

**Eurochild**  
Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

# Children's Rights: Political will or won't?

Eurochild 2023 report on  
children in need across Europe

Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.



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## Purpose of the report

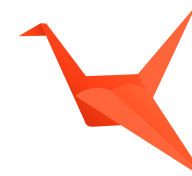
- 1 Assess the situation of children's rights in each country and provide recommendations to address any issues or gaps.
- 2 Build knowledge of the experiences of children, families, and communities living in poverty and social exclusion.
- 3 Assess whether the Child Guarantee National Action Plans align with the countries' needs, and the scale of Eurochild members' and children's engagement in implementing, monitoring, and evaluating them.
- 4 Assess the extent to which the European Semester 2023 Country Report and Recommendations are aligned to the lived experiences of children from a civil society perspective.
- 5 Provide an overview of the Countries in Accession's priorities regarding the most pressing issues for children and their involvement in EU-funded projects.

## Acknowledgements

This report is based on assessments provided by **38 Eurochild members in 26 countries**. These are:

Child Rights Centre **Albania**; A little Lining Comes, ONE and the Flemish Child Rights Coalition for **Belgium**; Hope and Homes for Children - Bulgaria, Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University, and the National Network for Children for **Bulgaria**; Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC), with input from the Association Children First Croatia (Children First) and SOS Children's Villages **Croatia** (SOS CV); Pancyprrian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC) for **Cyprus**; Fairstart Foundation for **Denmark**; Children's Rights Alliance for **England**; Central Union for Child Welfare for **Finland**; Child and Youth Welfare Organisation – AGJ and National Coalition **Germany** – Network for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (NC); The Smile of the Child, Network for Children's Rights, and ALMA for **Greece**; Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation (HCR) for **Hungary**; Children's Rights Alliance for **Ireland**; Association Latvian Child Welfare Network (LCWN) for **Latvia**; VŠĮ Auto Moto group for **Lithuania**; **Malta** Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS); Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights and Utrecht University, Strategic Theme 'Dynamics of Youth' for the **Netherlands**; Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI); Sergio Costa Araujo (Individual member), Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso Foundation, Instituto de Apoio a Criança for **Portugal**; Hope and Homes for Children – **Romania**; Network of Organisations for Children of **Serbia** and Pomoc Deci; Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY) for **Slovenia**; Plataforma de Infancia and FEDAIA for Spain; Barnens rätt i samhället (Children's Rights in Society - BRIS) for **Sweden**; Hayat Sende Youth Academy Association for **Türkiye**; Polina Klykova (Individual member) for **Ukraine**; Children in **Wales**.

We are very grateful to all Eurochild members who contributed to the 2023 questionnaire and follow-up meetings; all Eurochild Secretariat staff, in particular, Ally Dunhill, Agata D'Addato, Ciaran O'Donnell, Davide Rambaldi, Fabiola Bas Palomares, Federica Marra, Mieke Schuurman, Sabine Saliba, Sebastian Lindt, Reneta Krivonozova and Zuzana Konradova; Laura de Jongh at [Hallo Mondo](#) for design. This report has been possible thanks to the support of the European Commission, Tanya's Dream Fund, and Open Society Foundations.



# Background

At Eurochild, children's rights form the basis of all areas of our work. The 'Children's Rights: Political will or won't?' Report focuses on the extent to which children's rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled across Europe, and on which policies and programmes are in place to prevent child poverty and social exclusion. These are political choices that reflect a government's commitment to the well-being of its youngest citizens. In the context of European governments, the commitment to children's rights and addressing child poverty and social exclusion can vary from country to country. Each government may have different political positions and priorities. Some countries are strongly committed to children's rights, while others need to improve their efforts in this area. While discussing children's rights, child poverty, the European Child Guarantee National Action Plans (NAPs), and the European Semester for EU Member States, this report provides an overview

of political will. It suggests actions for governments across Europe to create and strengthen social safety nets.

## Children's rights

The cornerstone of Eurochild's work on children's rights is the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). In recent years, the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#) have provided further guidance and instruments to the child rights community in Europe to advocate for children's rights. Some of the country profiles in this report will shed some light on the current status of children's rights and will provide recommendations to countries to further protect children and promote their rights.

According to our members, in the majority of countries in Europe, there is no specific cabinet minister responsible for children's rights. More often, key policies on children fall under one or more cabinet ministries, such as those for Social Affairs, Family,

Education, Health, Culture, or Welfare. However, some countries have children's rights or child poverty commissioners, dedicated state agencies operating under these ministries, or an ombudsperson for the Protection of the Rights of the Child. Five countries (Albania, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, and Malta), among those presented in this report, do have a specific minister for children's rights or childhood.

## Poverty and social exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

Children growing up in poverty and social exclusion are less likely to do well in school, enjoy good health, and realise their full potential later in life. With this report, Eurochild aims to collect good practices from our members on the ground and share this evidence with policymakers to guide an agenda that successfully fights child poverty. According to the latest [Eurostat data for 2022](#), 24.7% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty

**“Looking at the most recent data on child poverty, it is positive that some countries across Europe are reducing the numbers of children living in poverty and social exclusion. However, for some others, numbers are still increasing. There is a clear need for policies and programmes to do much more to ensure children develop to their full potential. Eurochild members can be a key partner to ensure children's rights are protected, respected and fulfilled across Europe”**  
**– H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Eurochild President**

or social exclusion. Compared to 2021, child poverty has increased in 8 countries but has decreased in 19 countries. Romania has the most children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, at 41.5%. Bulgaria is second highest with 33.9%, with Spain in third with 32.2%.

The highest increases in child poverty have been in Slovakia and France, recording increases of 5.0% and 4.7%, respectively. The most significant decreases were observed in Luxembourg (-5.4%), Hungary (-5.2%) and Greece (-3.9%). Country profiles included in this report shed some light on these trends.

As for Countries in Accession, Eurostat data are only available until 2021, except for Albania, which only has data for 2020. According to the latest data, the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion remains much higher in these countries compared to EU countries, the highest being Türkiye, with 45.2%. An exception

is Serbia, with a rate of 27.5%. Data from Eurostat are not available for Ukraine. As for UK countries, data are available from the [UK Government Office for National Statistics](#). In 2022, England was shown to have the highest percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, 30.8%, showing a slight increase (+0.15%) from 2021.

## The European Child Guarantee

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation and two years since Member States were requested to submit their NAPs to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

When drafting this report, two EU Member States still needed to complete their NAP (Austria and Latvia). The content of those NAPs already published varies significantly from country to country. Overall, the NAPs identify some of the most significant

groups of children in need in the countries. However, as detailed in the country profiles, some groups of vulnerable children and necessary key services are unfortunately not mentioned. The involvement of civil society organisations in the implementation of the NAPs varies from one country to the other. However, some of our members mentioned being in regular contact with their governments regarding this phase. According to Eurochild members, in most countries, a robust monitoring framework for the NAPs still has to be developed.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

Eurochild has an important role in tracking developments at the national and European levels and supporting civil society's responses to the most pressing needs of children across Europe. The annual European Semester cycle is a crucial opportunity to

reach policymakers at EU and national levels to ensure investing in children is prioritised within the broader macroeconomic and social policy agenda. In general, the [2023 European Semester Spring Package](#) Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations do not adequately address the needs of children in each country.

The majority of the reports refer to child poverty and social exclusion, and education, especially in the early years. However, specific groups of vulnerable children, such as children in migration, children with disabilities, children in alternative care, and LGBTQI+ children, are seldom referenced. The reports do not reference children's rights to be heard and participate in the decisions affecting them. Country Specific Recommendations for nine countries provide concrete recommendations and analyses of childcare, education systems and child poverty.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As outlined in the Eurochild Policy Paper [2023 Spring Package of the European Semester](#), July 2023.



There are only five Country Specific Recommendations that directly recommend countries implement measures for children (Austria, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and Sweden). Otherwise, the reference is always made to vulnerable households.

### Countries in Accession

Every year, the European Commission publishes the Enlargement Package that assesses the state of play in accession countries, including progress concerning upholding human rights and children's rights. Eurochild and its members in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine contributed to the [2023 consultation on the Enlargement Package](#) to provide a child-rights perspective and insights into the situation for children in need.

This report aims to provide an overview of the actions needed to advance children's rights as part of the EU accession process. According to Eurochild members in Albania, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine, it is crucial to provide children with a stable economic environment, quality health and education, and safety. They also believe that extending the European Child Guarantee to accession countries would lead to an increase in access to key services and support for all children's well-being.

It is important to acknowledge that since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, several countries, including Ukraine, have put into place a comprehensive range of changes for children's rights and policy development.

# Eurochild Country Reports at a glance

## Children's Rights

Five countries (Albania, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, and Malta) included in the report have a specific Child's Rights or Childhood minister. 21 countries have no specific cabinet minister responsible, and policies on children fall under other cabinet ministries such as Social Affairs, Family, Education, Health, Culture or Welfare.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion

According to the latest Eurostat data, 24.7% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022. This implies that overall, there has been an increase in child poverty in Europe compared to 2021. In the majority of non-EU countries in the report, there has been a reduction in the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2021/2022 compared to the previous years. Two exceptions are England and Türkiye, where an increase in child poverty has been registered.

## European Child Guarantee

Two EU Member States, one included in the report (Latvia), still needs to submit their NAP. According to Eurochild members, in the majority of countries where a NAP has been published, the use of robust indicators and a monitoring framework for the NAPs still has to be clarified by Member States.

## European Semester Process

For the countries included in this report, only two Country Specific Recommendations for 2023 directly recommend measures for children (Belgium and Sweden). Many European Semester Country Reports only mention children in relation to poverty and social exclusion, and education, especially in the early years. Other groups of vulnerable children are seldom referenced.

## Countries in Accession

For the four accession countries (Albania, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine) presented in this report, providing children with a stable economic environment, quality health and education, and safety is the most pressing issue towards EU accession.



# “Eurochild member Recommendations

<b>Albania</b>	“Albania needs to take the rights of the child seriously. The current system of child protection, despite all the improvements, is not able to fully provide care, protection and all the needed support to vulnerable children, or those who become victims of crimes or difficult social realities.”
<b>Belgium</b>	“It is essential for a federal country like Belgium, with different levels of power, to improve the coordination of policies related to children.”
<b>Bulgaria</b>	“Bulgaria should take action to strengthen the rights of children from families living in intergenerational poverty and children with disabilities. More effort should be made in order to guarantee that the necessity principle is applied consistently as to prevent unnecessary family separations.”
<b>Croatia</b>	“Croatia should take action to secure an adequate range of locally based social services to prevent child poverty and social exclusion.”
<b>Cyprus</b>	“Cyprus should take action to include children in all decision-making processes for all issues that affect them and make sure they collect disaggregated data on children.”
<b>Denmark</b>	“Denmark should strengthen child-family investments, policies, and adjacent professions, with a focus on supporting children and families with a migrant background.”
<b>England</b>	“The UK government must set out a clear roadmap for how it will meaningfully improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in society by producing a children’s rights action plan and appointing a Cabinet Minister for Children to ensure oversight and coordination of the action plan takes place at the highest levels of government.”
<b>Finland</b>	“Finland should make a stronger commitment to actively advance children’s rights in all decision-making and make sure there is no regression in realising the rights of vulnerable groups of children.”

<b>Germany</b>	“Germany should take action to explicitly anchor the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the German Constitution. This would strengthen the legal position of children, clearly recognise them as holders of their own rights, lead to more legal certainty and increase the overall visibility of children’s rights.”
<b>Greece</b>	“Greece should take action to reduce child poverty, especially in the regions of Central Greece, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.”
<b>Hungary</b>	“Hungary should take action to empower children and give them a voice.”
<b>Ireland</b>	“Ireland should take action to invest in services to break the cycle of poverty early by rolling out a new equal participation model in early years education and care that addresses accessibility, affordability and targeted wraparound services for those living in disadvantage.”
<b>Latvia</b>	“Latvia should take action to implement Article 12 of the UNCRC and integrate the recommendations outlined in the General Comment into its national legislation and practical measures. This concerted effort is essential to foster a shared comprehension of child participation and will respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of children in Latvia.”
<b>Lithuania</b>	“Lithuania should take action to fully integrate children with special needs inclusively and safely into mainstream schools, but without compromising the rights of all other children and teachers.”
<b>Malta</b>	“Malta should take action to transpose the UNCRC into a comprehensive legislation, to eradicate any form of discrimination against children, and to safeguard children’s human rights.”
<b>The Netherlands</b>	“The Netherlands should take action to decrease child poverty and look into achieving more structural solutions and taking measures targeted at specific groups of vulnerable children.”
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	“Northern Ireland should take action to properly account for the needs of children in budgetary decisions and budget-making processes.”

<b>Portugal</b>	“Portugal should activate the effective participation of children and young people in the design, monitoring and evaluation of public policies that concern them. Portugal should also take action to reduce inequalities in access to basic services, including improving the timely access to high quality services for all, particularly to children”
<b>Romania</b>	“Romania should take action to increase the children’s participation in the decisions that affect them and should create and strengthen the child participation mechanisms in a way that consultation and participation processes become meaningful and have a long-term impact.”
<b>Serbia</b>	“Serbia should take action to prioritise the development and implementation of a Child Guarantee programme aligned with the European Child Guarantee”
<b>Slovenia</b>	“Slovenia should ensure more accessible and multidisciplinary treatment of children and adolescents in the field of mental health.”
<b>Spain</b>	“Spain should take action to increase public support for parenting, in line with the Directive (EU) 2019/1158.” (Plataforma de Infancia) “Spain should take recommended measures to implement the Organic Law for the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against violence.” (FEDAIA)
<b>Sweden</b>	“It is essential to prohibit the use of solitary confinement in Sweden’s compulsory care institutions and ensure that all staff receive adequate and continuing training and capacity building in how to apply a human rights-based approach in their work.”
<b>Türkiye</b>	“Türkiye should take measures to develop social work practices that include prevention, protection, and intervention in children’s well-being at micro and macro levels.”
<b>Ukraine</b>	“Ukraine should develop a national strategy on children’s rights and ensure governmental programmes respect, protect and fulfil each right defined by the UNCRC.”
<b>Wales</b>	“Wales should take action to introduce legislation to fully and directly incorporate the UNCRC into Welsh law without delay.”

# Policy recommendations

Eurochild members urge political leaders and decision-makers to:

## 1. Put children's rights at the heart of the political agenda

We observe the compartmentalisation of child-related policies even though child poverty and social inclusion and a broader child-related agenda requires a comprehensive solution. There is a clear need for a central body at national level to coordinate the child-rights agenda. At the same time, solutions need to be developed to interconnected problems by cross-sectoral cooperation and consultation.

## 2. Invest in efficient data collection

To address the needs of children, understanding the problem is critical. Problems and needs that children face must be well analysed to uncover the underlying roots of the problem. National government responses should be based on data and evidence as well as consultation with the stakeholders, including children themselves. Upgrading data collection is crucial because we need to know where we are starting from to identify success or what is not working. We call for disaggregated and longitudinal data collection on children and more indicators for children. With clear, cross-sectoral, and comparable metrics, policymakers can be better equipped to implement better policies to improve children's lives.

## 3. Protect and support vulnerable children

It is vital to identify the specific target groups of children most in need, what key services they need access to, and how we can ensure the children and their families will get support from these essential services. Governments must prioritise and ensure targeted support to children from families in need. By providing universal child benefits and free access to key services, this group of children's needs are not often identified or met. Too often, their families cannot afford the hidden costs of education, such as attendance of compulsory extracurricular activities or transportation to and from school.

Additionally, vulnerable groups, such as children in migration, children with disabilities, children

in alternative care, LGBTQI+ children, and Roma children, also face segregation, exclusion, and discrimination. Integrated, cross-sectoral cooperation that leads to an integrated whole school and community approach is needed to effectively address the needs of these children.

#### 4. Invest in prevention

The family is the best place for each child to thrive, and all interventions must prioritise keeping families together by targeted social benefits, targeted subsidies such as housing subsidies, disability subsidies and the development of community-based services for children with special needs. Investing in prevention is crucial in supporting families in need, and it is proven to be more cost-effective than subsequent interventions such as alternative care for children.

Poor housing conditions, lack of other necessities, or undeveloped inclusive education should not be factors leading to children's separation from their families.

To deliver change for the most vulnerable families, the social intervention must be demand-driven. Support preventative measures should start from the prenatal and early years of

children. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are a time of unique and rapid development and are highly influenced by the child's environment, early experiences, and interactions. Increased support and public investment in nurturing care and quality early years services are essential for tackling child poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

#### 5. Promote children's well-being online and offline

Children's experiences in the digital environment, mental health of children and children facing climate change should be everyone's priority. Eurochild members report that children are increasingly at risk online. However, the safety of children online today still heavily relies on the digital skills of children, their parents, and educators. Although many initiatives exist at national level to promote their digital literacy and support (for example, helplines and hotlines), EU Member States still lag behind in holding online service providers accountable to keep children safe on their platforms and uphold children's rights online through comprehensive legislation, as indicated by the UN General Comment No. 25.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of children's mental health. Policymakers have taken measures, such as increasing the affordability and availability of psychological support. However, waiting

lists for mental health services remain very long, particularly for children. Eurochild members also identify that stigma is a barrier to addressing the mental health needs of children. Positive mental health is crucial for healthy development; therefore, Member States should develop concrete measures and plans to adequately support children's mental health, including preventative measures. It is crucial that the situation of children and young people must be recognised and tackled with a unique awareness of their lived experiences and needs.

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups affected by climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss in terms of health, food, and living environment. In line with the UN General Comment No 26 that introduces a child rights approach to environmental policies, we call for all children to have the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment without discrimination.

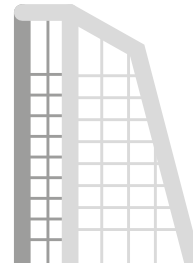
## 6. Implement the Child Guarantee at national level

The European Child Guarantee should be expanded to Countries in Accession. Members believe that this would lead to an increase in access to key services and support for all children's well-being. Child-related interventions, including the Child Guarantee NAPs must have enough resources to make a long-term impact. To ensure the sustainability of funded measures, there must be a mix of EU funding and national and sub-national resources. For EU Member States, Eurochild calls for upscaling of the Child Guarantee budget by an additional 20 billion Euro as part of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework revision aligned with the European Parliament Resolution Children first – beyond the Child Guarantee, two years on from its adoption. Given that the European Child Guarantee is a new instrument, to adequately manage different funding streams of the Child Guarantee NAP, more guidance and capacity building of national authorities is required.

## 7. Put children's rights at the core of the European Semester Cycle

The European Semester Cycle has yet to prioritise children's rights. To learn from the failures and ensure the scalability of working measures to lift children out of poverty, it is crucial to establish a sound system for monitoring and evaluation. This should feed into the EU monitoring and evaluation framework of the Child Guarantee being developed by the European Commission and the Social Protection Committee. The European Semester, as declared, should also provide thorough guidance in regard to the implementation of the Child Guarantee. Currently, the Social Scoreboard only partially indicates the situation of child poverty, access to early childhood education and school drop-outs. Given that the European Semester is an annual process, it can play a crucial role in delivering this important policy to reduce child poverty by the EU target of at least 5 million

by 2030. However, we call on Member States to demonstrate political will and aim to far exceed this target.



