Centers for Children and Families as a Subject of the Social-Legal Protection of Children and social Guardianship

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Abstract:

The study focuses on centers for children and families (CDR) as key entities of the social and legal protection system for children and social guardianship in Slovakia. It discusses their legislative anchoring, objectives, forms of measures, and practical implementation in accordance with the current legal regulation. It describes various interventions – residential, field, outpatient – and specialized programs, principles of work with children, documentation systems, and financial security. The study also includes a public opinion poll, which revealed the population's partial awareness of how centers for children and

families function, especially regarding pocket money, meals, and allowances. The results point to the need to improve public awareness and a take more sensitive approach in the diagnostic phase. The work offers a comprehensive view of CDRs as a tool for protecting the best interests of children in situations where remaining in their natural environment is not possible.

Legislative grip

Act No. 305/2005 Coll. characterizes the measures of social and legal protection of children and social guardianship (SPODaSK) that are implemented in centers for children and families. These measures are as follows:

a) measures temporarily replacing the child's natural family environment or substituting the family environment based on a court decision ordering institutional care, an urgent measure, or imposing an educational measure (court residence measures),
b) educational measures imposing an obligation to undergo social counselling or other professional counselling; obligations imposed to ensure the purpose of an educational measure, pursuant to a special regulation or urgent measures imposing such an obligation (outpatient educational measure),
c) measures to prevent the emergence, worsening, and recurrence of crisis situations for a child in a natural or substitute family environment, as well as to prevent the child from developing psychological, physical, and social disorders due to problems in the natural or substitute family environment, the social environment, and in interpersonal relationships,
d) specialized programs for children who are victims of human trafficking, maltreatment, sexual abuse, or other acts that threaten their life, health, or psychological, physical, and social development,
e) resocialization programs to support the social integration of a child or adult addicted to alcohol, drugs, or pathological gambling.

The Social and Legal Protection of Children and Social Guardianship Authority has established centers for children and families as budgetary organizations. Centers for children and families may also be established by:

- a village,
- a higher territorial unit.
- legal or natural persons.

Act 305/2005 Coll. states that "measures under this Act may be carried out or participated in by a natural person or legal entity by implementing various methods, techniques, and procedures on the basis of the granted accreditation, unless otherwise provided by this Act." In point 3, it further states that "an accredited entity shall not carry out measures under this Act for the purpose of making a profit." Overall, the above-mentioned Act deals with accreditation in Sections 77 to 86, where it specifies the implementation of measures by accredited entities, the conditions for granting accreditation, the accreditation procedure, and the termination and cancellation of accreditation.

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic reports the following number of centers for children and families in Slovakia, as seen in the Table 1. The data was updated as of 1.1.2017.

Table 1 The number of state and non-state CDRs by region

	CDR – state	CDR – non-state (accredited)
Banská Bystrica Region	12	5
Košice Region	14	2
Trenčín Region	6	1
Trnava Region	7	3
Žilina Region	6	4
Bratislava Region	5	4
Nitra Region	9	3
Prešov Region	8	4
TOTAL	**67**	**26**

Centers for children and families provide services through residential, field, and outpatient formats. These forms of intervention can be effectively and appropriately integrated to maximize their impact. Act No. 305/2005 Coll. § 46 para. 1 states for whom CDRs implement measures in its residential form. These include:

a) a child based on
   - agreements with the parent or person who personally cares for the child,
   - the child's requests,
   - court decisions on the order of institutional care, on the order of an urgent measure, and on the imposition of an educational measure,

b) an adult natural person
   - who is participating in a resocialization program,
   - who is a young adult, after the court's residence order ends upon the child reaching the age of majority,

c) a pregnant woman, a woman after childbirth, and her child.

Internal standard No. IN – 012/2019 issued by the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (2019) states that when implementing SPODaSK measures in CDRs, the following applies:

- the principle of the primacy of the natural family environment,
- the principle of priority for placing children who cannot grow up in their natural family environment in alternative personal care, or if this is not possible, in foster care,
- the principle of priority for placing children and, if necessary, children with their parents, in a CDR on the basis of an agreement, if possible and expedient, before placing a child in facilities on the basis of a court decision,
- the principle of priority for placing children in CDRs based on a court decision in professional families over other organizational units of this facility,
- the principle of priority of implementing a court decision in separately organized groups established in separate houses or apartments, if it is no longer possible to place the child in a professional family,
- the principle of preserving sibling relationships and not separating siblings,
- the principle of placing children as close as possible to their natural family environment,
- the principle of integrating children who require special or increased care.

