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Home sweet home: helping European families become more resilient

Based on direct input from households in six countries, EU-funded researchers have developed policy recommendations to support families in real life.

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It's the season for celebration. Families gather for festive meals, exchange gifts or plan special outings – moments designed to be memorable and shared.

Yet for many households across Europe, these happy rituals come only after months of planning, bargain hunting and worry. Behind the sparkle of Christmas lights can lie a great deal of effort to make the holidays feel normal.

Parents under financial pressure can spend weeks searching for the best deals or cheapest groceries. Instead of restaurants or cinema outings, they pack homemade sandwiches and spend the day in a park to keep costs down.

"Low-resourced families go to great lengths to make the most of the little they have," said Rense Nieuwenhuis, an associate professor of sociology at Stockholm University in Sweden.

Nieuwenhuis has spent the past three years researching how today's shifting labour markets are affecting families across Europe and how well those families are coping. The work was part of an EU-funded research initiative called rEUsilience.

Understanding family resilience

The rEUsilience team brought together researchers from Belgium, Croatia, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK to investigate how changing labour market and social conditions are impacting families' capacity to withstand hardship. Their central question: how resilient are European families today?

By analysing the struggles households face, the strategies they use to adapt and the policies that support or fail them, the researchers set out to better understand the elements that strengthen or weaken family resilience.

Drawing on pan-European data and new focus group research in all six countries, the rEUsilience team was able to shed light on the pressures families experience and the policy changes needed to help them thrive.

Based on the lived experiences of more than 300 low-resourced families, their work revealed some harsh truths about life in many European households, as well as families' ability to adapt to challenging situations.

What emerged were stories of inventiveness, love and determination, but also clear evidence that personal resilience alone cannot compensate for structural inequality and deprivation.

"Resilience requires support. People can't be expected to carry the full burden alone," said Nieuwenhuis.

Everyday sacrifices

Across the six countries studied, the researchers heard accounts of the daily struggles many households face. Nieuwenhuis recalls the story of a young boy who offered to sell his bike to help out at home.

He also remembers a mother who would bring homemade popcorn to an amusement park or cinema, where she would ask for an empty container to put the popcorn in. That way, her child could feel like they got the "proper" popcorn and not feel left out.

These stories are hardly unique. Families often resort to imaginative strategies, especially when it comes to making their children happy, pointed out Mary Daly, professor of sociology and social policy at the University of Oxford.

"The extent to which parents have to deny themselves in order to help their children is striking," said Daly, who co-coordinated the rEUsilience research. "People sometimes forego their own desires and even skip meals, just to be able to care for a child."

Changing challenges

Despite their adaptability, families are constantly being tested. Although the research covered six different countries, each with their own national policies, its results showed that some challenges are universal across Europe.

"Societies are changing, the labour market is changing, the climate is changing," noted Nieuwenhuis. These broader "mega trends" increase the risks for vulnerable families.

Faced with personal crises, such as illness, job loss or bereavement, families without strong financial buffers or accessible support systems rarely recover fully. Crisis becomes a turning point, not a temporary disruption.

"What stood out the most was that if there are multiple issues the family needs to deal with, life gets incredibly difficult."

This is especially true for the most vulnerable families, including single parent families, migrant families and those caring for children with illness or disability.

"It's often the families who have the least resources to respond to risks that are the most exposed to these risks," said Nieuwenhuis.

The burden of staying afloat

Access to effective help is a common challenge for European families, some of which reported that it can become a full-time job to get the support they need.

“This issue is surprisingly similar in all the studied countries, the common factor is the complexity of getting help,” said Nieuwenhuis.

These challenges do not only impact families’ finances and employability, but also have a major effect on people’s mental state, stressed Daly. “It comes with a lot of cognitive burden. It is astonishing how much mental work people need to do to stay afloat.”

“People feel they are not being good enough parents because their kids can’t have what they want,” Daly said. “As a society, we have strong norms of what a good family life is, and many people can’t live up to those expectations. Especially if your resources are low, the odds are stacked against you.”

The foundations of support

The rEUsilience scientists were able to translate their findings into 15 policy principles for family resilience. These set out practical priorities on income support, access to childcare, and accessible family support services, giving policymakers a concrete roadmap for action.

The rEUsilience researchers highlighted three key areas where change could significantly strengthen family resilience.

First, income support must align more closely with children’s changing needs as they grow. Costs rise steeply as children move into adolescence, yet many benefits remain static.

Second, the “childcare gap” must be closed. In many countries, parents face a period between the end of parental leave and the age at which children gain legal access to affordable childcare. This gap forces parents, especially mothers, to step back from employment or take precarious work.

Third, support services for families should be easier to access and embedded in existing community structures, such as healthcare centres, daycare facilities or local social hubs, where families already spend time. This approach reduces stigma and creates a more preventative and inclusive model of support.

“These aren’t luxury additions,” Daly stressed. “They are essential foundations for a society where families are able not just to survive, but to thrive.”

Behind the holiday glow

As the festive period highlights togetherness, generosity and joy, the realities revealed by rEUsilience remind us that many families work tirelessly, often invisibly, to make the season bright. Their remarkable resilience is being constantly challenged by changing social and economic structures.

To withstand these shifts, the EU is promoting a Resilience 2.0 approach to help Europe anticipate challenges and stay strong in turbulent times.

“We argue that this cannot be done without considering families,” said Nieuwenhuis. “Policies generally address individuals, but most individuals live in a form of a family. If Europe wants resilient societies, it cannot get there without supporting families.”

In this season of giving, the lessons from rEUsilience offer a powerful message: strengthening families is not only an act of compassion, but also an investment in Europe's collective wellbeing.

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- Building a resilient Europe
- EU research and innovation – Social sciences and humanities