## 8. Recognise children as agents of change in their own right

It is crucial to raise awareness and enable meaningful participation of civil society organisations and children themselves. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, respect the views of children, and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, Thematic Area One, 'Participation in political and democratic life', clearly states that children have a right to be heard and listen to. The European Child Guarantee outlines the need to cooperate with stakeholders, children and civil society organisations. Currently, there is little evidence of such cooperation in countries. However, this report draws attention to some good and promising practices, making recommendations on improving national, regional, and local cooperation with children and child rights organisations. Such meaningful and inclusive cooperation practices must be developed and shared across Europe to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of all children.

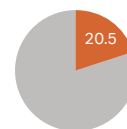
## “ Country recommendation

Albania needs to take the rights of the child seriously. The current system of child protection, despite all the improvements, is not able to fully provide care, protection and all the needed support to vulnerable children, or those who become victims of crimes or difficult social realities.

## Country Profile 2023



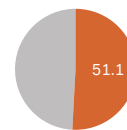
# Albania



### Child Population:

**579,203**

20.5% of total population (2021)



### Child Poverty:

**304,204**

51.1% (2020)

▼ -2.6% compared to 2019

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Child Rights Centre Albania](#)

## Children's Rights in Albania

At national level, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection is responsible for children's rights in Albania. There is also a Minister of State for Children and Youth (without portfolio) working to support the government in areas related to children and youth's rights.<sup>2</sup> The aim is to strengthen youth involvement in decision-making processes and protect the rights of young people.

The Minister of State for Youth and Children also has as its mission to protect the rights of young people and to guarantee their participation in social life, through drafting, developing, and monitoring youth policies, and coordinating issues related to the protection, care, health, welfare and well-being of children. The [Children's Agenda](#)

(2021-2026) is the main policy tool related to the wellbeing and protection of children.

Child Rights Centre Albania (CRCA) identified several key areas related to children's rights.

### Child participation

Although child participation still represents a new concept for the Albanian government and society at large, in recent years more attention is being given towards the acceptance and respect of children's views and opinions. In 2017 the Albanian Parliament adopted the Law No. 18/2017 on the Rights and Protection of the Child, which sets out the rights and protections enjoyed by every child, the responsible mechanisms, and authorities. The Law effectively guarantees the exercise, respect, promotion of these rights, as well as the

special protection of the child in application of the Albanian Constitution, and in alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Schools are required to establish children's governments and elect representatives for the School's Senate, which gives children and young people the possibility to participate. However, these participation mechanisms often do not function appropriately due to a lack of sufficient interest and support by adults.

### Child safety and well-being online

Child safety online presents one of the most challenging issues for the protection of children's rights and their well-being. Albania does not have a well-developed legislation for protection of children from online crimes, and the criminal legislation is not in

compliance with EU acquis. The current criminal code does not protect children from several forms of online sexual abuse or extreme online bullying. Moreover, child sexual abuse materials are only partially regulated, while the authorities lack the capacities and technologies for further advancement in this regard.

Albania must ensure their legislation is in line to the existing and upcoming EU legislation, especially the proposed EU Regulation to Prevent and Combat Child Sexual Abuse to avoid becoming a hub for criminals abusing children online.

Since 2009, a national child helpline has been established to provide support to every child and young person to report child sexual abuse incidences and receive the necessary guidance. Despite this, the authorities are not prepared to provide sufficient

<sup>2</sup> The Minister of State for Youth and Children's mission is to protect the rights of young people and guarantee their participation in social life, through the drafting, development and monitoring of youth policies, and the coordination of issues related to protection, care, health, well-being and good education of children. For more visit the following link: <https://riniafemijet.gov.al>.



services to child victims of online violence, as lack of technical skills and resources makes it difficult for teachers and child protection officers to be able to respond to the situations.

### Child protection systems

Albania has made remarkable efforts in recent years to establish the fundamental pillars for the Child Protection System. The core legislative and policy framework around child protection was significantly reinforced in 2017, with the adoption of the new Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child and the Criminal Justice for Children Code. The process is aligned with an approach to gradually build a system of child protection, focused on addressing root causes of children's vulnerability, rather than symptoms alone, and working across different sectors working with children.

### Children in migration and refugees

Albania continues to be a country of origin and transit for migration and refugees towards Western Europe, including unaccompanied children. Between 2015 to 2022, more than 60,000 Albanian children applied as first-time asylum seekers in European Union. During the last two years, migration has reduced drastically but still it continues.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Albania's child protection system is not ready to adequately respond nor protect foreign unaccompanied children.

A [monitoring report](#) on the situation of foreign unaccompanied children in Albania, prepared by CRCA/ ECPAT Albania, found that at least 80 unaccompanied children had disappeared from their shelter. Albania needs to take serious measures to overhaul its system of care and protection of

foreign unaccompanied children migrating to or transiting through the country.

### Climate change and environmental impacts

Despite Albania being considered at high risk from climate change, neither the government nor the population are aware of environmental protection. Legislation, policies and practices do not meet the obligations coming from international conventions, such as [UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters](#), despite Albania's ratification.

### Children's mental health

The mental health care system is in need of reform, as practices and instructions are outdated and overall lacking. CRCA is criticising that mental health is mostly adult-

focused in Albania and lacking the perspective of children. Moreover, evidence is lacking - there are no reports or data on children being affected by mental health and thus no knowledge of the real situation on the ground.

### Child victims of sexual violence

A [new report](#) analysing the cases of sexual violence against children found that most of the local and national authorities in Albania are unable to provide social care services or compensation. Currently, most social care services are provided by civil society organisations (CSOs) with foreign funding, such as Barnahus Albania that provides trauma and long-term support to child victims of sexual violence. CRCA/ECPAT Albania and Barnahus Albania have requested the government to introduce a nationwide system of care and protection which, however, has not been successful.

<sup>3</sup> All data is drawn from Eurostat: [Enlargement countries - statistics on migration, residence permits, citizenship and asylum](#), May 2023. Also, see [Child Rights Centre's Albania statement](#); and Eurostat data for [Children in migration - asylum applicants](#).

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Albania

Albania has a total child population of 579,203, of which 51% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2020<sup>4</sup>. This amounts to an estimated 304,204 children in need in Albania. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased over the last couple of years, as a result of positive economic development.<sup>5</sup>

Around 7% of Albanian children are forced to work as they grow up in poverty<sup>6</sup>, with 15,000 children not attending school at all which is most often related to the financial income of the families.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, almost 22% of Roma children in Albania

between 10 and 18 years have never been to school.<sup>8</sup>

According to Child Rights Centre Albania the groups of children most in need in Albania are children living in extreme poverty, Roma and Egyptian children, and children without family care. The services urgently needed to support these (groups of) children are a functioning child support system, appropriate housing, and adequate social care measures.

To help alleviate child poverty and social exclusion, the Albanian government should establish a National Programme with the overall goal of reducing children in poverty to zero. Moreover, appropriate housing and free education and support for every child is needed.

## Countries in Accession

Every year, the European Commission publishes the Enlargement Package that assesses the state of play in accession countries, including progress concerning upholding human rights and children's rights. Eurochild and its members contributed to the [2023 consultation on the Enlargement Package](#) to provide a children's rights perspective and insights on the situation for children in need.

As a country in accession, Albania created the [National Agenda for the Rights of the Child \(NARC\) 2021-2026](#). It is a commitment to achieving children's rights in Albania between 2021 and 2026.

For Child Rights Centre Albania, an essential service missing in the NARC is the provision of free meals in educational institutions

to all children as well as a functioning child support scheme. A significant step forward could also be achieved by offering free tablets to children starting school for the first time. That way, access to online education would be significantly eased.

Civil society is actively involved in meetings consulting the state of the implementation of the NARC, however CRCA criticises the formality of these meetings and the lack of inclusion of civil society in the actual implementation thereof.

The NARC should be the backbone of all measures to support and advance children and their rights. Yet, CRCA criticises that these policy documents are often used only for publicity purposes, rather than actively using them as transformative tools to progress the situation.

<sup>4</sup> Latest data for the number of children in Albania available from Eurostat is for 2021, yet the latest AROPE data is for 2020.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, *Poverty and Equity Brief*, April 2023.

<sup>6</sup> National Agency for Child Rights in Albania, *Annual Report on the Situation of Children in Albania 2015*.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, *Albania: The Cost of Underinvestment in Education: And ways to reduce it*, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> *Roma Census 2014*, Study of Albanian Communities, Open Society Foundation in Albania (Soros), Tirana 2014.

It is crucial that Albania increases its national budget for children, in particular to eliminate child poverty and support children's education. Moreover, the government should guarantee access to social care services for all children, no matter their background. Lastly, mental health disorders are on the rise following the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>9</sup>. In CRCA's opinion, and in accordance to the discussions during the [World Health Organisation's meeting to address mental health in the Western Balkans](#), Albania needs to update its public health legislation and offer children free medical treatment and medication at least until the age of ten years.

When it comes to shaping national policies, CRCA confirmed that this happens mostly through annual consultations on implementation

of national policies for children through the National Council for Children.<sup>10</sup>

To ensure a positive impact on children's rights, CRCA recommends that Albania should align with the EU Child Guarantee Recommendation, appoint a Child Guarantee Coordinator and develop an Albanian National Action Plan together with all relevant stakeholders.



<sup>9</sup> Euronews Albania, Mental health disorders surging in Albania, amplified by Covid-19 pandemic, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> The body established by the Law on the Rights and Protection of Children in Albania to oversee the implementation of the law, the work of the public institutions and to recommend measures, priorities and policies to the Albanian government to address issues related to the respect of children's rights or child protection.

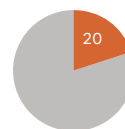
## “Country recommendation

It is essential for a federal country like Belgium, with different levels of power, to improve the coordination of policies related to children.

## Country Profile 2023



# Belgium

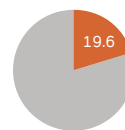


20

### Child Population:

**2,327,977**

20% of total population



19.6

### Child Poverty:

**456,283**

19.6% (2022)

▼ -0.9% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[A little Lining Comes](#)

[ONE](#)

[Flemish Child Rights Coalition](#)

## Children's Rights in Belgium

In the 'French-speaking community of Belgium', the Minister for Childhood is responsible for Children's rights and an [action plan for the period of 2020 to 2024](#) for children's rights has been developed.

In Flanders, the Ministry for Youth, Media, Brussels and Poverty Alleviation and the Co-ordinating Ministry for Children's Rights, are responsible for the rights of children in the region. The Ministry for Education, Sports, Animal Well-being, and the Flemish Border Region, is also partly responsible for the well-being of children. Currently, the Minister is working on an 'integrated youth decree' that combines and updates five decrees relating to Flemish youth work and youth and child rights policy. The role of the Flemish Child Rights Coalition will also be included and updated in this integrated decree. A [Youth and Child Rights Policy Plan](#) for 2020 to 2024 has been developed.

Members in Belgium identified several key areas related to children's rights.

### Child participation

**At federal level**, children's opinions are collected through [a participatory project](#) aimed at producing a version of the recommendations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adapted to young people.

**In the French-speaking community of Belgium**, a number of bodies take children's points of view into account at different levels:

**At local level**, children are consulted through the [municipality's children's councils](#).

**At the level of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation**, there are initiatives taken by:

- [The General Delegate for Children's Rights](#);
- [The Childhood Observatory](#) (OEJAJ);
- The [Youth Forum](#) with the

objective of meeting young people and bringing their struggles, fears, hopes and demands to all levels of society.

In the Walloon Region, children's voices are also heard through an [intergenerational dialogue](#).

In Flanders, the Flemish Commission for Children's Rights is mandated to take complaints from parents, professionals and children relating to child rights. However, [most complaints that are received come from adults](#).

In Flanders, secondary schools are required (by decree) to organise a means of participation for their students (for example by a student's council). However, not complying with this does not bear any consequences for the school involved. Primary schools are required to organise a students' council if 10% of the students aged 11 to 13 years asks for it.

### Anti-child rights movements

According to Eurochild members, the uprise of the radical right is a worrying development for civil society and the advancement of human rights in general in Flanders and Belgium, including children's rights, and particularly for children and young people of colour.

### Child safety and well-being online

According to the [Digisprong Knowledge Centre](#), 32% of children and 24% of youth report being cyberbullied in 2022.

The increasing dissemination of images of child sexual abuse is complicated by the transnational nature of the problem in Belgium. Filing a police complaint is often a high barrier for victims and not all online platforms are equipped with reporting mechanisms. According to the [Child Focus Annual Report 2022](#), the real extent of the problem in Belgium is still unknown: many victims

remain unidentified and there is no centralised reporting system nationally.

Several initiatives have been implemented:

- The recent EU [Directive 2018/1808 on audiovisual media services](#) (AVMSD) was transposed to Belgian regulatory framework in 2021 by adapting the [decree on audiovisual media services and video-sharing services](#) (4 February 2021). This decree includes measures to combat harmful content, such as hate speech and discrimination, as well as other measures to protect children.
- In 2022, the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation adopted a [media education plan](#) entitled *62 Actions to Develop Critical Thinking and Interactivity with the Media*.
- A new structural policy on school environment to counter harassment and cyberbullying

has been implemented.

- [BetterNet](#) is the Belgian Safer Internet Centre, appointed under the *EU Better Internet for Kids+ Strategy*. The project aims to improve the online behaviour of Belgian citizens, paying particular attention to young users, other vulnerable groups, families and those involved in education. This programme also set up a helpline for children and teenagers, as well as parents.
- The Direction for Equal Opportunities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation relaunched a [campaign to prevent sexual violence in relationships between young people](#).

### Child protection systems

Belgium's child protection (*Jeugdhulp* in Dutch and *l'Aide à la jeunesse* in French) sector is in difficulty. As a result of successive crises, there are many children at risk. There is a shortage of staff and accommodation places,

leading to institutional violence. Children who are not ill are having to live in hospital as this is the only measure of protection available.

### Children in migration and refugees

There is an ongoing asylum seeker reception crisis in Belgium. It remains possible [to detain](#) families with children because of their migration status, and the number of non-accompanied minors going missing in Belgium [increases yearly](#). There are currently [1,249 non-accompanied minors](#) waiting for a guardian to be appointed to them.

Minor asylum seekers do not always receive a place in a reception centre and are forced to live on the street. Fedasil (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) has been convicted by Belgian courts for over 7,000 times since the beginning of 2022 for failing to provide asylum seekers a place in

a reception centre. Additionally, several interim measures were imposed on Belgium by the European Court of Human Rights due to its failure to provide reception to asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup>

### Climate change and environmental impacts

In 2022, Belgium signed the [Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action](#).

Nevertheless and despite its relative wealth, Belgium [scores poorly](#) in comparison to other OECD countries on its level of exposure to pollution, lead and pesticides. The country's air quality is also quite low and access to green spaces is limited and unequally divided. 8 out of 10 children in Belgium report being worried about the climate.

### Children's mental health

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of young people's mental health.

<sup>1</sup> Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, [Opvangcrisis: Een Trieste Verjaardag](#), 2023; AGII, [Wettelijk kader en rechtspraak over gebrek aan opvang van asielzoekers met oneigenlijke code no show](#), 2023.

Policymakers have taken measures in this regard, such as increasing the affordability of psychological help. However, waiting lists for mental health services remain very long, particularly for children.

Belgium is in the process of reforming its mental health care delivery system with the aim of simultaneously strengthening community care and improving integration of care. The new policy model attempts to strike a balance between hospitals and community services, and it is based on networks of services.



## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Belgium

Belgium has a total child population of 2,327,977. Of which 19.6% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021.

There are significant differences between the Belgian communities:

- Brussels: 23.3% of children grow up in poverty.
- Wallonia: 16.2% of children grow up in poverty.
- Flanders: 7.3% of children grow up in poverty.

According to the Children's Rights Coalition, the groups of children most in need in Belgium are children with a migration background, children with

disabilities, children in alternative care, and children experiencing housing deprivation.

The main services needed to support children most in need in Belgium are [affordable and quality housing](#) and inclusive education, since children growing up in poverty and children with a migration background are [over-represented in special education](#).

Moreover, Belgium needs to provide accessible childcare facilities for children living in vulnerable families and preventive medical care for children. The country should also develop a policy for the inclusion of refugee children.

A few recent interventions have been able to help children and their families in Belgium:

- [ZoJong!](#), an organisation for and by young informal caregivers that won a sustainability award, provides support to young caregivers through awareness campaigns, workshops in

secondary education, packages for preschool education, activities for young informal caregivers and training/lectures for professionals and teachers.

- The government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation validated a draft new price list in nurseries, [reviewing the scale of parental contributions](#).

## The European Child Guarantee

### Belgium's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The [National Action Plan \(NAP\) of Belgium](#) was published on 3 May 2022.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the federal government and the federated entities have chosen not to target

<sup>2</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

particularly vulnerable groups of children with specific measures. Measures generally address all children experiencing poverty.

ONE explains that for French-speaking community of Belgium, the NAP mentions that various categories of children have been identified as vulnerable: children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children in care, migrant children, children from single-parent families and children whose mothers are in prison. The issue of children's mental health has also received attention.

According to the Child Rights Coalition, many of the initiatives listed in the NAP are project-based or dependent on the goodwill of individual local actors (such as schools). More structural measures are needed to ensure all children have full access to all services. ONE adds that the NAP includes measures or actions planned at various levels of the federal state. Therefore, the implementation of

these measures is responsibility of the administrations/sectors concerned. Better coordination of child policy in a federal state seems necessary.

In general, there is a lack of disaggregated national data relating to children and their rights. The complex institutional setup of Belgium contributes to this issue.

POD Maatschappelijke Integratie, the Flemish federal administration for Social Integration co-ordinates the implementation of the Child Guarantee, and has held several meetings with a variety of other civil society organisations, including our member the Child Rights Coalition.

ONE is in touch with the person of contact for the French-speaking community of Belgium and will participate in the meeting that will be organised by the federal coordinator for the implementation of the Child Guarantee.

The Belgian NAP is an overview of measures already included in the Child Guarantee and its adoption did not lead to new procedures being introduced. Moreover, the Belgian NAP does not analyse whether the measures that were already in place meet the standards of the Child Guarantee. In general, as Child Rights Coalition have argued in their [position paper](#) in April 2023, the NAP lacks ambition and additional structural measures are needed to meet the goals of the Child Guarantee.





## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's [European Semester Country Report for Belgium](#) did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground because, while the report highlights a slight reduction in poverty in the country, the situation of children is not specifically mentioned.

The recommendations for Belgium highlight the excellent level early childhood education and care (ECEC) coverage compared with other European countries. Nevertheless, social inequalities remain, with more privileged families making greater use of ECEC than more disadvantaged ones.

While the high cost of education and its social inequality are

highlighted. Early childhood is given very little attention in the report.

Overall, Eurochild members were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report do not take children sufficiently into account.

ONE highlights that only one single recommendation is focused on children, linking the importance of quality childcare service (ECEC) to support the employment of mothers.

In the [Country Specific Recommendations](#) for Belgium, the European Commission failed to highlight the need to support children in poverty. ONE points that, while the report highlights the appropriate measures taken by Belgium in response to the

Covid-19 crisis and points to a slight reduction in poverty in Belgium, it does not specifically mention the situation of children.



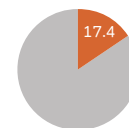
## “Country recommendation

Bulgaria should take action to strengthen the rights of children from families living in intergenerational poverty and children with disabilities. More effort should be made in order to guarantee that the necessity principle is applied consistently as to prevent unnecessary family separations.