Ďurková Fábryová, in her methodological guidelines for the education sector at centers for children and families, defines the target group she works with as follows:

- a child
  - based on an agreement with the parent or person caring for the child,
  - which is in the facility upon request,
  - based on a court decision,
- an adult natural person
  - who is participating in a resocialization program,
  - a young adult, after the court's residence order ends upon the child reaching the age of majority.

All centers must have their own program for children and families. Decree 103/2018 Coll. in § 1 clearly lists the essentials of the program that must be included. These programs must be published on the CDR website and available to everyone for study. Essentials that must be included are, for example, contact details, the purpose of the center, the type of measures implemented, the form of the implementation of measures, a description of the target group, the total number of places, the number of buildings, a description of internal and external spaces, the number of employees, professional work methods, a description of healthcare provision, a description of school attendance, and other essentials. The legislation mandates the inclusion of 25 essential elements; however, it does not prescribe a specific graphic format, only that these elements must be present.

The maximum number of groups in one family house or one building of the center that is not a family house can be two. The total number of groups allowed in one apartment is one.

The number of separately organized groups in one family house is at most two, if one of them is a specialized separate group. If it is an

apartment, the maximum number is one. If it is a building that is not a family house or an apartment, there can be at most two groups (Decree 103/2018 Coll. § 13). The number of children in one group is 10.

For each child, a social worker establishes a file. This obligation is imposed by law. Specifically, Decree 103/2018 Coll. in Section 31 details the maintenance and requirements of the file, which must include:

- the decision on a residence order by the court,
- the child's birth certificate,
- report cards,
- a social report on the child prepared by the social and legal protection of children and social guardianship authority prior to admission to the center,
- a comprehensive assessment of the child's situation and its updates, including the conclusions of psychological diagnostics and recommendations of a psychologist, an assessment of the child's social situation and other professional assessments, reports, examination results, and necessary information about the child's health status to assess the child's situation,
- a video recording of the child; the video recording is updated at least once every six months,
- video recordings and audio-visual recordings documenting significant events in the life of a child who is kept in the register of children who need to be placed in foster care or adoption,
- records of the child's psychological, physical, and social development,
- an individual plan for the development of the child's personality, an individual plan for implementing measures regarding a residence, or an individual resocialization plan and evaluations and updates,
- records of parental visits and other visits,
- records of leaving the center when unauthorized to do so, accidents, and other risky situations,
- other requirements necessary for the implementation of measures and monitoring the fulfillment of their purpose.

Additionally, the center prepares and maintains the following documentation, depending on the purpose and form of the implemented measures:

- an individual plan for the child's personality development,
- a plan for implementing measures regarding the child's residence– based on an agreement,
- a plan for preparing a young adult for independence,
- a plan for implementing residential care measures for the child – in a specialized program,
- an individual resocialization plan,
- a plan for implementing measures in an outpatient or field form (Act No. 305/2005 Coll. Section 45, paragraph 9).

Centers for children and families whose purpose is to implement a residence measure based on a court decision must develop an individual plan for the development of the child's personality in cooperation with the SPODaSK authority, and if possible with the child himself/herself. The abbreviation IPROD is used for the individual plan for the development of the child's personality. It is a set of partial plans for the implementation of professional activities in the center, in particular:

- a social work plan – a partial plan, developed by a social worker that contains:
  - the degree of risk to the child, a description of the determination procedure,
  - an assessment of the child's situation,
  - cooperating entities in creating a social work plan,
  - the goals of social work at the center,
  - specific tasks to achieve the goals
  - criteria for evaluating task completion and the deadline for re-evaluating the task,
  - the result of the reassessment of task performance and the level of threat,
  - other crucial facts that could help in fulfilling social work.
- an educational work plan with a child – the activity of the educator in direct contact with the child; the educational plan is evaluated in such a way as to capture the child's development. The plan includes:

- sub-goals that follow on from IPROD,
- specific tasks to achieve the goals,
- other crucial facts and significant events related to the child's life.

- the main tasks of the psychological activity carried out by the center's psychologist – The psychologist shall, upon the child's arrival at the facility, provide psychological intervention aimed at stabilizing the child's immediate emotional reaction to the stressful situation of transitioning to a new environment, and subsequently monitor the child's adaptation process,
- a comprehensive nursing care plan if the child's health condition requires it - This is developed in centers where there are specialized separate groups and children whose health conditions require special care based on a medical opinion. These are children:
  - with a mental disability,
  - with a physical disability,
  - with a sensory impairment,
  - with a combination of disabilities.

