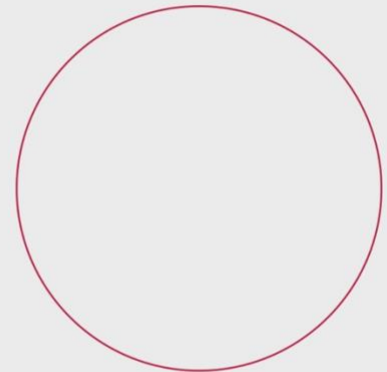


HOW TO USE SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS TO TACKLE ENERGY POVERTY?



Joanna Mazurkiewicz, Aleksandra Prusak, Jan Frankowski

Abstract

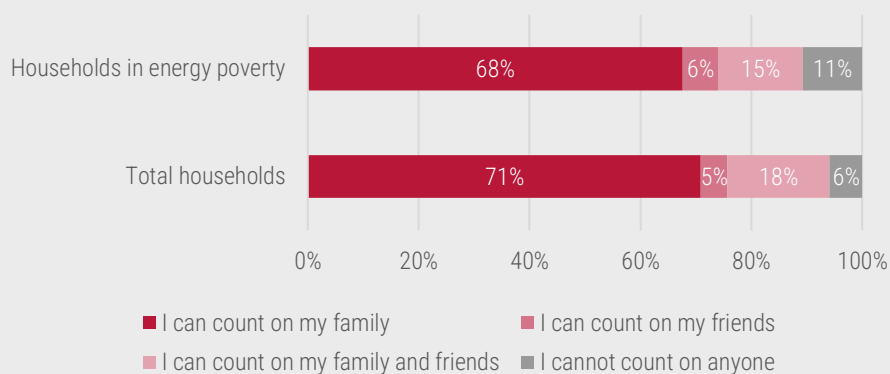
Some households in energy poverty cannot rely on support from other people. Also, the effectiveness of programs combating energy poverty is limited due to difficulties in reaching households in crisis. Without institutional, material, and emotional support, people experiencing energy poverty are not able to improve their situation.

We argue for broader usage of social support networks to tackle energy poverty. Involving local leaders, community groups and organizations will facilitate reaching energy-poor people and enhance the effectiveness of public policy. We recommend three actions: 1) harnessing the potential of local organizations to reach energy-poor households, 2) extending the scope of support in the implementation of the investments through the assistance provided by social organizations, and 3) considering specific energy needs in the designing instruments to address energy poverty.

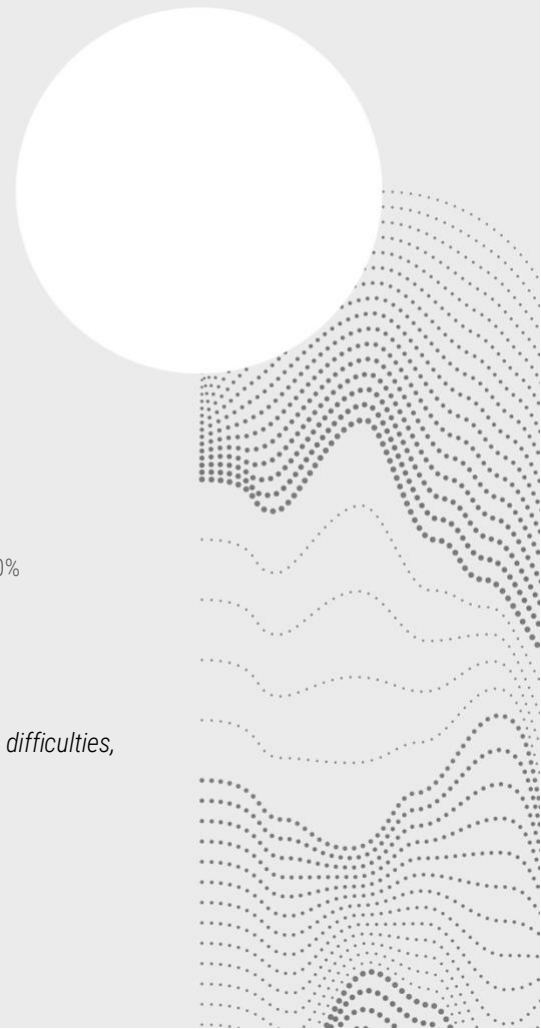
Key facts

- **12%** of households in Poland are struggling with energy poverty.
- **28%** of households experiencing energy poverty declared the need for financial assistance, while 13% expressed the need for material aid, even though they did not receive it.
- **11%** of energy poor households cannot rely on family and other close individuals for help.

