

# Lay explanation of poverty during the pandemic in Hungary

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## Abstract

The paper analyzes perceived causes of poverty in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, Hungary, one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country. Data collection was carried out in the second half of 2020 using consensus theory and the methods of systematic data collection. The aim of the research is to discover whether support for explanations which blame structural conditions is dominant in the public perception of poverty during the pandemic. From the research discussed it is clear that structural conditions are not dominant and that the poor are often seen as being themselves responsible for their unfavorable situation. The COVID-19 pandemic is not associated with an increased support for the social type of lay explanations.

**Keywords:** attributions for poverty, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, COVID-19, individual, structural

## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on economic and social processes. Employment has fallen, while the number of registered job-seekers and the at-risk-of poverty rate have increased compared to the pre-crisis level. The effect of the pandemic on the lay explanation of poverty, however, is not clear.

The impact of the pandemic on the public perception of poverty is relevant because unusual social and/or economic strains can strengthen social beliefs making them temporarily dominant (Hunt, 1996, Kluegel & Smith, 1986, Lee et al., 1990, Marquis, 2020). The paper tests whether social types of poverty explanations are indeed dominant during the pandemic. The research is carried out in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, one of the most backward areas of Hungary.

This paper begins with a short review of the literature regarding lay explanations of poverty, followed by the applied methodology. Finally, the main findings and the conclusion is described.

## 2. Lay explanations of poverty

Reasons for poverty have been discussed by a great number of authors in literature. It was Feagin (1975) who first revealed that lay explanations of poverty can be grouped into three categories. Individualist reasons for poverty include cases when poverty is thought to be related

to the attitude of the individual; structural causes of poverty are related to the society; while fatalist causes refer to impoverishment randomly or due to fate (Harper 1996). In addition, attributions for poverty can be associated with financial situation (Williamson 1974) and ethnic origin (Hunt 1996).

Furnham (1982) categorized the above described explanations of poverty as an individual blame type (like low willingness to work or laziness), a social blame type (like the lack of real social safety nets), and an individual fate type (like bad luck) of explanations. He added a social fate type (including cases like worldwide recession) to this categorization creating a two dimensional matrix of attributions for poverty. Van Oorschot and Halman (2000), Lepianka et al. (2009) and Kainu and Niemelä (2014) confirmed the four-type structure of poverty explanations.

There are differences in the importance of these categories across countries. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, individualist beliefs predominate the public perception of poverty, while in continental Europe, societal explanations play an important role in the attributions for poverty (Kluegel et al. 1995). There are, however, some differences between Western Europe and post-socialist Europe (Kainu and Niemelä 2014).

While social types of the lay explanations of poverty play a more important role in Western Europe, Eastern Europeans emphasize more individual blame types of poverty attributions (Kallio & Niemelä 2014; Kreidl 2000; Lepianka et al. 2009; van Oorschot & Halman 2000). Across post-socialist European countries, there is a large variation of poverty explanations (Lepianka et al. 2009). Kainu and Niemelä (2014) concluded that social blame type of poverty explanations are the most popular in Ukraine, Lithuania, Slovenia, Hungary, Russia, and Latvia.

Less attention has been paid on the attributions for poverty specifically in Hungary. Kreidl (2000) revealed that no dominant ideology could be identified for poverty in Hungary in the 1990s. Habibov et al. (2017), by examining 24 post-communist countries, concluded that social type of poverty attributions were supported by more than half of the respondents in Hungary between 2006 and 2010.

Previous studies have shown that unusual social and/or economic strain can temporarily modify the public perception of poverty and structuralist beliefs can become dominant. Kluegel and Smith (1986) concluded that structuralist beliefs can temporarily become dominant. Hunt (1996) observed that structuralist views of poverty were more popular than individualistic beliefs under certain circumstances in the United States.

## 2. Methods

Based on the literature, I assume that structuralist beliefs of poverty are dominant during the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic. To test the hypothesis, primary data were collected using consensus theory and the methods of systematic data collection. Within the framework of consensus theory, a preliminary study is used to define the necessary sample size and the set of items relevant for the field of research. The minimum number of informants is a function of the average level of competence, the confidence level, and a minimum rate of questions to be classified correctly (Weller & Romney 1988, Siposné Nándori 2021b). The

application of consensus theory requires meeting the following three assumptions:

- the average level of competence across the individuals shall be at least 0.5;
- the answers of the individuals shall be independent of each other;
- each question must deal with the same domain (Weller 2007).

Preliminary study included interviews to elicit a list of lay explanations of poverty. To do so, the method of free listing was used. A total of 88 informants were asked from Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County. Free listing elicited a total of 31 reasons for poverty, out of which 9 were selected for further research taking into account the aim of the research and the frequency of the items mentioned in the free listing<sup>1</sup> (de Munch & Sobo 1988; Siposné Nándori 2016). The attributions for poverty selected for further research can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Perceived causes of poverty selected for further research based on free listing results (in alphabetical order)

Addiction	Laziness	Not enough working opportunity
Inability to economize	Low education level	Poor health
Large family	Low income level	Unemployment

Source: own compilation

Taking into account that its three assumptions are met, consensus theory determines the necessary sample size for further research. The average level of competence is nearly 0.8. At least 99% of the questions should be classified correctly at the 0.99 confidence level, therefore the minimal number of informants is eight.

