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Effective management of social benefits for at-risk families: research in the Małopolska Region

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the effectiveness of managing social benefits for at-risk families in the Małopolska region. The main objective was to identify the role of social workers as social service managers in the administration of support for vulnerable families. The method used was a diagnostic survey method (CAWI), with data collected from 312 respondents. The results show differences in the evaluation of the system's effectiveness, with a prevailing view of moderate efficiency and a strong need to simplify administrative procedures. Key tools identified include access to socio-economic databases, expert consultations, and inter-institutional cooperation. The results also reveal correlations between job satisfaction and perceived fairness and flexibility of the system. Systemic supporting at-risk families requires not only effective management but also enhanced professional competence among social workers. The authors advocate for systemic adaptation to changing social and economic conditions.

Keywords

social security, at-risk families, social workers, social benefits, social services management

1. Introduction

To be effective, organization management requires a complex approach.¹ At the local level, such organizations include social service centers and social assistance centers. These organizations deal with the distribution of benefits for at-risk families. The benefits, often called social benefits, which are granted to families vulnerable to different risks,² are part of social services and are the key support instrument that determines the improvement of the quality of life of individuals and their families in difficult financial and social situations. The idea is to provide the beneficiaries with a minimum standard

¹ Effective organization management is one of the fundamental aspects of organization functioning, that include personnel policy, organizational culture, recruitment processes and existing managerial challenges. In the case of public administration units, human resource management and organization of work becomes of particular importance due to their influence on the quality of the services provided and the realization of public tasks. The research in the Małopolska region has focused on social workers as managers responsible for effective distribution of social benefits among at-risk families. Social workers are often case managers. W. Walczak, *Uwarunkowania polityki personalnej i ich wpływ na relacje międzyludzkie w organizacji*, “Acta Universitatis Lodzensis. Folia Oeconomica” (2013) no. 282, p. 284; E. Kowalczyk, *Kultura organizacyjna jako nowoczesne narzędzie zarządzania w samorządzie terytorialnym*, “Prace Naukowe Wałbrzyskiej Wyższej Szkoły Zarządzania i Przedsiębiorczości” (2015) no. 33 (3), p. 156.

² Threats to at-risk families. Social risks involve situations or events that have a negative impact on the functioning of a family in social and economic dimension. They usually result in the loss of income, decrease of the quality of life, sometimes also deteriorated health due to e.g. unemployment, violence, addictions, accidents, disability. They not only disturb the individual's financial and social stability but also lead to other negative consequences in the family's development and stability. The legal point of view on this issue is presented in the Polish literature in, among others: J. Jończyk, *Prawo zabezpieczenia społecznego*, Zakamycze, Kraków 2006; W. Jaśkiewicz, C. Jackowiak, W. Piotrowski, *Prawo pracy w zarysie*, PWN, Warszawa 1985; J. Młyński, *Podstawy pracy socjalnej. Od teorii do praktyki*, WN UKEN, Kraków 2023; I. Sierpowska, *Bezpieczeństwo socjalne jako dobro publiczne*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej im. Witelona w Legnicy” (2015) no. 16 (3), pp. 45–58; Z. Domański, *Bezpieczeństwo socjalne*, “Journal of Modern Science” (2017) no. 2 (33), pp. 367–384; B. Rysz-Kowalczyk, *Leksykon polityki społecznej*, Instytut Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych, Warszawa 2002; J. Auleytner, K. Głębicka, *Polityka społeczna pomiędzy opiekunczością a pomocniczością*, WSP TWP, Warszawa 2000. And in the foreign publications: D. Pieters, *Social security: An introduction to the basic principles*, Kluwer Law International, Alphen aan den Rijn 2006, p. 136.

of living as well as safety and stability in life. The benefits can be financial or non-financial.³

