



MOBILITY POVERTY

MOBILITY POVERTY OVERVIEW IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

SLOVAKIA

Project: Mobility poverty in CEE and SE Europe

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Mobility poverty (MP) in some countries has been relatively unexamined and no clear definitions are available at EU or national levels. However, it is a problem that is becoming more pressing as fuel prices are rising and some countries face high car dependency thus commuting to work or for daily errands can become very expensive. The most important factor that causes MP is the household's income. But then the mobility expenses are lower if the family members have good access to public transport and can go on foot/by bicycle to do their daily errands. It seems that the low-income households in peripheral and (by public transport) less accessible areas might be the most affected and vulnerable groups.

Against this backdrop, project Mobility poverty in Central and Eastern Europe aims at reviewing the policies and assessing the state of mobility poverty in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. It also aims to raise awareness of policy- and decision- makers about the mobility poverty issue. The overview in selected countries will result in a 4-pager policy brief for each country. The policy briefs will be disseminated to 20-30 stakeholders in each country. These reports will be based on an accessible EU database and quality insight (e.g. interviews). These policy briefs will be a good basis for further project activities, especially stakeholder awareness and communication.

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1/ Mobility poverty definition and indicators

Mobility poverty definition

Slovakia has not adopted any definition of mobility/transport poverty yet. Mobility poverty is still an unknown concept in Slovakia. It is not mentioned in any official statement or document. However, with an increased frequency, we witness discussions about the problem of the inaccessibility of public transport in some regions of Slovakia.

Mobility poverty in Slovakia is mainly caused by the lack of public transport, which would ensure the connection of all municipalities with the centres - district or regional cities, where employment opportunities, schools and health care are concentrated. At the same time, the price of transport is not considered as a problem¹, since discounts are provided to the most vulnerable groups of residents - senior citizens, disabled persons, children, and students. This problem is transformed into the so-called hidden mobility poverty – one that is not measurable by the amount of money spent directly on travelling. Many people suffer from insufficient transport accessibility, while not spending a large amount of their income on travelling. **Hidden mobility poverty** is a condition where residents are unable to use mobility services to the extent necessary for them and do not use much of their financial resources for travel expenses. This is mainly caused by the non-existent (inadequate) public transport and the inability to provide transport by one's own initiative. The reason may be the lack of funds to secure their own means of transport, combined with the inability to pay for fuel - petrol, diesel, ... However, this problem can also be suffered by people who, for various reasons, are unable to drive their own vehicle - children, people without driver's licence, old or disabled people.

The proposed definition of **mobility poverty** is as follows: it is a situation where an individual or a household cannot afford transport services for their access to essential socio-economic services and activities. It may be caused by the unavailability or inadequacy of transport services and/or the high costs of existing transport – private or public.

Executable definition #1: a household is at risk of mobility poverty if it spends more on transport services than the national median transport expenditure and its income is below the income poverty level.

¹ Based on survey on energy poverty collected by the author between October 2022 – February 2023

Executable definition #2: a household is at risk of mobility poverty if it spends more than 10% of its income on transport services and its income is below the income poverty line. However, in these definitions, people in hidden mobility poverty are absent, which could be solved by an expanded definition of this problem, as described below.

Mobility poverty, as seen in Slovakia, affects entire regions. In light of the need to achieve carbon neutrality, the emphasis should be placed on public transport (not individual support). It is provided by local governments – municipalities and cities. Therefore, it is also necessary to introduce the concept of a mobility-poor region and to support those who provide transport services. This could solve the problem of hidden mobility poverty.

A **mobility-poor region** is one where there is a pre-defined percentage of municipalities that are mobility-poor. A municipality can be considered in the state of mobility poverty if it has less than 7 (10) connections per day to a nearby regional centre. This draft definition needs to be supported by an in-depth analysis.

Indicators of mobility poverty

Some indicators are already collected in Slovakia, which **partially measure transport poverty**. However, these are not sufficient to determine the scope of this problem. It is necessary to extend the indicators and collect them on a regular basis.