Country  
Profile 2023



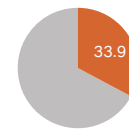
# Bulgaria



**Child Population:**

**1,188,803**

17.4% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**403,004**

33.9% (2022)

▲ +0.9% compared to 2021

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Hope and Homes for Children – Bulgaria](#)

[Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University](#)

[National Network for Children](#)

## Children's Rights in Bulgaria

At national level, the State Agency for Child Protection (DAZD) and the Agency for Social Support (ASP) are the main public authorities responsible for protecting children's rights in Bulgaria.

Together, Eurochild members in Bulgaria - Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) – Bulgaria, Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, and National Network for Children (NNC), identified several key areas related to children's rights, namely in the areas of child participation, safety online, children impacted by war and migrant children, and child protection.

### Child participation

Children still have limited opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them and in

public debate. Eurochild members identify the lack of understanding of children's right and belittling a child's position in relation to that of an adult as the main barrier for wider civic participation. Despite some great examples of ensuring child participation (such as young people taking part in the 95th Session of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and creating a child friendly report related to the event<sup>1</sup>), the needs of children for free expression and respect for their opinion on topics affecting them, are hardly and variously recognised.<sup>2</sup>

### Anti-child rights movements

Violations of children's rights and human rights in general, have become more visible in Bulgaria. This is particularly applicable for children standing up for their views against the so-called 'traditional societal

norms', and children from minority groups (child refugees and migrants, ethnic minorities, children from the LGBTI community). Their vulnerability is largely due to widespread discriminative mindsets, high level of misinformation, fake news and hate speech on a daily basis. Children from these groups can very often become victims of harassment, violence, and violation of rights.<sup>3</sup>

### Child safety and well-being online

Since the beginning of 2023, the hotline managed by the [Safer Internet Centre](#) has received almost 10,000 reports, 90% of which are for online sexual exploitation, including bullying<sup>4</sup> and sextortion. The quality of the National Children's Telephone Line (the second tool in Bulgaria for supporting children who

are victims of violence) has deteriorated due to lack of the necessary expertise among the officials who manage it, including lack of qualification to provide psychological support for the children calling and seeking help.

### Child protection systems

The child protection system in Bulgaria remains reactive, with about 2,000 children entering the system annually. Child protection departments still have severe staff shortages and high staff turnover. There are also gaps in actions to encourage change of attitudes that stigmatise poverty and marginalisation.

Children's rights are being undermined and violated in the new residential homes meant to overcome the institutionalised model of raising children. Further efforts to build and strengthen

1 Hope and Homes for Children – Bulgaria, [The Child participation programme of Hope and homes for children at a UN session](#), 2023.

2 National Network for Children, [Report Card 2023: What is the average government score for childcare?](#), May 2023.

3 ARETE Youth Fundation, [People Think we are a Threat to Them!](#), 2023.

4 Any form of harassment of the child, including verbal hate speech, image abuse, sexting, blackmail through personal data and/or images etc.

multi-sectoral cooperation and coordination between all public institutions constituting the elements of the child protection system is needed.

### Children in migration and refugees

Bulgaria has the largest share of unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum in the member states of the European Union. Specifically, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, nearly 150,000 Ukrainian refugees have passed through Bulgaria; the percentage of children among them is consistently around 40%. Less than 10% of those children (approximately 2,200 children) are enrolled in the Bulgarian education system.

Eurochild members underline that all refugee children's access to education and social services must go beyond policy

commitments. However, families face a number of practical obstacles to access education, such as language barriers and low administrative and financial capacity of service providers in enrolling, attending and support for children.

### Climate change and children's rights

Environmental pollution is a relevant topic among children. The research<sup>5</sup> conducted by Know-How Centre shows that they participate in initiatives or create projects about nature conservation. Additionally, the *Children-researchers joint initiative*<sup>6</sup> between NNC and Eurochild studied the children's opinions on the topic of ecology and environment. The findings indicate that children's most common association with regard to nature is related to reducing the use of plastic, using air and

water purifiers, and increasing the sensitivity of society on the subject.

### Children's mental health

The *National Strategy for the Mental Health of the Citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria 2020–2030* was adopted in 2021 and it foresees strengthening the focus on child and youth mental health. Activities include programmes supporting children with mental health conditions and their families, modules on the problems of violence against children and training of healthcare professionals and general practitioners to integrate activities and services for early diagnosis of mental health problems.

The strategy outlines the development of a public register of approved qualified professionals providing mental health help to children and young people. To

extend these positive practices, more robust collection of data on children's mental health is needed. Eurochild members recommend a mapping on children's mental health needs and the provision of support by schools to help pupils cope with the demands of the education system.

### Other developments for children's rights

The Know How Centre and NNC are working on empowering children to become defenders of their rights, while NNC is advocating introducing reforms in Bulgaria's juvenile justice system. HHC – Bulgaria is active in the deinstitutionalisation of childcare, child participation and advocacy for the rights of the child and support for the cause of every child to live in a family.

<sup>5</sup> Know-How Center for Alternative Child Care, New Bulgarian University *Child participation and activism: Where are we headed?* Sofia, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> In this initiative, teams of young people research six meaningful topics that they themselves have identified as important to them and the community in which they live.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a total child population of 1,18 million, 33.9 % of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 403,004 children in need in Bulgaria. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased since 2021. There is a serious discrepancy between the general child poverty rate and that of children from different ethnic backgrounds - 37.5% children from Türkiye and 69.4% from Roma backgrounds respectively are growing up in poverty.

Nearly 20% of children in Bulgaria live in households with three or more children, and those are the ones traditionally at the

highest risk of poverty and social exclusion. Additionally, children from marginalised<sup>7</sup> communities and children with disabilities are among the ones currently placed in out-of-family state sponsored care due to a consistent failure to apply the ‘necessity principle’ in child-family separations. Furthermore, there are groups of children in state sponsored alternative care that are overrepresented - children with disabilities (31% of all children in institutional/residential care) and Roma children (figures as of 2021).<sup>8</sup>

The abolishing of fees for kindergartens and nurseries for families with children is a positive intervention to address child poverty. In addition, the amount of financial benefit for raising children in the second year of maternity leave was increased, and so were the tax benefits for working parents. Nevertheless,

there is a challenge with providing integrated support for the poorest and most marginalised families and children.

There are a number of pilot initiatives throughout the years addressing different aspects of the generational poverty, however these usually lack long-term financial stability and do not transition beyond the pilot phase to a stable national policy.

In its report ‘Poverty takes away the right to childhood’: Children’s perceptions of poverty in four EU Member States, Eurochild provides an overview of the situation of poverty on the ground in Bulgaria bringing children’s voices into the conversation. The report is the final product of a series of consultations and surveys with children carried out by four National Eurochild Forums, among which the National Network for Children in Bulgaria.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Bulgaria’s National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee’s implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan of Bulgaria was published on 05 December 2022.<sup>9</sup> The NAP identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children with disabilities, children in migration and refugees, children from minority backgrounds, children in alternative care and those leaving care, especially children in residential care and children from households with more than three children, single-parent families.

<sup>7</sup> Toneva E., *Protection as punishment: alternative care for children in Bulgaria, Structural violence and human dignity*, 2023, ISBN: 978-619-01-1275-4, pp. 81-103.

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, *The situation of children in Europe and Central Asia*, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

Moreover, the plan also mentions the importance of regional differences in terms of an extended risk of poverty and social exclusion, such as children living in isolated and difficult-to-reach regions who are subjected to a multitude of risk factors.

The NAP contains measures against social exclusion and fighting child poverty, but they are not specifically tied to the target groups of children in need. The Plan does not include robust indicators and a monitoring framework on how measures would be implemented or coordinated between responsible governmental institutions. There is a measure in the plan aimed at collecting sufficient data on different groups of children using cross-institutional system and cooperation; however, this is something yet to be implemented.

To ensure that interventions set out in Bulgaria's NAP can be effectively monitored and evaluated, Eurochild members recommend developing a tool to assess outcomes by

municipality, rather than on a national level. This would help target regional differences and will prompt adjustments of future measures. In addition, monitoring and evaluation should include feedback from children and their families in order to provide a comprehensive picture of effectiveness.

Funding for measures set out in the NAP will draw on both national and EU sources. Funding from municipalities budgets or non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) budgets are combined with different Operational programmes, such as 'Education', 'Equal Access to education', the 'Development of regions'.

To support the NAP's implementation, Eurochild members recommend developing a working cross-sectoral co-ordination between representatives of all institutions responsible for children's care and protection on a municipal level in order to support every child in need. In addition, our members would like to see the highest

political level responsibility towards the Monitoring and Evaluation of the results of the European Child Guarantee.

However, there are concerns among the NGOs that the NAP will be implemented as another pro forma document through which institutions will report activities, rather than making real policies to improve children's lives in Bulgaria.

## **European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations**

### **Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need**

This year's European Semester Country Report for Bulgaria outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely children with disabilities, Roma children, children living in rural and remote areas, children impacted by the pandemic, and children with a migration background. On the other hand, the Country Report failed to include children

in alternative care, child participation, and children's rights in the digital environment. Eurochild members underline that there is no specific mention of the topic of deinstitutionalisation.

Eurochild members in Bulgaria were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

The adoption of the National Strategy for Mental Health of Citizens is a promising development. It should enable improvements in health services for children by regulating minimum quality standards for the provision of social services. Eurochild members welcomed adopted measures to address shortages of healthcare professionals and better geographical distribution across Bulgaria.

Lastly, concerning the importance of investing in children, Eurochild members welcomed the inclusion of the amendment of the Pre-school and School Education Act, to make pre-school education mandatory from the age of four.

Our members urge for quality, age-oriented, and accessible Early Childhood Education and Care practices to encompass the needs of children in bigger cities, where there is lack of some services, and better geographical distribution to address the needs of children in smaller, more remote settlements.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations on addressing the mitigation of energy poverty, quality of

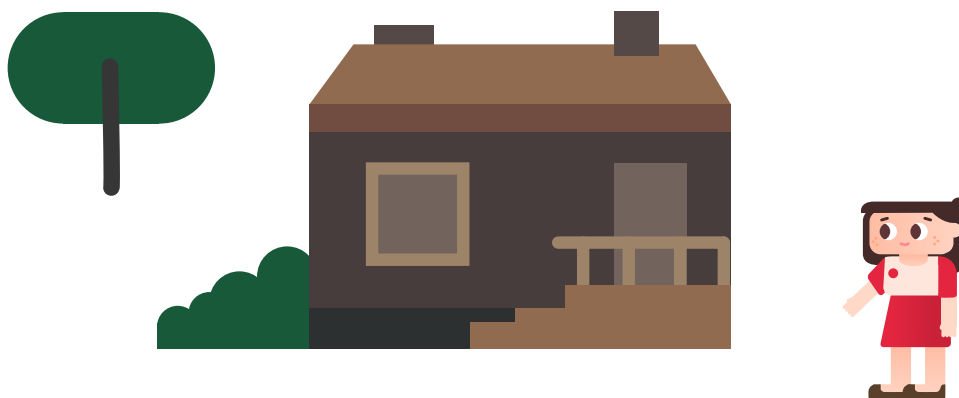
education and training included in the Country Report do correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground in Bulgaria. These recommendations respect the right of children to decent quality of life and supports their future development in line with the changing labour market needs.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Bulgaria, the European Commission made social recommendations to allocate higher spending on social, health and educational

policy, as well as higher spending on public investment. These are necessary factors to support children's development. However, to ensure that all children reach their potential, a more targeted approach for children in disadvantage is necessary.

Spreading the measures equally across all groups of children will not solve the problem due to regional imbalances, vulnerabilities and inequality. Eurochild members recommend more strategic and cross-sectoral

reforms concerning the protection of children's rights; only then can support and financial investment achieve the desired positive change in the well-being of children.



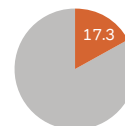
## “ Country recommendation

Croatia should take action to secure an adequate range of locally based social services to prevent child poverty and social exclusion.

## Country Profile 2023



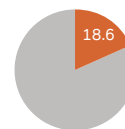
# Croatia



### Child Population:

**666,615**

17.3% of total population



### Child Poverty:

**120,657 (2022)**

18.1%

▼-0.5% compared to 2021

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC), with input from the Association Children First (Children First) and SOS Children's Villages (SOS CV)



## Children's Rights in Croatia

The [Deputy Prime Minister for Social Activities and Human Rights](#) is responsible for children's rights in Croatia. The role includes coordination for social activities and human rights and considers issues related to education, health care and insurance, social welfare, demography, family, and youth.

The Deputy Prime Minister is also responsible for protecting and promoting human rights and collects data on the state of human rights and the rights of national minorities.

Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) identified a range of key child rights activities and concerns in Croatia.

### Child Participation

There are a range of mechanisms implemented in Croatia for child participation. At the local

community level, there are Children's City Councils (however, not all local communities have them), public welfare institutions, which consist of student councils in schools, and beneficiary councils in social welfare institutions.

At the national level, there is a network of young advisers of the Ombudsperson for Children of the Republic of Croatia, National Council of Students, the Council for Children, and an [advisory committee for children's participation](#) at the UNICEF Croatia Office.

CAC have concerns regarding children's participatory rights (and participatory research) in Croatia, as they are often not understood by educators, teachers and parents. Most often, the right to participation is linked to the child's right to express his opinion freely but ignores the requirement that the child's opinion should be considered whenever possible.

CAC supports the view of [Professor Dubravka Maleš from the University of Zagreb](#) that child's participation in decision-making is often absent in Croatia, and adults still do not sufficiently include children in the decision-making process, even when the decisions concern children themselves.

CAC believes children's participation in Croatia is legally and strategically regulated. However, child participation is not taught in courses that prepare future experts who will work directly with children, but it is often discreetly (but steadily) present in practice.<sup>1</sup>

### Child protection systems

In Croatia, there have been continuous organisational changes in the social care system. In addition, there is a lack of experts, a lack of support from the competent ministry for experts, an increase in domestic violence

after the Covid-19 pandemic and an increase in the number of children at risk living with their families due to a shortage of safe services, such as foster families, to place them within. Deinstitutionalisation reforms in Croatia began in 2021. For over 20 years the implementation of deinstitutionalisation plans and social care institutions has progressed slowly.

Political parties highly influence deinstitutionalisation in Croatia. While residential care was decreased, alternative care, foster care, and support services to prevent children from going into care were not developed enough. There was insufficient funding available for a sustainable deinstitutionalisation programme in Croatia. The number of children requiring child protection is rising, but places have decreased. It often appears that places for children are unavailable in emergencies unless the child's situation is shared in the media.

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, *LET'S RESPECT, INVOLVE, TAKE INTO ACCOUNT- Analysis of the state of children's participation in Croatia*, p. 98.

There has also been a strike of court officials, and the Croatian Government has been unwilling to solve the accumulated problems in the judiciary, resulting in delays in urgent procedures to protect the best interests of the child.

The [Child Guarantee piloting programme](#) focused in the Međimurje county, in north Croatia, aims to support and develop social services, focusing on including Roma children. According to CAC, the initial results of providing access to [integrated and multidisciplinary services](#) look promising.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

According to the Croatia Government Council for Children<sup>2</sup>, from February 25 to July 12, 2022, a total of 20,936 displaced persons from Ukraine entered Croatia, of which 7,016 were children. 40 facilities were

mobilised, and three reception centres created (Osijek - South, Arena Varaždin and GŠD Gospić). 1,704 people were placed in collective accommodation, and 19,232 people in individual accommodation.

Children arriving from Ukraine in 2022 were offered support, such as language classes, to integrate into Croatian schools. As of July 13, 2022, there were 1,708 Ukrainian children in 554 Croatian educational institutions, including 234 children in kindergartens, 1,330 students in primary schools and 144 students in secondary schools.

According to the Ministry of Science and Education [data](#), in the school year 2022/2023, 1,394 students from Ukraine were enrolled in schools. Of the total number of students from Ukraine, 1,171 of them attended elementary school, and 223 attended secondary school.

As in the previous school year, [refugee children from Ukraine](#) will have the right to free textbooks and other educational materials in the school year 2023/2024. Additionally, Ukrainian students will have the right to subsidised costs for extracurricular classes, extended stay for elementary school students, and accommodation and meals in the dormitory for secondary school students.

### Children's mental health

Croatia has 56 child psychiatrists and approximately 60 child psychiatry beds<sup>3</sup>. There has been an increase in suicides among child and adolescent, including young children. A rising trend in anxiety and depressive states of children and young people is visible, teenage girls are among the highest risk.

The Croatian government has developed a [Strategic Framework](#)

[for Mental Health \(2022-2030\)](#). This includes principles, goals, results, indicators, their initial and target values, and areas of implementation and desired outcomes: preserving and improving mental health; prevention and early recognition of mental health problems; increasing the availability of effective biopsychosocial interventions while respecting human rights and protecting mental health in the community. The reform plans for mobile teams for mental health, and the return of mental health into the primary health protection system.

Considering the data on the lack of child psychiatrists, accommodation capacity, waiting lists, increased suicides among children and young people, and difficulties related to mental health, it is a worrying fact that the Strategic Framework does not foresee additional financial resources for its implementation.

<sup>2</sup> This was the 6th session of the Croatia government Council for Children, held in July 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Data presented at the thematic session of the [Committee for Health and Social Policy on the state of child psychiatry in Croatia](#) (March 2023).

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Croatia

According to Eurostat data, Croatia has a total child population of 666,615, of which 18.1% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to approximately 120,657 children in need in Croatia. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has slightly decreased since 2021.

The [national statistics](#) are slightly different, as they report that in 2022, 16% of children aged 0-17 were at risk of poverty.

One example of meeting the needs of children living in poverty is a [free school meals project](#). In Croatia, there have been a range of researchers calling for free school meals for all children<sup>4</sup>.

From the second half of the school year (2022/2023) free school meals were available to all primary school children. Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) would like to see this initiative extended to secondary schools. However, they are concerned regarding the sustainability of the initiative due to funding.

According to CAC, the children most in need in Croatia are children in alternative care, children with developmental disabilities, and children with mental health problems.

The services needed to support these children differ for each specific group mentioned above. However, CAC states that children need a broad range of social services, which should be available in their local communities. These should include financial support, psychosocial support for children at risk of separation from their

parents, early intervention services, access to early childhood education and care, access to health services, access to education tailored to their needs, and access to adequate housing.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the Croatian government should focus on:

- Broadening and developing a range of integrated social services for children and families at risk which should meet children's needs across the different regions.
- Developing non-institutional forms of care and prioritising the expansion of foster care in other regions in Croatia, where availability is very low.

CAC would share a good example of a project that has helped children in need in Croatia. The family strengthening project [Loving home for every child](#) by [SOS CV](#) consists of a mobile

team and counselling centre in Sisacko-Moslavacka county, one of the poorest counties in Croatia. The project aims to increase and improve parental and pedagogical skills and knowledge through counselling and education aimed at parents, foster parents, and guardians. The initiative has been successfully running for ten years. It provides social services innovatively to children and families who not only come from disadvantaged backgrounds but are also among those who are often not listened to or excluded.

Ongoing evaluations on the project include written feedback from parents and children, who feel that the support they receive from the practice meets their needs and that they would recommend the services to others. They particularly appreciate the people-focused approach of the professionals. CAC is calling for this project to be part of the interventions

<sup>4</sup> *'Every child's right to a school meal'* is an initiative of professors from the Faculty of Law, Study Center of Social Work, Olja Družić Ljubotina, Marijana Kletečki Radović, Antonija Petričušić and Ivana Dobrotić. [jačanja obitelji – SOS Dječje selo Hrvatska \(sos-dsh.hr\)](#).

carried out by the official network of social service providers and funded from the state budget. Currently, funding remains largely dependent on successful applications to national calls for proposals by non-governmental organisation and SOS CV Croatia's internal fundraising to make this project sustainable.

