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# Living *in* poverty, living *with* poverty: the community workers' conceptions on child poverty in Greece

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**ABSTRACT** The recent debt crisis in Greece severely affected the Welfare State, as well as the overall social policy of the country. Families facing severe material deprivation and depending on the local soup kitchens have grown rapidly in number over the past decade. In drawing upon the given risks, this paper explores the church community workers' and volunteers' conceptions of poor children's living conditions. It is worth noting that the volunteers reflect on the situation of the poor beneficiaries as they often are at risk of poverty themselves. The analysis is based on a mixed methods study (Quan-Qual) that was conducted in 2016–2017, and which covered the area of Thessaloniki (northern Greece) with a special focus on the neighborhoods suffering the most from the impacts of recession. The results show how the children living in “new poor” households experience the degradation of their well-being, as perceived by the volunteers, and what the main social services are they are receiving through the church family support. According to our findings, the pressure of the economic crisis broke the traditional welfare networks and left children vulnerable to risks in terms of their cultural, social, biological and psychological development. Furthermore, the results reveal how traditional family support is reaching its limits as the economic crisis gets more complex and prolonged.

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## Introduction

As Leena Alanen (2014) suggests we are witnessing a “theoretical turn” in childhood sociology already from the second half of the 1980s. This turn has been clearly visible at international level in the 1990s (Ben-Arieh and Goerge, 2001; Ben-Arieh, 2000; Casas, 2000; James et al., 1998; Ben-Arieh and Wintersberger, 1997; Jensen and Saporiti, 1992; Bardy et al., 1991). The emergence of a child-centered perspective in sociological analysis focused on a new consideration of childhood as a distinctive and highly influential phase of the life-circle (Qvortrup, 2008, 1994; MacNaughton et al., 2007; Olk, 2006; Ben-Arieh, 2005; Alanen, 2001). This perspective, replacing the idea of childhood as an intermediate stage on the way to adulthood, was interrelated with the recognition of Children’s Rights and eventually marked a paradigm shift in the study of childhood (Fernandes et al., 2011; Lippman et al., 2011; Andresen and Albus, 2010; Kahn, 2010; McAuley and Rose, 2010; Ben-Arieh, 2007; Bradshaw et al., 2007; Hubner, 2004; Ben-Arieh et al., 2001; Andrews and Kaufman, 1999).

Similarly, several studies use an ecological framework for understanding child well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Andrews, 1997) according to which individual development occurs within concentric circles of environmental influence (the networks of family, community, school, peers, and neighborhood). A redefined concept of child well-being is, therefore, guided by two underlying assumptions: that children are entitled to dignity and basic human rights and that childhood is a stage deserving our attention and respect in its own terms (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Articles 6, 24, and 27).

Yet, despite the international efforts the children are still identified today as the most vulnerable social group; in some cases they carry a double burden as they experience the phenomena of general deprivation along with the consequences of their parents’ exclusion. As Eurostat’s data reveal (2016), in 2015 children in the EU-28 were the age group at the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion (26.9% of children compared with 24.7% of adults and 17.4% of the elderly). With almost 27% of child population in Europe growing up in poverty or social exclusion and more than 1 in 5 children (21.1%) experiencing severe material deprivation, for a child to live in these conditions is not just a possibility but an alarming reality. The severe material deprivation has been repeatedly indicated as a rising risk factor in affluent societies. As it is noted in Innocenti Report (Card 10, p. 6):

“...the 14-item Child Deprivation Index encompasses the ability of households to afford: 1. Three meals a day, 2. At least one meal a day with meat, chicken or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent), 3. Fresh fruit and vegetables every day, 4. Books suitable for the child’s age and knowledge level..., 5. Outdoor leisure equipment..., 6. Regular leisure activities..., 7. Indoor games..., 8. Money to participate in school trips and events, 9. A quiet place with enough room and light to do homework, 10. An Internet connection, 11. Some new clothes..., 12. Two pairs of properly fitting shoes..., 13. The opportunity, from time to time, to invite friends at home to play and eat, and 14. The opportunity to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays, name days, religious events, etc.”

In relation to these, Frank Vandembroucke (2011) underlines that child poverty is a “time bomb” threatening the social cohesion in EU member states and that it is absolutely necessary to prevent its explosion.