- ◆ Share of people who cannot afford public transport (collected once). Need every 1-5 years.
- ◆ Share of people who cannot afford (own/operate) a car (partially collected) – every 1-5 years.
- ◆ The number of households having a car in urban and rural area (not collected). Collection of the data for analytical purposes preferably on an annual basis or as a part of the Housing Budget Survey. The question could also be part of the decadal Census. The currently available data on the number of registered cars is not the proper indicator, because there exist households where every adult member has a car, but on the contrary, there are households without a car.
- ◆ Average number of public transport connections leaving/arriving to municipalities, e.g., under 300 inhabitants (not collected). Traffic chart

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changes every year, data collection should be every year (for mobility poor region).

- ◆ Satisfaction with the frequency of provided public transport broken down into districts (not collected) need every 1-5 years (for mobility poor region)
- ◆ Number of km of cycle paths.

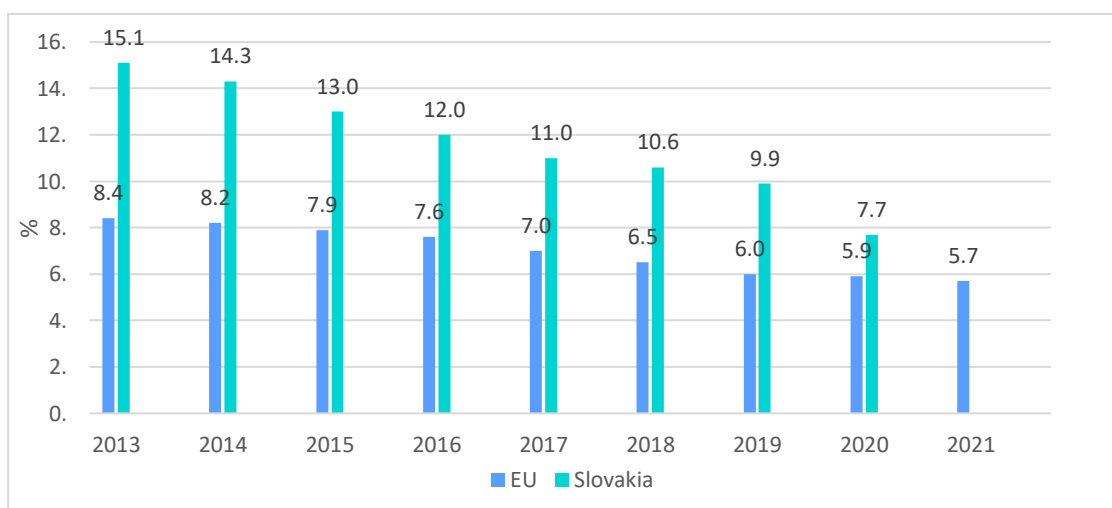
2/ Situation in the field of mobility poverty

In Slovakia, mobility poverty is mainly a **regional problem**. The most affected are rural areas in southern and eastern parts of the country with limited job opportunities, low incomes, high unemployment rate, where people do not have enough financial resources to afford their private car/vehicle. Deepening the problem is a fact that in many regions, regular train services have been cancelled due to inefficiency (many of them in the least developed regions). However, the missing railway transport was not replaced - e.g., by bus transport in an adequate frequency. Cost optimization is also taking place in bus transport - the frequency of connections is being reduced. Thus, many regions found themselves without regular and sufficiently frequented transport options. There is a lack of connections to nearby larger municipalities providing work, education, but also health care.

Slovakia is a country where, in general, people do not experience a significant problem regarding **access to a personal car**. By the end of February 2023, 2.57 million passenger cars were registered (MI SR), which means that more than every second resident of Slovakia over the age of 18 owns a car. However, these are not regularly distributed in the population - there are households where every adult member has a car, but also households without a car. In 2020, only 7.7% of respondents in the entire population cannot afford a car, while this ratio has been decreasing over the years. In 2013, 15.1% of people in the entire population could not afford a car, which is, however, more than the EU average (Graph 1).