In its report '[Poverty takes away the right to childhood: Children's perceptions of poverty in four EU Member States](#), Eurochild provides an overview of the situation of poverty on the ground in Croatia bringing children's voices into the conversation. The report is the final product of a series of consultations and surveys with children carried out by four [National Eurochild Forums](#), among which the Society 'Our Children' Opatija in Croatia.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Croatia's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at the national level. The National Action Plan of Croatia was published on 16 August 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children of the Roma national minority, child beneficiaries of ZMN (*Zajamčenu minimalnu naknadu* – Guaranteed minimum benefit in the social welfare system), children in less developed, especially rural areas, children with disabilities, children in migration (specifically unaccompanied children, asylum seekers, foreigners

under subsidiary and temporary protection under 18 years of age), children in alternative care, children from Ukraine and all other displaced children and children whose parents are in prison. However, children with mental health problems are missing from Croatia's NAP.

Moreover, the NAP includes key services for preschool and education, meals at school, quality and affordable housing, family support, foster care, and residential communities for young people leaving care. Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) will welcome the adoption of a national framework for the protection of children's mental health.

According to CAC, many measures in the NAP are defined and aimed at creating a legislative and institutional framework for supporting children. However, they are concerned that only a few measures are direct services

for children and their families. The NAP does not include robust indicators and a monitoring framework. There are clear measurable results, and much data to collect, but it needs to be clarified that such data will lead to concrete measures.

Children First, as a civil society organisation (CSO) representative, is directly involved in supporting Croatia's implementation of the Child Guarantee. Going forward, CAC states that the priority now is for the Croatian government to implement the NAP in collaboration with a range of CSOs. Alongside this, further developing the monitoring and evaluation indicators and processes should include stakeholders - children and CSOs.

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<sup>5</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for Croatia outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely young children, and children in alternative care. However, the Country Report refers to a reform mentioned within the National Recovery Resilience Plan to develop family and community-based services to reduce poverty and support the integration of vulnerable groups. Social reform in Croatia should identify children as a priority.

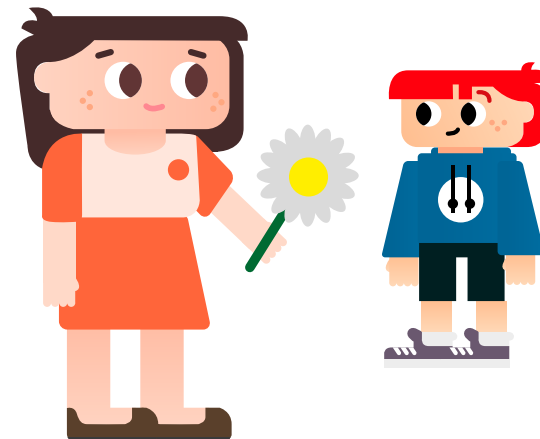
Political parties highly influence the deinstitutionalised programme in Croatia. While residential care was decreased, alternative care, foster care, and support services to prevent children from going into care was not developed enough. The number of children requiring

child protection is rising, but places have decreased.

Overall, Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) were not involved in the Semester Process 2023 and they are not aware of any other civil society organisation being involved in Croatia. Concerning the importance of investing in children, the CAC found no new developments within the country specific report or recommendations, as they are similar to those included in 2022.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

CAC highlight the children in need who are missing from the Semester Report and Recommendations: children in alternative care, children with developmental disabilities, and children with mental health problems.



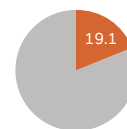
## “Country recommendation

Cyprus should take action to include children in all decision-making processes for all issues that affect them and make sure they collect disaggregated data on children.

## Country Profile 2023



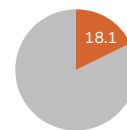
# Cyprus



### Child Population:

**173,028**

19.1% of total population



### Child Poverty:

**31,318**

18.1% (2022)

▼ -1.1% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC)

## Children's Rights in Cyprus

In Cyprus, no political appointee is responsible for children's rights. However, key policies on children's rights in Cyprus are developed by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Justice. The country also recently developed a new legislation on [Children Against the Law \(N. 55\(I\)/2021\)](#) which provides the framework and the necessary mechanisms to ensure fair treatment of children in the justice system, taking into account their age and vulnerability.

The Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC) states that there are various legislations on violence against children, corporal punishment, sexual abuse, and exploitation. The government of Cyprus is committed to implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as much as possible.

PCCPWC stresses that the Children's Law in Cyprus has been under review for several years. The legal framework existed since 1952 (with amendments and annexes added since). PCCPWC has been advocating for the government of Cyprus to enact a new law since 1990, but this has not yet passed.

Cyprus has an independent office of the [Commissioner for the Protection of Children's Rights](#).

The 4 pillars of the Office of the Commissioner are:

- Monitoring of legislation, policies and practices that affect children;
- Sensitisation on children's rights;
- Empowering children and promoting their participation;
- Representing children in processes that affect them.

However, this role can only provide recommendations to the government.

PCCPWC identified several critical areas related to children's rights, namely in the area of children being experts in their own lives; anti-child rights movements; child safety online, (digital) well-being and mental health; child protection systems; and children impacted by war and conflict.

### Child participation

In Cyprus, children are not considered partners, and are not invited to participate in any decision-making processes. Also, family culture does not involve children in decision-making. Child participation is a relatively "new" concept.

PCCPWC recommends the government in Cyprus, especially the Ministry of Education, to involve a significant number of children more regularly in decision-making instead of working with only a small group of organised students, as is often the case.

### Anti-child rights movements

PCCPWC has not seen any evidence of anti-child rights movements in Cyprus. However, family/parent organisations often ask to be consulted, overcoming the right of children to raise their voice on issues affecting them.

PCCPWC recommends the government of Cyprus to include children in consultations on matters that directly affect them and not only ask family/parent's organisations.

### Child safety and well-being online

PCCPWC reports that significant efforts have been made for several years in Cyprus to inform children of all ages about their online safety and ways to report abuse, bullying, and other issues. There is a special police unit, a dedicated phone line, and a series of trainings through the [Pedagogical Institute](#) that is expected to reach many children through peer-to-peer learning.

Mental health had not been a priority for the government in Cyprus until the Covid-19 pandemic. However, even in that period of crisis, the government's response to mental health has been superficial.

PCCPWC recommends that the Ministry of Health prioritise directly consulting with children about their mental health. In addition, all activities focusing on child safety online, (digital) well-being and mental health should be better coordinated and involve all civil society organisations working with children to disseminate the good practices widely.

### Child protection systems

According to PCCPWC, there is not an adequate and comprehensive system of child protection in Cyprus for vulnerable groups, the majority of which are migrants. PCCPWC recommends the development of a comprehensive child protection system that includes

all individuals under the age of 18, regardless of race, religion, or parent's status.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

PCCPWC reports a strong response by the government of Cyprus to accommodate the needs of Ukrainian children. However, there was no real effort to do the same for other children with a migrant background, especially those arriving unaccompanied and without papers. Many children with a migrant background live in adverse conditions and are deprived of schooling, and their development needs are unmet. PCCPWC recommends that the migration policy in Cyprus is non-discriminative and recognises the rights of all children.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Cyprus

Cyprus has a total child population of 173,028, of which 18.1% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to approximately 31,318 children in need in Cyprus. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021.

The Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC) states that the number of children at risk of poverty and exclusion in Cyprus has decreased over the last two years due to social transfers available for all age groups.

According to PCCPWC, the groups of children most in need and often forgotten in policy responses in the country are children with a migrant background and children

with special needs. Children with a migrant background are often placed in mainstream schooling before obtaining adequate language skills or some of them are not even enrolled in any educational programme. The government of Cyprus must ensure that all children have access to an inclusive education. Children with a migrant background should be regularly assessed for academic purposes, their living conditions, mental health, family relationships, and any other needs.

**“Children with a migrant background in Cyprus are often the ones who are likely to suffer without anyone noticing.”**



Different groups of children with special needs should be better supported, especially in their education and rehabilitation. For example, children who require an accompanying adult to be able to attend mainstream school should be provided with such support, and that adult must only cater for one child and not a group (two or three is now the case).

According to PCCPWC, school rehabilitation programs are poorly monitored, evaluated, and modified. They do not always meet children's needs. For some children with disabilities, school should not only be a place for learning but also to receive a wide range of specific therapies and psychological support. Personalising the support children need will allow them to reach their full potential.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the government of Cyprus should prioritise:

1. Continuous assessment and revisiting of education, health (including prevention) and social protection policies for children with a migrant background.
2. Better coordination across the Ministries involved (Education, Health, Social Welfare).
3. Personalised schemes for children with disabilities and/or requiring learning support.
4. Social transfers not only in hard cash to the parents/family but also in direct free key services to children (e.g., transport, extracurricular activities).

## The European Child Guarantee

### Cyprus' National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to

outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan of Cyprus was published on 5 December 2022.<sup>1</sup> According to the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC), the NAP includes a comprehensive list of children most in need in Cyprus.

The NAP targets:

- Children under (statutory) care – especially those under the protection of the Director of Social Services;
- Children with a migrant background, including unaccompanied minors (under the protection of the Director of Social Services);
- Children in vulnerable family situations (relying on Social Services and receiving social benefits from the Welfare Department);
- Children with disabilities;

- Children belonging to a minority racial or ethnic group (especially Roma);
- Children with housing problems (families that are identified by the relevant departments such as the Social Services or the Welfare Department);
- Children with mental health issues.

Although the NAP includes various actions, it fails to consider child poverty in its entirety – the NAP consists of bits and pieces that can contribute to combatting child poverty. According to PCCPWC, a more holistic and comprehensive approach to combatting child poverty should be employed. It is currently unclear which synergies will exist between different Ministries and authorities and how combatting child poverty will be mainstreamed in all actions that would be key to lifting children out of poverty and social exclusion in Cyprus.

<sup>1</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

It must be clarified if the NAP includes robust indicators and a monitoring framework. Statistics and data will be collected, and a monitoring mechanism will be established. The NAP states that there will be a committee, but it is not clear if and when civil society and children (and which children) will be involved.

**“PCCPWC will welcome and support activities focusing on the Child Guarantee NAP for Cyprus that will enhance child participation and structures to ensure that children are involved in the implementation and assessment processes.”**

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

According to the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC), overall, children were overlooked in the 2023 European Semester Country Report for Cyprus, as it did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. The Country Report failed to include the vulnerable groups of children that national policymakers should target.

These include:

- Children living in poverty and social exclusion, as there is no real mention of children or any measures for them. The one-off allowance towards the energy cost increase has not made a real difference and has no real added value.
- The early childhood development scheme on

tuition subsidy is currently only available for children aged four years and eight months. This scheme has been criticised for favouring private schooling and not enhancing public schools. The focus on early childhood education and care is not about quality or accessibility but to put mothers back into the labour market. The scheme is expected to be tested in the 2023-2024 school year. After then PCCPWC plans to assess and evaluate it.

- Children in alternative care and deinstitutionalisation are invisible in the report. Deinstitutionalisation has previously been a goal for the government of Cyprus, but due to the increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors, children with a migrant background are currently placed in institutions with no opportunity for a placement in family-based alternative care. This is not the case for Cypriot children, as numbers for them are very low and efforts are made to place these children in alternative care.

- An emphasis on education performance rather than an education experience. PCCPWC acknowledge that the [PISA results](#) (2018) for Cyprus are not good, and they believe there is a need for a radical change in the education system, which was promised by the government but has yet to be carried out. PCCPWC states that the [changes made to the curricula](#) for 2023-2024, such as the examinations system reform, are not enough. There needs to be a radical rethinking of what the people of Cyprus expect from the system, a radical change in teaching and examining methods and continuous teacher training to implement the changes. PCCPWC agree that there are huge disparities based on children's socioeconomic status, and in their opinion, this has never been given adequate attention.

Therefore, they have been calling for linking education with social conditions.

Other pressing issues that the government of Cyprus should prioritise are children's right to be heard, the need of children with a migrant background - including child refugees, the need of children impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the inequalities that have been exacerbated, and children's mental health and well-being.

Overall, PCCPWC was not involved in the Semester Process 2023 and is continually looking for opportunities to work with the government of Cyprus on issues affecting children.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, PCCPWC welcomed the focus on housing in the Country Report. This is the first time that housing has been included, and funds have been allocated.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

One recommendation on housing, included in the Country Report, does correspond sufficiently to reform needs in Cyprus. However, the European Commission should have highlighted the need to support the holistic needs of children in poverty.



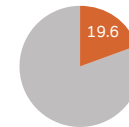
## “Country recommendation

Denmark should strengthen child-family investments, policies, and adjacent professions, with a focus on supporting children and families with a migrant background.

Country  
Profile 2023



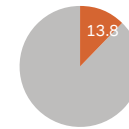
# Denmark



**Child Population:**

**1,151,729**

19.6% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**158,939**

13.8% (2022)

▼ -0.2 compared to 2021

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Fairstart Foundation](#)

## Children's Rights in Denmark

At national level, the Minister for Children and Education is responsible for children's rights. Unfortunately, there has been a trend in Denmark to cut budgets for professional staff supporting children and their families. Moreover, recently a new law, the [Danish Act of Parental Responsibility](#), has been passed that encourages the use of adoption without consent, which is contrary to UN and European conventions.

### Child participation

According to Fairstart Foundation, many local authorities have been decreasing budgets for child participation while increasing bureaucratic state control systems, which makes it difficult to meaningfully include children in decision-making.

### Anti-child rights movements

Concerning anti-child rights movements, the needs of children are being ignored, as children continue to not have opportunities to influence decision-making in economic and political matters.

### Child protection services

Denmark has a family-service-oriented child protection system that is centred around children's basic rights and needs. Following a system of consent, it is the responsibility of the protection systems to provide help and services when a child needs it. In 2018, 5.2% of Danish children receiving child protection services.<sup>1</sup>

### Children in migration and refugees

Denmark is currently suffering from a political stalemate

amongst the governing parties on the topic of migration, whereas close to no process has been made towards a more open and supportive migration system. Instead, Denmark has introduced more restrictive laws for immigrants, in which immigrant families are being separated and second-generation immigrants are denied citizenship. Naturally, this also impacts children in these families, as they have to endure being separated from their parents or carers.

In contrast, children fleeing the war in Ukraine have been welcomed to Denmark with open arms and they have received support from all sides. Despite these regressive policies, Fairstart Foundation sees that the general Danish population is more tolerant than the government towards the inclusion of people in migration and more welcoming regardless of people's origin.

### Climate change and children's rights

Climate change is a topic of vast importance for young people in Denmark. 84% of people aged 15-29 consider climate change as the biggest challenge for humanity at the moment and almost 70% feel that it has a direct impact on their daily lives<sup>2</sup>. According to a [recent study](#), temperature increases can have major consequences for human health, particularly impacting children of risk of disease and malnutrition.

### Children's mental health

Children continue to have significant mental health struggles in Denmark, as 15% of Danish young adults are diagnosed with mental disorders, which has been increasing over the last few years<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the rising numbers, children and young people still

1 Hestbæk A et al., *The Child Protection Systems in Denmark and Norway*, Oxford Handbook of Child Protection Systems, 112 – 132, 2023.

2 European Investment Bank, *79% of Danish people think that climate change and its consequences are the biggest challenge for humanity in the 21st century*, 2021.

3 Euronews, *Mental health: Is Denmark's youth living up to the country's happiness claims?*, 2023.

have to wait for often several years to gain access to psychiatry wards and receive treatments, which also reflects the stress of professionals working in this field. There is a lack of social services directed at children with mental health struggles as well as an insufficient number of professional workforce trained for working with children. This also risks creating insecure early attachments for children due to high turnover of professional caregivers and teachers throughout childhood.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Denmark

Denmark has a total child population of 19.6% out of which 13.8% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021 after

having increased the previous years. However, Denmark has abolished the official poverty limit for families, which makes the comparison of the data more difficult.

According to Fairstart Foundation, the groups of children most in need are children below the poverty line as well as second generation immigrant children. The rise in poverty is related to the following factors among others: firstly, a general increase in wealth during the economic boom leading to a higher income level for the poverty indicator. Secondly, the rise in unemployment following the economic crises from 2008. Thirdly, the introduction of various – for Danish standards – very low cash benefits such as ‘start help’, ‘introductory benefit’, ‘225 hour rule’, etc. At the beginning of 2022, 50,000 households with children received a housing benefit. It is estimated to cover on average between 40-60% of

monthly rent payments depending on the composition of the household.

Local authorities assess the local need for public housing in their communities, and on that basis commit - and provide financial support - for the establishment of new housing<sup>4</sup>. However, regarding the child allowance, only residents with Danish nationality or foreigners with 1 to 3 years of residence in Denmark are eligible to receive the benefit. Despite the intention of this policy to incentivise job seeking among non-Danish residents, this criteria exempts certain groups of refugees and poses a challenge for newly arrived children and their families.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the Danish government should utilise a multidimensional poverty concept and focus on the structural causes of poverty and inequality. This means that all programmes

and projects must include objectives that address one or several dimensions of poverty, ensuring that the UN Sustainable Development Goals are applied, namely that no one must be left behind. Additionally, highlighting non-discrimination, participation, transparency and accountability would serve as leverage to fight poverty.

A promising example of a project taking a multidimensional approach to supporting children at risk of poverty and social exclusion is an [initiative by the Fairstart Foundation](#), funded as part of a European Union funded Lifelong Learning grant. The project was directed at children's mental health in alternative care institutions and, was designed to include online educational courses for foster families and group home staff. At the same time, group training sessions were designed for students, in which attachment practices such as infancy or leaving care were

<sup>4</sup> Government of Denmark, [42nd National Report on the implementation of the European Social Charter](#), 2022.

discussed. By creating a more stable environment for children, the project managed to improve the mental health of these children.

In addition, following the new legislation Preventing segregation of children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) from 2018, each ECEC facility in Denmark must ensure that they hold a maximum of 30% of children from vulnerable housing areas. The purpose of this initiative is to promote better opportunities for each child to develop their language, well-being and their general readiness to learn.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for Denmark outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, particularly in the field of education. The Country Report suggests improving the digital skills of individuals by increasing the use of digital tools throughout all levels of education. Moreover, the focus on young people not in education, employment, or training should be increased.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report to some extent do correspond sufficiently

to reform needs on the ground in Denmark. For instance, it is well reflected that in Denmark, while equity remains high generally, schools differ in teaching time, and quality, and pupils with a migrant background achieve significantly worse education outcomes.

The Country Specific Recommendations for Denmark failed to highlight the need to support children in poverty. Social inclusion targets and several social inclusion efforts are focused on employment and labour market. While this is tightly related to social marginalisation and poverty, applying a single-focused labour market approach is questionably adequate<sup>5</sup>. In addition, the recommendations do not respect the rights of children living in poverty as it foresees cuts in certain child benefits.



<sup>5</sup> Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage, EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, Denmark.

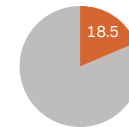
## “Country recommendation

The UK government must set out a clear roadmap for how it will meaningfully improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in society by producing a children's rights action plan and appointing a Cabinet Minister for Children to ensure oversight and coordination of the action plan takes place at the highest levels of government.