## What is the case in Greece?

According to Papatheodorou (2014), the Greek social protection system is particularly feeble in alleviating poverty reflecting its

own structural weaknesses and peculiarities. More precisely, it is considered a highly fragmented and deeply polarized system, with rudimentary and uncoordinated provisions. As in other southern European countries, social networks in Greece cover the shortcomings of the incomplete welfare state, while family bears the responsibility to act as a “shock absorber” institution in times of crisis (Adam and Papatheodorou, 2016; Calzada and Brooks, 2013; Moreno and Mari-Klose, 2013; Andreotti et al., 2010; Gal, 2010; Ferrera, 2005; 1996; Leitner, 2003; Flaquer, 2001). This status quo reflects Flaquer’s argument that “*the welfare state in South Europe is the Mediterranean figure of family welfare*” (Flaquer, 2001, as cited in Kallinikaki, 2010, p 181) or Moreno’s and Mari-Klose’s consideration of family as a source of “inter-generational household micro-solidarity” (Moreno and Mari-Klose, 2013, p 494–495). In an era of uncertainty and social insecurity, Greek families remain child-oriented and parents invest in their children’s future mainly through investment in education. Against their efforts though, in the framework of the current economic recession, child well-being has been deeply affected as the ultimate consequence of an unprecedented increase in unemployment rates. As Matsaganis noted (2014, p 115) “*with long-term unemployment set to remain high in the foreseeable future, the plight of children in jobless households, unsupported by social benefits and ineligible for medical insurance (except for emergency care), has become Greece’s new social question*”. Recent research in Greece indicates the danger of the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality (Papanastasiou et al., 2016; Papanastasiou et al., 2016a; Mentis, 2015; Papanastasiou and Papatheodorou, 2010). More than 1 in 4 children in Greece were facing severe material deprivation in 2015 (25.7%), while the largest increase in the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in European level since 2010 was also recorded in Greece (Eurostat, 2016). According to the last UNICEF report on the state of the children in Greece (Papatheodorou and Papanastasiou, 2017), based on the poverty line of 2007, the child poverty rate increased rapidly, from 20.7% in 2009 to the critical level of 55.1% in 2014. This increase actually depicts the fact that in 2014 more than half of the child population in Greece was facing similar poor living conditions as the 20.7% in 2009.

In this context, pupils’ fainting incidents have been recorded in school units of the country. In 2013 about 1200 malnourished children (2 per cent of the school population in central Athens) had meals delivered to them by municipal agencies (Matsaganis, 2014). Additionally, the growing number of families dependent on the local soup kitchens mirrors the parents’ inability to act as a protective shield against their children’s social exclusion. As the adult members feel that they are not able to protect their family status in the local society, phenomena of social withdrawal frequently occur and affect the children’s well-being and community life. As Aber et al., already in the 1990s suggested (1997, p 463) “*poverty has been shown to negatively influence child health and development along a number of dimensions*”. Recent literature affirms the harmful impact of social degradation to the overall children’s development and well-being (Chzhen et al., 2017; Neubourg et al., 2012; Ortiz et al., 2012; Yoshikawa, 2012; Aber et al., 2007).

Based on these arguments, the current study focused on church community workers and volunteers who are involved in the support of economically vulnerable families with children. Its aim was to examine their views on the way children in Greece experience the consequences of the economic downturn and the degradation of their well-being. The participants of this study were involved in “religious volunteering” as they were all taking part in the organization of the parish soup kitchens and linked

their participation with religious norms and values (Qvist, 2017). This study was based on the assumption that one can only indirectly approach the way the children perceive the impact of the crisis on their lives in the Greek family welfare model.

### Methodology

This study aimed to examine how the community workers and volunteers involved in family and child support services perceive the ways the economic crisis in Greece affects the well-being conditions of the younger family members. Parents and carers in Greece act as a protective shield against the children's poverty stigma and therefore it is not easy to record the firsthand experience of the children. Taking this into consideration we attempted to approach the children's view on the effects of the economic recession on their personal well-being through the eyes of the people working with them in charitable organizations.

In this perspective the main research questions of our study were:

1. Are the children aware of all the negative impacts that the economic crisis has to their well-being?
2. Have the parish social centres got a clear idea of what the living conditions of children growing up in poor households are?
3. What kind of support do the church communities provide to children at risk and what is the impact of their traditional -by nature- care?