Vulnerable groups of the population are more exposed to the problem - e.g., every fifth household (19.1%) of single parents with dependent children cannot afford a car (HBS, 2021).

Graph n°1: Percentage of people who cannot afford a car.

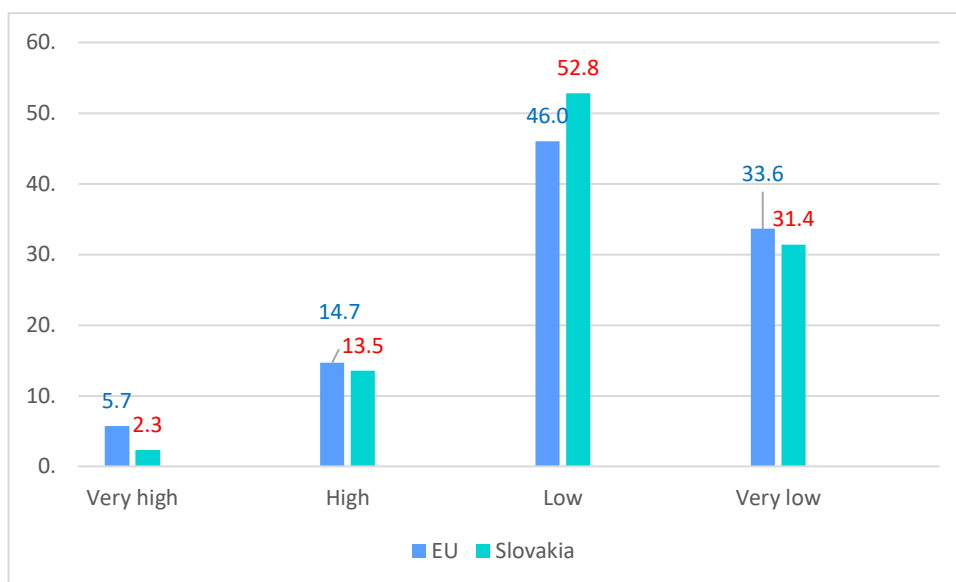


Source: Eurostat - ILC_MDDU05

In the case of people who fall below the income poverty line (if their income is below the income level of 60% of the national median equivalent income), 27% of people do not have access to a car, and also every third single-parent household with dependent children.

Based on data from 2012, only 16% of the population has a problem with **access to public transport**, while the situation in Slovakia is better than the average of EU countries (Graph 2). Given the significant reduction in frequency of connections, it can be expected that the current data would be more negative.

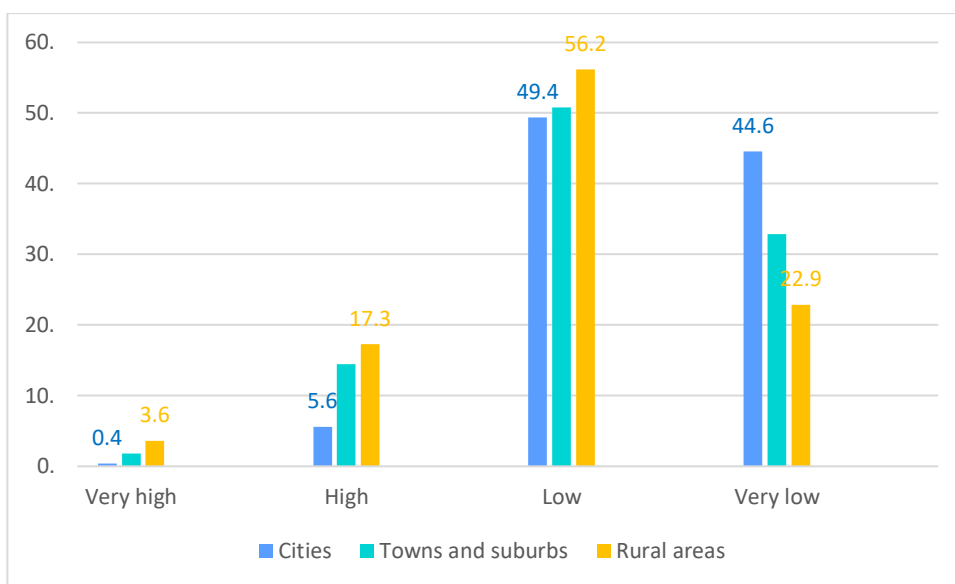
Graph n°2: Level of difficulty accessing public transport, 2012.