Family allowance, social pensions, housing allowances, supplementary benefits and social services such as advisory, counseling, psychological⁴ and social support form the landscape of systemic support.⁵ However, these benefits are only effective if they are adapted to the needs of the beneficiaries. This, in turn, requires proper analysis of the clients' situation by social workers.⁶ In this context, thanks to their competence and benefit management, social workers create a "protective parachute" for at-risk families. To be effective, they also must cooperate with other institutions, educational units and NGOs. This facilitates a holistic approach to the problems faced by at-risk families. Therefore, monitoring the effectiveness of the benefit distribution and adapting the support strategy to the changing reality, labor and service markets are necessary for effective management of the human capital of beneficiaries in this area.⁷

This article provides an analysis of the effective management of social benefits for at-risk families. The main research problem was formulated as follows: How to effectively manage social benefits for at-risk families. The main research purpose is the analysis of management of social benefits for at-risk families. The study was conducted using the diagnostic survey method, the technique was the survey and the tool was a survey questionnaire. The analysis also included the source materials (the literature on the subject) and observations.

³ M. Grewiński, *Świadczenia a konteksty usług społecznych i socjalnych*, in: *System pomocy społecznej w Polsce – wyzwania i kierunki*, eds. M. Grewiński, A. Zasada-Chorab, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2012, pp. 63–65.

⁴ B. Krajewska, *Financial support for large families. Nature, forms, significance*, "Fides et Ratio" (2023) no. 3 (55), pp. 108–117.

⁵ *Meritum. Pomoc społeczna. Wsparcie socjalne*, ed. I. Sierpowska, Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2022, pp. 24–26; D. Moroń, *System świadczeń rodzinnych jako forma wsparcia rodziny w Polsce*, in: *Współczesne wyzwania polityki społecznej wobec rodziny*, eds. A. Kubów, J. Szczepaniak, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2010, pp. 323–343 (Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu, 146).

⁶ J. Młyński, *Praca socjalna w bezpieczeństwie społecznym. Myśleć, widzieć, działać*, Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne, Kraków 2021, pp. 113–117.

⁷ L. Zelek, *Menedżerskie zarządzanie jednostkami organizacyjnymi pomocy społecznej. Studium diagnostyczno-koncepcyjne*, Instytut Rozwoju Służb Społecznych, Warszawa 2023, pp. 56–57.

2. Methods

The results presented in this article were obtained from the study conducted in 2025 among the staff members (social workers) of the Social Assistance Centers and the Social Services Center in the Małopolska region. The study was conducted among all professional social service managers in the Małopolska voivodship—about 1,600 individuals. As a result, 312 questionnaires were obtained, which means 5% of maximum error at 95% reliability.

The research was quantitative, and the research technique used was a computer-aided website interview (CAWI) conducted using the survey questionnaire. As for the sample characteristics, the majority of the group were women (91.3%), persons aged 41–45 years (26.9%), with higher education (90.7%), social work experience of over 20 years (29.8%), married (73.1%), generally satisfied with their job as social workers (45.8%) and rather not recommending the social worker career to their family/friends (30.1%). The detailed characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent profile

Respondent profile		n	%
Gender	women	285	91.3
	men	27	8.7
Age in years	up to 30	33	10.6
	31–35	29	9.3
	36–40	49	15.7
	41–45	84	26.9
	46–50	52	16.7
	51–55	43	13.8
	more than 55	22	7.1
Education	secondary	29	9.3
	university degree	283	90.7
Professional experience	up to 1 year	29	9.3
	2–5 years	62	19.9
	6–10 years	34	10.9
	11–15 years	41	13.1
	16–20 years	53	17.0
	more than 20 years	93	29.8

Respondent profile		n	%
Marital status	single (not married)	44	14.1
	married	228	73.1
	informal partnership	12	3.8
	divorced	21	6.7
	widow/er	7	2.2
Satisfaction from work as social worker	Definitely not satisfied	18	5.8
	Rather not satisfied	38	12.2
	Hard to say	83	26.6
	Rather satisfied	143	45.8
	Definitely satisfied	30	9.6
Recommending social worker career to family/friends	Definitely not	76	24.4
	Rather not	94	30.1
	Hard to say	88	28.2
	Rather yes	44	14.1
	Definitely yes	10	3.2
Total		312	100.0

