Dissatisfaction with the environment in which they live is one that accumulates over time and is rather the result of exposure to behaviors adopted by other children in the community with whom they do not say they agree, but do not disapprove:

*“I think that sometimes parents want to get rid of their children and then let them get married. They (those who got married) say they are better off.” (boy, DCS)*

Unlike children, their parents and also the employees of the organization were much more direct and accurate about the difficulties they faced during the pandemic. One of the first difficulties they faced was access to basic necessities and services because they no longer had the opportunity to earn money:

*“It was very difficult ...to think that I have 10 children and I have to feed them. Before the pandemic, I only cooked on Saturdays and Sundays because during the week they ate here at the organization but since the pandemic ...It's very difficult. Every day I have to find something to feed them and all day I hear «Mother, mother, what do we do?»”. (parent)*

The results of recent research reveal that “20% of income-poor school-aged children in European OECD countries lack good quality nutrition, which is about three times higher than among non-income poor children.” (Thevenon, & Adema, 2020, 8). Public authorities and NGOs cannot meet the needs of the entire disadvantaged population and the numbers of children who have nothing to eat is expected to increase in the next period. Even if the COVID-19 pandemic ceases, the economy needs more time to recover and provide jobs and income for everyone, especially for those without any professional qualifications. For children in FRC, the fact that their parents have lost their jobs, and that their living conditions have deteriorated even more can be an impediment to the reunification of families:

*“We want to reintegrate children but ... Where to take them home? What to feed them, where to put them to sleep? In cardboard houses, with earth on the floor, without*

*water, without light, with 2-3 smaller children, without any source of income?” (FRC representative)*

The “loss” disadvantaged children faced is also because of schools’ closure during the pandemic. This measure has led to two major problems: the exclusion of disadvantaged children from the knowledge and the interruption of social support programs associated with school attendance. By closing the schools, the parents had to deal on their own not only with the daily problems of the family but also with the children’s school lessons. For parents, especially since they have a low level of education, supporting and substituting for school was difficult or impossible:

*“I have high school but it is no longer the school it once was. I don’t understand anymore, I don’t know how to help him anymore. When he came to the NGO the educators helped him. Now he has no one to help him.” (parent)*

In disadvantaged families, there is no technology by which children have had the opportunity to participate in online classes (ILO and UNICEF 2020), and this has completely interrupted their relationship with the school. The closure of schools and the taking over by parents, who had to temporarily fulfill the role of teacher, is likely to contribute to stress increases and strengthen negative perceptions towards school and also towards children. (Spinelli *et al.*, 2020).

The more time spent exclusively in a disadvantaged family environment, the greater the risk that children will forget what they have learned in school or in the organization, or that they will move away from the patterns encountered in the school or organization:

*“After a period spent with us, they are very changed. They don’t look like other children and children in the community. They behave differently, they speak more civilized, and they are more caring.” (teacher urban school)*

For children in FRC, access to basic necessities and services and to online education was not a problem. Food, clothes, and ensuring decent living conditions were the default responsibility of the NGOs. The NGOs also have the technology (computers, internet connection) and children also had supervision and support from educators to learn. But there are also children for whom the closure of schools was not a problem, which reflects a difficult relationship with teachers or schoolmates:

*“What do I want to do after I finish 8th grade? Well, I don’t even know if I’ll get to 8th grade. I don’t think I’ll go back to school in the fall ... I’m not sorry that I didn’t go to school during this period ... It was really good that I didn’t go.” (boy, DCS)*

The educational performances of children tend to decrease when they do not go to school for a long time but the decrease is much higher, according to specialists among the disadvantaged (Campbell *et al.*, 2015). Or, the COVID-19 pandemic

sent children on “holiday” for more than half a year. Teachers are also worried about these disadvantaged children whom I believe will not only lose a lot of the knowledge they have acquired but will also drop out of school:

*“If we don’t want to lose them permanently, we have to find solutions to go back to class. Online school is not a school, especially for the disadvantaged population.”*  
(teacher rural school)

The pandemic also meant the cancellation of DCS programs: food, sports and leisure activities, counseling and psychotherapy for parents and children, joint activities of parents-children-teachers, etc. If children in FRC have benefited even during the pandemic of support conditions ensured by the organization, children from DCS and their parents who live in disadvantaged communities had no longer access to this type of support. The lack of support programs was also felt by parents, not just by children. For disadvantaged families, especially for women, leaving the community in which they live is a beneficial thing because it has created the possibility for them to do something other than domestic activities:

*“We came here and prepared materials for the holidays, for shows, we go on trips... we can’t afford to go on trips... And we learned to do many things: we learned to behave differently with our children, to talk differently with the teachers.”* (parent)

While the children went to school and then to after-school, these women had a break at least from some responsibilities. A large number of children in the family, sometimes under the responsibility of a single parent, increases the difficulty of the responsibilities and tasks that adults have to perform in a timeframe that always proves insufficient. The deficit of affectivity specific to disadvantaged family environments risks being accentuated during the pandemic period, leading to conflicts because of material and financial deficiencies and isolation. For this reason, losing participation in the organization’s activities is also regretted by the parents because it helped them change the way they approached problems in the family, and in the community.

*“They don’t know how to solve problems other than through quarrels and screams. If they are called to the school, if they have to explain something to the children, scream, swear. I organized activities in which I taught them how to speak, and that they must behave civilly.”* (psychologist)

Disadvantaged communities are territorially segregated communities (Škobla, 2016), avoided not only by other members of society but also by the authorities responsible for the safety of citizens. The pandemic period has raised concerns about personal safety not only among organization staff but also among community members:

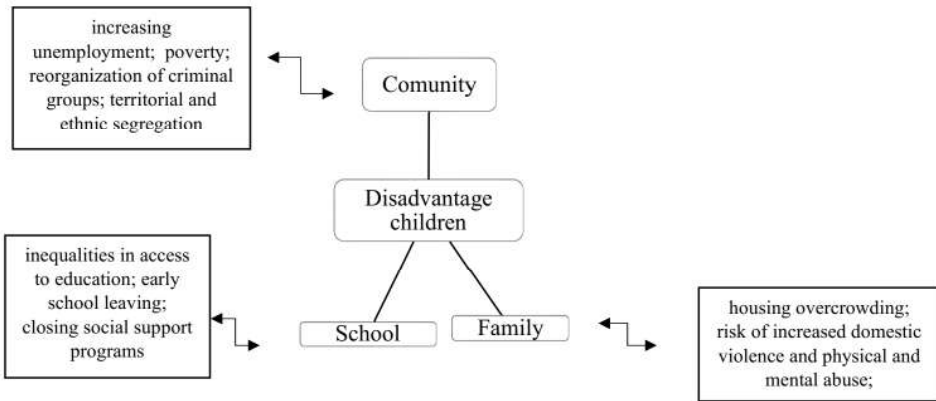
*“They say they are afraid. Many have returned from abroad – Romanian emigrants – who do not know exactly what they did and they are afraid for themselves as adults*

*but also for their children. Not to attract them to various groups, and clans. When you see that you live in a neighborhood that is surrounded by police.” (FRC representative)*

Conflict situations are enhanced by financial shortages and by difficulties people encounter in touch with the authorities to assist them against any abuses.

### Discussion

The crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic is atypical both in terms of its area of expansion, its nature, and the fact that it has generated a domino effect at the level of communities, families, and, obviously, individual level.