Source: Eurostat - ILC_HCMP06

The situation is significantly worse in **rural areas** (Graph 3). 20% of residents in rural areas have very limited or difficult access to public transport, compared to 6% in cities.

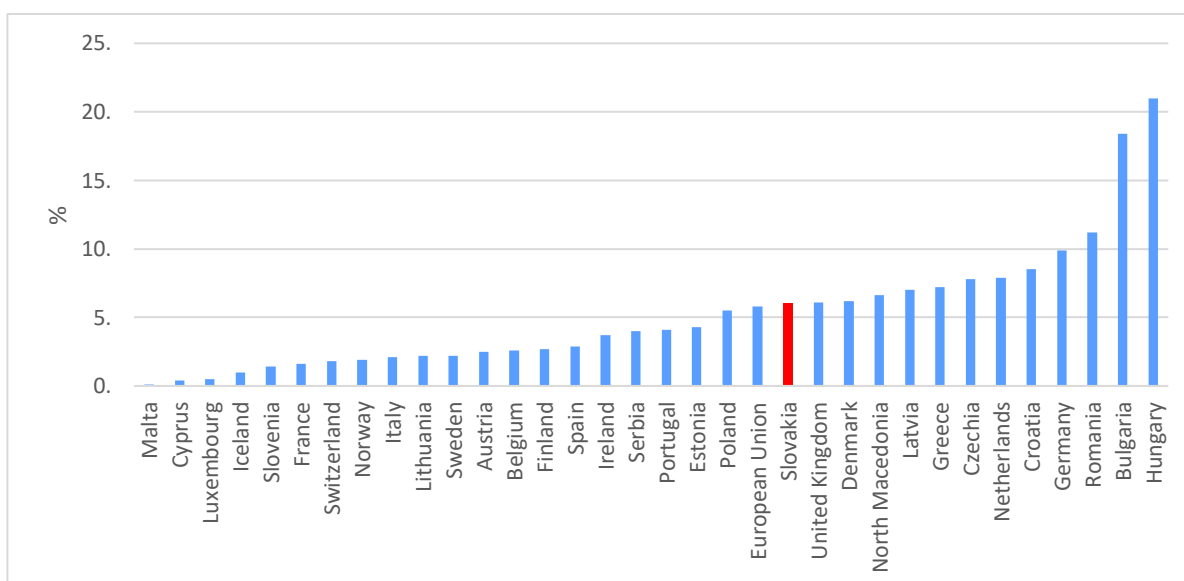
Graf n°3: Level of difficulty accessing public transport by urbanisation, 2012.



Source: Eurostat - ILC_HCMP06

Based on data from 2012, only 6% of people affected by income poverty cannot afford to use public transport, which is only 0.2% more than the EU average (Graph 4). The reason can be a wide variety of travel **discounts for the most vulnerable**. In the case of rail transport, up to free transport.