In response to these questions, research data were collected through a structured questionnaire which is divided in three parts: 1. *General Overview* (q. 6–10), 2. *The poor households with children attending in local soup kitchens* (q.11–14), and 3. *The impact on children* (q.15–19). The first five questions include the demographic characteristics of the participants. The research tool is structured over a series of closed questions rated in a five point Likert scale. Additionally, participants completed an open-ended question about their views on the crisis effects in children's equal participation in the community life and their development potential. Given the use of both quantitative and qualitative items, a mixed research method was used, that included an open-ended question, research visits and informal discussions with the participants. Participant observation was carried out in the parishes and field notes were taken and used later as "a reflexive account of fieldwork" (Bryman, 2012, p 447).

### Participants-data collection

The researchers approached the participants by visiting the local parishes. At first, the vicar was considered as a key informant person with a distinctive position in our research setting and a firsthand knowledge of the people, the resources and the services of the community (Payne and Payne, 2004; Marshall, 1996); therefore the vicars were asked to indicate the community workers engaged in family support. Subsequently, the questionnaires have been delivered to the participants. The research has been conducted in 2016–2017 and it covered the city of Thessaloniki with a special focus on the neighborhoods suffering the most from degradation. The sample of 24 parishes of three dioceses reflects the social, economic and cultural conditions in the city. A total of 105 respondents participated ( $n = 105$ ), all of whom were aged 18 years old or above. More specifically, the main age group constituted by participants aged over 41 years old (78.6%) and the 34.7% of the respondents had attained tertiary education. The participants consisted of two groups; the one was composed by the priests and church paid staff, while the other included the non-paid volunteers. In the frame of this research, the church social services were considered to be the soup kitchens

centres and the food banks established in local parishes. As it would be further explained in the results' discussion of this paper though, the parishes' social support proved to currently have a wider scope. During the research visits alternative ways of social support have been recorded, meaning the medication, clothing and pocket money provision, the healthcare services and the study support.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that 15 additional questionnaires were given as a pilot study to a Metropolis in the area of the capital city of Athens. The intention was to get valuable insights concerning the conceptual background of the main research area (church social support for deprived families) and to identify possible weaknesses of the research instrument. The parishes of this Metropolis were selected as they are considered to be among the most deprived urban ones in Greece. The replies of the additional questionnaires were in accordance with the replies of the main research in the parishes of Thessaloniki.

In the overall sample the participants were little or not at all familiar with the presence of a researcher asking personal questions regarding their convictions or practices and they faced a series of linguistic and conceptual problems when asked to define the nature of their participation in the social support structures. Very often they simply understand their involvement as part of their community life refusing to make further distinctions concerning their motives or even the meaning bestowal of their acts. Tsironis (2012, p 59–60) analyzing the case of the Greek Orthodox Communities notes that "due to a series of cultural, social and theological reasons it is difficult for a researcher to portray the voluntary work of religious organizations". This analysis was to a significant extent confirmed by the current study.

**Measures/instruments.** As it is mentioned above the Questionnaire is composed by 20 items related to: i) the participants' demographic characteristics, ii) their perceptions concerning the living conditions of beneficiary families (type of residence, parents' employment level, families' adversities and families' income), and finally, iii) their conceptions on how the children experience the impoverished conditions. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all study variables. Additionally, the Questionnaire included an introductory note of the research group that the study protocol adheres to ethical principles. In this note the respondents got to know the research frame and they were ensured that the principle of confidentiality will be respected and any disclosure of personal information will be avoided. Completed questionnaires were subject to manual and computer coding, as well as to quality control (enumeration, missing responses, questions misunderstanding etc).

### Data analysis

With reference to the demographic characteristics of the respondents, almost 70% of them are women, while the majority of those surveyed belongs to the middle age group (41–50 years old: 38.8%, 51+ years old: 39.8%) and only an 8.7% belongs to the age group of 18 to 30 years old. Furthermore, more than 2 thirds of the respondents are married and 77.7% have parental

**Table 1 The descriptive statistics for all study variables**

Descriptive statistics	Mean	Std. deviation	N
	Financial adversities	3.4108	0.67005
Crisis impact	3.0602	0.83886	99
Support provision	4.1408	0.78409	103
Children awareness	3.7573	0.92053	103

commitments (67% have up to 3 children while the rest 10.7% belongs to large families with more than 4 children).

As far as it concerns their educational background, 34.7% of our sample is composed by university graduates, while 53.5% have completed the compulsory or secondary education and a 12% of the respondents has obtained a master's or doctoral degree. It is worth noticing that nearly two thirds of the participants (64.4%) named their engagement in social support of the poor as "diaconia" while only a 13% chose the term "socially valuable task" in order to describe their participation in the parish soup kitchen. These rates are actually depicting the particular conceptual understanding of the "religious volunteering" in the Greek orthodox milieu. The study results show that there is a strong tendency among the participants to perceive their social offer as part of their Christian identity rather than their civil engagement.