One in nine households in energy poverty cannot count on the support of others



Source: Own elaboration based on the responses to the question: "In case of financial difficulties, are there people you can rely on for help?" (Statistics Poland, 2020).



1. Introduction

Energy poverty is a situation in which a household cannot afford to provide adequate heat, cooling, and electricity to power appliances and for lighting. The causes of this phenomenon are complex and systemic. The most common are 1) residing in an energy inefficient building, where maintaining a comfortable temperature requires significant expenses, and 2) low household incomes, which are insufficient to cover high energy costs. The sources of these problems are not just the result of individual characteristics (such as employment status, age, disability, or household social roles). They stem from a complex interplay of life circumstances, socio-economic conditions, infrastructure availability, and public policy solutions. They are also a consequence of the gender pay gap affecting income levels and the unfavorable structure of the pension system for women. The effects of energy poverty extend beyond energy usage and negatively influence health, well-being, and quality of life (Sokołowski et al., 2023; Recalde et al., 2019; Maidment et al., 2014).

Elderly people living alone and those independently managing households while also performing caregiving duties (such as raising a child, caring for a person with disabilities, or an elderly person) **are particularly affected by energy poverty.** In both cases, women are the predominant group. They constitute a quarter of all households experiencing energy poverty in Poland (Mazurkiewicz et al., 2023). Energy poverty is further exacerbated by factors such as:

- Limited opportunities to earn additional income (due to caregiving responsibilities, health conditions, or social assistance criteria);
- Increased energy needs (resulting, for example, from the need to use medical equipment).

Social support networks play a key role in coping strategies to meet energy needs. These networks include informal ties formed by family, friends and neighbors or social groups and organizations that aim to assist people in poverty crises. However, data indicate that among households experiencing energy poverty, the share of those without support from others is almost double that of other households.

We propose to make fuller use of the capacities of social support networks in implementing measures to reduce the scale of energy poverty. This will facilitate outreach to the energy poor and increase the effectiveness of public policies. We recommend:



(1) harnessing the potential of local organizations to reach energy-poor households,



(2) extending the scope of support in implementing investments with the assistance provided by social organizations,



(3) considering specific energy needs in the designing instruments to address energy poverty.

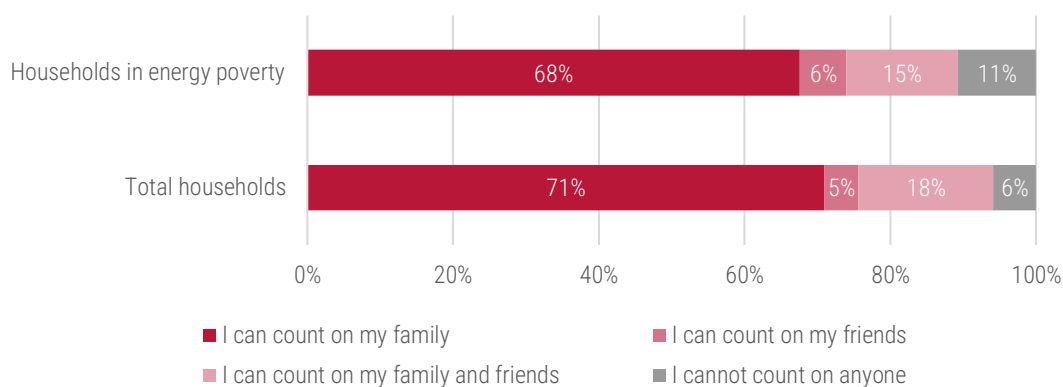
In the following sections, we assess the instruments to tackle energy poverty in terms of utilizing the potential of support networks. We then define social support networks and discuss their importance in implementing assistance programs for vulnerable groups. We also identify the mechanisms of support networks and their role in coping strategies in energy poverty. The final section provides recommendations to effectively implement assistance programs to help people facing energy poverty.