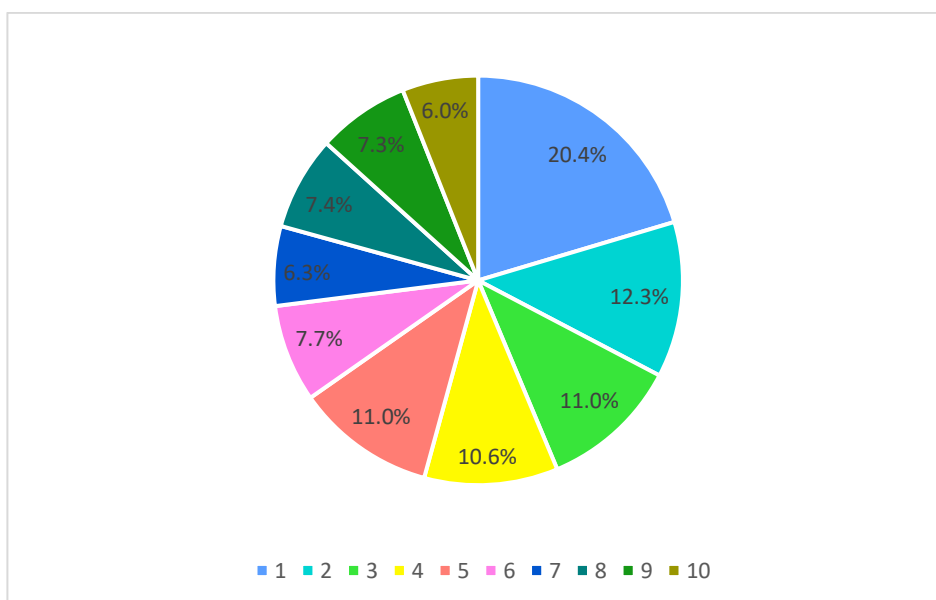
Graph n°4: Share of people in income poverty who cannot afford to use public transport, 2014.



Source: Eurostat - ILC_MDES13B

Based on the Housing Budget Survey 2021 (HBS), 10% of households spend more than 10% of their **income on transport services** (purchase of a car, fuel, and public transport expenses). If only expenses for the purchase of fuels and expenses for public transportation were considered, only 5.9% of households would have expenses for transportation higher than 10% of their income. If expenses for air transport are excluded (which can be expected for households with higher incomes), we would have 5.7% of households at risk of mobile poverty. These are mainly in households with the lowest income (Graph 5).

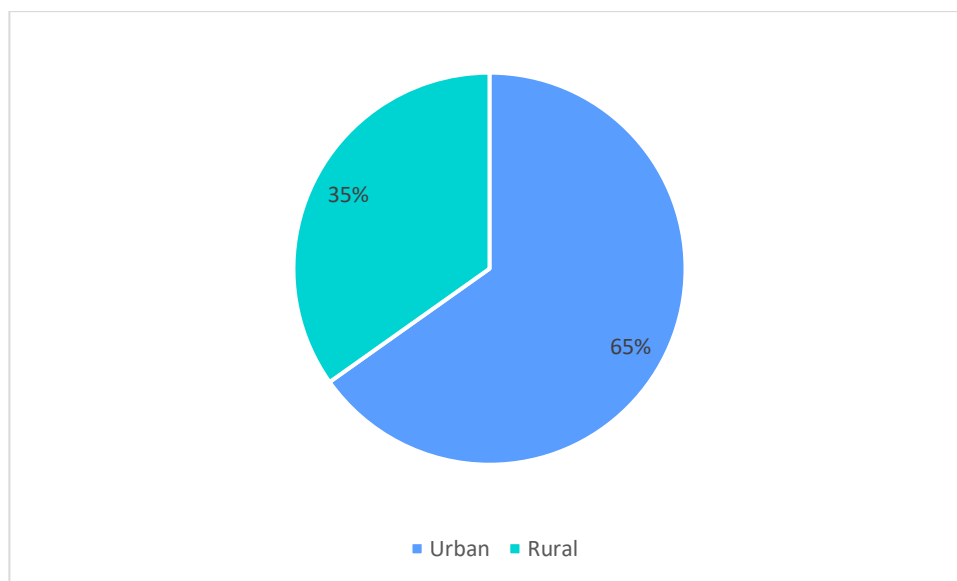
Graph n°5: The share of households with more than 10% of expenses on transport (excluding the purchase of a car and air transport) by income deciles, 2021.