Table 2 Sample decomposition based on the distribution of the population of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, Hungary

	Population (2020)	Sample size for free listing	Sample size for formal interviews
Miskolc	152,901	21	7
Other towns	220,436	30	10
Villages	263,727	37	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>637,064</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>29</b>

Source: Siposné Nándori 2021a, p. 281.

Informants were then selected with the method of multistage cluster sampling with stratification (Maxfield & Babbie 2009). The minimum number of informants from each settlement category was determined respecting the ratio of the population in the three categories (refer to Table 2). At last, a total of 29 persons were asked. Seven informants from the town of Miskolc, ten from other towns (Emőd), and twelve from communities (Radostyán and Karcsa) were selected (Siposné Nándori 2021a). Data were collected in the second half of 2020.

In the final step of the data collection, the method of quicksort was used to rank the lay explanations of poverty from the one most often causing poverty to the one least often resulting in poverty. Attributions for poverty were written on cards and then the cards were randomized. In each interview, a card was selected as a standard and informants were asked to compare all

<sup>1</sup> Items mentioned by fewer than 13 informants were excluded from the final research step.

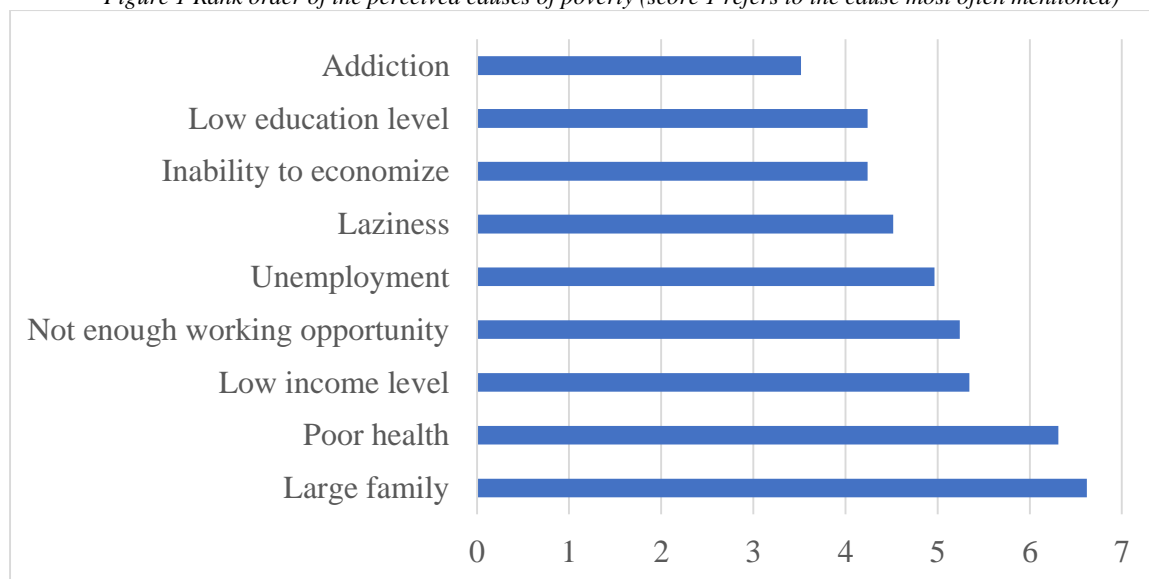
other items to the standard and group them into two categories: attributions more often causing poverty than the standard and the ones that less often causes poverty than the standard. This process was repeated for each category until all poverty explanations were ordered (Weller & Romney 1988, Siposné Nándori 2021a).

The perceived causes of poverty were then grouped as individual, structural, and fatal. Next, Analysis of Variance was employed in SPSS program to discover if the three groups of poverty attributions are rated differently.

### 3. Results

Nine main reasons for poverty were mentioned by the informants (Fig. 1). The top perceived reason was “addiction”, followed by “low education level” and “inability to economize”. Almost half of the perceived causes of poverty (“laziness”, referring to the low willingness to work, “unemployment”, “low income level”, and “not enough working opportunity”) refer to labor market disadvantages.