2. How do existing instruments to support people in energy poverty work?

Support for people in energy poverty includes financial and advisory assistance. It is provided through social assistance, support for investments in the thermal upgrading of buildings, and heat source replacements. It is also complemented by informational and educational campaigns. These instruments are implemented by national and local authorities. However, their effectiveness is limited due to the difficulty of reaching households experiencing energy poverty but remaining outside the social welfare system. In this section, we present energy poverty alleviation instruments in the context of the types of support provided and the reasons for the inefficiency in reaching hard-to-reach households.

The social assistance system does not always cover people in energy poverty. Data indicate that 11% of households experiencing energy poverty could not rely on support from their family or friends (Figure 1). Furthermore, almost one-third of energy-poor households declared the need for financial assistance, and one in ten for material aid, even though they did not receive it (Statistics Poland, 2020). This situation illustrates the difficulties in effectively supporting energy-poor households within the social assistance system. One of the reasons for such a deficit is the adoption of income criteria as the basis for granting benefits. Energy poverty can affect households with incomes higher than those qualifying for social assistance, such as when residing in a building with high energy demand. As a result, despite their difficult situation, energy-poor households not always receive financial support from the social assistance system.

Figure 1. One in nine households in energy poverty cannot count on the support of others



Source: Own elaboration based on (GUS, 2020); Based on the responses to the question: "In case of financial difficulties, are there people you can rely on for help?"

Another problem is the misrecognition of the diverse energy needs due to conditions such as health status. People forced to consume more energy due to the need to use medical equipment, such as respirators constantly, are in a particular situation (Mazurkiewicz, 2023). However, merely identifying a person as a senior citizen, chronically ill person, or person with a disability is insufficient to determine their energy needs appropriately. It is necessary to recognize to what extent an individual's condition affects energy usage in the household, their ability to modify it, and the need for support.

Monetary benefits alone do not lead to a lasting improvement in households' situations or increase their resilience to changes in energy prices. These measures are interventionist and serve to compensate for increased energy expenditures. An example is the series of allowances introduced as part of the inflation shield, including the shield allowance and the coal or electricity allowance, among others. Most of these instruments were transitional, and their payments depended on conditions determined each time as criteria for granting aid. In situations where they amounted only to one-off cash transfers, without identifying the household's needs

and supporting energy efficiency improvement, their nature should be assessed as temporary and ineffective for long-term reduction of energy poverty.

In many cases, households need additional assistance in applying for support. Such assistance is required, for example, in selecting the appropriate financing program for retrofitting and increasing the energy efficiency of a building or gathering the documents for grant application. Energy advisory can be a response to these needs. Energy advisors provide information regarding available forms of support for energy modernization, tailor them to particular cases, and help people going through the application process. The energy advisors operating within a municipality are familiar with the realities of the localities in which they work. In this way, they are aware of the needs of the local community. In an expanded scope, advisors' activities may also include assistance in implementing investments (Box 1). The activities of local energy advisors are an example of a combination of support provided within informal networks (direct, trust-based, and tailored to the specific needs and conditions of individuals) and formal ones (support programs offered by state institutions).

Box 1. Operators in the Clean Air Program

Expanding the scope of support for energy advisors in the Clean Air program is the aim of pilot activities initiated in the second half of 2023. The operators' task will be to support beneficiaries throughout the investment process – from applying for funding to subsidy settlement. Non-governmental organizations, enterprises, and municipalities will act as advisors. The inclusion of local governments in the program is of particular interest due to the data they collect on residents, and which is not available to external entities.