Source: own calculations based on HBS 2021

Data shows that people spend more on transport in **cities**. This comes from personal car transport (Graph 6). People at risk of mobility poverty living in cities spend 10 times more of their financial resources on personal transport than on public transport, in rural areas only 6 times more. The reason for low expenses for households in rural areas may be hidden mobility poverty.

Graph n°6: The share of households with more than 10% of transport expenses (excluding the purchase of a car and air transport) by urbanisation, 2021.



Source: own calculations based on HBS 2021

3/ MOBILITY POVERTY POLICIES AND MEASURES

In spite of the fact that mobility poverty is an unknown term in Slovakia, the country has started adopting measures to mitigate this problem. There exist social measures not aimed specifically at people with mobility problems. Nevertheless, they help mobility vulnerable inhabitants.

In Slovakia, several **transport discounts** are provided for the most socially vulnerable groups. All school-age children (up to 16 years of age or up to the 10th year of schooling) travel by train for free. Travelling by train is also free for all students under the age of 26 (limited number of tickets per train). Similarly, children under 6 years travel for free too. Seniors from the age of 62 and pensioners before reaching this age and severely disabled also travel for free or with discounts in trains.

When travelling by public transport, many cities offer discounted fares to seniors (pensioners) and disabled persons. After equipping a special voucher, persons older than 70 are allowed to travel for free. Pupils and students have a 50% discount on the travel fee. Substantial discounts are also provided to mentioned population groups when travelling by intercity buses.

Another means of improving the conditions of residents who have problems with transportation are **school buses**. Those take children to school at the beginning of classes. Similarly, they also make deliveries after the end of the classes. All children in the schools start classes at a similar time, ensuring that children can arrive at school on time. Returning home is a complication, as not all scholars end at the same time. Children must wait for each other.

Free transport is also available to residents who are going to or returning from a medical examination in justified cases - reduced mobility or malaise. A prescription from a doctor is required. However, there are not enough ambulances to transport patients, and they often must wait for hours to be transported.

Disabled can obtain the **contribution for the purchase of a car and fuel** when certain conditions are met.

However, these population groups are not the only ones at risk of mobility poverty. It is necessary to take measures to solve such a problem also for other population groups who meet the conditions of mobility poverty.

One of the other possible measures are **subsidies for individual transport** - for the purchase of a car or fuel not only for people in mobility poverty. However,

this is not consistent with efforts to reduce emissions and achieve carbon neutrality.

A better solution is a **shared transport** (supported by the state, local government) and the expansion of the network and frequency of **public transport** (bus, rail), especially in vulnerable regions.

Slovakia is facing a problem of limited network of **bicycle paths**, which would ensure a safe and cheap means of travelling supported by shared bicycles, which would be available at the most frequented traffic junctions. Supporting the infrastructure for cycling/scooters would help solve mobility poverty and at the same time contribute to improving the physical and mental health of the population.

It is necessary to consider the range of discounts provided for some groups of the population - e.g., reduce discounts for students, or introduce a co-payment for travelling - e.g., 70% discount and not a free ticket. On the other hand, it is necessary to increase the frequency of transport services - trains and buses in vulnerable regions with low incomes.

4/ KEY ACTORS IN THE MOBILITY POVERTY FIELD

Solutions to mobility poverty can take place on several levels – minimizing transport, supporting public or individual transport, e.g., allowance for the purchase of a car for certain groups of residents. The most important thing with great added value for all residents is the improvement of the public transport network and frequency. If it is supported by a shift from private to public transport, it could ensure the improvement of this situation not only for those in mobility poverty. The environment and the comfort of passengers could also improve - they would not have to be in traffic jams, and the transition from individual to public transport could reduce greenhouse gas emissions too. Public transport is provided at the national and regional level. **Self-governing regions** must be involved (they support/provide long-distance bus transport and suburban transport) but also the **municipalities** themselves (urban public transport). Significant financial aid for regions must come from the state, as a mobility-poor region is often also income-poor.