**General overview.** The vast majority of the sample parishes (71.8%) serve more than one hundred of economically vulnerable people on a daily basis. The parish of Saint Dimitrius alone as one of the biggest and most historic parishes at the centre of Thessaloniki serves 262 people daily, all year round. According to the volunteers questioned, almost all the beneficiaries of the soup kitchens are parishioners (92.3%).

In regard to the social groups appealing more frequently to the community support, the respondents (55 out of 92 answers) indicated families with minor children as the most vulnerable group, with the large families, elderly people and the single parent families following. The community support is addressed to all people in need and not exclusively to parish members. Furthermore, only few of the respondents in our survey identified the beneficiaries of the soup kitchens as regular attendees at the religious services (15%).

Another noteworthy observation is that there is not a reciprocal relationship between receiving of support and offering

in return. According to 30% of the respondents the participants of the soup kitchens do not volunteer at all, while 57% mentioned that the beneficiaries offer back to a very limited or limited extent. However, one can assume that two possible reasons for the low rates of beneficiaries' volunteering are either the fear of the Greek Orthodox people to be stigmatized or the hesitation that the non-Christian participants feel to offer in a church structure. The latest argument seems to be confirmed by the survey results as the Spearman's correlation coefficient applied between the rates of beneficiaries' participation in church life and their volunteering is statistically significant ( $\rho = .51, p < .001$ ) (see Table 2).

**The poor households with children attending in local soup kitchens.** In the second part, the main question arising was how the community workers and volunteers depict the living conditions of families with minors attending in the parish soup kitchens. Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for the variables used in this data set. Regarding the type of residence, 67.7% of the respondents claimed that most of the supported families pay rent. Moreover, the volunteers witnessed to a significant extent the families' tendency to return to grandparents' house due to the parental inability to meet household expenses.

Concerning the parents' employment level, almost nine in ten (88.4%) of those surveyed considered the possibility of both parents working as extremely rare. On the contrary 78.5% stated that the parents whose family is supported by soup kitchen are most likely to be both unemployed. These results are mirrored in international surveys such as the one of OECD (2015) where it is mentioned that poverty rates in jobless households with two or more working age adults and children are about three times higher compared to similar type households in which one of the adult members is working, and about fourteen times as high as those in similar households with two earners.

As to the supported families' financial resources, it is remarkable that 69% of the respondents argued that it is common

**Table 2 Church attendance and participation in community life**

	Q10_attendace_before_crisis	Q10_participation_in_church_life	Q10_volunteering
Q10_attendace_before_crisis	1000	105	379**
Q10_participation_in_church_life	105	1000	510**
Q10_volunteering	379**	510**	1000

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 3 Descriptive statistics: the adversity of poor households with children attending in local soup kitchens (Q. 11-14)**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Own a house	99	1	5	2.48	0.873
Pay rent	99	1	5	3.83	0.959
Return to grandparents' house	94	1	5	3.06	1.035
Either homeless or hosted to social support structures	88	1	5	2.64	1.279
Both parents working	95	1	5	1.76	0.908
Only one employed parent	99	1	5	2.64	1.015
Both parents long-term unemployed	102	1	5	4.05	1.129
Both parents recently unemployed	103	1	5	4.12	1.096
Parents' income	99	1	5	3.38	1.275
Grandparents' pension	100	1	5	3.90	1.059
Borrow money from friends or relatives	98	1	5	3.30	1.186
Depend on social benefits	102	1	5	4.04	1.218
Family's inability to meet fixed charges (rent, electricity, etc)	102	1	5	4.34	1.094
Inability of adequate heating	99	1	5	4.33	1.079
Valid N (listwise)	72				



for the families attending in soup kitchens to rely on the grandparents' pension, while more than three out of four stated that most of the families depend on social benefits. Greece is one of the countries where pensions predominate in social transfers and considering the prominent role of family and kin as welfare providers, pensions tend to have a noticeable impact on child poverty (Papanastasiou et al., 2016, p 84–85). However, while in the Nordic countries, generous and less strongly targeted social transfers greatly reduce child poverty, in South European countries (including Greece) the impact of this category of social transfers is rather low. According to the survey of Papanastasiou, Papatheodorou and Petmesidou on the impact of social protection policies and institutions on child poverty and intergenerational poverty transmission in the EU (2016), the lowest efficacy of social spending in reducing child poverty (cash benefits -except pensions- and service provision) is exhibited by South European countries due to scarce social services and very modest family benefits.