Source: Authors' own compilation based on a survey among employees of Social Service Center and Social Assistance Centers in Małopolska region

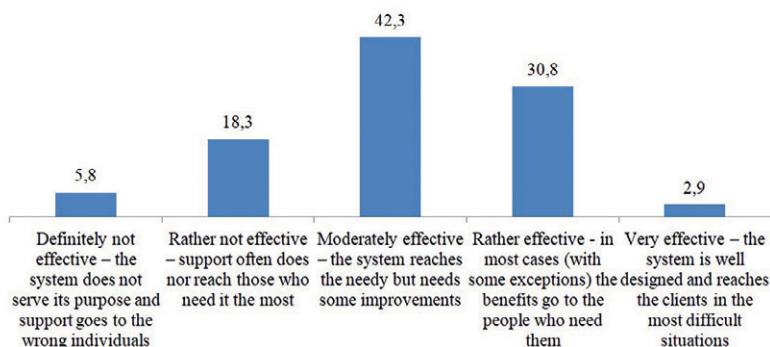
Statistical calculations were performed using the SPSS Statistic software, while the Pearson's chi-square test of independence, Pearson's R correlation, student's t-test and Anova analysis were used to show the occurrence of statistically significant relations between the variables. Correlations with a significance level of $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.

3. Analysis of the results

In the first question, the respondents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy persons (Figure 1). Their declarations were divided, with the largest percentage of the respondents evaluating the present system as moderately effective, meaning that it reaches the needy but needs some improvements—42.3% of indications. Almost one-third of the respondents (30.8%) thought that the system is rather effective as in most cases (with some exceptions) the benefits go to the

people who need them. Almost one in five respondents evaluated the system as rather ineffective because support often does not reach the needy individuals—18.3% of indications. In addition, 5.8% of the respondents admitted that the system is definitely not effective, does not serve its purpose and the assistance goes to the wrong individuals. On the other hand, 2.9% of the surveyed social workers declared that the system of managing social benefits is very effective, well designed and reaches the clients in the most difficult situations.

Figure 1. What do you think about the effectiveness of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy persons?
 N=312 (%)



Source: Authors' own compilation based on a survey among employees of Social Service Center and Social Assistance Centers in Małopolska region.

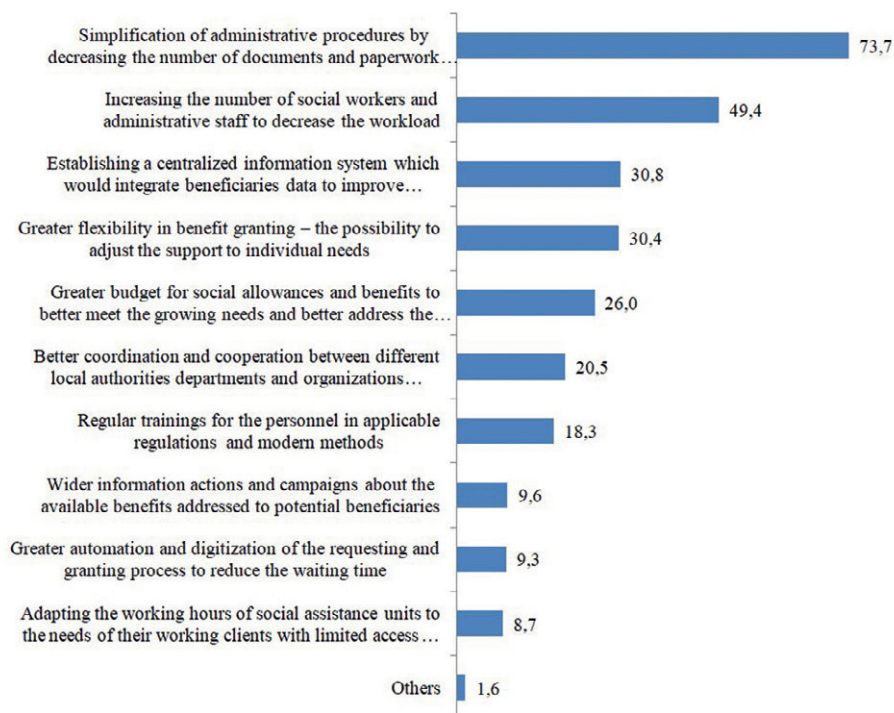
When comparing the respondent subgroups, it can be noted that the effectiveness of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy persons was evaluated significantly higher by those with secondary education ($\chi^2=12.647$, $p=0.013$) and married ($\chi^2=33.424$, $p=0.006$). Additionally, the greater job satisfaction ($r=0.119$, $p=0.035$) and the more frequently recommended career of a social worker ($r=0.126$, $p=0.026$), the more positive evaluation of the present social benefit management system. It is also worth noting that respondents who evaluated more positively the effectiveness of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy persons, more often declared that the present benefit system supports individuals in overcoming difficult situations ($r=0.485$, $p<0.001$), they also more often considered the system fair in providing access to assistance to all