Country  
Profile 2023



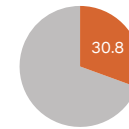
# England



**Child Population:**

**10,483,090**

18.5% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**3.7 million**

30.8% (2022)

▲ +0.15% compared to 2021

**RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):**

Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)



## Children's Rights in England

There remains no cabinet minister with responsibility for children's rights despite [growing calls](#) for one to be established. The minister with responsibility for children within the Department for Education has remained a junior minister since 2018, when the role was demoted.<sup>1</sup>

There has not been a child rights strategy to ensure the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) implementation since 2010, nor sufficient cross-departmental coordination and monitoring mechanisms.

There has been no progress to fully incorporate the UNCRC into UK domestic law in contrast to developments in other parts of the UK.

There is no statutory requirement to carry out Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs). Despite the UK government's claim that 'careful consideration is given to the UNCRC when developing new legislation'<sup>2</sup>, and the development of a template for officials to use, there is little evidence CRIAs are consistently carried out for policy or budgetary decisions.

Further areas relating to the UNCRC General Measures of implementation, alongside recommendations, can be found in the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)'s [2022 civil society alternative report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child](#).

### Child participation

Despite progress, many do not take children's views seriously,

and statutory participation rights remain ad hoc and do not apply to all children in all settings. There is often more willingness to involve children [in individual rather than strategic decision-making](#).

There are some welcome structures for involving children in national policymaking, but this is not systematic. UK government consultations do not consistently involve children or are presented in child-friendly language, although there are some positive examples.<sup>3</sup>

[Children report not feeling part of local decision-making](#) and want inclusion and representation in local democracy. Particular groups of children are less likely to have their voices heard<sup>4</sup>. There has been no progress in lowering the voting age to 16.

## Recommendation

A cross-government mechanism with associated funding should be implemented to ensure children's views are systematically considered in policymaking, particularly younger children, and those from underrepresented groups.

### Anti-child rights movements

There is growing anti-rights rhetoric in England. The UK government recently proposed repealing the Human Rights Act (HRA). However, these [proposals were shelved](#), after a great joint effort from civil society. Despite this, several pieces of recent legislation dilute the HRA for particular groups<sup>5</sup>. There are also [serious concerns](#) around calls for the UK to withdraw from the European Convention on

<sup>1</sup> Apart from a brief interlude in Autumn 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See UK government (2022) Combined sixth and seventh periodic reports submitted by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 44 of the UNCRC, Paragraph 35.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the consultation on the development of the Guide for children and young people: Working Together to Safeguard Children that took place in 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For example, disabled children or under 10 years old.

<sup>5</sup> The Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Victim and Prisoners Bill 2023 include clauses removing Section 3 HRA.

Human Rights, including [Cabinet members](#).

Against a broader backdrop of anti-immigration rhetoric, there has been severe regression concerning the rights of children subject to immigration control. Most recently, the [Illegal Migration Act 2023](#) poses a significant threat to the rights of children both under the UNCRC and the Refugee Convention<sup>6</sup>.

### Trafficked and missing children

The numbers of potential child victims of exploitation referred to the National Referral Mechanism has continued to rise to [7,019 in 2022](#) (41% of all victims). UK national children are the [fastest growing and largest group](#) referred to, driven by child criminal exploitation (CCE). Despite increasing attention on this issue and a statutory defence<sup>7</sup>, victims of CCE continue to be seen as [offenders rather](#)

[than victims](#). There is also still [no statutory CCE definition](#) for criminal law purposes.

Trafficked and separated children are among those at [greatest risk of going missing](#). An alarmingly high number are never found. Since June 2021, [4,500 unaccompanied children](#) have been placed in asylum hotels. As of April 2023, 447 children have gone missing from these hotels, mostly [within 72 hours](#) of arriving in the UK. ECPAT UK recently [won a legal challenge against the Home Office](#) over housing unaccompanied children in hotels instead of under local authority care (specified in the [Children Act 1989](#)). However, the recent Illegal Migration Act 2023 gives the Home Office the power to [accommodate unaccompanied children](#), which is [deeply concerning](#).

### Recommendation

All children arriving in the UK must be cared for by Local Authorities, as required by child welfare legislation.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

The UK continues to recruit under-18s to the armed forces, drawn [mostly from deprived neighbourhoods](#). In 2021-2022, 2,800 16-and-17-year-olds were recruited – 23% of total intake. In the army, [under-18 year olds made up 30% of new recruits](#) in the last year, with more soldiers recruited at 16 years old than at any other age.

[A new report](#) presents clear evidence of a high rate of suicide and associated mental health problems in those who join the British armed forces at a young age, particularly those who enlist under the age of 18. Data has also revealed [shocking levels of sexual](#)

[violence](#) towards young recruits, particularly girls.

### Recommendations

The country should raise the minimum age for armed forces enlistment to 18. In addition to this, while recruitment of children persists, the UK government must ensure:

- army recruits who enlist as children cannot be made to serve a longer minimum period than those who enlist as adults.
- under-18 recruits have the right to leave the armed forces at will, with no notice period.

### Children in migration and refugees

The rights of children in the immigration system have been further diminished by the [Illegal Migration Act 2023](#). This Act denies many refugees, including children, the opportunity to put forward their asylum or human rights claim and

<sup>6</sup> See the 2023 Concluding Observations on the UK, Paragraph 50(a).

<sup>7</sup> Section 45 Modern Slavery Act 2015.

undermines the very purpose of the Refugee Convention.

Under new provisions, children who have not arrived via the very limited 'safe routes' will be blocked from protection as refugees and victims of trafficking, deprived of pathways to assess their best interests and safeguarding needs. Yet legal routes to the UK for unaccompanied children and families seeking protection are increasingly limited. People seeking asylum are thereby forced to make dangerous journeys to the UK, with an [increase in people crossing the Channel in small boats](#), including children and families with infants, leading to a number of [child deaths](#). In 2022 alone, [7,177 children](#) made the journey to the UK in small boats – around 16% of the total (45,755).

Since 2014, unaccompanied children could only be detained for 24 hours and children in families a maximum of seven

days, but [the Act reversed this position](#). Children in families can be detained indefinitely, and only a small group of unaccompanied children can apply for bail after eight days.

Age disputes [increased by 195%](#) in 2021, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are increasingly [wrongly assessed as adults](#).<sup>8</sup> [Medical bodies](#) and [non-governmental organisations](#) have widely condemned new methods to determine age as inaccurate, unethical and potentially harmful.

### Recommendations

- To urgently scrap the Illegal Migration Act and Nationality and Borders Act and to instead create adequate, safe, and legal routes for children seeking protection to enter the UK and ensure child refugees have the right to sponsor their close family to join them.
- The country must also scrap

powers to determine children's ages through unreliable and invasive means.

### Children's mental health

The pandemic caused an [unprecedented increase](#) in demand for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS), particularly eating disorders. 409,347 children were referred for specialist mental healthcare, including suicidal thoughts and self-harm<sup>9</sup>, up from 230,591 in 2019. 450,000 children are waiting or undergoing treatment for a mental health condition – [the highest number on record since 2016](#). Children face high access thresholds, [rejected referrals](#), and long waiting lists.

[Inappropriate adult ward admissions persist](#) along with stays in inpatient wards for long periods, far from home, despite the UK government committing to [improve inpatient care for children](#).

[Black and mixed-race children](#) accounted for 36% of young people detained in acute mental health services<sup>10</sup>, but only 5% of those accessing community based CAMHS.

### Recommendations

To take urgent steps to:

- increase the provision of preventative and early intervention support within education and community settings, including the national roll-out of early support hubs;
- ensure children can receive mental health treatment and support near their home;
- prevent unnecessary, prolonged stays in inpatient settings and address racial disproportionality;
- ensure high-quality treatment.

8 There were 6,177 age disputes between 2016-21 - 42% were subsequently determined to be children.

9 April-October 2021.

10 Despite making up 11% of the population.

## Children in contact with the criminal justice system

Despite progress<sup>11</sup>, urgent reform of the child justice system is needed to respect children's rights, including raising the mandatory age of criminal responsibility (MACR). England and Wales have the lowest MACR in Europe – at just ten years old. Children in contact with the criminal justice system are often extremely vulnerable but frequently treated separately from other vulnerable children. Racial discrimination is stark within children's interaction with police and across the youth justice system.

Police 'use of force' on children continues to increase. For the year ending March 2022, there were 88,340 use of force tactics involving children (10% of all

recorded incidents); of those, 812 were under 11 years old. Types of force include limb and body restraints, batons, irritant spray, Taser, and spit-hoods. There is significant racial disproportionality in the 'use of force' on children.

Children's rights are being violated through strip searching, including in schools, without the presence of an appropriate adult (required by law). For the year ending March 2022, 3,133 10-17-year-olds were strip-searched in police custody – 9% of all children in police custody<sup>12</sup>, and research revealed 25% of strip searches by the London Metropolitan Police Service were on 10-15-year-olds.

Police custody is completely unsuitable and traumatic for children. In the year ending March 2022, 35,114 children were detained in police custody - 45%

of these were detained overnight. 21% of children detained overnight were Black<sup>13</sup> and 244 children were aged 12 and under and nine were just ten years old.

In 2021-2022, there were an average of 450 children in prison at any one time. Shockingly, 52% of those imprisoned are racialised children, with 28% Black. 45% of all children in prison are on remand, yet 73% of these do not subsequently receive a custodial sentence. The UK government predicts the number of children in custody will steeply increase, more than doubling by September 2024, but has no preventative strategy.

Most children are held in prison-like Secure Training Centres (STCs) or Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), with only 16% in welfare-based Secure Children's

Homes. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care concluded that YOIs and STCs are 'wholly unsuitable' for children and 'should be phased out within the next ten years.'

During the pandemic, children were subjected to awful conditions characterised by poor in-cell provision, withdrawal of support services, and deprived of education and visits. Serious concerns about the safety of children in prison remain, particularly given that the use of stun grenades<sup>14</sup> and dogs on children in YOIs has recently surfaced alongside a proposal to roll out PAVA irritant spray<sup>15</sup>. The Chief Inspector of Prisons recently concluded that 'levels of violence remained much too high' in almost all YOIs and STCs.

11 See Standards for children in the youth justice system and A smarter approach to sentencing.

12 Actual figure likely to be higher given data is for 28 of 43 police forces.

13 Black/African/Caribbean/Black British.

14 Stun grenades, also known as 'flashbangs', are designed to produce a blinding flash of light and an intensely loud 'bang'. A type of stun grenade called Nico 9 is used in children's prisons which emits a blinding light and nine bangs at 170 decibels. Their effects can include flash blindness, deafness and tinnitus.

15 PAVA is Pelargonic Acid Vanillylamide, a synthetic incapacitant, which was rolled out to staff in the adult male prison estate in England and Wales at the end of 2018.

## Recommendations

- To significantly raise the mandatory age of criminal responsibility, and set a much-reduced statutory limit on child detention in police custody.
- To urgently develop a national strategy and improvement plan, including steps to:
  - Prevent the predicted increase of children in prison and address racial disproportionality;
  - Repair the harm to children who were in prison during Covid-19;
  - Close child prisons and improve them in the interim.
- The UK government should eliminate the use of Tasers on children and as an immediate step, significantly improve regulations, training, and guidance. It must ensure children are not subject to strip-searching apart from in

the rarest circumstances; that the use of dogs and ‘flash-bangs’ in child prisons are banned and ensure that PAVA spray is not rolled out.

- The UK government must urgently address the disproportionate use of force on racialised groups of children.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in England

In 2021/22, there were 3.7 million children in England living in poverty (after housing costs)<sup>16</sup>. Children are more likely to be in poverty than the rest of the population, with child poverty rising in absolute and relative terms for nearly a decade. Around 1.8 million

children are in very deep poverty, with a household income so low it cannot cover basic needs.

Certain children in England face particularly high poverty rates, including those in:

- households headed by those from racialised groups - 49%;
- single-parent families - 46%;
- families containing three or more children - 44%;
- families where a child is disabled - 37%.

The benefits system is not fit for purpose. The Benefit Cap has been frozen since November 2016 despite considerable rises in the cost-of-living. Research by Child Poverty Action Group found that families affected by the policy have as little as £44 a week to live on after housing costs.

The Two-Child Limit<sup>17</sup> has also detrimentally impacted children’s living standards. In April 2023, 422,000 households with a third or subsequent child born, were affected by the two-child limit. Some ethnic and religious groups are more likely to have larger families and are disproportionately affected, exacerbating inequalities.

In 2020/21, 1.9 million children were eligible for free school meals (FSM) in England (an increase of 160,000), but the current very low-income threshold of £7,400 means one in three children living in poverty (800,000) are denied access to FSM.

<sup>16</sup> Classified as ‘Relative low income’, meaning household income is below 60% of the median. Source: The UK Department for Work & Pensions’ summary publication of the Households Below Average Income dataset for 2021-2022. Most analysis is UK-wide. Data breakdowns for England available [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> The Two-Child Limit restricts child allowances in universal credit and tax credits worth £2,935 per year to the first two children in a family unless the children were born before 6th April 2017 when the policy came into force.

Alongside this, anyone with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) cannot access mainstream benefits. This is either because they are undocumented and have an unresolved immigration status or because they have a legal right to remain in this country but have an attached NRPF condition on their leave to remain. There is [widespread evidence](#) it puts children at risk of destitution, exploitation and abuse.

### Recommendations

- Re-establish a national strategy to end child poverty and increase social security benefits for families.
- Abolish the Two-Child Limit and Benefit Cap and expand eligibility for FSM to all those on Universal Credit.
- Ensure the NRPF policy is not applied to families with children.



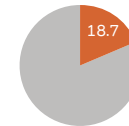
## “Country recommendation

Finland should make a stronger commitment to actively advance children's rights in all decision-making and make sure there is no regression in realising the rights of vulnerable groups of children.

Country  
Profile 2023



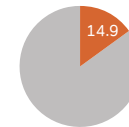
# Finland



**Child Population:**

**1,035,517**

18.7% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**154,292**

14.9% (2022)

▲ +1.7% compared to 2021

**RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):**

Central Union for Child Welfare

## Children's Rights in Finland

In Finland, there is no political appointee with responsibility for children's rights. There is a [National Child Strategy](#) (and a child strategy unit) that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) advocated for with the expectation that the strategy, drafted in parliamentary cooperation, would guide politics on children's rights from one government term to another. This, however, is not yet a reality, as for example the strategy document does not guide the [government programme](#) (a key document in Finnish politics), nor are children's rights impact assessments conducted when a government programme is drafted.

Also, Finland lacks a mechanism for the parliament to follow up on the implementation of the recommendations given by various human rights treaty bodies.

### Child participation

While the legislation supports child participation (and good practices in [child protection](#) have been developed), its implementation is still weak when it comes to decisions that affect the lives of individual children as well as of groups of children.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [has recommended](#) that Finland guarantee that all children can express their opinions and are heard in all decisions affecting them, in courts and administrative proceedings, with special observation in decisions regarding migration and asylum, custody, residence and contact, adoption of protection measures in alternative care to the family, social services and domestic violence.

The UN Committee also recommended that Finland reinforce measures to promote the meaningful and empowered participation of all children, including children in disadvantaged situations, within

the family, communities, and schools and that children are included in decision-making in all matters related to them in the area of policymaking at the municipal and national levels. The Central Union for Child Welfare (CUCW) calls on the Finnish government to support the approval of a strong and long-lasting Regulation at EU level that effectively prevents and combats the distribution of child sexual abuse material and the grooming of children online.

### Child protection systems

In relation to child protection, CUCW, [together with others](#), has stated that the whole system must be reformed so that fragmented services can be transformed into comprehensive supportive measures. NGOs have also emphasised that one of the biggest challenges in the national child protection system is the great turnover of the workforce in the field. According to a [recent report](#), the workers in child protection experience excessive pressure in their work and 72% of

social workers have considered changing their jobs.

The current government programme mentions the reform of the Child Welfare Act, but it fails to specify the scope, objectives or measures of the reform.

The UN Committee has expressed concern both over the [number of children in alternative care](#) and the insufficient human and financial resources available for the implementation of the Child Welfare Act, and it highlighted that urgent measures must be taken in Finland.

### Children's safety and well-being online

Child safety online is another significant and growing issue in the country. For example, according to a [recent report](#), 62% of children said that they had been contacted on the web by a person they knew or suspected was an adult or a child at least five years older. One third of these children had not told anyone about it.



The UN Committee has also recommended that Finland strengthen regulations and safeguarding policies to protect the rights and safety of children in the digital environment; and that it ensures that laws on access to information and the digital environment protect children from harmful content and materials and online risks.

### Children's mental health

The [indicators describing the mental well-being](#) of children and young people have developed in a worrying direction, especially after the pandemic. At the same time youth experience difficulties in getting help. Several civil society organisations (CSOs) have stated that mental health should be promoted in a broad-based and cross-administrative manner.

While the government programme recognises mental health as a social problem and targets mental health and preventative services, the (numerous) cuts included elsewhere in the programme may jeopardise this goal.

The UNCRC has provided Finland with several recommendations concerning mental health, e.g. that Finland invest in preventive measures and address the underlying causes of mental health issues among children.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

With regard to the situation of children impacted by war and conflict, CUCW has been in dialogue with other NGOs and CSOs, including Ukrainians in Finland.

Based on these conversations, it emerges that many families who fled Ukraine to Finland are currently living in a kind of limbo, as they understandably hope to return to Ukraine soon. As a result, they do not necessarily enrol their children in a school in Finland, but instead, children participate in remote teaching (the one provided by the Ukrainian education system).

Regarding the use of different services, there are several

obstacles, such as a lack of understanding of the nature of the services and how to access them. Children with disabilities have been recognised as a particularly vulnerable group. Problems in interpretation may further reinforce the difficulties experienced with the services. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge of one's rights and legal remedies may also be a problem.

### Children in migration and refugees

The general tightening of immigration policy (including asylum seekers and refugees) with the new government programme raises great concerns.

The right of undocumented people to health care is being limited to urgent care, despite the fact that the UNCRC recently recommended that Finland provide health and social services to all children and pregnant women, regardless of their status. Also detention of minors will continue despite a specific recommendation to end it.

Policy concerning family reunification remains very strict and will possibly be further tightened.

### Climate change and environmental impact

In Finland, the climate and environmental crisis have been somewhat sidelined due to other crises. [NGOs have urged](#) that Finland advance with determined actions towards the 2035 carbon neutrality goal and halting the loss of biodiversity and that the government, in its decision-making, take into account the general comment of the UNCRC (on children's rights and environment).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that Finland ensure that policies and laws on climate change and mitigation and adaptation are implemented in accordance with children's rights; and that Finland evaluate the possible effects of climate actions and mitigation measures on children and their rights, including Sámi children.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Finland

Finland has a total child population of 1,035,517, 14.9% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. Although the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion is still low in Finland compared to the EU average, it has increased since 2021 (13.2%).

In a [recent report](#) Finland's relatively low child poverty and social exclusion rate is explained by a good social security system. The system includes benefits that belong to all families with children – such as child allowance and the subjective right to early childhood education and care (ECEC) – as well as housing support and other services that support the

everyday life of families with children.

However, the new government programme contains several cuts to social security, and [CSOs have expressed serious concern](#) that the risk of experiencing poverty for families with children will increase as a result of the cuts. The goal of adjusting the public finances and, for example, cuts in central government's transfers to local government are also a cause for concern about the future quality and availability of key services.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recently recommended that Finland avoid cuts in social security benefits that impact negatively on children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

According to the Central Union for Child Welfare (CUCW) prolonged poverty in Finland affects in particular families with small

children, single-adult families and families with many children.