Additionally, the volunteers' answers show that the families frequently or very frequently (46.9%) borrow money from friends or relatives to meet their needs. This is a tendency that reveals the significance of solidarity deriving from social networks in the frame of the Greek "welfare-net" (Adam and Papatheodorou, 2016; Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2013; Kallinikaki, 2010; Papatheodorou, 2009; Matsaganis et al., 2003).

Last but not least, there is a strong convergence on the community workers' conceptions on the inability of families to maintain a warm house, as well as to meet basic living standards (commodities such as water, electricity, heating and transportation). A percentage of 87.5% pointed out that the beneficiary families express these predicaments frequently or very frequently.

**The impact on children.** In the last part of the questionnaire, the research focused on the impact that the families' economic

vulnerability has on children. The participants were asked to list the problems they hear more frequently from the parents attending daily the parish soup kitchen concerning their children's daily life (see Table 4). To this point, it is necessary to note that about a quarter of the participants (24.1%) stated that children's fainting incidents is not a rare phenomenon. Furthermore, 60.7% of the respondents mentioned the profound worries the beneficiary families communicated to them concerning their children's health. This is a significant finding especially when it is interrelated with the fact that the families very often express their inability to guarantee proper health care for the children. More precisely, only a 5.4% and a 16.3% of the participants answered "never" or "rarely" to the question whether the supported families express their inability to cover the cost of their children's health insurance. The stress of the family members as manifested above is not only an indication of their child well-being degradation but also a vibrant documentation that feelings of uncertainty and insecurity dominate the family life in Greek society today.

The survey results indicate that the beneficiary families are also deeply concerned about their children's education. The parents' worries about children's learning difficulties or their poor school performance were listed in the 71.6% of the responses. The possibility of changing schools due to a residence change caused by financial difficulties was reported as another stress factor. Spearman's correlations were performed to examine the relationships between the family's return to grandparents' house resulted to children's forced school change and a number of variables concerning their educational attitude (Table 5). As we notice, there is a statistical significant association between the change of school environment and children's poor educational achievements ( $\rho = .587, p < .001$ ), while their poor school performance is strongly correlated in its turn with a broader feeling of rejection of school ( $\rho = .639, p < .001$ ). Table 5 illustrates the results of Spearman's correlations.

**Table 4 Descriptive statistics: the impact of crisis on children (Q15)**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Children's fainting incidents	83	1	5	1.96	1.098
Children's serious health problems	84	1	5	2.89	1.193
Family's inability to cover children's health insurance	92	1	5	3.58	1.197
Children's poor school performance compared to their peers	81	1	5	2.93	1.104
Children's rejection of school	79	1	5	2.58	1.287
Forced school change due to family's economic difficulties	85	1	5	2.78	1.294
Children's denial to participate in school activities	77	1	5	2.69	1.426
Parents' inability to secure children's equal participation in school activities	89	1	5	3.66	1.107
Limited participation in leisure activities (sports, painting, music, etc)	79	1	5	3.56	1.268
Tensions in school	76	1	5	2.59	1.202
Tensions within the family members	79	1	5	3.11	1.121
Children's expression of anxiety and emotional insecurity	89	1	5	3.18	1.239
Valid N	67				

**Table 5 Child poverty and school performance**

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Q11_back_to_parents_house	1000	379**	485**	203	219	398**
Q15_forced_school_change		1000	587**	476**	409**	435**
Q15_poor_school_performance			1000	468**	419**	639**
Q15_tensions_within_family				1000	502**	435**
Q15_denial_of_participation_in_school_activities					1000	475**
Q15_rejection_of_school						1000

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Additionally, a percentage of 78.7% of the community workers and volunteers indicated that the beneficiary families openly express their difficulty to support children’s participation in school educational trips or cultural visits. In detail, 12.4% of those surveyed answered “occasionally”, 42.7% “frequently” and 23.6% “very frequently”. Children’s unequal participation in out of school activities (like music, painting or sports) is another consequence of families’ economic adversity according to about three quarters of the respondents (76%). Hence, the analysis of these data brings into the fore the long-term impact of poverty on children’s future perspectives as the poor children face a high risk of exclusion from their peers. Phenomena of children withdrawal from school life were also mentioned. More precisely, Table 6 indicates a significant statistical association between children’s awareness of family’s vulnerable economic situation (Q18) and their limited participation to leisure activities ( $\rho = .516, p < .001$ ), as well as between children’s awareness of family’s dependence on the parish soup kitchen (Q19) and their unequal participation to school life (educational trips, cultural visits) ( $\rho = .510, p < .001$ ).