Educator documentation refers to the parts of the file documentation listed below that may also contain outputs processed by educators. They are as follows:

- a comprehensive assessment of the child's situation and updates (Pedagogical diagnostic report and recommendations),
- an individual plan for the development of the child's personality, an individual plan of measures in the form of residential care, an individual resocialization plan with evaluations and updates,
- a plan for educational work with the child,
- a record of the child's mental, physical, and social development,
- half-yearly reports on the child,
- the book of life,
- records of pocket money, gifts in kind, and the child's valuables,
- records of parental and other visits,
- records of leaving the center without authorization, accidents, and other risky situations,
- other significant events in the child's life are recorded. (Ďurková Fábryová)

G. Kriglerová (2015) draws attention to a certain situation when a child comes to a CDR and goes through a diagnostic phase, which serves as a basis for developing individual plans for the development of their personality. However, diagnostic methods are often not sensitive enough to ethnocultural differences among children and the specifics of the environment from which they come. The fact that adaptation to a different language environment can distort the child's performance in tests is not taken into account. The overall behavior can be classified as problematic because it does not correspond to the norms of behavior in the facility. For example, regarding Roma children from segregated localities, this is their first contact with a formalized institution in the non-Roma world, so the adaptation process is more difficult for them. Gradually, they realize that their behavior is not unmanageable, but is just a reaction to a new life situation and not their personality trait. However, these reactions also have an impact on the helping staff. As Mačkinová and colleagues (2024, p. 1) state, "the burden and resilience of helping professions have a significant impact on workers in this field." Mačkinová describes helping workers as irreplaceable and important forces (2020, p. 10). "Their skills, professional qualifications, their passion for the cause and, last but not least, the ability to cooperate and collaborate with all parties are important."

In the case of a professional's inability to cope with the workload, supervision is an important aspect, as it serves as a type of prevention. As Nowak and Planka (2024, p. 7) state, "supervision is oriented towards teaching, guidance, reflection, feedback, and, in a certain sense, support for the supervisee. Through supervision, we prevent burnout, control and monitor the procedures used, and receive feedback."

Centers for children and families provide various financial contributions. The amount of contributions depends on changes to the subsistence minimum. The subsistence minimum is always reassessed on July 1 of a given year. The financial contribution also increases on this date. The official website of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic states that "as of July 1, 2020, the subsistence minimum amounts were established by the Measure of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Fam-

ily of the Slovak Republic No. 174/2020 Coll. The subsistence minimum of a natural person or natural persons whose income is assessed is considered to be the sum or total of the amounts:

- €214.83 per month, if it concerns one adult natural person,
- €149.87 per month, if it is another jointly assessed adult natural person,
- €98.08 per month if it is a dependent child or a dependent minor child."

Act 601/2003 Coll. on the subsistence minimum and on amendments and supplements to certain acts in Section 1 defines the subsistence minimum as follows: "This Act establishes the subsistence minimum as a socially recognized minimum income limit of a natural person, below which a state of material need occurs."

As was mentioned, the subsistence minimum set by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, in our case is €98.08 per month. All contributions provided are therefore based on this basic amount.

Contributions to ensure the purpose of the court's residence order and contributions are as follows:

- food allowance,
- pocket money,
- gifts in kind,
- contributions to independence.

Food allowance

The amount of food units is regulated by the Decree of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health of the Slovak Republic No. 103/2018 Coll. in Section 8, paragraph 1. It states that food shall be provided according to the food units per day. It can be provided for a child, a minor mother, a child of a minor mother, a young adult, and an adult natural person. The food unit is determined as a percentage of the subsistence minimum. The exact data is provided in the Table 2.

The food units can be increased to cover food and raw material expenses:

- by 25% if dietary food is provided for a diabetic diet, a protein diet, a nutritional diet, or a special diet,
- by 8% during non-working days, except Sundays and public holidays (in 2020 it was specifically 06.01, 10.04, 13.04, 01.05, 08.05, 15.09, 01.11, 24-25-26.12),
- by 5% during recreational activities provided by the center for children and families,
- by 7.2% during recreational activities when collecting food from other natural or legal persons.