The effectiveness of educational campaigns promoting energy savings is limited from the perspective of the support provided to people in energy poverty crises. These efforts aim to raise citizens' awareness of energy-saving methods, benefits, and green energy solutions. From the standpoint of the support offered, educational campaigns provide information and foster a sense of resourcefulness and empowerment in daily energy management. Their significance lies in energy conservation and reducing behaviors related to inappropriate energy use. However, the problem for those experiencing energy poverty is insufficient, not excessive, energy consumption. Therefore, focusing solely on advice and "tricks" for saving energy may perpetuate a flawed and dangerous narrative that if only low-income households were more careful, efficient, and sensible in their energy consumption, they wouldn't struggle to pay increasing bills. Therefore, informational campaigns should highlight the diversity of household needs and other structural causes of energy poverty.

3. What are social support networks?

In this section, we explain what social support networks are and present their types. We also highlight the interconnections between the occurrence of crisis situations and the functioning of formal and informal support networks.

Social support is the assistance available to individuals or groups facing difficult situations they cannot overcome on their own. These activities help secure life's needs and are provided by those closest: family, friends, neighbours, or representatives of organizations whose activities include supporting individuals in difficult situations (such as social care, the healthcare systems, and educational institutions). A group of close people supporting a person in crisis is called an informal support network while assisting organizations belong to formal networks. Therefore, the availability of support depends on the network of social relationships that people experiencing a crisis possess.

Social support contributes to overcoming difficult life situations. The assistance provided within social support networks is tangible (material or financial) or intangible (informational, emotional, and appraisal support). Therefore, the essence of support is not only to provide specific goods and services. Equally important is conveying information and aiding in assessing and finding remedial actions and emotional support (Table 1). As a result, the competencies and capabilities to overcome the problem are strengthened, and the person's sense of resourcefulness and agency is built up. In this way, social networks help to mobilize one's resources and actively seek solutions to challenging situations. At the same time, they provide a "buffer" to mitigate the negative impact of adverse life situations on the well-being of those experiencing crises.

Table 1. Types of social support

Types of support	Scope
Instrumental	In-kind and financial aid, charitable activities, direct actions (such as providing shelter, medicines, clothing, etc.)
Informative	Providing information or advice that enables problems to be solved, relevant support services to be reached, and the situation to be better understood. This support also takes the form of feedback, through which the supported person gains knowledge about the effectiveness of their actions. It also involves sharing knowledge and experience by people who have been in a similar situation.
Emotional	Empathy and communication of supportive, reassuring emotions, active listening, expressing concern. It enables one to alleviate a difficult situation, calm negative emotions, and release tension, anxiety, and sadness.
Appraisal	Feedback on how a person is perceived and evaluated by those closest to them. The aim is to enhance self-esteem and inspire hope.

Source: Developed based on (Glanz et al., 2008; Cieślak & Sęk, 2023)

However, people experiencing poverty are often socially excluded. This can undermine their ability to participate in social support networks. Building and maintaining support networks is related to the ability and opportunities to establish and maintain close relationships, as well as a sense of self-esteem. Extensive social networks are predominantly possessed by individuals with higher social and cultural capital. Coping with a crisis situation often results in withdrawal from social life and social exclusion. Conversely, difficulties in social relationships and loneliness can deepen helplessness in the face of crises (Middlemiss et al., 2019). Individuals in the most difficult situations, deprived of support from close individuals, often cannot benefit from systemic assistance, which requires knowledge of the functioning of support programs, awareness of the application process for funds, or finally, going through the application procedure. The more complex the procedures, the more burdensome and stigmatizing the process becomes. As a result, support institutions, in many cases, are unable to reach their beneficiaries, and some individuals in need of assistance remain in crisis for many years.

