

Children's homes

Imagine how it must feel for a child not to be surrounded by their own family, but to have to grow up within the walls of an institution and never be able to become part of a real family. Even if you are surrounded by your own family, you can still be an orphan. The question is, can someone who grows up in care become a healthy adult? Dave Pelzer is a good example of this; he was placed with foster parents at the age of 12, and that is when his life took a turn. He did have a mother and a father, but they happened to abuse him. I could also mention János Kotháncz, who was raised by the church and the state, and has now been working in child protection for half a century. As chairman of the Szent Ágota Child Protection Service, he fights every day to ensure the system remains functional. Of course, not every story is a positive one, and to understand the system, we need to go right back to the beginning.

The fate of children without families is one of the most fundamental issues in our society. After the change of regime, a social catastrophe began, and although reducing poverty should have been the government's responsibility, this did not happen, despite Zsuzsa Ferge's 2005 programme against child poverty. Where do we stand now? Today, 23,000 children are in child protection care, 30% of whom are in foster homes. There are 5,400 foster carers in the country. Unfortunately, there is a shortfall of 2,000 in the system, even though legislation has stipulated since 2014 that children over the age of 12 must be placed with foster carers. First and foremost, we need to find the answer to why there are not enough foster carers. Foster care is a profession whose aim is for the child to eventually return to their own family or be placed with an adoptive family. In 2023, if we consider the care of a healthy child over the age of 2, the monthly amount comprises: the basic foster care allowance, the care allowance, the supplementary allowance and the special allowance, totalling 289,437 forints per month per child; for a young adult, this is the gross amount, so the net figure is approximately 193,000 forints. This amount may be higher if we take on a child aged 2 or younger, or one with a specific health condition. Foster care is not about the money, because in many cases, severely traumatised children, or those with disabilities or learning difficulties, enter the system. There are so-called basic criteria, such as being over 24 years of age, having a clean criminal record, holding one of the qualifications required to carry out foster care, and having completed the foster care training course; but the most important thing is to provide stability for the child, to care for them, love them, support them, pay attention to them and not burn out. These are all basic requirements that not everyone can meet all at once, as parenting shapes the rest of our lives.

A child has the right to grow up in a loving family, which is precisely why I personally believe that foster parents should adopt if they can, and that it shouldn't just be people in their 40s who apply. We need many more parents, and it is not only couples who can become foster parents, although from the child's developmental perspective, it is better if both parents are present. It is not necessary to take in more children; even if you take in just one, you can change their life and set them on the right path. Before I started preparing for this talk, I thought everyone was kicked out at the age of 18, but you can remain in the system until the age of 21 if the child is working, and until the age of 30 if they are studying. The biggest problem is that 7% of the adult population believes that children end up in state care through their own fault. It is true that

some do leave the system because of their own actions: they run away or turn to crime, but this is a negligible number compared to those who have entered specialist care .

The current situation is that, in the long term, poverty and institutional care cost society more than prevention and support. In what follows, I would like to back this up with concepts and data; whilst the Prime Minister failed to do so in his most recent interview, I shall now attempt to shed light on the truth, dispel misunderstandings and clear up misconceptions.

Perhaps we should clarify the concept of poverty, as we cannot simply bandy the term about. There are three main indicators of poverty.

- Relative income poverty shows what percentage of households live below the poverty line.
- Very low work intensity indicates the proportion of households that are effectively unemployed.
- Those living in severe material and social deprivation are defined as those for whom at least 7 out of 13 problems apply. These three statistics combine to form a composite indicator: the proportion of those at risk of poverty or social exclusion : households that are classified as poor based on any of the above indicators are also classified as such according to this composite indicator.