Finally, in the answers of 67% of the sample, tensions within the family have been recorded as a non-rare phenomenon, while seven out of ten participants indicated children’s feelings of anxiety and insecurity as the main concern of the supported families. More particularly, 25.8% of those surveyed stated that this concern is “occasionally” communicated to them, while 28.1% answered “frequently” and 15.7% “very frequently”. The Spearman’s correlation coefficient for children’s emotional insecurity and existing tensions within the family is statistically significant as it is pictured in Table 7 ( $\rho = .617, p < .001$ ).

As the economic crisis deepens the families with underage children attending regularly the church support centers seem to be in need of a more holistic support. This can be concluded from the significant percentage of answers referring to families’ tendency to ask for clothes, school supplies or remedial tuition in order to meet their children’s basic needs (more than 90%). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the Greek families usually hesitate to appeal to the community for support as it became evident by the majority of the informants. A woman who has voluntarily undertaken the organization of the soup kitchen in her parish underlined that “Greek families are very decent. They have to be in despair in order to knock at your door and ask for support. They sometimes prefer to get hungry rather than feel ashamed asking for food. Do you know how many times I had to come in the church during the night in order to fill some bags with

food supplies and visit a family so as no one from the neighborhood to understand that the family is in such a vulnerable position?”.

Finally, according to 88.2% of the community workers and volunteers, the children are aware of their family’s economic vulnerability within the economic depression the country faces. Contrary to our prediction based on the shield role the Greek family has for its minors, 98.1% of the respondents believe that children know about their family’s dependency on the church soup kitchen. In detail, 12.6% of the volunteers answered that the children are little aware of their parents’ attendance to the parish soup kitchen (24.3% answered that they are somewhat aware) whereas 32% answered that they are much aware and 31.1% that the children know to a great extent their family’s dependency. At the last open ended question the participants expressed their worries that the families’ inability to provide food to the children might negatively affect the children’s opportunities to fully develop their potential and to equally participate in the community life. This finding is in accordance with recent research findings (Chzhen et al., 2017; Papatheodorou and Papanastasiou, 2017; Papanastasiou, 2016; Papanastasiou et al., 2016a; Kokkevi et al., 2014; UNICEF, 2014).

Pearson’s correlations were performed to examine the relationships between the following variables: *Financial Adversities (14 items, quest. 11–14)*, *Crisis Impact (12 items, quest.15)*, *Support Provision (2 items, quest.16–17)*, *Children Awareness (2 items, quest.18–19)*. Table 8 illustrates the results of Pearson’s correlations.

In order to explore the relation between the crisis impact and awareness the children have, the Pearson’s correlation coefficient was applied. Results showed a statistically significant association between the two dimensions ( $r = .63, p < .001$ ). This is a very interesting finding since we were supposing that the Greek family will keep away its minor members from the sadness of the philanthropic dependency. It is obvious that the longstanding debt crisis already broke the traditional role of parents/ kinship carers in cushioning the impact of economic shocks: the family suffers, the children know it and everybody knows that they know it. The children nowadays visit the churches’ support centers not only to get some food but also to get support in their school life. They ask for books, training, instruction and tuition services etc. and they realize in detail the adverse conditions of their family life. The Pearson’s correlation coefficient for support provision and awareness the children have is statistically significant ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ).

**Table 6 Children’s awareness of family’s vulnerability**

	Q18	Q19
Q18	1000	680**
Q19	680**	1000
Q15_rejection_of_school	375**	317**
Q15_denial_of_participation_in_school_activities	401**	415**
Q15_exclusion_of_school_activities	483**	510**
Q15_limited_participation_to_leisure_activities	516**	505**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Limitations**

The analysis of the survey findings sheds light to some limitations that deserve to be noted. Firstly, the respondents were diverse in terms of educational background (24.8% have attained compulsory education and 28.7% secondary education, 34.7% are university graduates, while 11.8% have fulfilled postgraduate or PhD studies). Consequently, it was difficult for a number of volunteers to clearly understand the questions or the differentiations in the Likert scale. Moreover, the analysis of this study indicates differences among the respondents in the way they conceptualize the work they offer. In this regard, a larger number of participants