Also, the share of children with a foreign background in the risk of poverty [has increased](#), and it is fourfold if compared with the poverty risk of children with at least one parent born in Finland.

CUCW believes that child poverty reduction must be set as a goal in the (forthcoming) social security reform and that the reform must be planned with this goal as a priority. The child poverty rate must be used as an indicator when evaluating the success of the reform.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Finland's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were

requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan of Finland was published on 21 April 2022.<sup>1</sup> The NAP rightfully identifies a broad range of groups of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the country.

However, while the need for both universal and targeted key services is recognised in the NAP (and the need for resources), the action plan does not include concrete measures that would be key to lift children out of poverty and social exclusion in Finland.

There are indicators for monitoring progress (or they are being developed), however concrete targets and/or deadlines have not been set up.

Finland implements the European Child Guarantee as part of their

<sup>1</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

national work related to the national child strategy, and there has been a regular dialogue with CSOs in relation to the national child strategy. However, Central Union for Child Welfare (CUCW) is not involved in implementing any measures or activities included in the NAP.

CUCW also shared concerns about the future of the existing *National Child Strategy* and its hope that the new government reaffirms its commitment to preserve this over-arching cross-sectoral framework document for coordinating child and family policies in Finland.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for Finland did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. Sadly, the Country Report does not include any

reference to children's rights to be heard, children in migrations and refugees, children's mental health and well-being, children in the digital environment, children in alternative care.

Central Union for Child Welfare (CUCW) recognises the problems caused by the teacher shortage described in the analysis of the Country Report and the need to invest in quality ECEC.

CUCW believes that providing the necessary support for a child in the early years requires sufficient resources and competent and trained staff. In addition, it believes that raising the participation rate should not be done at the expense of the quality of the childcare services.

Eurochild member emphasises the importance of sustainable funding. Projects and project funding are a good tool for strengthening the quality of services, but the implementation of the results requires permanent resources. Moreover, funding risk to be jeopardised for example by

the cuts in central government's transfers to local governments in Finland.

Overall, CUCW regrets that the Country Report for Finland failed to include a focus on the importance of investing in children.

CUCW was not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report do not correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground in Finland and neglect the child-rights perspective.

There is a recommendation about Finland pursuing the reform of the social security system. However, this is framed with the aim of increasing incentives to work and also supporting the long-term sustainability of public finances.

CUCW pointed out that the recommendations made for

Finland do not respect the rights of children and that the European Commission failed to highlight the need to support children in poverty. According to Eurochild member, child poverty reduction must be set as a target in the reform of the social security system.



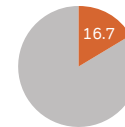
## “Country recommendation

Germany should take action to explicitly anchor the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the German Constitution. This would strengthen the legal position of children, clearly recognise them as holders of their own rights, lead to more legal certainty and increase the overall visibility of children's rights.

Country  
Profile 2023



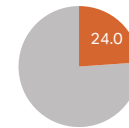
# Germany



**Child Population:**

**13,863,259**

16.7%



**Child Poverty:**

**3,327,182**

24.0% (2022)

▲ +0.3% compared to 2021

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Child and Youth Welfare Organisation \(AGJ\)](#)

[National Coalition Germany – Network for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(NC\)](#)

## Children's Rights in Germany

There is currently no national minister responsible for children's rights in Germany. Due to the federal structure of Germany, however, there are four commissioners for children's rights in the German Bundesländer (federal states): Brandenburg, Hesse, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt; constituting one-fourth of all federal states. Eurochild members National Coalition Germany and Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ welcome the progress in this regard but are calling for an introduction of children and youth commissioners in all states.

Additionally, an institutional working group on child policy issues has been in place since 1998 as part of the Bundestag Committee for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

### Child participation

In regard to children participating in the democratic processes, AGJ and the National Coalition Germany have identified an unequal power structure that fosters adultism<sup>1</sup> in schools. The establishment of independent counselling and complaint structures, as planned in several federal states, can counter adultism, but must also be accompanied by comprehensive and effective participation of students in all matters that affect them. In legislation, jurisprudence and politics, adultism has even been solidified in that children have very limited access to the law, are discriminated against by existing laws, and are kept away from participation in and activity in political institutions. However, with the amended [Youth Protection Act](#) as of May 2021, child participation is enshrined in law for the first time.

In Germany, there were efforts by the federal government to anchor children's rights in the German Basic Law during the last legislative period, which unfortunately failed.

### Child safety and well-being online

Eurochild members in Germany welcomed the [reform of the Protection of Minors Act 2021](#), which made an important contribution to the realisation of children's rights in the digital environment. To fully enjoy the variety of digital content and services, it is crucial to provide appropriate services suitable for children while also providing compulsory media education and skills development in education curricula. Typically, these child-friendly services are provided by technology companies or organisations, some of which are funded by the federal government.

An example, is the child-friendly search engine [Blinde Kuh](#) without advertising and age-appropriate. A first step towards a more child-appropriate digital environment was made by amending the [Youth Protection Act](#) in 2021, protecting the personal integrity of children and young people when using media. Nonetheless, according to AGJ and the National Coalition Germany, the federal government should support the Regulation to prevent Child Sexual Abuse currently being discussed on the European Level. Moreover, it is crucial to offer psychological help to victims in a timely manner.

### Child protection systems

The [Child and Youth Strengthening Act](#) significantly strengthened child and youth welfare, which is welcomed alongside regulations on child protection – including the standardised definition of a

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<sup>1</sup> Adultism describes discriminatory behaviour by adults toward children and young people on the basis of their age. It also refers to the way society deals with the power imbalance between generations. Laws, social organisations and political institutions, as well as traditions, help to reinforce adultism.

facility and new requirements in the context of operating permits for institutions. However, a lack of financial resources has been identified. The child and youth welfare system should, thus, be strengthened and expanded into a crisis-resilient child protection system in which low-threshold access to counselling and complaints is guaranteed for children, parents, and professionals alike.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

Germany is one of the few countries in the world that still recruits minors as soldiers, at age 16. This is despite repeated requests by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Children's Commission of the German Parliament to raise the recruitment age to 18. Due to this practice, underage soldiers in the German Armed Forces are subjected to serious violations of children's rights (sexual violence, degrading treatment, physical and psychological damage) and are not provided with sufficient

support in coping, therapy, and fair transitional justice.

### Children in migration and refugees

In the first half of 2023, 39,384 people, or 61.69% of all asylum applicants, were younger than 18. Thus, in the period in question, more than half of all people who fled to Germany were children. Since the outbreak of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the situation of unaccompanied minor refugees in particular has increasingly deteriorated due to overburdened accommodation and care structures for children and young people. AGJ and National Coalition Germany recommend the abolishment of reception centres instead of expanding them to enable accompanied and unaccompanied refugee children to live safe, healthy lives.

### Climate change and environmental impacts

Germany bears responsibility for the climate crisis and is affected

by it. With the consequences of the climate crisis already evident, children and young people are particularly affected. The German government should recognise an independent right to a healthy and sustainable environment. The General Comment No. 26 of the UN Committee (2023), developed with the participation of children and young people from all over the world, should be used as a basis for discussion on ecological children's rights. The National Coalition Germany is planning a conference to promote General Comment No. 26, also intend to foster a dialogue with the government.

### Children's mental health

The significant increase in treatment, mental health diagnoses, and inpatient psychiatric treatment days in childhood and adolescence is of concern. Despite a significant increase in private practices, outpatient clinics and day-hospital treatment places in Germany, the demand is far from being adequately met.

The mental well-being of children and strengthening their resilience should be the focus of all responsible parties. There is a need for development and implementation of information and education services for parents, and further training measures for pedagogical specialists.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Germany

Germany has a total child population of 13,863,259, 24.0% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to approximately 3.3 million children in need in Germany. After stagnating at a high level for almost two decades, the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has reached a new high in 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, refugee movements, and inflation. The poverty rate varies between Bundesländer, rural and

urban areas and across different family types.

According to the AGJ and the National Coalition Germany, the groups of children most in need in Germany are children from migrant families, in particular refugee children, children from single-parent households and those living in families with more than two children. A priority should also be to address the needs of homeless children, children with disabilities, and children in alternative care.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, financial and infrastructural measures need to be combined. To do so, the [Child Basic Income](#) (Kindergrundsicherung) is an essential tool. From 2025 onwards, the Child Basic Income is intended to bundle various family benefits and simplify the application process even if it is becoming apparent that less money than required will be

available for it. This planned Child Basic Income must fit the real needs of all children and young people, including children who currently receive benefits under the Asylum Seekers' Benefit Act and are not eligible for it. The Child Basic Income must also take into account the impact of inflation and rising energy costs and ensure an appropriate balance.

A strong social infrastructure consisting of high-quality and easily accessible institutions is also needed to mainly supports poor children and their families in the country. Instead of being strengthened, this infrastructure is increasingly at risk due to rising costs and often shrinking communal budgets. A strong social infrastructure also includes well-trained professionals; so the government must increase its efforts to fill the current personnel gaps in daycare, schools, youth and social work and other relevant fields. Similarly, AGJ and the

National Coalition Germany criticise the Child and Youth Plan where the financial support to civil society organisations (CSOs) working with children, [being reduced by at least 20%](#).

## The European Child Guarantee

### Germany's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan (NAP) of Germany was published on 17 July 2023.<sup>2</sup> The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children in migration and refugee children. Nonetheless, children in single-parent households and with parents from non-academic

backgrounds are unfortunately left out of the NAP.

AGJ and the National Coalition Germany would like to see the intersectional view of social exclusion strengthened in the NAP to cover children affected by different types of discrimination. In addition, they would like the NAP to clearly distinguish between children and young people with a refugee experience and those with a migration background, and to provide concrete measures for improving the situation of children with refugee experience.

Our members recommend that systemic reforms are needed to address structural inequalities and prioritise public investment in education, health care, housing, family support and childcare. In this respect, it is unfortunate that the NAP does not set new priorities, but for the most part, refers to existing measures and government plans enshrined in the coalition agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

The NAP contains important measures to improve access to and the quality of early childhood education. However, it lacks plans to remove financial access barriers. All-day programmes for elementary school children can improve the situation.

Nonetheless, there is a shortage of professionals, which needs to be an absolute priority to be addressed. Concerning nutrition, the NAP proposes updating the nutrition quality standards and ensuring access to healthy meals. However, support for families in precarious situations should be strengthened, as a quarter of food bank users are children. AGJ has also published a [position paper](#) on the NAP and its other shortcomings.

The NAP does not include robust indicators and a monitoring framework. However, it is welcomed, that the participation of children and young people is to be included as part of the regular reporting mechanisms.

Germany has established a NAP committee which is to

discuss topics, accompany the evaluation, and provide a platform for communication for the NAP. Eurochild members AGJ as well as the National Coalition Germany have been invited to join alongside several other CSOs.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for Germany outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, particularly in the field of early childhood development and education. This also becomes apparent in the low participation numbers in early childhood education and care (ECEC), as around 30% of children under three are enrolled therein and 90.9% of children above three which is considerably below the EU average (93%) and the EU-level target (96%). The

Country Report failed to include specific measures on children in alternative care and children's right to be heard. Unfortunately, there was also no mention of children's mental health and children's rights in the digital environment, despite their growing importance.

Overall, AGJ and the National Coalition Germany were not involved in the Semester Process 2023. To their knowledge no civil society organisations were consulted. However, some have been approached by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to comment on the German National Reform Programme.

The country report does not particularly mention investment in children, so there is no promising comment that refers to children and their rights.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations aim at investments in the green and digital transition, and high-

capacity digital communications networks. Moreover, energy security should be safeguarded and reliance on fossil fuels reduced. While all this is important for the lives of all people, none of the recommendations are specifically aimed at children, young adults, or families. Given that the Country Report finds that Germany, among other things, needs to take measures to reduce inequality and address poverty as mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals, these aspects should have been included in the Country Specific Recommendations. AGJ published a [position paper in 2022](#) recommending improvements to the process of the European Semester to focus more on children, youth and families.



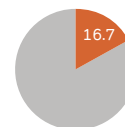
## “Country recommendation

Greece should take action to reduce child poverty, especially in the regions of Central Greece, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

## Country Profile 2023



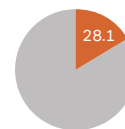
# Greece



### Child Population:

**1,748,720**

16.7% of total population



### Child Poverty:

**491,390**

28.1% (2022)

▼ -3.9% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[The Smile of the Child](#)

[Network for Children's Rights](#)

[ALMA](#)

## Children's Rights in Greece

In Greece, the Ministry of Justice in cooperation with the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Migration and Asylum; and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs adopted the [National Action Plan for the Rights of the Child](#) that covers the period 2021-2023.

The National Center for Social Solidarity (EKKA) under the recently established Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family has been designated as National Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee.

### Child participation

The only widespread form of child participation in public life in Greece is the Youth Parliament. Established in 1994, it enables children from all high schools in Greece to actively participate in

political life. For children under 12 years old, there is no possibility for participation. Eurochild members in Greece suggest that active citizenship and participation should be cultivated from preschool-aged children and that children's councils should be exercised in local to state-level decision-making processes.

A promising development for children's participation in decision-making was a public consultation to inform Greece's Child Guarantee National Action Plan, held in June 2022. The President of Greece, the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, and representatives of Parliament listened to children, including those at risk of poverty, expressing their needs and concerns. Over 400 attended, including local authorities and civil society organisations.

### Child safety and well-being online

Children face considerable dangers online such as exposure to inappropriate content and cyberbullying, predatory and addictive behaviours and several challenges to mental health. [Children aged 12](#) and above overuse online applications more than recommended. The Smile of the Child's own [research](#) shows that children who are bullied spend many hours on screens. 46.1% of children (ages: 9-10, 14-15 and 17-18) in all regions of Greece spend excessive hours on screens, and have lower levels of general well-being.<sup>1</sup> There is a gap in empirical data for online use, safety and mental health, and overall well-being in children younger than 12.

To address the existing gaps, the legislation to protect children in online environments must be prioritised. Education on and

prevention of risks associated with internet usage should be provided.

### Child protection systems

Children in residential care in Greece usually live in institutions until they reach adulthood, with harmful consequences and unacceptable cutbacks in the protection of their rights and best interests in general. The main barriers to the de-institutionalisation of these children and their smooth social reintegration are:

- the low number of foster carer applicants and the lack of professional foster care especially for children with disabilities;
- the lack of training for prospective foster and adoptive parents on special needs of children with disabilities (autism, physical disabilities, learning or sensory disabilities);

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<sup>1</sup> The Smile of the Child, [Understanding and Measuring Child Well-Being in Greece: Empirical Findings for 2022-2023](#), August 2023; Eurochild, [School violence and bullying on the rise in Greece](#), 2023.

- no sufficient living arrangements outside institutions for older children;
- no public rehabilitation services in case the child is placed in foster care or adopted;
- the lack of targeted prevention, support and monitoring interventions for vulnerable families in the community;
- a weak recording system that lacks information on poorly functioning foster/adoptive placements.

Existing policy frameworks include the Law on adoptions and fostering, which aims to record more accurately children in child protection services and support deinstitutionalisation. The new Law 4837/2021 envisages the creation of Semi-Autonomous Living Hostels for young people over 15 years old. It also established a Juvenile Protection Officer in each unit of the Child Protection Institutions.

For persons with disabilities, the Institution of Personal Assistants was introduced.

The National System for Recording and Monitoring Reports of incidents of child abuse has been established. However, children who are victims of violence and abuse do not receive adequate treatment and support. Newly opened Independent Offices of Minor Victims, or “Children’s Homes” in Athens should be aligned with the Barnahus model methodology.

Despite positive developments, the child protection system still copes inefficiently due to its fragmentation. Child protection services are designed for different groups of children: children in institutions, Roma children, children on the move, and child victims of abuse. Moreover, the lack of coordination and communication between ministries and public

authorities leads to delays or non-implementation of legal provisions.

Eurochild members in Greece recommend streamlining current legislation into a holistic legal framework to create a comprehensive child protection system. There should be a centralised agency to undertake all the responsibilities regarding children’s rights, their protection, and the promotion of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and to coordinate other authorities at the national, regional and local levels.<sup>2</sup>

### Children in migration and refugees

In 2022, new pieces of legislation concerning the migration population and unaccompanied children were introduced.<sup>3</sup> This new legislation regarding reception and asylum procedures

poses restrictions when it comes to children’s rights and their entitlement to basic services and as regards procedural guarantees.

Civil society had called for specific consideration and appropriate safeguards in asylum proceedings to be provided for children. However, none of these suggestions were included in the legislation. Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) should be granted a protection status regardless of asylum procedure with an extension of their protection status until the age of 21 or 23, like in other EU countries such as Italy and Spain.

In total, there are 1,624 unaccompanied children in Greece. This figure referred only to the accommodated unaccompanied children, while still there are unaccompanied children who live outside

<sup>2</sup> As recommended in line with the UNCRC Concluding Observations for Greece (2022):

[https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/crc\\_c\\_grc\\_co\\_2-3.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/crc_c_grc_co_2-3.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The law regarding the reception conditions, international protection of third country nationals and stateless persons and for the temporary protection in the event of a mass inflow of displaced third country nationals; Law on the National Guardianship System for the Unaccompanied children (UASC), as well as the JMV for the Framework for Hosting of UASC.

registered accommodation facilities. Most of the 6,330 Ukrainian children who have arrived in Greece are 0-13 years old (81%) and half are girls. By the end of 2022, there were nine children from Ukrainian institutions in Greece.

As stated in the 2022 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's [concluding observations report](#), public authorities are not treating all children with a migrant background equally - children from Afghanistan and Syria do not receive the same support and services as children from Ukraine.

Refugee children have access to education regardless of their asylum claims, although issues exist in the enrolment on the islands and while children are not registered or their asylum request has been rejected. The lack of transport to and from schools from campsites, either closed or not, where children are housed is a practical barrier, as centres are mostly based in remote areas. A more systemic approach is necessary.

Families seeking asylum should be provided with adequate housing to remedy the closure of the 'ESTIA apartments programme' in 2022. Housing deprivation hampers integration and access to education for children in these families, as they are forced to relocate from urban communities for camps in more remote areas.

As part of its work, the Network for Children's Rights together with UNHCR and other non-governmental organisations played an instrumental role in the creation and implementation of the National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM) to protect unaccompanied children under the Ministry of Asylum and Migration.

### **Climate change and children's rights**

Greece has been hit hard by the consequences of climate change. Climate changes deserve an adequate policy response. More awareness raising and training, such as on recycling and reforestation, should be added to the school curriculum to inform

children how climate change impacts their everyday lives. Training by the Fire Department in child-friendly language for children, teachers, and parents should be provided.

At the end of September, the Greek National Coordinator of the Child Guarantee organised a meeting to identify the needs of children in the Thessaly region that has been flooded.

### **Children's access to healthcare**

A recent study by [the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Initiative](#) revealed the most frequent mental health conditions of Greek children include attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, disruptive behaviour, depression, and bullying. Alarming, the daily practice of 22% of health professionals in the study involves the assessment of suspected child abuse and neglect. Educators agree on the scarcity of training and support to aid in identifying and addressing students' mental health problems, and child abuse and neglect.

Parents identify that stigma is a barrier in Greek society, and they too need support to tackle their own stigma towards mental health.

ALMA calls for urgent action with a focus on early intervention in order to create supportive family and community environments to combat stigma for children with disabilities and with mental health problems.