who need it ($r=0.486$, $p<0.001$) and they more often positively evaluated the flexibility of the system in responding to urgent, individual needs ($r=0.447$, $p<0.001$).

When asked about changes in organization and management of the social benefits that could improve their effectiveness and availability, almost three-quarters of the respondents (73.7%) pointed to the simplification of administrative procedures by decreasing the number of documents and paperwork required to grant the benefits (Figure 2). Almost half of the sample also opted for increasing the number of social workers and administrative staff to decrease the workload (49.4%). Nearly one-third of the respondents stated that such a change would be establishing a centralized information system which would integrate beneficiaries data to improve cooperation between institutions involved, as well as greater flexibility in benefit granting—the possibility to adjust the support to individual needs. These indications were given by 30.8% and 30.4% of the respondents, respectively. In this context, less than one in ten respondents opted for wider information actions and campaigns about the available benefits addressed to potential beneficiaries (9.6%), greater automation and digitization of the requesting and granting process to reduce the waiting time (9.3%) and adapting the working hours of social assistance units to the needs of their working clients with limited access to standard operating hours (8.7%).

When comparing the analyzed changes with the respondents' profile, it can be noted that male respondents significantly more often opted for greater automation and digitization of the requesting and granting process to reduce the waiting time ($\chi^2=5.859$, $p=0.015$) and wider information actions and campaigns about the available benefits addressed to potential beneficiaries ($\chi^2=5.405$, $p=0.020$). Respondents aged 31–35 years and 46–50 years significantly more frequently indicated better coordination and information exchange between different local authority departments and organizations involved in social tasks ($\chi^2=16.004$, $p=0.014$). Wider information actions and campaigns about the available benefits addressed to potential beneficiaries were also significantly more often declared by single respondents ($\chi^2=11.726$, $p=0.020$).

Figure 2. What changes in organization and management of the social benefits could improve their effectiveness and availability? N=312 (%)

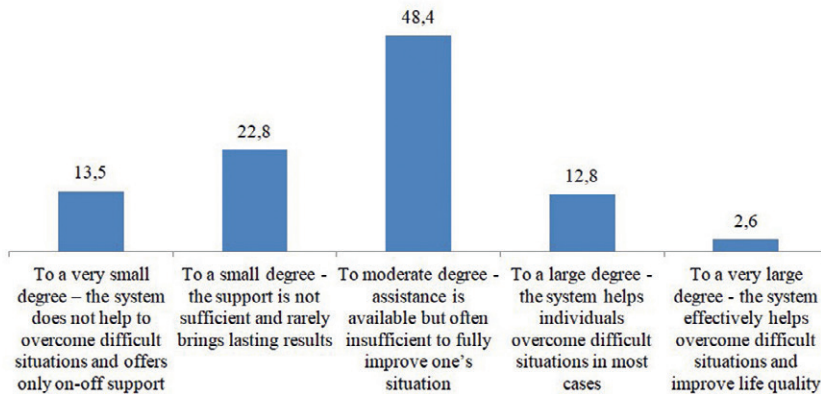


Source: Authors' own compilation based on a survey among employees of Social Service Center and Social Assistance Centers in Małopolska region.