In Hungary, one in five children lives in income poverty; according to figures from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), this amounts to 20.9% of children, not to mention the fact that those leaving care often find it harder to integrate, and face a greater risk of exclusion, segregation and discrimination. This situation could change, but there are still twice as many children (15,480) aged 10–17 living in care homes, and roughly half of them – 7,458 – are with foster parents. If we have to go without in our childhood (and I'm not just talking about a Nespresso thermos or an Adele concert, which I'm currently throwing a tantrum about), but about the fact that 11% of foster parents cannot afford sufficient meat, fish, vegetables or fruit, and 36% buy second-hand clothes, particularly those with three or more children. 12% do not have a computer, and 7.8% do not have internet access. 9.8% cannot afford the books needed for their studies, and 27% cannot afford toys. 29.5% cannot invite guests, and 22.7% do not engage in regular leisure activities (those under 30, the unemployed, and those with low levels of education). The poverty rate is 38.5% among all households with children, and the risk of poverty is 2.11%. Within the poverty group, we distinguish the following sub-groups: poor but not deprived (**10%**), poor with a single deprivation (**6%**), poor and multiply deprived (**22%**), not poor and not deprived (**37%**), not poor with a single deprivation (**33%**), not poor but multiply deprived (**12%**). The proportion of multiply deprived children is 34.2% (more live in poor households, particularly in families with several children), the proportion with primary education is 69%, those with vocational training 34.6%, 21.2% have completed secondary education, 9.6% have a higher education qualification, whilst 55.9% of household heads are economically inactive.

Why have I brought up these statistics? They're dry, and as I write this section, I can't help but wonder what percentage of my audience will yawn – I didn't even need to consult the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) for this. No one ever talks about the exact figures, especially

when it comes to childcare. It is not necessarily the responsibility of the ‘ ’ government, because politicians are cloaked in the guise of child protection even when it doesn’t suit them. Statistics aren’t meant to scare us, as we’ll never achieve a society of equality due to the staggering scale of global capitalism; however, these percentages could be reduced, and let’s admit it, nothing should take precedence over the social sphere. A weaker economy, a better social life – though this isn’t an either-or question. The economy will only ever improve if there is a pool to draw from; we must build on people, on our own people. The creation of new jobs depends on the next generation, a significant proportion of whom find it harder to plan for the future than those of us here complaining that, oh dear, we can go on to do a master’s degree. Everything is relative.

Not only is everything relative (including the good and bad data), but everything changes. The 2024 figure stands at 2.9 per cent regarding the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Among children under 18, the risk of social exclusion has improved by 17.5 per cent. The proportion of people living in severe deprivation fell to 10.5 per cent by 2024. Thanks to this improvement and reduction, more than 300,000 children were able to move from living at risk of poverty or social exclusion into the middle class. These figures are not false, and the percentage points are the second best among Member States, after Latvia. We can also point to achievements over the past 15 years; of course, there is still work to be done, as we are by no means at the perfect level yet. The latest development is that support for foster parents has been doubled.

But after all this professional analysis, why is the level of *child poverty* and its changes important? We’re fine, the rest doesn’t matter. Because poverty hasn’t been eradicated and the media should be covering it more. Whilst, according to 2024 data, 3.6 per cent of children lived in households with very low work intensity, one in ten (10.5 per cent) lived in severe material deprivation and nearly one in five (18.1 per cent) in relative income poverty; ergo, many more households with children are poor. The poverty gap (an indicator of the ‘depth’ of poverty) and the situation of the Roma are also relevant, because unfortunately the stereotype that a significant proportion of these figures are accounted for by the Roma is true. They are the group in which, despite state support, a third (31%) live in severe material or social deprivation; according to our current knowledge, this figure has now risen to the majority (57.4%). It is difficult to reach the Roma, but for some reason I feel that more effort is needed here, particularly regarding education. Since I started university, I have not had a single Roma fellow student, and I would much rather live in a Hungary where Roma people are also my fellow students. I don’t know what needs to be changed or how, because I helped a Roma person recently, but it ended rather badly, even though I did everything I could, which would have been the job of professionals. I hope that there will be fewer poor Roma people in this century, because the strategic plan provides for everything, and I say quite firmly here that it is not primarily the government’s responsibility. As long as only 1.2 per cent of them attend university and a third or a sixth of them are in work, we cannot achieve meaningful change.

Last but not least, we must discuss the scandals and the Child Protection Act. Child protection is not merely a legal obligation, but a moral one.

