



October 2026

## Inequality by Postcode: How Where You Live Shapes Your Life Chances in Czechia

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### Abstract

Where you live is more than just an address on your ID card. It affects which schools are within reach, whether you can get to work without a car, how long you have to wait to see a doctor, and how much you need to earn to afford housing. On their own, none of these factors necessarily represents a major barrier. But when several disadvantages overlap, they can significantly narrow the opportunities available to a person throughout their life.

### Summary

- Where people live has a significant impact on their opportunities in education, employment, housing, healthcare and access to public services.
- The greatest problems arise when several disadvantages are concentrated in the same area and reinforce one another, with their effects potentially carrying over from one generation to the next.
- Regional averages often conceal major differences between individual municipalities and smaller regions.
- Regional policy should target support according to local conditions and better coordinate different areas of public policy.

Regional inequalities in Czechia are often described in terms of differences between regions, such as income, unemployment or economic performance. However, this perspective captures only part of the picture. Significant disparities also exist within individual regions, and some problems are much more local in nature. Regional underdevelopment is linked not only to economic performance, but also to education, the structure of the labour market, housing, and the departure of young and educated people. The interaction of these factors can lead to the long-term persistence of disadvantage in some areas.

Different areas have different starting conditions, challenges and potential for development. Alongside metropolitan areas and regional centres, it is therefore important to distinguish structurally disadvantaged regions and economically and socially vulnerable areas. The government has therefore emphasised the need for place-based measures – policies that do not apply the same approach across the entire country or region, but instead reflect the specific conditions of each area.

These differences may not always be immediately apparent. Employment, for example, is relatively high across Czech regions by European standards, and regional differences in employment rates are not particularly large. A much greater contrast emerges when looking at the types of jobs available and the skills they require. The OECD, for example, shows significant differences in the share of high- and low-skilled jobs between Prague and north-western Czechia. The same statement – “a person has a job” – can therefore imply very different prospects for career development and income growth depending on where in the country they live (OECD, 2024).

Regional inequality is not simply a divide between richer and poorer parts of the country. It reflects a broader set of conditions that shape the opportunities actually available to people where they live and their ability to make use of them. The key question is not whether where someone lives determines their future. Such a conclusion would be too simplistic. What matters is whether some places systematically provide better conditions for education, employment, housing, health and mobility than others – and what happens when several forms of disadvantage become concentrated in the same place.

## **Schools as Drivers or Barriers to Regional Inequality**

Children do not choose where they grow up, their family’s economic situation or the primary school available to them. Yet these circumstances affect not only their academic performance, but also their future educational path and, ultimately, their position in the labour market.

Regional differences in education are not a short-term phenomenon. The Czech School Inspectorate shows that similar patterns across districts recur in different types of assessment – in pupil testing in 2017 and 2022, in standardised secondary school entrance examinations in 2024, and in Czech-language school-leaving examination results between 2022 and 2024. Prague, Brno and their surrounding areas, as well as the Zlín Region, consistently achieve better results. Weaker outcomes repeatedly occur in the Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem regions, parts of the Moravian-Silesian Region, and some internal peripheral areas along regional borders (Czech School Inspectorate [ČŠI], 2025).

These differences are also evident when looking at educational underachievement at the microregional level. PAQ Research includes factors such as failing classes, repeating a school year, leaving primary education early and high levels of absenteeism in this category. In microregions with very low levels of educational underachievement, an average of 1.3% of pupils fail to complete primary education. In areas with very high levels of underachievement, the figure reaches 8%. Test results also differ significantly. In the lowest-performing regions, 34% of ninth-grade pupils fail

into the lowest skills category, compared with 18.8% in the highest-performing regions (PAQ Research, n.d.-a).

Much of this disparity is directly linked to the environment in which children grow up. In its research, PAQ Research uses the concept of “destabilising poverty”, which includes factors such as parents facing debt enforcement, housing insecurity, long-term unemployment or living in socially excluded areas. It is therefore not simply a question of how much a household earns. Levels of stress and uncertainty, housing stability, and the time and resources a family can devote to a child’s education also matter. This factor is more strongly associated with educational underachievement than the overall economic situation of a region (PAQ Research, n.d.-b).

The consequences are not limited to grades or test scores. They also affect the educational paths children choose after primary school. The Czech School Inspectorate confirms that applications to eight-year grammar schools are more common in metropolitan areas, while pupils in socioeconomically disadvantaged districts are more likely to choose vocational programmes that do not lead to a school-leaving certificate. Decisions about further education are therefore shaped not only by a child’s abilities, but also by their socioeconomic background, their family’s educational aspirations and the schools available nearby. Differences that begin with where a child lives and their family background can therefore gradually develop into disparities in educational attainment and, later, employment opportunities.

However, where a child lives does not determine their future. After socioeconomic conditions are taken into account, some districts perform better than might be expected given their starting point. This suggests that factors which can be influenced also play an important role – the quality of school leadership, cooperation between schools and local authorities, access to support professionals, and the way a region supports children at risk of educational underachievement (ČŠI, 2025).

## **Having Opportunities Is Not Enough – They Must Be Within Reach**

The difference between a city and a peripheral region lies not only in the number of services available, but also in how much time, money and effort people need to access them. For a household with two cars, travelling to a doctor in a neighbouring town may be little more than a minor inconvenience. For an older person, someone on a low income or a family dependent on public transport, the same distance can become a real barrier.