**Table 7 Emotional insecurity and tensions in daily school and home life**

	Q15_tensions_in_school	Q15_tensions_within_family	Q15_emotional_insecurity
Q15_tensions_in_school	1000	428**	502**
Q15_tensions_within_family		1000	617**
Q15_emotional_insecurity			1000

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 8 Correlations: financial adversities (14 items), crisis impact (12 items), support provision (2 items), children awareness (2 items)**

		Financial adversities	Crisis impact	Support provision	Children awareness
Financial adversities	Pearson Correlation	1	.266 <sup>a</sup>	.216 <sup>b</sup>	.122
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.008	.029	.224
	N	104	99	102	102
Crisis impact	Pearson Correlation	.266 <sup>a</sup>	1	.207 <sup>b</sup>	.637 <sup>a</sup>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008		.040	.000
	N	99	99	99	98
Support provision	Pearson Correlation	.216 <sup>b</sup>	.207 <sup>b</sup>	1	.356 <sup>a</sup>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.029	.040		.000
	N	102	99	103	102
Children awareness	Pearson Correlation	.122	.637 <sup>a</sup>	.356 <sup>a</sup>	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.224	.000	.000	
	N	102	98	102	103

Children awareness (2 items)  
<sup>a</sup>Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)  
<sup>b</sup>Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

coming from different regions of Greece and volunteering in parishes with varying economic, social, and political features could essentially enrich the available data.

Further, longitudinal studies and ethnographic research are needed in order to better explore the children’s primary views on the effects of the economic downturn to their daily life and the way they perceive their future perspectives. Participatory research in the life of poor families might enable us to overcome the sense of shame and the self-blaming narratives that are strongly associated with poverty and keep the poor people in silence, away from the researchers’ focus.

The findings of this study show that many of the families currently depending on the soup kitchens belong to the “new poor” or to the “working poor”, categories that one way or another are very difficult to define and measure (Eurofound, 2017). It is not unusual for these families to try to hide the adverse reality from their kids by avoiding to accept openly the social support or trying to find informal ways of help. Therefore, the results of this study could be benefited by future research on the “hidden” child poverty including in-depth interviews, statistical data, police and administration reports and other available data.

**Discussion and conclusive remarks**

As it is mentioned above, it is a common assumption in Greece that the “family” (Payne and Payne, 2004; Marshall, 1996) eventually keeps its younger members away from the current impasse of the long-term economic depression. The aim of our paper was to investigate, based on volunteers’ and community workers’ perspectives, the way children in Greece derive support from church social networks in times of crisis. The study emphasized on the attendance at soup kitchens as the most evident and absolute element of deprivation. Needless to say that the lack of sufficient food and the inability to ensure a daily meal was a shock to the Greek society considering its economic development during the past three decades. However, as it is revealed through the questionnaires, many other forms of community support have emerged, such as: pharmaceutical and medical support, remedial tuition, financial assistance to allow university students to study away from their city, and more.

According to Effie Fokas (2010) the role of welfare provider is considered as a new or renewed role claimed by the majority of churches throughout Europe in the context of increasingly challenged welfare systems. However, even before the current socio-economic crisis, the Orthodox Church of Greece had a “de facto significant place” in the Greek welfare system which rooted in the

philanthropic role of the church during the Byzantine era (Molokotos-Liederman, 2016, 2010; Kokosalakis and Fokas, 2007). The byzantine philanthropy was the ultimate example of Christian welfare work and became a source of inspiration for the social consciousness of the western Church by developing an institutionalized platform of social welfare services including hospitals, orphanages and structures for the elderly. While not systematically, the church’s social assistance continued under Ottoman rule in the form of “an expression of Christian agape”. Hence, a theology of diaconia or social offering has been embedded in the Orthodox faith as an expression of the Eucharistic nature of Orthodox ecclesiology.

The philanthropic role of the Orthodox Church in the Greek communities has been extensively analyzed in its historical (Constantelos, 2003, 1991) and social (Kanner, 2004, 2002, Tsironis, 2015, 2013, 2009a, 2009b) dimensions. There has been, though, a dispute in the literature about the role of the Orthodox Church of Greece as a dynamic social stakeholder (in times of crisis). Some studies pointed out a lack of critical stance towards the structures that produce poverty and social inequalities and therefore a fragmented philanthropic approach (Petmesidou and Polyzoidis, 2013a, 2013b; Zoumboulakis, 2013; Petmesidou, 2010; Kahl, 2005; as cited in Molokotos-Liederman, 2016). According to these studies, this weak charity-centered welfare strategy focused mostly to address the symptoms but not the root cause of social injustice (Makris and Bekridakis, 2013). Thus, the Greek Orthodox Churches have accepted criticism on remaining a primarily philanthropic and charitable institution instead of adopting an active social stance on the deficiencies of a welfare system characterized by “fragmentation, polarization and particularism” (Petmesidou and Mossialos 2006, p 25) or organizing any collective social action on solidarity and social welfare rights in Greece. Although recognizing the significant role of the Greek Orthodox Church as welfare provider, Polyzoidis highlights that its social support activities have not, on the whole, evolved into well-developed non-profit organizations comparable to the major Catholic welfare organizations, as a result of the inexistence of bridges between political and civil society actors to the same extent as in the Catholic Church (Polyzoidis, 2015, p 111).