The 1901 Act was the first comprehensive piece of legislation aimed at protecting children, focusing primarily on the moral and physical protection of minors. Act IV of 1952 (the Family

Law Act) is legislation on marriage, the family and guardianship, which enshrined children's rights within the family framework.

Act XXXI of 1997 – is widely regarded as the 'true' child protection act, and not without reason. This Act concerns the protection of children and the administration of guardianship, abbreviated as Gyvt. It is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which Hungary ratified in 1991. Its main objective is to ensure the physical, mental and moral development of every child, and to prevent and eliminate situations of risk. It regulates basic child welfare services (e.g. family support, child welfare services), specialist child protection services (e.g. the foster care network, children's homes), the duties of the guardianship authority and the role of the state.

The 2021 'Child Protection Act' – as the legislation is termed by the government – actually aims to restrict the portrayal of homosexuality and transgenderism in media and education accessible to minors, which was more a part of the campaign. According to civil society organisations and professional circles, this is not a child protection law but a politically motivated one that stigmatises the LGBTQ community. For this reason, the profession consistently distinguishes between the 'real' (1997) and the 'fake' (2021) Child Protection Act.

Act XXXI of 1997, which comprehensively regulates children's rights and protection, remains the professional benchmark to this day. The 2021 "Child Protection Act" is at the centre of political controversy and does not actually serve the interests of children.

If the 1997 Act counts for anything at all, how can such scandals occur?

The preconceived journalistic conduct of , taken out of context, , is making the situation worse. The journalist in question should be held primarily responsible for this. Foster parents face insults on a daily basis: they are branded "filthy paedophiles", even though they have been child carers for 20 years. Two or three reports ("formal complaints") arrive every week, which are completely unfounded 10 times out of 10. If there is any suspicion, we report it immediately. Of course, there are no loopholes in child abuse cases, and since the events in Bicske and Szőlő Street, accusations of paedophilia have become a staple of the protests . Those working within the system want to do good in specialist care; we fail to notice this, and for a long time, I didn't see it either.

Public sentiment undermines any discussion of child protection, which is why we talk about paedophilia so much. I'm not trying to excuse paedophiles with this; other women have done that for me.

There's a metaphor that really struck me, namely that a few rotten apples under an apple tree do not equate to the whole system. There is no social category where this does not exist. If this doesn't come to light in 2024, will it ever? The press has exposed this, and rightly so. Szőlő Street and Bicske must never happen again. But these scandals have turned children into tools, and when a child is used as a tool to strike another, there is a serious problem.

Politics should withdraw from this world, not enter it. Children and their dignity must be elevated above communication on the political stage. We must inspire hope, show a future, and mend the wounds of trust where vulnerability reigns. Child abuse is not about nasty men hurting

innocent little children. Peer abuse (children hitting one another) is a far more serious problem. Less than 10% of cases involve an adult committing violence against a child. The SZGYF system cannot employ staff who use violence towards children. The percentage of staff who need to be weeded out is very small. Apologies, recognition of fault, and the right wording. Bicske and Szőlő Street in ' ' will not receive social absolution, but I consider Szőlő Street to be more criminal, because after Bicske I did not believe things could get any worse. In Bicske, there was a form of apology that I myself felt was genuine. Society expected more such statements from the government.

After the mistakes, the most important thing is change. If everyone agrees on one thing—that the fate of children deprived of their families is the most fundamental issue—then we have common ground. If we are blind to this, it is merely the blind leading the blind. If the aim of this collaboration is for everyone to finally consider the words they use, to speak responsibly on this matter, and to steer public discourse towards the profession rather than towards politics.

This public discourse is not a supporter, but an obstacle to everything. How long are we going to coddle the idea of what, when and why we do things in public discourse?

The children growing up within the walls of the children's home are not statistical figures, but flesh-and-blood human beings. It is up to us whether they get the chance of a loving family. Let us not view them as a problem, but as an opportunity to build a better future. Our children will grow up in loving families and have a bright future, but everyone deserves a bright future, just as everyone deserves a loving family. Less trauma, a healthier society, healthier people and longer lives – this is my message to ourselves and to the Hungarian people.