Transport is therefore one of the factors that can either reduce or deepen regional disparities. The Czech Statistical Office monitors commuting between municipalities for work and education because where people live is often different from where they work or study. Commuting can broaden the range of opportunities available, but only if there is a viable transport option.

The same applies to healthcare. Access to healthcare cannot be reduced to the question of whether there is a doctor somewhere in the region. What matters is the capacity of local practices, whether they can accept new patients, and the distance people have to travel to receive care. In a discussion organised by the Institute for Politics and Society, Josef Bernard pointed out that finding a dentist in Prague is a very different challenge from finding one in more remote parts of the Karlovy Vary Region. According to Bernard, some medical positions remain difficult to fill despite the efforts of local authorities, meaning that improving patient mobility may also need to be part of the solution.

The same logic applies to housing, but in the opposite direction. While jobs and services may be less accessible in peripheral areas, housing costs become a barrier in major urban centres. According to data from the Ministry of Regional Development (MMR), in the second quarter of 2025 a household

on an average income would have needed approximately 8.5 years of annual income to purchase a standard 60-square-metre flat in Prague and 8.2 years in Brno. In Litvínov, the figure was 2.5 years of annual income, while in Most and Sokolov it was three. The cheapest housing is concentrated in some structurally disadvantaged areas that have also experienced long-term population decline (MMR, n.d.-b). Cheaper housing therefore does not automatically mean better living conditions. Low prices may reflect weaker demand for locations that offer fewer employment opportunities or poorer access to certain services. The opposite applies in large cities: jobs, schools and healthcare are concentrated there, but high housing costs make them unaffordable for some households.

It is therefore useful to distinguish between the existence of an opportunity and whether it is actually within reach. A job vacancy in a regional centre has a different value for someone with a car than for someone living in a municipality with only two bus connections a day. Similarly, a well-equipped hospital dozens of kilometres away is not equally accessible to everyone. Where people live therefore affects not only what is available nearby, but also the resources they need to access those opportunities.

## When Disadvantages Add Up

A lower income alone does not necessarily amount to a major disadvantage. Nor does a longer journey to the doctor, a more limited choice of schools or poorer bus connections. The real problem arises when several such disadvantages occur in the same place and begin to reinforce one another. This is at the heart of regional inequality: it is not simply that some areas lag behind according to a single indicator, but that their residents have to overcome several barriers at the same time.

PAQ Research describes the social conditions of individual microregions using two main indicators. The first is destabilising poverty, associated with factors such as parents facing debt enforcement, housing insecurity or living in socially excluded areas. The second is socioeconomic development, which covers educational attainment, employment and the share of better-paid jobs. In ten of the sixteen municipalities with extended powers (ORPs) in the Ústí nad Labem Region, microregions fall into the bottom fifth for both indicators at the same time. A similar concentration of disadvantages affects roughly one third of ORPs in the Moravian-Silesian Region (PAQ Research, n.d.-b).

When these problems overlap, they create a cycle that is difficult to break. The local labour market offers a limited number of good-quality jobs, prompting some younger and better-educated residents to move elsewhere. Their departure changes the age and educational profile of the region, makes it less attractive to other residents and investors, and may reduce demand for certain services. At the same time, the departure of younger and better-educated people further deepens the problems facing peripheral regions. Meanwhile, population shifts towards large cities and their surrounding areas increase pressure on housing, transport and services in the places people move to.

A similar cycle can develop within families. If a child grows up in a household facing housing instability, debt or insecure employment, these conditions can affect their education. Poorer educational outcomes can then limit their choice of further study and, later, their employment opportunities. Regional and social inequalities can therefore reinforce one another and be passed on to the next generation. This does not mean that a child growing up in a disadvantaged region has their future determined in advance. It does, however, mean that they are likely to face more obstacles in achieving the same outcome as a child growing up elsewhere.

## Conclusion: Your Postcode Is Not Your Destiny, but Opportunities Matter

Where people live does not in itself determine the lives they will lead. However, the data show that it has a significant impact on the conditions in which they make decisions about the opportunities available to them. These differences are not limited to Prague versus the rest of the country or to richer and poorer regions. They often exist within much smaller areas and result from a combination of factors, including employment opportunities, education, housing, transport, healthcare and other public services. A missing bus connection or a lower wage alone may not significantly reduce a person's life chances. But when a weaker labour market coincides with poorer educational outcomes, the departure of young people and limited access to services, these disadvantages can begin to reinforce one another. It is their cumulative effect that turns regional differences into genuine inequality of opportunity.

Regional policy does not need to make every part of Czechia the same. Instead, it should identify more precisely the places where several problems overlap and address them according to local conditions. Regional averages are often not enough, and the same type of support may not work equally well in a remote microregion and in the area surrounding a major city. Nor is it enough to address education, transport, housing or healthcare separately when their effects overlap in people's everyday lives. The aim is not to ensure that everyone lives the same distance from a school, has the same job or sees the same doctor, but to create conditions in which where someone lives does not significantly limit their ability to change their life. Your postcode is not your destiny. But it can determine how many barriers you have to overcome to reach the same opportunity.

## Resources

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In the past, she focused mainly on media studies and semiotics, now she is expanding her horizons at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in the field of historical sociology. She focuses professionally on the domestic political scene, social and health issues, and also focuses on the defense industry, transport and energy. She has extensive experience with the international political agenda, including European issues, the European Union, the politics of the United States, the UN and NATO. She has worked professionally in both radio and Czech Television. In her free time, she most often devotes herself to sports and her daughter.

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