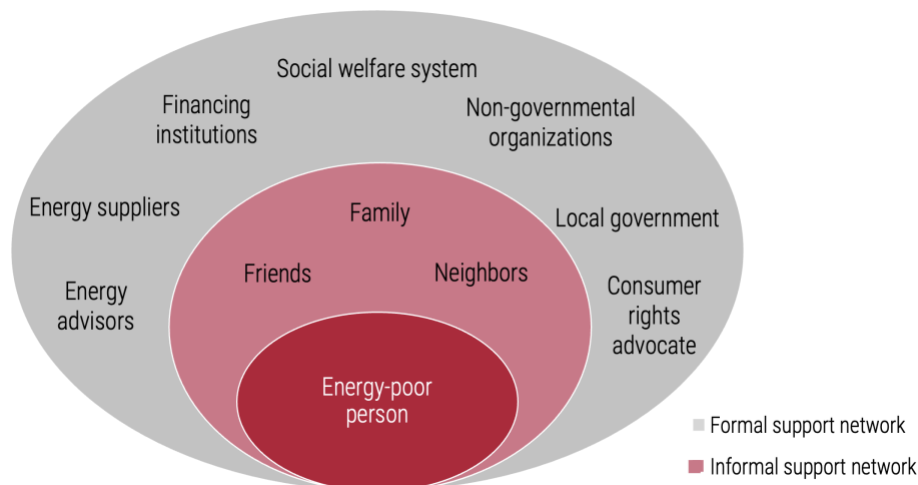
4. What is the importance of social support networks for people in energy poverty?

In this section, we present the results of qualitative research conducted between April and June 2023 among 35 women struggling with energy poverty. In the conducted interviews, we highlight ways of coping with energy poverty: actions aimed at addressing the causes of difficulties in maintaining a comfortable temperature at home and mitigating the negative emotional impact of energy poverty. We explain the functions of social support networks in coping strategies in the energy poverty crisis. We compare the findings of the qualitative research with the results of the Social Cohesion Survey conducted by the Statistics Poland (GUS).

The most commonly used strategy in the situation of energy poverty is self-control. These actions are related to a very frugal use of energy: maintaining reduced temperatures in the apartment (or even resigning to heat the rooms), limiting the use of lighting, organizing daily activities, such as washing or cooking, in a way that minimizes energy consumption. Importantly, rationing energy, in this case, is a regular and enforced way of coping with high energy and housing maintenance costs (Mazurkiewicz et al., 2023). The necessity of bearing high housing expenses is often associated with sacrificing other basic needs. In energy poor households, adults were almost twice as likely to refrain from purchasing medicines or visiting specialist doctors than in families not experiencing this problem. Energy poverty also limited children's participation in additional and non-compulsory after-school activities (GUS, 2020).

Seeking support within networks is an important part of energy poverty coping strategies. Such assistance is provided within formal and informal support networks (Figure 1). People struggling with energy poverty first turn to their closest relatives for help. They receive support primarily from family members, especially their adult children. They are the main source of material (including financial) and emotional support. This finding is reflected in the results of the Social Cohesion Survey, which indicate that family ties dominate the sphere of informal social relations. These connections were also deeper than social-neighborly relationships.

Figure 1. Formal and informal support networks in energy poverty crisis



Source: Own elaboration

The support received through informal networks facilitates coping with the material and emotional aspects of energy poverty. It includes basic assistance in daily functioning (such as acquiring fuel or making minor repairs at home), informational support (mainly searching for information, and dealing with official matters) and emotional support. Importantly, sources of informational and emotional support also include individuals outside the closest family circle - mainly close friends and neighbors. The possibility to obtain support through informal networks is significant for people living alone, especially seniors who have difficulties functioning independently or lack sufficient competencies (including digital) to access information and use institutional support (for example, to fill in official forms on their own).

However, support obtained within informal networks is not sufficient to overcome energy poverty. Family and friends provide essential help, especially in emergency or short-term situations. However, this assistance is insufficient to tackle the structural causes of energy poverty effectively. This is due not only to the lack of adequate resources among those forming the support network. Even interventions in building insulation or replacing heat sources may be insufficient if the causes of energy poverty stem from low incomes and the

inability to take on additional work due to age, social roles, or health. Given these conditions, investments to increase the energy efficiency of buildings may still not provide an adequate level of energy services.

Energy-poor people find it challenging to seek institutional help. They experience shame and try to avoid stigmatization.