There is a need to establish clearer definitions on mental health issues at a national level, and to improve the availability of data on mental health for children.

When it comes to access to health-care services, children with disabilities face additional challenges. Lack of public services force families to use private health services for children's rehabilitation. Furthermore, the shortage of specialist doctors in the Disability Certification Centers (KEPA) causes significant delays in issuing disability certificates and entitlement for specialised benefits and care.

Increased investment and awareness raising in health and mental health services for children is needed to make them more accessible in rural areas, and for vulnerable/low-income groups such as Roma and children with disabilities.

### Early childhood development

The recently launched 'Kypseli' programme aims to develop and enhance the capabilities and skills of infants and toddlers mainly through play and with respect to the uniqueness and regularly monitor and evaluate the development and progress of infants and toddlers. The National Council for Preschool Education and Training is a new advisory and consultative body. The *Neighbourhood Nannies* initiative has been established to deliver home care services for infants and toddlers.

In order to ensure an inclusive educational environment, the integration of children with difficulties from a very early age must be a priority. ALMA designed a training programme

*Starting from the kindergarten together* providing basic knowledge on developmental and intellectual disabilities and autism for educational staff of the nurseries. This project aims to raise awareness of the community on issues related to neurodiversity with the training of useful tools and methods for more effective support of infants on the autism spectrum in order to cultivate acceptance of diversity by creating collaborative relationships within and beyond the school community. This initiative is a pilot project between ALMA and the nurseries of the Municipality of Palaio Faliro in Athens. The future goal is to expand it nationwide.

### Education

While primary and secondary education is compulsory in Greece, there are children who face difficulties in accessing it. The rates of school attendance for Roma children are significantly lower than the national average. Only 32% of Roma children are enrolled in pre-school. There is

also a distinction between Roma girls, as they are pulled out of the school system sooner than male students.

In this regard, the Government should align with the *2020-2030 EU Roma Strategic Framework* to ensure better educational outcomes for Roma students.

To ensure all children have access also to online education the measures should be taken for children with disabilities, of minority status, with language barriers, or weak digital connectivity.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Greece

Greece has a total child population of 2.8 million, 28.1% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022. Despite these worryingly high figures, the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Greece has

decreased since 2021 (32%), which is the lowest rate since 2015.

Research from the Smile of the Child recommends that children at risk of poverty and social exclusion need to be made more visible within the public sphere and corresponding policies and investments. These groups of children are most exposed to child poverty are:

- children of the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace - 14.4%;
- children suffering from deprivation of safe and smooth home conditions in Central Greece - 10.9 %;
- children of large families face difficult economic circumstances - 12.4%;
- children with only their mother in a single parent household - 13.9%;
- Elementary school children - 8.3%;
- children with disabilities;
- children with migrant background.

The National Observatory for Child Well-being puts forward four policies and tools that

are expected to tackle high rate of child poverty, relating to [tackling energy poverty for children](#); providing financial and psychological support for families of children with disabilities, children with psychiatric or other health issues; improving child well-being focused policies through the use of artificial intelligence.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Greece's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level. Greece's NAP was published on 21 September 2022.<sup>4</sup>

The NAP includes several measures that have already been implemented to reduce child poverty and social exclusion, namely actions and services related to pre-school education and childcare, health care, nutrition, and housing. It also includes new measures, such as the full vaccination coverage of uninsured children, and the full provision of their special treatments such as speech therapy. A Special Roma Secretariat has been established in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, to coordinate Roma social integration activities.

The [NAP fails to mention](#) the shortages of social services, and the lack of coordination among public authorities. Concerning the target groups, children in correctional facilities are not currently considered.

The NAP does not introduce specific indicators for the monitoring and evaluation of its measures. In general, although a NAP on the Rights of the Child was established in 2021, as well as the National Mechanism for the Monitoring and Evaluation of this Action Plan, a central database on children with disaggregated data on all areas of the UNCRC has yet to be developed. This is despite successive recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its 2003, 2012, and 2022 concluding observations.<sup>5</sup> The NAP should also strengthen efforts to improve children's right to be heard and speak out, including those from vulnerable backgrounds.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

The 2023 Country Report for Greece includes an accurate overview of early childhood development. Of note is that for children aged 3+ and 4+, Greece recorded one of the best improvements in participation in early years' services in the EU.

However, there are a lot of gaps in its depiction of the situation for children living in poverty and/or social exclusion in Greece. The Country Report does not mention deinstitutionalisation. Education receives partial coverage. For children with a migrant background, including child refugees, the report notes concern for their limited

<sup>4</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

<sup>5</sup> Where it recommended 'that the State party establish a central database on children with disaggregated data on all areas of the Convention and its Optional Protocols and develop indicators consistent with the Convention': [https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/crc\\_c\\_grc\\_co\\_2-3.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/crc_c_grc_co_2-3.pdf).

access to post-secondary and tertiary education. Other key concerns, such as the lack of legal documentation proving the application for international protection, lack of access to health and social services, child participation, impact of the pandemic on children's well-being are not included.

There is a reference to the digital skills without linking them to children's rights or safety in the digital environment.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The Country Specific Recommendations document corresponds to the general reform needs in Greece but unfortunately it fails to identify reforms regarding the children.



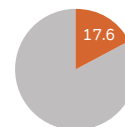
## “ Country recommendation

Hungary should take action to empower children and give them a voice.

## Country Profile 2023



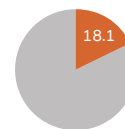
# Hungary



### Child Population:

**1,707,018**

17.6 % of total population



### Child Poverty:

**308,970**

18.1 % (2022)

▼ -5.1 % compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation \(HCR\)](#)



## Children's Rights in Hungary

At national level, the Ministry of Culture and Innovation (MoCI) and the Ministry of Interior (MoI) are responsible for children's rights in Hungary.

As reflected in Hinalovon Child Rights Foundation (HCR)'s, [Annual Child Rights Report](#) the competencies and tasks of these ministries are split according to the key policies on children's rights in Hungary. The MoI responsibilities include social inclusion, health, child and youth protection, public education, and social policy. The MoCI is responsible for family policy, vocational training, children and youth policy.

Experts, working on the *Annual Child Rights Report* identified several key areas related to children's rights, namely child participation, child safety online, children impacted by war and conflict as well as children in migration and refugees, discrimination against vulnerable

groups, and sexual violence against children.

### Child participation

When it comes to child participation, a new norm entered into force in 2022 concerning children's right to participate and express their views on the settlement of parental custody and third-party placement proceedings. Besides this positive change, [nationwide protests](#) throughout the year related to issues in the public education system have raised the issue of children's participation in public affairs. The *Annual Child Rights Report for 2022* describes that while students joined the civil disobedience wave in spring mainly as participants, in autumn, they also took an active part in the events as organisers and initiators.

### Child protection systems

The comprehensive [Review of the Digital Child Protection System](#) produced by the Ombudsman, highlights that the functioning of

the online child protection system poses obstacles for parents and children to identify the corresponding responsible body to report violations of children's rights in the online space and the most effective route to getting an outcome.

There is a need for action on the labour shortage of child protection workers. HCR recommend taking steps to ensure financial and professional recognition of this crucial line of work, which would ensure the stability children in the protection system need. What is more, child protection experts identify a gap in legislation on institutional safeguarding for children.

### Children in migration and refugees

These children face challenges when receiving approval for entry into Hungary. The procedure of submitting a 'Letter of Intent' does not provide an effective and accessible opportunity for vulnerable asylum seekers to receive protection. In addition, the

number of refugee children from Ukraine, who have been granted protection and starting school in 2022 is significantly lower than the number of children applying for asylum status. According to HCR's *Annual Child Rights Report 2022*, in cooperation with the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Hungary has made significant progress in protecting children from becoming victims of trafficking.

An [Action Plan](#) has been adopted to support the implementation of Hungary's [National Strategy 2020-2023 to Combat Trafficking of Human Beings](#). This decision also includes commitments to ensure the human, material, professional and organisational conditions are in place to reinforce the fight against human trafficking. To this end, the Child Protection Act created a legal basis for a pilot programme that would place children, victims of trafficking, in temporary homes for at least 6 months and would provide special therapeutic care.

## Children's mental health

In several areas concerning children, there is no official data available. Children's mental health, for instance, relies on statistical data from previous years that raises awareness of deviancies such as alcohol consumption, risky sexual behaviour, teenage pregnancy, and suicide attempts; however, there is no official data from 2022 concerning children's mental health. Our member in Hungary urges for the recognition of the problem by the state, which they consider a great step forward. In addition, HCR sees the need for accessible information regarding sexuality and contraception, which currently is a task left to schools only as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are excluded from educational institutions.

## Additional concerns for children's rights

In terms of climate change and its impact on children, there is a lack of strategic thinking in viewing climate change as a significant national problem. HCR has continuously underlined various groups of vulnerable children who face discrimination – Roma children, children with disabilities, and children in low-income families. Additional state programmes and support are needed to bring more visibility to the needs of those children.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Hungary

Hungary has a total child population of 1.7 million, 18.1% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 308,970

children in need in Hungary. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion decreased by more than five percentage points since 2021.<sup>1</sup> Although in 2023 the Hungarian Central Statistical Authority measured an improvement in the overall indicators for poverty and social exclusion, the data shows that the groups of children most in need, and according to Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation (HCR), often forgotten in policy responses, are children with a single-parent, children of unemployed parents, and Roma children.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the Hungarian government should prioritise introducing adequate measures to tackle child poverty in the National Action Plan, including a mapping of NGOs working on the topic. This would be the first step to opening the discussion to professionals from the non-governmental sphere and allowing their participation in implementation.

In addition, more robust data on the current situation is required to provide further visibility of this issue.

HCR quotes the [Hungarian Maltese Charity School Foundation's initiative](#) as a recent promising good example of an intervention that has helped children in need. The development aims to support children living in disadvantaged settlements providing pedagogical help beyond the traditional tasks.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Hungary's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

<sup>1</sup> According to [Eurostat data](#), poverty among children below 18 was 23.3 % in 2021.

The National Action Plan of Hungary was published on 26 May 2023.<sup>2</sup> It rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children living in poverty, children experiencing mental health challenges, children in institutional and alternative care, children with disabilities, children from third countries, and children with special educational needs and complex developmental disorders.

Nevertheless, the NAP does not foresee external monitoring practices, nor robust indicators to assess the implementation of the Plan. Eurochild member Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation (HCR) expresses concerns that the plan is more report-oriented, reflecting on past events, rather than laying out strategic steps for implementation. Additionally, HCR anticipates that due to fragmentation of the cross-sectoral working in Hungary, collaboration between the four

ministries involved with the work on the NAP will be complicated and challenging.

A consultation with a few civil society organisations took place in 2021 in the preparation phase of the NAP, however HCR did not have information related to the event. Similarly, Eurochild member in Hungary lacks information on available funding or funding sources linked to actions related the Child Guarantee's implementation.

Despite not being involved in supporting Hungary's implementation of the Child Guarantee in Hungary, HCR identified the following gaps in the NAP and has forwarded these observations and recommendations to the relevant ministry's secretariat:

- Available and accessible child-related data that follows a clear formatting logic. Additionally, to put in place secure data collection and storage guidelines. The reporting

process of data must also be standardised and feedback mechanisms put in place.

- A revision of the Civil and Penal codes should be carried out to smoothen the discrepancies when it comes to levels of accountability of children of the same age.
- Capacity building and training for professionals working with children is essential, particularly those working in child-protection, dealing with children with specific educational needs and complex development disorders. In addition, HCR urges for adequate steps to address the situation of children struggling with complex trauma due to abuse and adverse childhood experience.
- Equal distribution of child addiction treatment services - action is necessary to increase the availability of child psychiatric facilities. Additionally, improved maintenance and overall quality of child-specialised care

facilities are needed, as well as crisis centres and institutions to provide temporary support for families.

- Revision of the healthcare provision and educational integration of Ukrainian refugee children staying within the territory of Hungary for more than 30 days.
- Revision of the apparatus of provision of meals for children in state care.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for Hungary outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely children facing poverty and social exclusion, and children who drop out of school early. On the

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<sup>2</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

former, the material and social deprivation rate is specifically high for Roma children.

To promote social inclusion, the [Catching up municipalities initiative](#) aims to improve access to social services, healthcare, employment, and housing across 300 of the poorest municipalities in Hungary. In addition, the report reflects that further efforts are required to support children with a disadvantaged background (including Roma children and children who live in rural areas) that continue to face challenges in terms of accessing inclusive and quality education.

The report fails to include several important areas of children's rights. For instance, there is no relevant information about children in alternative care or the current situation of deinstitutionalisation, no information on children's right to be heard, children with migration background, nor children impacted by the pandemic, nor children's right in the digital environment. Due to the lack of

official data on children's mental health, which Hintonalovon Child Rights Foundation considers a reflection of the low prioritisation of the topic in Hungary, the report does not mention this subject.

The HCR and their counterparts in Civil Child Rights Coalition were not involved in the Semester Process 2023. In their view, civil society organisations can be involved through holding consultations with the existing working groups.

However, HCR found that the report highlighted well the structural challenges, namely the sustainability of project-based funded initiatives.

### **Needs analysis: alignment at country-level**

HRC pointed out that the Country specific recommendations indirectly made respect to children's rights, as they address structural reforms required to support children and their

families. However, there is no explicit mention of children in the Country Specific Recommendation for Hungary.



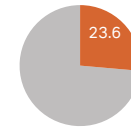
## “Country recommendation

Ireland should take action to invest in services to break the cycle of poverty early by rolling out a new equal participation model in early years education and care that addresses accessibility, affordability and targeted wraparound services for those living in disadvantage.

Country  
Profile 2023



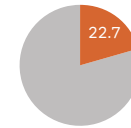
# Ireland



**Child Population:**

**1,195,128**

23.6% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**271,294**

22.7% (2022)

▼ - 0.1% compared to 2021

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Children's Rights Alliance](#)

## Children's Rights in Ireland

The [Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth](#) (DCEDIY), has responsibility for children's rights in Ireland. The most recent policy framework, [Better Outcomes Brighter Futures](#) has come to an end. However, a successor policy is at an advanced stage of development with a [blueprint](#) document setting out the scope of the strategy. A ten-year whole-of-government strategy called [First Five](#) sets out the priorities for babies, young children and their families.

In December 2022, Ireland's Taoiseach (Prime Minister) announced a new Child Poverty and Well-being Unit in his department. In August 2023, this unit published its plan [From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025](#) setting out its priorities in relation to child poverty for the next 2.5 years.

### Child participation

The [National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020](#) aimed to make sure that children and young people have a voice regarding decisions that affect their lives. A successor strategy is in [development](#). The national 'Hub na nÓg' (Youth Hub) aims to support participation and provides resources to [Comhairle na nÓg](#) (Youth Councils) in every local authority area of the country. A representative from each area is elected to a National Executive which meets once a month for two years. The National Executive is supported by the DCEDIY to ensure they can engage with relevant decision-makers, including Ministers.

The right to vote is restricted to those over 18 years. In 2012, the Convention on the Irish Constitution [considered](#) a constitutional amendment

to reduce the voting age in Ireland. A majority voted in favour of lowering the voting age – 48% in favour of lowering the age to 16 years and 38% in favour of lowering it to 17 years. Despite [commitments](#) to hold a referendum on the issue, and recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2016, none are currently planned.

Children's Rights Alliance believe that Ireland should lower the voting age to 16 for local and European elections as a first step towards ensuring that younger people have a greater say in the issues impacting them.<sup>1</sup>

### Child safety and well-being online

The Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022 established an Online Safety Commissioner as part of the new Media Commission. The Online Safety

Commissioner is now developing Online Safety Codes. These aim to provide enforceable guidance to online service providers on the application of certain EU and national regulatory instruments and can be a game changer in terms of children's online safety - not only in Ireland but in Europe due to several platforms being headquartered in the country.

### Child protection systems

Recent reports spotlight serious issues in the Irish child protection system for some of the most vulnerable children in the State. The latest volume of cases from the [Child Law Project](#) alongside the publication of a letter from [Judge Simms](#) highlighted the lack of care placements for very vulnerable children and young people. Tusla's (Ireland's child protection authority) [2022 Annual Report](#) highlighted the ongoing challenges for recruitment and retention of social workers/

<sup>1</sup> See the [UNCRC Alternative report](#) prepared as part of Ireland's examination by the UN Committee in January 2023.

specialised staff, and the strain on residential and foster care placements. Recent reports from the Health Information and Quality Authority identified serious deficits in governance and oversight of the system, and serious delays for initial child protection assessments to take place. This is resulting in delayed notice of suspected abuse or welfare concerns of an average of four months to An Garda Síochána (the Irish police).

### Children in migration and refugees

The situation regarding children in migration and refugees is highlighted in the Children's Rights Alliance's flagship publication [Report Card 2023](#).

There has been an unprecedented increase in the number of people seeking refuge in Ireland as a direct result of the war in Ukraine. This has led to a

sharp deterioration in standards for children and young people seeking asylum. The resulting delay in implementing the [White Paper on Ending Direct Provision](#) requires reconsideration.<sup>2</sup> Children have been placed in temporary accommodation centres, which is unsuitable in some circumstances, and lacking any level of oversight.

A Government Scheme to regularise the status of undocumented people living in Ireland, including children, took place in 2022, regularising 8,311 people. The scheme was a breakthrough, and its implementation has shown significant positive results. To ensure its impact, necessary legislation needs to be brought forward to advance multiple, sustainable pathways for the regularisation of undocumented children.

### Children's mental health

In [December 2020 there were 2,755](#) children and young people waiting for mental health services. By the end of February 2023 this had risen to 4,434. In July 2023, Ireland's Mental Health Commission published its [Independent Review](#) of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The final report lays bare concerns on significant shortcomings with 49 recommendations for action. Alarming, services cannot give assurance to children and families that they will get the support they need, and they deserve, within the current system.

Mental health services are completely stretched thin with most services significantly understaffed. The Health Service Executive needs to consider alternative ways to deliver healthcare to ensure the children that need support the most,

have access to it, regardless of where they live. Special attention is needed for children who face difficulties accessing support, for example: the Traveller Community, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants (including those in Direct Provision), children in care and young LGBTI people.

### Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

#### Child poverty in Ireland

Ireland has a total child population of 1.19 million, 22.7% of which live at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022. The 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion', abbreviated as AROPE, used at EU level, corresponds to the sum of persons either at risk of poverty, severely materially deprived, or living in a household with a very low work intensity. This figure shows a decrease from 2020,

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<sup>2</sup> Direct Provision is the name for Ireland's system of provision of accommodation, food, money, and medical services for people applying for international protection and asylum.

where the rate of children at risk was 23.5% and from 2021, with the rate of children at risk of 22.8%.

However, the national annual poverty statistics captured by the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) show an increase across all three child poverty measures between 2021 and 2022 – at risk of poverty, households experiencing deprivation, and consistent poverty.

Children are the second highest demographic group in Ireland at risk of poverty, with a poverty rate of 15.2% – higher than the rate among the general population (13.1%). Single parent households with children have a higher rate of 23.8%, versus those in two-adult households (13.1%). A shortcoming of the SILC is that it collects data at a household level and therefore does not contain data on groups such as the Traveller community or those living in Direct Provision.

According to Children's Rights Alliance, the groups of children most in need in Ireland are outlined below.