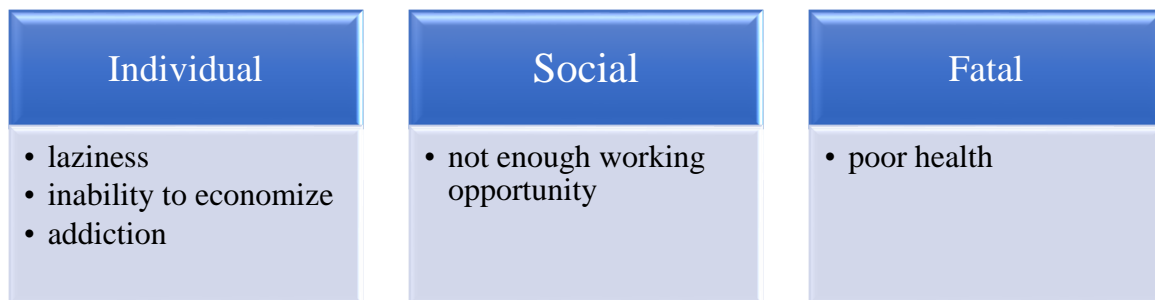
Figure 1 Rank order of the perceived causes of poverty (score 1 refers to the cause most often mentioned)



Source: own compilation

Certain causes of poverty mentioned by the informants can be grouped as individual, social, or fatal (Fig. 2). “Not enough working opportunity” is classified as a social cause of poverty. Timmer et al. (1994), Magnet (1993), and Main (1998) argue that individual factors include alcoholism, substance abuse, or the lack of work ethic. Accordingly, “laziness”, “inability to economize”, and “addiction” are categorized as individual types of poverty. “Poor health” is grouped as fatal cause. In the case of the other poverty explanations like “low income level”, “low education level”, “unemployment”, and “large family”, there can be ambiguities as to whether they are structural, individual, or fatal, therefore they are excluded from this part of the analysis.

Figure 2 Categories of the perceived causes of poverty



Source: own compilation

The box plot of the groups of poverty attributions (Fig. 3) shows that individual causes of poverty have the lowest mean score, while fatal ones have the highest mean score. The chart therefore highlights differences in the importance of the lay explanations of the three groups. To test whether these differences are significant, Analysis of Variance is used.

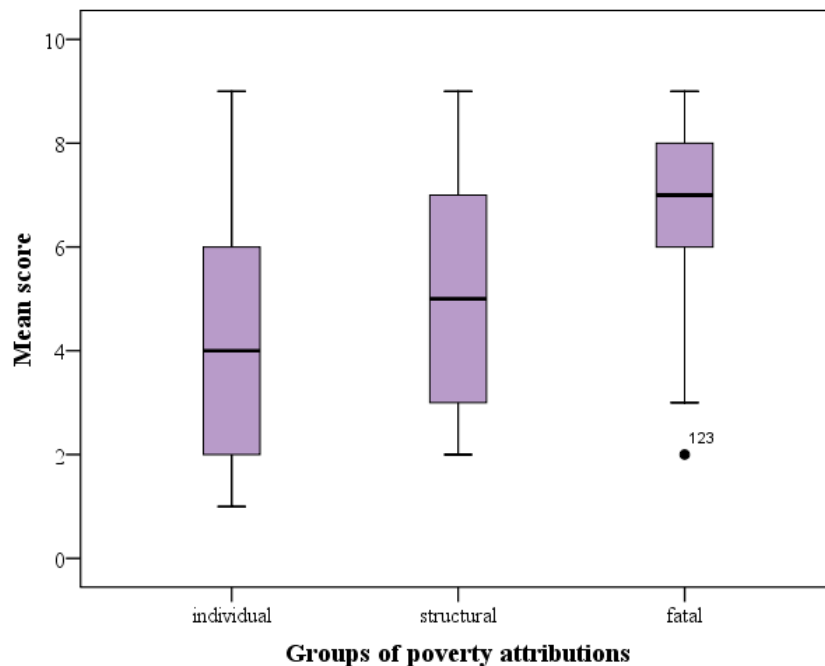
The significance value of F test in the ANOVA table is 0.000 (Table 2). Therefore the hypothesis that average scores are equal across groups of poverty attribution must be rejected. The average scores highlight that individual attributions for poverty are perceived to be more important than structural ones.

Table 2 Results of the Analysis of variance

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Between Groups</b>	115.246	2	57.623	10.092	0.000
<b>Within Groups</b>	810.782	142	5.710		
<b>Total</b>	926,28	144			

Source: own compilation

Figure 3 Box plot of the groups of poverty attributions



Source: own compilation

## Conclusion

The hypothesis that the main lay explanations of poverty are structural in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, Hungary, was rejected. Support for explanations which blame the individuals (like low willingness to work, addiction, or inability to economize) is stronger than support for explanations which blame structural conditions (like not enough working opportunity). In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic and social downturn, the poor are seen by the public as being themselves responsible for their unfavorable situation.

The high support of individualistic attributions for poverty has a remarkable implication on the operation of the welfare system. Policies aiming at poverty reduction should focus more on the individual circumstances of poverty when elaborating the most effective poverty reduction strategies. The fact that the public often endorses individualistic explanations of poverty draws attention to the necessity that public aid should be made available only to the faultless poor, while the so called “undeserving poor” shall be excluded from the support (Szalai 2006).

A limitation of the present research is that it focuses on just one county of Hungary. It raises the question as to what extent its findings can be generalized to the whole country. Extension of the research field to more counties of Hungary would make spatial comparison possible. Finally, another promising line of research would be repeating the data collection after the

pandemic to examine the effect of the end of unusual social and/or economic strains on the lay explanation of poverty.

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