The social workers were also asked to evaluate to what degree does the present system of granting social benefits support individuals who are trying to overcome difficulties (e.g. long-term unemployed, single mothers, persons with disabilities) (Figure 3). The analysis revealed that almost half of the sample evaluated the system as moderately effective because assistance is available but often insufficient to fully improve one's situation (48.4%). Almost one in four respondents thought that the support is insufficient and rarely brings lasting results (22.8%), whereas 12.8% declared that the system helps individuals overcome difficult situations in most cases. Then, according to 13.5% of the respondents, the present social benefit system supports individuals who are trying to overcome difficult situations to a very small degree, while for 2.6%

the system effectively helps overcome difficult situations and improve life quality to a very large degree.

Figure 3. To what degree do you think the present system of granting social benefits supports individuals who are trying to overcome difficult situations (e.g. long-term unemployed, single mothers, persons with disabilities)?
N=312 (%)



Source: Authors' own compilation based on a survey among employees of Social Service Center and Social Assistance Centers in Małopolska region.

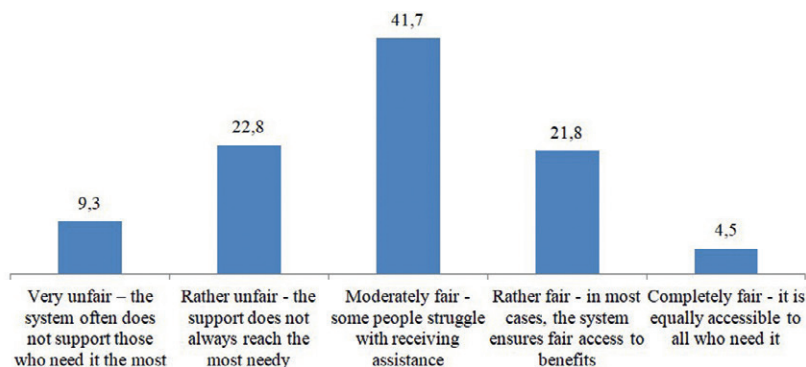
The detailed analysis showed that the greater job satisfaction ($r=0.130$, $p=0.021$) and the more frequently recommended career of a social worker ($r=0.164$, $p=0.004$), the greater willingness to declare that the present system of granting social benefits supports individuals in overcoming difficult situations.

In addition, the more often the respondents declared that the present benefit system supports individuals who are trying to overcome difficult situations, the more positively they evaluated the effectiveness of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy persons ($r=0.485$, $p<0.001$), the more often they considered the system fair in providing access to assistance to all who need it ($r=0.435$, $p<0.001$) and the more often they evaluated positively the flexibility of the system in responding to urgent, individual needs ($r=0.465$, $p<0.001$)

The analysis of declarations regarding the fairness of the present social benefit system in providing access to assistance has yielded some interesting

results (Figure 4). As it can be noticed, the opinions were again strongly divided. The greatest percentage of respondents (41.7%) evaluated the system as moderately fair as some people struggle with receiving assistance. Almost the same percentage evaluated the present system as rather unfair (the support does not always reach the most needy) or rather fair (in most cases, the system ensures fair access to benefits)—22.8% and 21.8%, respectively. One in eleven respondents thinks that the system is very unfair and often does not support those who need it the most (9.3%). In turn, 4.5% declared that the present social benefit system is completely fair because it is equally accessible to all who need it.