This applies not only to accessing social assistance but also to energy advisory services. In our research, people struggling with energy poverty often rejected describing themselves as living in energy poverty. They emphasized their habit of living in underheated homes as part of their everyday lives. The acceptance of deprivation is worrying because it indicates the normalization of lower living standards by those experiencing the crisis. It also affects the extent to which people mobilize to change their situation (Butler, 2022).

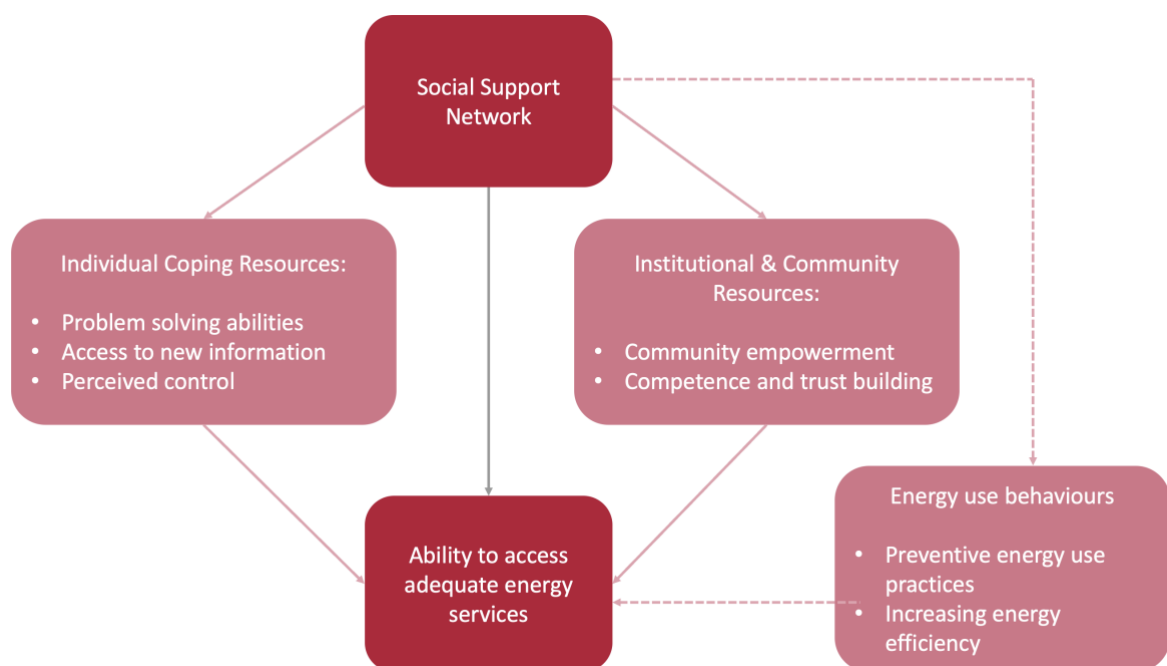
The support obtained through social networks reduces the risk and shortens the duration of energy poverty crises.

Access to social networks increases individual resources to cope with energy poverty (Figure 2). In particular, it facilitates acquiring new information, identifying potential remedies for emerging problems, and selecting the best solution. Therefore, it helps reduce uncertainty and build a sense of control and efficacy (path 1). Collaboration between formal and informal network actors supports the development of resources and competencies of organizations involved in offering assistance. In the longer term, it also enables the development of solutions that can be implemented in various communities (Box 2) and strengthens trust in institutional action (path 2). The exchange of information within the networks also fosters the building of behavioural patterns that reduce the risk of finding oneself in crisis in the future and more efficient use of energy in households (path 3).

Box 2. The „Help heating your neighbour” campaign

An innovative project launched in the municipality of Godów in the Silesian voivodeship involves the cooperation of residents and local government in combating energy poverty. The idea is to launch an online platform that allows neighbors to anonymously report the people who may be experiencing energy poverty and who, for various reasons, do not seek help themselves. The notification is verified by municipal staff, who can prepare an offer of assistance. This allows reaching out to those in need of support and matching the scope and type of aid to the needs of the household. Also, take into account the resources of the municipality.