Decree 103/2018 Coll. in Section 9, paragraph 1 states that the food unit per day is determined according to the number of meals taken as a percentage of the amount calculated according to Section 8, which is

a) with a rational diet, a sparing diet, and a low-salt diet:
   1. breakfast 12%
   2. morning snack 9%
   3. lunch 40%
   4. afternoon snack 9%
   5. dinner 30%
b) for diabetic diets, protein diets, nutritional diets, and special diets:
   1. breakfast 11%
   2. morning snack 8%

Table 2 Food units per child in CDR

Pursuant to the Decree of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Slovak Republic No. 103/2018 - Section 8, paragraph 1	FOOD UNIT	Age category	% of the subsistence minimum
		0 - 3 years	2.2 - 3.4%
		3 - 6 years	2.3 - 3.6%
		6 - 10 years	2.4 - 3.9%
		10 - 15 years	2.6 - 4.2%
		15 - 18 years	2.7 - 4.4%
		18 years and over	4.4 - 5.3%

3. lunch 40%
4. afternoon snack 8%
5. dinner 27%
6. second dinner 6%

The CDR director has the authority to reduce or increase the percentages in the provision of meals, but only while staying within the range of the total meal units per day specified by law.

The Table 3 shows, as an example, the specific processing of the financial contribution for meals, where CDRs set the % of the subsistence minimum within the range set by law while retaining the number of meals and their percentage division from the amount set by law.

Pocket Money

A child placed in a center for children and families pursuant to a court-ordered residence decision, as well as a young adult undergoing measures while preparing for a profession, is legally entitled to receive pocket money. This allowance is provided on a monthly basis and is determined according to the rates specified in the Table 4, calculated as a percentage of the subsistence minimum.

Act 305/2005 Coll. Section 66 in paragraphs 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 further states that:

- The child decides how to use the pocket money, but the child may be provided with assistance that takes into account their age and mental maturity,
- Pocket money can also be provided in several installments per month, if it is purposeful and appropriate. Or with the child's consent, pocket money or part of it can be kept for a certain period of time,
- Due to educational reasons, the amount of pocket money can be reduced for the child. The difference can be paid in the next round of pocket money, or the amount corresponding to this difference can be deposited into the child's personal account,

Table 3 Example of processing food units in CDRs

		Breakfast	Morning snack	Lunch	After-noon snack	Dinner	
% of the amount of the CDR	Age category	12%	9%	40%	9%	30%	Total EUR
2.8%	0 to 3	€0.33	€0.25	€1.10	€0.25	€0.82	€2.75
3.0%	3 to 6	€0.36	€0.26	€1.18	€0.26	€0.88	€2.94
3.3%	6 to 10	€0.39	€0.29	€1.30	€0.29	€0.97	€3.24
3.6%	10 to 15	€0.42	€0.32	€1.41	€0.32	€1.06	€3.53
3.8%	15 to 18	€0.45	€0.34	€1.49	€0.34	€1.11	€3.73
5.0%	over 18	€0.59	€0.44	€1.96	€0.44	€1.47	€4.99

Table 4 Pocket money for a child in a CDR

Pursuant to the Decree of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Slovak Republic No. 103/2018 - Section 23, paragraph 1	POCKET	Age category	% of the subsistence minimum	Amount
		6 - 10 years	8%	€7.85
		10 - 15 years	12%	€11.77
		15 years and over	30%	€29.42

- Pocket money can be used to create savings for the child, with their consent,
- The amount of pocket money established for a month is reduced by the proportional amount of pocket money for those days when the child left the CDR (escaped) and stayed outside the center without permission.

Financial literacy is a very important topic these days. Even with a child in a CDR, it is necessary to address this topic and not avoid it. Pocket money is a great tool for teaching children how to handle money. A child does not yet have a general idea of the value of money and cannot recognize what an adequate price for a good or service is. When communicating, it is necessary to take into account the child's age and intellectual maturity. If a child's pocket money has been reduced for educational reasons, it is necessary to explain this to the child and give them space to express themselves. Subsequently, the decision must be evaluated to see if it has achieved its purpose, and the child must be informed.

Gifts in kind

Gifts in kind are provided on important life events of children and young adults. These include, for example, birthdays, name days, significant religious events, sporting achievements, school achievements, and other achievements in other areas of social life. Act 305/2005 Coll. § 67 further states that the amount due on such an event is at least 25% of the subsistence minimum for a dependent child.