Figure 4. How do you evaluate the present social benefit system in terms of providing fair access to assistance to all who need it? N=312 (%)



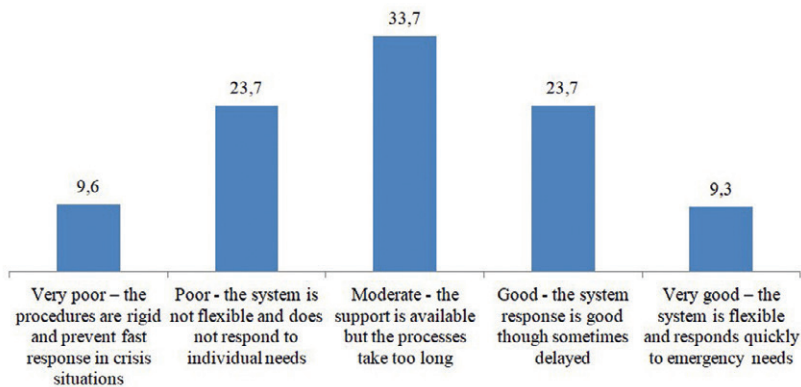
Source: Authors' own compilation based on a survey among employees of Social Service Center and Social Assistance Centers in Małopolska region.

When comparing the subgroups, it can be noted that the greater satisfaction from being a social worker ($r=0.123$, $p=0.030$) and more frequently recommended social worker career ($r=0.143$, $p=0.011$), the more positive evaluation of the present social benefit system in terms of fair access to assistance.

Moreover, the more positive evaluation of the present social benefit system in terms of fair access to support, the more positive evaluation of the effectiveness of the system in terms of reaching the most needy persons ($r=0.486$, $p<0.001$), the more frequent declarations that the present benefit system supports individuals who are trying to overcome difficult situations ($r=0.435$, $p<0.001$), and they more positive evaluation of the flexibility of the system in responding to emergency, individual needs ($r=0.436$, $p<0.001$).

The respondents were also asked to evaluate the flexibility of the social benefit system in responding to urgent, individual needs (e.g. in case of emergency or crisis situations) (Figure 5). In this case, the responses were distributed almost symmetrically as the same percentage of the respondents evaluated the system flexibility as good (the system response is good though sometimes delayed) or poor (the system is not flexible and does not respond to individual needs)—both options were chosen by 23.7% of the respondents. It should also be mentioned that almost the same share of the respondents evaluated the system flexibility as very good or very poor—9.3% and 9.6%, respectively. In addition, one in three respondents evaluated the system flexibility as moderate—the support is available but the processes take much time (33.7%).

Figure 5. How do you evaluate the flexibility of the social benefit system in responding to urgent, individual needs (e.g. in case of emergency or crisis situations)? N=312 (%)



Source: Authors' own compilation based on a survey among employees of Social Service Center and Social Assistance Centers in Małopolska region.

When comparing this feature with the respondents' profiles, it can be observed that the greater the satisfaction from work, the more positive the evaluation of the flexibility of the social benefit system in responding to urgent, individual needs (e.g. in case of emergency or crisis situations) ($r=0.159$, $p=0.005$).

It is also worth noting that respondents who more positively evaluated the flexibility of the system in responding to emergency, individual needs were also more positive about the effectiveness of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy persons ($r=0.447$, $p<0.001$),

they more often declared that the present benefit system supports individuals in overcoming difficult situations ($r=0.465$, $p<0.001$), and they more often considered the system fair in providing access to assistance to all who need it ($r=0.436$, $p<0.001$).

The last question involved a 5-degree scale evaluation of the most helpful forms of additional support in managing social benefits in the respondents' everyday work. The analysis showed that the most frequently chosen form of support was access to a database that would facilitate verification of the socio-economic situation of the clients and, consequently, accelerate the decision-making processes. Another popular form of support were consultations with social law and policy experts to better understand the relevant regulations. These indications received an average of 4.40 points on the 1–5 scale. With similar frequency, the respondents pointed out better communication and cooperation with other institutions like unemployment offices or NGOs, and psychological support for social workers to help them cope with work-related emotional load—4.32 and 4.29 respectively. The respondents definitely less often declared the need for support in the area of flexible working hours and remote work opportunities to adjust their working hours to the clients' individual needs (3.76 on average) as well as access to advanced IT tools enabling faster and more efficient processing of requests (3.73) (Figure 6).