Figure 2. Influence of social support networks on households' ability to meet energy needs



Source: Compiled from (Glanz et al., 2008)

5. Policy implications: How to increase the role of support networks?

Some households experiencing energy poverty lack support from family, friends or other close people. This means that they cannot rely on the help offered within informal support networks, which is one of the primary strategies for coping with energy poverty and reducing the severity of the problem. Existing instruments can be enhanced by using the mechanisms of informal support networks. Actions are needed to reduce uncertainty and strengthen the position of the person in crisis. Such modifications will enable new channels to reach those in energy poverty and increase the effectiveness of current programs. We therefore recommend:



(1) harnessing the potential of local organizations to reach energy-poor households,



(2) extending the scope of support in implementing investments with the assistance provided by social organizations,



(3) considering specific energy needs in designing instruments to address energy poverty.

Harnessing the potential of local communities and organizations will facilitate reaching out to energy-poor persons who are outside the social assistance system. Involving various community groups, such as local NGOs, interest circles, cultural institutions, neighborhood and religious communities, is crucial to reach out with information about available support instruments. In particular to those people who remain invisible to the social welfare system. The main advantage of such action is the ability to respond to energy poverty issues without increasing feelings of shame and stigmatization. This is important because the way information is conveyed influences the effectiveness of specific actions and decisions. The involvement of local communities can be facilitated by organizing informational meetings and intervention training sessions on available forms of support for local community leaders. Also, supporting local initiatives, especially in smaller communities, may be useful in this regard. It is equally essential to streamline the flow of feedback information about persons experiencing the energy poverty crisis and requiring support between formal and informal support institutions, provided that sensitive data protection is ensured.

Extending support will facilitate the implementation of investments for individuals lacking sufficient resources to organize and supervise this process themselves. For some energy-poor persons, such as elderly people living alone, the barriers to carrying out home modernization include not only financial resources but also organizing, supervising works, and accounting for subsidies. Energy advisory primarily covers the initial stages of the thermal modernization process: selecting the scope of renovation and assistance in correctly applying for subsidies. The possibility of receiving support also in the later stages of the investment is essential to more effectively assist those who would not be able to carry out this process on their own. Local community organizations could support energy advisors in this regard. This would harness the potential of organizations that are well-versed and rooted in local environments and have the trust of both local governments and local communities. The advantage of these entities lies in their experience in working with vulnerable people. By

increasing cooperation between energy advisors and community organizations, the support provided to the energy poor could be more comprehensive while drawing on existing local resources.

Considering specific energy needs in designing instruments to address energy poverty will enable better customization of the assistance provided to households. Among the beneficiaries of social organizations are persons whose increased energy needs stem from age or health conditions. These aspects are currently not recognized in the design of instruments addressing energy poverty. Consequently, the primary criterion for benefits or increased funding is the applicant's income. What is overlooked, however, are factors that permanently and strongly increase energy demand, such as disability or the need for permanent use of medical equipment. Supplementing the criteria required to qualify for support with non-income factors would allow reaching out to those who were not entitled to support despite their difficult situations. Support for individuals with special energy needs could take the form of social transfers, tax relief or changes in energy sales tariffs. However, identifying the optimal solution for mitigating energy poverty requires separate research.

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Research on energy poverty by the Institute for Structural Research (IBS)

Energy poverty has been the subject of research at the Institute for Structural Research since 2015. We have developed and adapted to Polish context the measures of energy poverty used in the European Union. We improve the methodology of measurement, conduct research on the group affected by energy poverty, and present proposals for its mitigation. The results of our research are published on the website: ibs.org.pl/publications/

IBS publications

1. Sokołowski, J., Frankowski, J., Lewandowski, P. (2023). Energy poverty, housing conditions, and self-assessed health: evidence from Poland. *Housing Studies* 1–30, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2023.2176831
2. Mazurkiewicz, J., Prusak, A., Sokołowski, J., Frankowski, J. (2023). Ubóstwo energetyczne kobiet w Polsce. IBS Research Report 01/2023
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