Independence allowance

A one-time allowance is provided to a young adult to facilitate their independence. It is used to provide housing and housing-related items. The allowance is provided upon leaving the center, no later than the day of their departure. It is provided only once and:

- in cash,
- in a tangible form,
- in a combined form.

It provides a set amount, up to a maximum of

Table 5 Gifts in kind for a child in a CDR

Pursuant to Act No. 305/2005 of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Slovak Republic - Section 67	GIFT IN KIND	% of the subsistence minimum	Amount
		at least 25%	€24.52

Table 6 What is the financial value (how many €) of meals for one day that should be allotted for the breakfast, morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner and drinking regimen for 10-15 year old children?

ANSWER	ANSWERS	SHARE
€1 - €2.53	3	1.5%
€2.54 - €3.53	21	10.5%
€3.54 - €4.54	47	23.5%
€4.55 and more	129	64.5%

Table 7 How much does the state contribute to clothing for a child in a CDR, regardless of the child's age?

ANSWER	ANSWERS	SHARE
€100 per year (€8.33 per month)	57	28.5%
€200 per year (€16.67 per month)	71	35.5%
€300 per year (€25.00 per month)	48	24.0%
€400 per year (€33.33 per month)	24	12.0%

Table 8 Do children in CDRs receive pocket money?

ANSWER	ANSWERS	SHARE
yes	120	60.0%
no	80	40.0%

15 times the subsistence minimum for a dependent child. The allowance is not granted if, upon the termination of the court-ordered placement due to reaching the age of majority, the young adult is residing outside the center without its consent, or is serving a prison sentence or held in custody (Act 305/2005 Coll., Section 68). However, the law does not mention one item that is also financially demanding: clothing for the child.

Empirical anchoring of the topic

The aim of our survey was to gain a comprehensive understanding of public perceptions regarding the operation of centers for children and families, including the level of public awareness about their activities, the services they offer, and the nature of their clientele. Respondents were presented with targeted questions to express their opinions on these topics. A questionnaire served as the primary research instrument and was administered through the Survio platform, which facilitated both the distribution of the survey and the detailed analysis of the collected responses.

A total of 310 respondents participated in the survey. However, specific groups were excluded from the sample – namely children and youth under 18, CDR employees, persons directly interested in the issue, and children placed in CDRs.

More than half of the respondents, a total of 129, chose the fourth answer, €4.55 or more. There were 47 respondents who chose the second highest value, representing 23.5%. As the offered amounts decreased, so did the number of respondents. The option €2.54 - €3.53 was chosen by 21 respondents (10.5%), and the option €1 - €2.53 was selected by three respondents (1.5%).

We offered 4 possible answers to this question. The respondents chose the following order – €200, €100, €300, then €400. The distribution of answers, as can be seen from the table, was quite even.

The respondents were divided into two groups. The numerically larger group consisted of respondents who answered yes. There were 120 of them, or 60% of the total number. 40 respondents (40%) believed that children in CDR did not receive pocket money.

Discussion

The survey results suggest that while the public demonstrates a general awareness of the role and activities of centers for children and families (CDRs), there are notable gaps in understanding the specific operational mechanisms of these institutions. Many respondents accurately estimated the amount allocated for children's meals, indicating a basic familiarity with the topic. However, a significant portion—up to 40%—believed that children in CDRs do not receive pocket money, highlighting a lack of awareness regarding the social benefits available to these children. The survey also revealed that public perceptions regarding the amount of state contributions for clothing are inconsistent, suggesting a lack of transparency and limited media coverage of specific support measures. These findings highlight the need for more systematic and accessible public communication about the operations of centers for children and families, including their legislative framework and the practical aspects of the services they offer. Moreover, the results raise important questions about how public awareness and attitudes may influence levels of support for, or distrust of, these institutions.

Conclusion

Centers for children and families play a vital role in Slovakia's system of social and legal child protection, ensuring comprehensive care when a child cannot remain in their natural family environment. The study revealed that both the legislative framework and practical implementation of measures are extensive and differentiated, with

a strong emphasis on individualized care, the protection of children's rights, and their gradual reintegration into society. Nevertheless, ongoing challenges remain, particularly in addressing ethnocultural sensitivity and ensuring adequate public awareness. The empirical findings suggest that while public familiarity with CDRs exists, there is significant potential to enhance this through educational and informational campaigns. For these institutions to continue operating effectively, it is essential not only to ensure robust legislative and professional support but also to foster greater public trust and engagement.

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