Source: author

Figure 1. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

## Analysis of the macro- and mezosystem

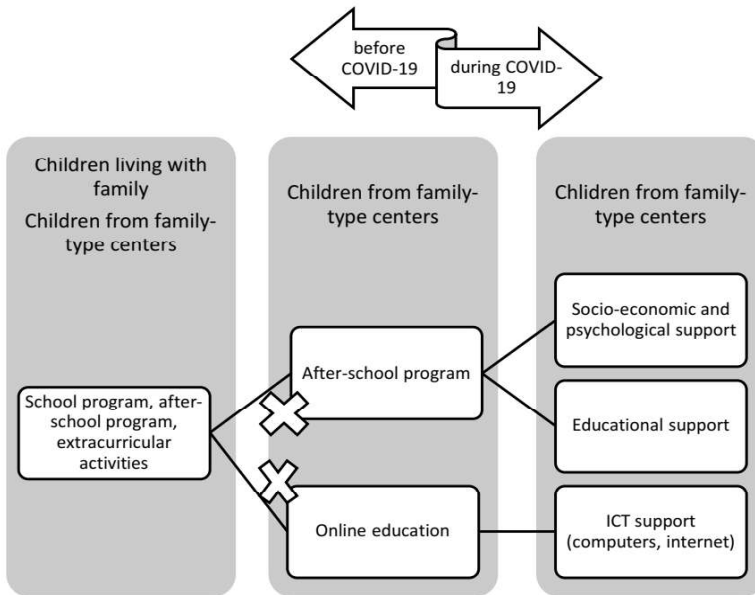
### Community

Irrespective of the type of crisis facing humanity, the most visible negative effects with immediate impact are those of economic nature: increasing unemployment, reducing population incomes, reducing consumption, deepening inequalities between people, etc. According to modern theories (Persson, & Tabellini, 1991), the economy is directly related to many social indicators such as health, education, and the well-being of the young generation. The total or partial closure of some economic activities had important repercussions on the occupational status of the population (Coibion *et al.*, 2020; ILO, 2020; Fisher *et al.*, 2020): many people lost their jobs or work only part-time. For children (Thevenon, & Adema,

2020), the risk of poverty is higher where parents have lost their jobs and tends to increase in situations where parents have never had a stable job. The current crisis has affected people working in the informal economy to a greater extent. Disadvantaged communities – as is the case in Romania – are characterized by a high share of the population working in the informal economy (Stănculescu, 2010) because the level of education and professional training is very low. The longer the crisis, the intergenerational transmission of poverty is growing (DiPerte, 2002; Zaidi, & Solyomi, 2007; Saracheno, 2010) and, depending on the country, the communities take different forms: children, who are currently facing poverty and not attending school, with minimal chances of returning to the system, are the future adults who will work in the informal economy on low and unstable incomes. Most children who are in FRC have at least one living parent they know and keep in touch with. In other words, these children are “social orphans rather than biological” (Stănculescu *et al.*, 2016, 37). Given the fact that these children, for the most part, went through several episodes of abandonment – they were abandoned by their families, they changed to several foster cares, they left the orphanages to live in such a center – they develop problematic relationships with the family of origin, with colleagues, with the educators from the school or from the organization. In order to return to the family of origin, the children go through evaluation processes in which the relationship between them and the family as well as the family’s ability to support their children, are assessed. There is a risk that in the case of many children in FRC, family reunification will be delayed because of the effects of the pandemic on the relationships between family members and on their incomes. In the case of children, the COVID-19 pandemic will signify a new abandonment and a new obstacle between them and the family, a source of deteriorating already fragile relationships that they have with members of the family of origin. Also, the longer the crisis period of prolongation and institutionalization, the lower the chances of children reintegrating into the family of origin (Guggenheim, 2007). The socio-economic difficulties in disadvantaged communities are accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this creates a favorable context for the manifestation of anti-social behaviors (Đapčić *et al.*, 2020) such as thefts, robberies, and excessive alcohol consumption, or begging to which children fall victim. Anti-social behavior is not inherited but is learned through the “example” of the people with whom the individual comes in contact (Sutherland *et al.*, 1966) and the pandemic has created a situation in which “examples” multiply. Because they do not have the resources to fight against criminal groups, or anti-social behaviors are tolerated, joining such groups becomes a natural trajectory for disadvantaged children. (Tespstra, 2006). If disadvantaged children in FRC have access to information from credible sources and can talk to educated staff, children living with families in disadvantaged communities are exposed to multiple sources of information, not always credible.

## School

The reduction of incomes or lack thereof, but also the low level of parental education leads to an increase in the risk of educational system's early leaving among disadvantaged children. According to UNESCO (2020), 91% of children have been impacted worldwide as result of school closures to prevent the outspread of COVID-19. Our research data allowed us to identify the type of educational and support activities in which both categories of disadvantaged youths participated before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Source: author

Figure 2. Activities carried out before the pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic

We see (Figure 2) that before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, both groups of children attended school and had access to support programs. After the outbreak of the pandemic, only children from FRC benefited from this support. For the children from DCS, the pandemic interrupted all these activities. When schools are closed and after-school programs are suspended, access to education for disadvantaged children living with their family of origin depends exclusively on the socio-family and cultural environment in which they live. To these “classic” inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic added another, modern one, specific to the 21st century: digital inequality. Not only is the technical dimension a problem for disadvantaged children, but in addition to that, there is the lack of availability and educational capital for parents to enable them to supervise and help children to learn, to be

able to take on the role had by a teacher in the classroom. The involvement of parents in educational activities depends very much on the existence of at least two conditions: how competent they feel to help their children and whether they believe that this activity is part of their responsibilities. (Deslandes *et al.*, 2004) The analysis of our research data reveals that parents of disadvantaged children lack skills, motivation, and self-confidence. During this period, their responsibility as parents is rather to secure food for them, which is a burdening daily task, leaving no time to invest in educating them. For disadvantaged children, the closure of schools brings other forms of inequality: not only they have no longer benefited from the support of non-governmental organizations, but they also didn't have access to the support provided by public authorities. For instance, in many countries, including Romania, for children who are in the education system, the authorities facilitate free access to a hot meal ("Milk and Bread" Program, for example) as part of national programs to combat poverty. In the absence of these programs, the phenomenon known as "holiday hunger" (Nord, & Romig, 2006) can turn into "pandemic hunger".