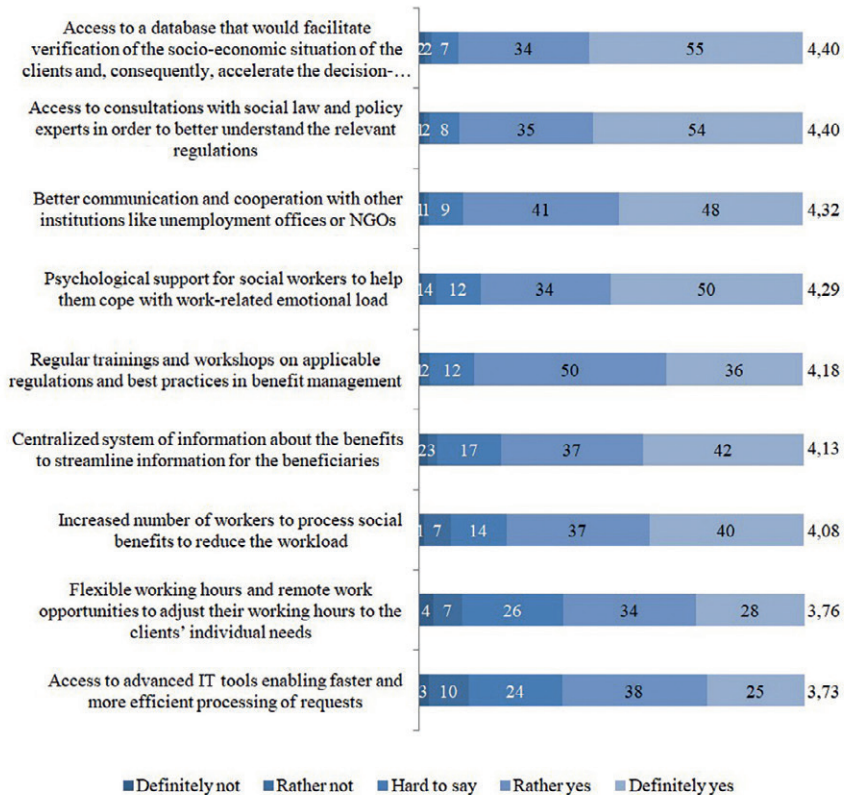
The more detailed analysis revealed that the greater professional experience, the less often chosen support in the form of: access to advanced IT tools for faster and more efficient processing of requests ($r=-0.118$, $p=0.038$), regular trainings and workshops on applicable regulations and best practices in benefit management ($r=-0.128$, $p=0.024$), increased number of workers to process social benefits to reduce the workload ($r=-0.119$, $p=0.035$) and access to consultations with social law and policy experts to better understand the regulations ($r=-0.119$, $p=0.035$). In turn, the greater satisfaction from work, the more often declared the need for psychological support for social workers to help them cope with work-related emotional load ($r=0.124$, $p=0.028$).

When comparing the specific forms of support, it turns out that the strongest positive correlations have been noted for the following, significantly more often chosen, indications:

- access to a database to facilitate verification of the clients' socio-economic situation, which in turn would accelerate the decision-making processes, and centralized system of information about the benefits to streamline information for the beneficiaries: Pearson's $r=0.505$, $p<0.001$

- centralized system of information about the benefits to streamline information for the beneficiaries and access to consultations with social law and policy experts to better understand the regulations: Pearson's $r=0.461$, $p<0.001$
- access to a database to facilitate verification of the clients' socio-economic situation, which in turn would accelerate the decision-making processes, and access to consultations with social law and policy experts to better understand the regulations: Pearson's $r=0.439$, $p<0.001$

Figure 6. What forms of additional support in managing social benefits would be the most helpful in your everyday work? N=312 (%)



Source: Authors' own compilation based on a survey among employees of Social Service Center and Social Assistance Centers in Małopolska region.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Supporting at-risk families is not only our social responsibility but also a widely understood investment in the future well-being of families and local communities. Properly targeted social benefits can reduce risks such as poverty, violence and addictions, improve the quality of life and strengthen social relationships.⁸ In this regard, they help build fair society where every citizen has the right to live with dignity. Every citizen is a full member of the social and family system. Because of this, their functioning depends on the available support and management skills of the representatives of the social service sector—social workers whose effectiveness correlates with how effectively vulnerable families improve their functioning.

