

The principal objective of the project is to investigate the problem of the so-called “paltry pensions” (emerytury groszowe), i.e. pensions lower than the minimum pension, from the perspective of the sense of social justice and the goals of pension policy.

Most Poles resign from their occupational activity at or before the age of 60–65 and start to earn income from pension benefits. The most important reform of the Polish common pension system in the last decades was conducted in 1999. One of the fundamental changes was a transition from the defined benefit system to the defined contribution system. The latter, also referred to as a “capital-based system”, is characterised by the fact that the amount of the received retirement benefit is closely linked with the amount of contributions paid to the system in the past by a particular person. There is no longer the requirement to have an adequately long seniority period in order to be eligible for the retirement pension, and now anyone who has ever paid any contribution is entitled to receive that benefit. In consequence, in the recent years there have appeared press reports about extremely low, “paltry pensions”. The system allows for increasing such a benefit to the minimum pension (PLN 1250.88 gross), but this requires the pensioner to prove an adequately long period of insurance coverage (20–25 years).

The number of people who receive a retirement pension lower than the minimum is rapidly growing: it has increased nearly thirteen-fold within the last 10 years. In 2020, the number of those people was 310.1 thousand, and they constituted 9.6% of all the “new-system” pensioners. However, we do not know much about life situations that stand behind the fact of receiving a “paltry pension”. Upon the disbursement of the first “paltry pensions”, in the public debate (statements of politicians, officials or experts, mass media reports and comments given on such reports), there started to appear opinions which show various attitudes to the axiological assumptions and the effectiveness of a system that produces “paltry pensions”. When referring to effectiveness, I mean whether the system meets the objectives of the pension policy, which – according to the European Commission – can be defined as follows: (a) providing adequate income in old age while ensuring (b) financial sustainability and (c) maximizing employment. When it comes to social justice, there are many formulas present in philosophy, social sciences literature and in the public discourse. In reference to the pension system, there are mainly two competing formulas of social justice: the social, solidarity formula (“each person according to their needs”, “each person equally”) and the liberal, individualistic formula, which is meritocratic to a certain extent (“each person according to their contribution” or “each person according to their merits”). This competition is clearly noticeable in the Polish public debate but has never been summarised or analysed from the sociological point of view.

Given the above, I formulate the following research questions: 1) Which categories of life situations can we distinguish among the people receiving “paltry pensions”, considering (a) their life pathways (related to occupational career, family, health, etc.), (b) the strategies they used in the past (i.e. before reaching the age of retirement) to provide means of subsistence, (c) any strategies they used in the past with the view of financial security for following years, and (d) objective living conditions and the means of subsistence of such people? This is a question about objective differentiation. 2) Are the legal regulations giving rise to the provision of “paltry pensions” considered (by the pensioners who receive such benefits, by experts and by the general public) to be socially just and effective when referred to the objectives of the pension policy? If not, then what changes should be introduced to make these regulations more equitable and effective? This is a question about subjective perceptions and desirable changes. The first problem will be analysed from a long-term perspective, using the life course approach. The second question will be approached taking into account the fact that the discourse has the power to shape reality.