## **Analysis of the exo- and microsystems**

### *Family*

For most families, the pandemic involves multiple changes: the organization of space and time so that adults can fulfill their professional and family responsibilities; giving children time and support for online lessons; identifying solutions so that spending a long time with the family does not become a source of stress, etc. For disadvantaged families, the situation becomes much more complex: the problems specific to the COVID-19 pandemic are compounded by the vulnerabilities associated with social exclusion and marginalization. The results of our research are consistent with those identified in other countries (Thevenon, & Adema, 2020): the risk of overcrowding is twice as high for children in low-income households, compared to children in high-income households. Overcrowding associated with financial-material gaps creates an environment conducive to the initiation and maintenance of acts of domestic violence, and child abuse (Thevenon, & Adema, 2020). Rules imposed by the pandemic make it difficult to access the justice system and child protection services. In times of stress, many families consider giving up minors for a period or forever by placing them in institutions and specialized centers. Some specialists (Palayret, 2013) consider that this attitude is closely related to the undervaluation of the child in society in general, and in disadvantaged communities in particular. In disadvantaged families, the child is not a reason for pride, a way of fulfilling parents, or an investment, but a source of stress, a source of consumption and, at best, cheap labor force. When seen as potential source of

income, children are exploited: either they are involved in various jobs, or they are used for begging, robbery, theft, and prostitution. UNICEF (ILO, & UNICEF, 2020, 17) warns that minors of legal working age – in Romania as of 16 years – can be encouraged to drop out of school and look for a job. Taking this into account, the chances to return to school after the crisis period are very low. Working in the informal economy is a common practice in disadvantaged communities. Studies on child abuse (Tobey *et al.*, 2013) claim that it tends to occur more frequently and with greater intensity during periods of stress, and during crises, but also when minors stay longer at home. In disadvantaged communities, but not only, in addition to anti-social behaviors, another type of behavior is also tolerated by the population: the separation of children from families. For children in FRC, the parents are social workers, staff who work and live with them in the same house. Even if it is in a protected environment compared to that offered by disadvantaged families, the COVID-19 pandemic may also generate certain problematic behaviors here between children and staff. Employees who have been forced to stay in isolation with disadvantaged children feel a lack of contact with their own families, adding to the fear of being exposed to illness. Also, staff who have remained in isolation no longer benefit from the break provided by children's participation in school, the support of colleagues, and the level of fatigue tends to increase. The two target groups did not differ in terms of psycho-intellectual, socio-economic, or cultural criteria. Consequently, as response to the crisis, attitudes or behaviors are not very different: there are children for whom the difficulty is a way of life for which they lack the resources to cope with.

### *The limits of research*

Qualitative research has the advantage of allowing a critical but also detailed description of the relationships between family members, the relationships between children and teachers, between community and NGOs, etc. contributing in more depth to the understanding of the phenomenon studied: the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged children. One of the great disadvantages of this type of research is the impossibility of generalizing the results at the level of the entire population or at the level of a segment of the population (children, teachers, for example). However, the results of qualitative research can represent the starting point for conducting quantitative research because it highlights the central points that should be analyzed at the level of the whole society, or at the level of certain segments of society.

## Conclusions

Research results confirmed that any analysis of the impact of a crisis on disadvantaged children requires an examination of the many factors that act upon pressures and difficulties they are already faced with. The description of the community to which the children belong, analysis of their experiences in relation to the schools, NGOs, their own family, their reactions to and perceptions about the current situation marked by stress, uncertainty, and the limitations arising from group discussions and interviews with NGOs' staff confirmed the utility of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1994) to guide research design and data analysis in this study. This confirms that a successful intervention, especially in times of crisis, must take many factors into consideration. Some of these factors, the socio-economic situation, the mentality of the population regarding institutionalization, and community influence are more difficult to change in particular during a health crisis situation with many unknowns. But those factors that refer to education, support programs, and family preservation can certainly be strengthened through actions and strategies that have at their center the interest of the children, especially the of the disadvantaged ones.

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