To some extent, the critique about the efficiency of the traditional methods and the need of a more coherent and comprehensive approach in social care are mirrored in the interviews of the participants. However, as Molokotos-Liederman distinctively points out (2016, p.37–38), “when state welfare services prove to be an insufficient safety net and the economic pressures from the crisis on the family are too great, the Orthodox Church of Greece

becomes a critical resource and ends up assuming the role of a «second family»". According to her, the social welfare activities of the Greek Orthodox Churches have been locally and informally based, thus not very publicly visible or prominent as it would be in contrast to the principles of authentic philanthropy and the Orthodox ethos.

The present research focused on social services offered by the Greek Orthodox Church, taking into consideration three key points: First of all, that the structure of the parishes configures a significant network both in numbers and extended spatial distribution. Secondly, the social problems at the very local level are mirrored on the social interactions among the church members. This means that key members of the community know at personal level families' problems like economic adversity or unemployment (Molokotos-Liederman, 2016). And finally, the ethics and the social teaching of the Christian Orthodox tradition focus greatly to child well-being.

The key findings of this study are:

1. Children intensely experience the consequences of the economic downturn and even disproportionately compared to other social groups.
2. After eight consecutive years, the crisis has become so deep that the traditional safety net of the Mediterranean family can no longer keep children away from the effects of the economic depression (Mulé, 2016; Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014; Petmesidou and Guillén, 2014; Calzada and Brooks, 2013; Matsaganis, 2013, 2012, 2011; Petmesidou, 2013). Currently, as the familistic welfare model is reaching its limits and the socio-economic framework is changing, new needs are emerged and new ideas are being shaped such as the corporate voluntarism (Polyzoidis, 2008).
3. Many beneficiaries belong to the "new poor" or "working poor" categories. These families often feel insecure and ashamed to approach charity services, a fact that underlines the role of the local parish networks. In other words, in many cases they are the priests who approach in a discreet way families in need and offer them community support.
4. The crisis Greece is being through is not only economic but also social and polymorphic. The social problems affect to a great extent families' lives. In this context, the parishes' mobilization is remarkable and in many cases they offer valuable work. It seems, however, that there is a further need of specialized and ecosystemic care addressed directly to children, i.e., education, food and psychological support.
5. A very important observation concerns the participation of female volunteers in parish soup kitchens and the recognition of their community offer as "diaconia". In the theological field, 'volunteerism' is perceived mainly in terms of diaconia. This understanding does not necessarily associate the volunteers with the participation in civil society or social welfare. In other words, the women participating in soup kitchens recognize more frequently their contribution as part of their Christian identity rather than social involvement.

To summarize, this paper discusses a true story about The Church's Children Support Services. These services are staffed by priests, volunteers, and members of the parishes, who strive to overcome the threatening rise of poverty in their own milieu by offering their community services. In addition, as they work with the less privileged they reflect on their own possibilities to enter the poverty zone. This is a situation that might be considered as an actual reality snapshot and apparently cannot be fully explored only within the typical "professionals-clients" schema. Therefore, it should be studied further as a challenge to use our sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) in an everyday life setting or in other

words, to interconnect the individuals' contextualized reflections with their social and historical frame.

Taking under consideration the severe economic crisis that the Greek society undergoes, the study's findings shed light to the negative effects of poverty in children's well-being at local level. The need of new and ecosystemic approaches in children's support is also underlined. Moreover, this study proposes future research efforts such as the longitudinal examination of the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and the investigation whether families' interaction with social services will enable a trust relationship between the beneficiary families, the social support structures and the researchers. The latter will certainly be a crucial step to approach and better understand the children's primary views about the impacts of economic crisis on their lives.

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### Data availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### Additional information

**Competing interests:** The authors declare no competing interests.

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