The study conducted in the Małopolska region correlates, to some extent, with similar studies performed in other parts of Poland. However, there are not many of them and there is not much discussion about the results. In 2010, an article by D. Moroń was published, where the author points out that family benefits are an important form of support to the poorest families, but to remain effective, this solution requires regular validation mechanisms and needs to be adapted to the changing needs. After 14 years of systemic support of at-risk families, the postulates to introduce a more flexible approach and adaptation mechanisms to validate and update the benefits remain relevant. The study was conducted in 2020 by M. Holewa's bachelor's dissertation titled *Family benefits in Polish family policy* focused on the citizens' awareness of the available benefits. The results showed that this awareness was insufficient. The article referred to, in the study, that improving the awareness and competencies of social workers is a research gap in effective management of social benefits for at-risk families.

Similar study was conducted in 2021 by K. Kukla and titled *Effectiveness of social programs supporting families in Poland and selected European countries*.⁹ The study included the analysis of a wide range of support programs (family and social) in terms of their functionality and perception by the stakeholders. The conclusion was that despite the purposes being legitimate, the operational

⁸ T. Pawlak, *Rola świadczeń socjalnych w przeciwdziałaniu ubóstwu*, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 2023, p. 128.

⁹ K. Kukla, *Efektywność programów socjalnych wspierających rodziny w Polsce i wybranych krajach europejskich*. Praca licencjacka, Wydział Zarządzania i Komunikacji Społecznej Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2021, promotor K. Peter-Bobik.

effectiveness requires better coordination and simplified communication. The research in Małopolska region also highlights the need to simplify the procedures and relations between institutions, which confirms Kukla's manipulation regarding the improvement of support systems effectiveness.

To summarize the result of the study presented herein, it should be emphasized that more than one-third of the respondents positively evaluated the effectiveness of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy individuals (33.7%). Some objections were present among almost one quarter of the surveyed professionals (24.1%). In turn, 42.3% noticed both disadvantages and advantages of the present social benefit management system in terms of reaching the most needy persons.

Regarding changes in the administration and management of social benefits that could improve their effectiveness and availability, almost three quarters of the respondents (73.7%) pointed to simplification of administrative procedures by decreasing the number of documents and paperwork required to grant the benefits. A high percentage of the respondents also opted for increasing the number of social workers and administrative staff to decrease the workload (49.4%).

When evaluating to what degree does the present system of granting social benefits support individuals who are trying to overcome difficult situations, more than one-third of the respondents gave negative answers (36.3%). Positive evaluation came from 15.4%, whereas almost half of the respondents did not choose any of the sides (48.4%).

When evaluating the fairness of the present social benefit system in providing access to assistance, positive responses were indicated by 26.3%, while negative indications were given by 32.1% of the surveyed professionals. In turn, 41.7% of the respondents remained neutral.

Indications regarding the flexibility of the social benefit system in responding to urgent, individual needs (e.g. in case of emergency or crisis situations) were the most divided, as positive evaluation was given by 33% and negative evaluation by 33.3% of the respondents. The rest choose the neutral answer.

When evaluating additional forms of support in managing the social benefits, the respondents most frequently opted for access to a database that would facilitate verification of the socio-economic situation of the clients and, consequently, accelerate the decision-making processes. This solution was followed by access to consultations with social law and policy experts to better understand the relevant regulations. Both answers received an average of 4.40 points on the 1–5 scale.

In the light of the above, several important recommendations and postulates were formulated:

1. Study managerial competencies of social workers as the key factor in effective support of at-risk families should be further developed.
2. Models integrating social management and digital tools to facilitate verification of clients' situation and decision-making should be introduced.
3. Standards of benefit system flexibility should be created, that would take into account the individual needs of families in crisis situations.
4. The influence of job satisfaction among social workers on the quality of the services provided should be analyzed, as it can be an indicator of the system's effectiveness.
5. Inter-institutional cooperation systems should be designed, especially at the local level to provide more comprehensive support to at-risk families.

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