The Ministry of Transport and Construction, having railway transport under its patronage, should re-evaluate the operation of railway lines also in view of the social impact of the lack of transport connections for the population. This is especially necessary in less developed regions.

Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family – support of the social aspect of poverty in the form of transport allowances for socially weaker groups of the population, especially in areas without sufficient public transport.

Employers - The vast majority of the population's trips are for work. If the work can be done at home, it is up to the will and experience of the employers to enable and support such work for their employees. This will reduce household travel costs. (But the household expenditures will be increased by energy consumed during working hours - especially heating, but also electricity consumption, e.g., for the computer.) Helpful are buses that take people to work at the exact hour (which already works in many companies). Buses facilitating daily commute by the local employer can be helpful too. In jobs where it is possible, flexible working hours could help (this option already exists but may need to be expanded).

Media and non-profit organisations - Great added value can also be brought by the involvement of the media, which will enlarge people's knowledge,

bring examples of good practice - how to change their current behaviour towards a more sustainable one. Using shared and public transport, or bicycle and walking.

5/ RESEARCH GAPS

Mobility poverty is not a named problem. But that doesn't mean it hasn't been addressed. The most vulnerable population groups are protected and supported by various national and regional programs. However, the deeper analysis of the problem is lacking, we do not have a precise definition of what mobility poverty is, and the most mobility vulnerable groups of population have not been examined. And measures are lacking. An important factor affecting research in this area is **missing data**. The source of data on the basis of which international comparisons can be made is the EU SILC survey. At the national level, data are collected through the housing budget surveys. It would be necessary to add other questions to the surveys that would shed light on the situation.

It is also important to look at the vulnerable unit. Is it a household or an individual? Mobility poverty is **not always a problem of the household as a whole**. Sometimes it affects only some of its members. One member of the family (mostly a man) uses a car, the others rely on public transport. For families living in the countryside, this often means a significant problem, which manifests itself in the breaking of social ties, insufficient health care - e.g., impossibility to attend "less important" treatments - rehabilitation, speech therapy and after school educational and sports activities.

A significant part of the research should be devoted mainly to the appropriate setting of the **definition**, which would primarily cover people at risk of mobility poverty and especially hidden one. This problem seems to be the most problematic and important to solve in Slovakia.

A significant part of the research should be devoted to the **coordination of solving problems synchronously** - mobile poverty and efforts to achieve carbon neutrality. In this light, the setting of measures to solve the problem should also be approached - primarily the support of public and non-emission transport - bicycle, scooter, on foot, or work from home.

An important step is to examine the **availability of public transport** - both in terms of its existence and the frequency of existing connections. There is a considerable number of municipalities where the connection is provided only a few times a day - 3 departures and 3 arrivals per day.

It would also be necessary to investigate the willingness and ability of the population to use **shared transport**, which could be a way to improve the transport connections of some municipalities.

6/ EXPERT EVALUATION

Mobility poverty is a real problem that affects many citizens and permanent residents of Slovakia. Based on the available data, however, it is hard to quantify its impact and identify exact causes. Further research in this area, supported by additional data, is needed. It is necessary to focus mainly on hidden mobility poverty.

To solve the existing problem of mobility poverty, the most important thing is to adopt a definition. Without it, it is impossible to help the most vulnerable in a targeted manner (based on experience in solving energy poverty).

A more sensitive name for people at risk of mobility poverty is “transport vulnerable”.

LITERATURE

Eurostat - ILC_HCMP06, available online at:

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_hcmp06/default/table?lang=en

Eurostat ILC_MDDU05, available at:

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MI SR, Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, available at:

<https://www.minv.sk/?celkovy-pocet-evidovanych-vozidiel-v-sr>

HBS, Statistical Office of Slovak republic, Housing Budget Survey, 2021