### **Children living in Direct Provision**

Children living in Direct Provision centres are at a high risk of consistent poverty and are not counted in the official poverty statistics. In April 2023, approximately one in every five applicants for international protection was a child, with 4,331 children being accommodated by the [International Protection Accommodation Service](#).

Children and young people in Direct Provision [have spoken about](#) how a lack of income means they have few opportunities to take part in activities with their friends and peers after school. The financial cost of school trips or the need to take public transport after sports activities is a major barrier in terms of integrating into the community.

Children in Direct Provision [receive a weekly payment](#) of €29.80 currently. Families can access payment support for school uniforms and other necessary costs, such as buggies for babies, and clothing. Historically the rate of the Daily Expense Allowance has been significantly lower than other social welfare payments for children ([in 2013](#) it was €9.60 compared to €29.80 for the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC) paid to families receiving social welfare). This rate has remained unchanged since 2019 despite increases for other social welfare recipients. Children living in the Direct Provision system do not have access to the child benefit payment given to all children residing in Ireland.

This was the only group of children in Budget 2023 that did not receive any additional help to tackle increased costs-of-living. This is [despite government commitments](#) to introduce a monthly payment at the same rate as the regular child benefit payment as families move into

independent accommodation. This has yet to happen, and children in Direct Provision also do not qualify for the IQC available to children whose parents are in receipt of social welfare payments.

### **Traveller Children**

The prevalence of poverty in Traveller and Roma households is not captured in official statistics. However, [research](#) shows they have greater difficulty making ends meet when compared to the general population. Traveller families face significant barriers to accessing their right to housing and are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness than settled families. It is [calculated](#) that approximately 39% of Travellers are experiencing homelessness.

School completion rates for Travellers are significantly lower than the general population, and [analysis of census data](#) suggests Travellers benefitted less from overall improvements in educational levels since the



1960s. Traveller and Roma children are significantly less likely to attend early years services, with 17% of services [reporting](#) having one Traveller child attending their service, and only 7% reporting a Roma child in their service.

### Children Experiencing Homelessness

The numbers in homeless accommodation increased throughout 2022, with a small seasonal decline in December. While there was some stagnation of figures at the start of 2023, by [August](#) there were almost 13,000 people living in Emergency Accommodations. These latest statistics show that there were 3,895 children living in Emergency Accommodation and 1,520 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years.

Organisations working with families experiencing homelessness have identified a

need for targeted interventions for children living in emergency accommodation. These interventions, which could be delivered by a dedicated child or family support worker, should provide tailored support to help children and their families deal with the trauma of homelessness and/or the challenges that they faced before becoming homeless.

To effectively reduce child poverty and social exclusion in Ireland, the government should:

- Benchmark all social welfare rates to a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) to ensure that all households with children can afford a minimum standard of living.
- Prioritise investment in the development and implementation of the Equal Participation Model of early years over the next number of Budget cycles.
- Appoint an expert on play in the Department of Children,

Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to lead the development of a new National Play Plan. The Plan should have a focus on the need for green spaces and recreational facilities in local communities. In developing this plan, a review should be carried out of what exists at local authority levels.

Further analysis of issues facing these children can be found in the Children's Rights Alliance's [Civil Society Alternative Report in response to the Fifth and Sixth Combined Report of Ireland under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). The 2023 edition of the Alliance's [Child Poverty Monitor](#) also spotlights eight best practices solutions to address child poverty.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Ireland's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The NAP of Ireland was published in June 2022<sup>3</sup>, developed by the Irish National Coordinator for the EU Child Guarantee, responsibility for which lies with the EU and International Unit in the DCEDIY.

The [NAP](#) provides details of the key statistics in relation to children in Ireland, including a profile of those who are most in need. This includes identifying the proportion of children living in lone-parent families, those engaged in caring duties and those who are members of the Traveller

<sup>3</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

community. In addition, the NAP presents the key barriers to accessing services that families and children face. However, there is little discussion about targeted action, or the specific actions needed for target groups.

The Irish NAP restates the current services, programmes, and supports in place across relevant government departments within the scope of the Guarantee. In addition, the plan proposes to pilot Local Area Child Poverty Plans developed between Local Community Development Committees and Children and Young People's Services Committees in four sites.

The NAP states that a new monitoring and evaluation framework will be developed to meet the needs of the implementation of both the EU Child Guarantee and Ireland's new policy framework being developed for children and young people.

In May 2023 the DCEDIY hosted the national EU Child Guarantee

Coordinators in Dublin. On the second day, a stakeholder event took place including Irish civil society organisations (CSOs) and other stakeholders. There was opportunity at this event for CSOs to network with colleagues from across the EU as well as with officials from key Irish government departments.

Since the publication of the NAP, the DCEDIY have begun to develop a new model of early years – informally referred to as the Equal Participation Model – to develop a new model of provision for families experiencing disadvantage.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

While this year's European Semester Country Report for Ireland references poverty, there is no specific focus on children.

The report captures some of the key areas of reform over the past number of years (such as those noted in the Children's Rights Alliance [Report Card](#)). However, there is little focus on the need to develop a new model of early years for children experiencing disadvantage. The focus on early childhood education and care is promising, but there is a need to shift the focus away from the perspective of labour force activation and participation towards a child-centred approach.

There is no substantial consideration of educational disadvantage. The Country Report failed to include children in alternative care, children's rights to be heard, children with a migrant background, children's mental health and well-being. There is a strong focus on digital in terms of economic/employment and business but no focus on children's rights.

Children's Rights Alliance were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

There is a lack of specific focus on children's rights and the key areas in need of reform for children such as: child protection and welfare, mental health, housing and early childhood education and care from a children's rights perspective.



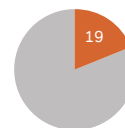
## “Country recommendation

Latvia should take action to implement Article 12 of the UNCRC and integrate the recommendations outlined in the General Comment into its national legislation and practical measures. This concerted effort is essential to foster a shared comprehension of child participation and will respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of children in Latvia.

## Country Profile 2023



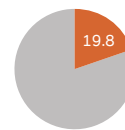
# Latvia



### Child Population:

**356,864**

19% of total population



### Child Poverty:

**70,659**

19.8% (2022)

▼ -0.3% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Association Latvian Child Welfare Network \(LCWN\)](#)

## Children's Rights in Latvia

At the national level, the Minister of Welfare is responsible for children's rights in Latvia. However, the [Ministry of Welfare](#) has many parallel competencies. Previously, between 2002 and 2009, there was a Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, and from 2009, this was incorporated into the Ministry of Welfare. Today, the interests and priorities of the person holding the post of Minister for Welfare determine the level of attention given to children's rights.

According to the Association Latvian Child Welfare Network (LCWN), in Latvia, children are seen as part of a family in policy planning, implementation and statistics. This can often impact the child's quality of life as they are seen as an object and not the subject of rights.

Therefore, the family's needs are recognised, but the needs and any

additional support the child needs are not recognised. In policy planning at national and local levels, children are seen as future adults rather than a member of society with their own needs now.

LCWN identified several key areas related to children's rights that they wanted to provide comments on.

### Child participation

The [Latvian Law on the Protection of the Children's Rights \(1998\)](#) does not incorporate Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), for children to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity. Moreover, different laws and regulations set different ages for children's views to be ascertained, from 12 years for views on adoption, 14 years for views on health care and criminal

justice, 11 years for views on educational coercion<sup>1</sup>, 13 years for views on civic participation and youth policy. Accordingly, the legal framework has no common or consistent approach for children to provide their views.

### Anti-child rights movements

There is a lack of understanding of children's rights across Latvian society, and consequently, a strong resistance to respecting, protecting, and fulfilling children's rights. Instead, there is a focus on children's responsibilities. Currently, teachers and school managers' unions are [campaigning](#) for children with behavioural disorders to be assigned to family education provided by their parents. LCWN is concerned that such a decision will not protect, respect and fulfil children's right to an education ([Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC](#), and [General Comment 1](#) on the aims of education).

### Child safety and well-being online

Although educational campaigns and materials are made available occasionally, the actual safety of children on the Internet depends entirely on the knowledge, actions, and capacity of parents. The State does not provide specific protection for children in the digital environment. Mental health and social professionals [have recently become increasingly concerned](#) about children's mental health in Latvia, linking this to the isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic and children's uncontrolled device use. However, children in Latvian schools are largely free from restrictions on the use of devices (phones, tablets, etc.). Some [schools have individual initiatives](#) to restrict the use of devices in schools, but this is not a priority for national policy.

<sup>1</sup> Law On the Imposition of Compulsory Measures of a Correctional Nature on Children, Legal Acts of the Republic of Latvia, Section 3, and Section 12.

## Child protection systems

The child protection system in Latvia is fragmented and no one institution is responsible for child protection. The Ministry of Welfare is the policymaker. The State Inspectorate for the Protection of Children's Rights is a direct administrative body under the supervision of the Minister of Welfare, which ensures supervision and control of compliance with laws and regulations in protecting children's rights and the activities of the Orphan Courts.<sup>2</sup>

The Orphan Courts are an important part of the children's rights protection system that ensures the protection of the rights and legal interests of the child and make decisions concerning children. Experts continue to debate the lack of influence and decision-making capacity of Orphans' Courts staff. Therefore, a growing debate is on

the need for a children's family court that will replace the Orphan Courts.

The reform of the Inspectorate is currently under review to structurally separate the support function from the supervisory function and establishing the Inspectorate as a support institution.

There is no children's Ombudsperson in Latvia. However, there is an Ombudsperson who is responsible for child protection issues. LCWN reports that children rarely turn to the Ombudsperson as they are unaware of the role in protecting their rights. The Ombudsperson is also not represented on the [Children's Cooperation Council](#) of the Ministry of Welfare, a collegial body convened by the Minister of Welfare to promote coordinated action between institutions to protect children's rights.

In Latvia, a child at risk does not have a single responsible person (social worker or case manager) in charge of their case and its progresses. Thus, no one is looking after the child's best interests. Each case is handled in a fragmented way as it moves through the system, depending on the specific area of work of the particular person responsible for the process.

## Children impacted by war and conflict

The war in Ukraine has increased nationalism in Latvia, which has created negative social attitudes towards the use of the Russian language and ethnicity. These social resentments have a direct impact on children. This is especially significant given that Russian is the mother language of about 36% of the Latvian population.

As a result of the war in Ukraine, Ukrainian refugee children

currently make up 2% of children in Latvia. LCWN is currently clarifying information on the needs and available support for Ukrainian children in Latvia.

## Children's mental health

The main problems in mental health in Latvia are related to the shortage and availability of professionals. In addition, societal stigma towards mental health persists, which affects the speed with which mental health professionals are contacted, if at all.

Children from 14 years old can receive psychological counselling without parental consent. LCWN is calling for this age limit to be removed and for a child to receive psychological counselling at whatever age they require it. If such access is free, this would significantly expand the possibilities for children to receive psychological support

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<sup>2</sup> This is a historical title, and they are not courts. An Orphan's Court is a guardianship and trusteeship institution established by a local government. They are not only for child right protection of orphans but for all children.

anonymously and timely. Mental health support and services for children are expensive, and these costs are either not covered by the State or insufficiently covered. School psychologists are available to children but are often used in schools as a punishment for inappropriate behaviour.

Moreover, according to the [legislation](#), psychological counselling is one of the coercive measures of an educational nature, which consequently does not promote trust in mental health professionals among the general public, including children.

In addition, there are no medical and rehabilitation services available for children with addictions in Latvia. Despite the extremely widespread problem of addiction, there is only [one motivational programme](#) for young people with addictions, and only if they do not want to continue treatment.

## Education

Developing an inclusive education system is a key issue in Latvia.

Currently, children with special needs and disabilities are not provided with the necessary support in schools. Often, a teacher must cope alone with a class of 30 children, where some have behavioural problems, and some have learning disabilities. As a result, schools have very high levels of bullying, both by teachers and between children. [Latvia](#) has the highest school bullying rates among both OECD and EU countries.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Latvia

Latvia has a total child population of 356,864, of which 19.8% of children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 70,659 children in need in Latvia. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has slightly decreased by 0.3% since 2021.

According to the Association Latvian Child Welfare Network (LCWN), the groups of children most in need in Latvia are children with disabilities, including children with mental disabilities, street children, children from families at social risk, Roma children, refugee children, including Ukrainian children, children in alternative care, under-age parents-to-be/ young parents, children of parents with mental disabilities/severely ill parents, children of single-parent families.

The children listed above require available and sufficient universal services, and specialised services according to the specific needs of each target group. Also, due to diverse needs, the groups of children require individual evaluations and individually tailored services.

To tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the Latvian government should prioritise:

1. The development of social services, including creating a wide range of basic services in municipalities.

2. Increasing the quality of education, including free school meals for all age groups and free extra-curricular education.
3. Developing an inclusive housing policy.

A recent promising practice of an intervention that has helped children in need in Latvia are [OPEN Radošais Centrs](#) for young people aged 13 to 25. The 19 centres are located across Latvia. Most of the children attending these centres spend their days on the streets and are at risk of dropping out of school.

The young people are mostly from families at social risk, families in need or who are homeless, and children neglected in affluent families. Young people can receive a range of support without providing personal data and without involving the orphan court or social services, where there is a lack of trust and security.

The centres allow young people to eat, wash, receive hygiene items, and, if necessary, to receive advice from various medical and

mental health specialists, lawyers, etc., as well as help to continue their education. The centres also have several apartments where young adults and women (mothers) suffering from intimate partner violence are provided with temporary accommodation.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Latvia's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan of Latvia had yet to be published at the time of writing this report.<sup>3</sup> Association Latvian Child Welfare Network (LCWN) is aware that Latvia submitted its NAP to the European

Commission on 1st of June 2023, but the NAP has not yet been published and made available for analysis. LCWN reported that non-governmental organisations were not involved in preparing the NAP.

The LCWN has identified two main obstacles that are challenging for civil society organisations in shaping national policy in Latvia:

1. Meaningful participation of children in policy making is not implemented in practice.
2. Meaningful cooperation between non-governmental organisations and policymakers.

For the NAP, LCWN has been calling for the Latvian government to provide free meals for all children in schools, and fully funded meals in kindergartens for all children, not only for certain categories. In addition, they call on the Latvian government to prioritise early intervention policies to help prevent many of the issues children face today.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

The 2023 European Semester Country Report for Latvia outlines the needs of young children. However, it does not include a policy on early childhood development planning, guidance on the need for such planning, or targets for support. The report includes goals to improve access to education for all children. However, it does not have targets to promote inclusive education and the need to increase the availability of special education programmes in mainstream schools, to end the practice of residential schools, and to reduce the very widespread problem of bullying in school systems.

Overall, the European Semester Country report did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. The Country Report failed to include the needs of families with children (especially single-parent families), families with children with disabilities, young people after leaving alternative care, families with children at social risk, street children, Roma children, refugee children including Ukrainian children, under-age parents-to-be/young parents, children of parents with mental disabilities/severely ill parents among the groups at social risk.

The report does not address the current problems of alternative care, including insufficient numbers of foster families, quality of care provided by foster families, unavailability of care for young people with behavioural and addiction problems, and aftercare support systems for care leavers. In addition, the support system for children and after out-of-family

<sup>3</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

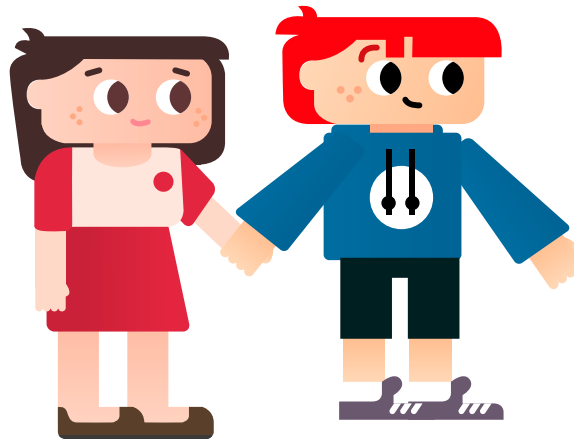
care is formal and inadequate, leaving them unable to continue their education and at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The report does not mention the situation and the country's plans for children's mental health and well-being. In addition, there needs to be recognition of the much-needed attention to children's rights in the digital world, including protecting children from age-inappropriate content on the Internet.

There are more than 4,000 Ukrainian children enrolled in Latvian schools. It is particularly worrying that the report does not draw attention to the State's planned solutions to provide support measures for Ukrainian children in the education process, given that in Latvia, these children can only receive education in Latvian.

Overall, the Association Latvian Child Welfare Network was not involved in the Semester Process 2023, and they are unaware of the involvement of any other civil society organisation.

Overall, there is a lack of focus on investing in children, and the Recommendations issued by this year's European Semester do not reflect the situation of children in Latvia. Therefore, they do not meet the needs of national reforms needed for children.





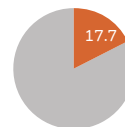
## “ Country recommendation

Lithuania should take action to fully integrate children with special needs inclusively and safely into mainstream schools, but without compromising the rights of all other children and teachers.

Country Profile 2023



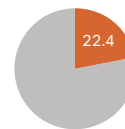
# Lithuania



**Child Population:**

**495,618**

17.7% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**93,098**

22.4% (2022)

▲ +0.8% compared to 2021

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

VŠĮ Auto Moto group

## Children's Rights in Lithuania

In Lithuania, the Parliament and the President's Office set national policy on the protection of the rights of the child, and the Government ensures the implementation of this policy. There is also an [Ombudsperson for the Protection of the Rights of the Child](#).

The VŠĮ Auto Moto group identified several key areas related to children's rights, namely child participation, children's safety online, and children's health and development.

### Child participation

In Lithuania, the extent to which a child is allowed to make choices in childhood is determined by the parents, with a view that this is to protect their best interests. VŠĮ Auto Moto group believes that parents should explain what is involved in making one decision and another, but the child should have the final say. Over time, the child begins to understand that

good decision-making brings a person closer to a goal, and bad decision-making moves them further away, so it is important to think things through before making a choice. In Lithuania, children and youth can participate with authorities in making decisions through various youth organisations.

### Child safety and well-being online

Liaison police officers provide sessions in Lithuania to raise children's awareness of dangers online and digital well-being, through lectures in schools, from various institutions, and during community events.

### Children's health and development

Children with disabilities living in Lithuania do not often get opportunities to experience informal education, and therefore, children's rights are not being respected. The VŠĮ Auto moto group advocates for children and adults with a disability to live a

fulfilling life, socialise, and pursue and fulfil their dreams.

In Lithuania, there is a shortage of teachers, including those who provide sports and physical activities. This is often due to the teacher's workload and salaries. VŠĮ Auto Moto group believes that the Lithuanian government should prioritise the recruitment of more teachers and increase the teaching salaries and encourage others to offer physical activities to support the development and well-being of children.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group provides inclusive camps where youth with disabilities and children who have no disabilities, attend the camps and socialise together. All the children experience a range of activities to encourage a healthy lifestyle and to develop skills and knowledge. For example, first aid training, positive mental health and well-being, physical exercises, and martial arts.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

Lithuania has a total child population of 495,618, of which 22.4% of children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 93,098 children in need in Lithuania. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased by 0.8% since 2021.

According to VŠĮ Auto Moto group, the groups of children most in need in Lithuania are the children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including those who do not access education due to their family situation.

The services needed to support these children are specific support that meets the needs of the individuals. Many children live in different family situations, for example children living in a family where they are not encouraged to attend school, and for single parents with dependent children.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Lithuania's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan of Lithuania was published on 30 June 2023.<sup>1</sup> The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children at risk of poverty, children of Ukraine, homeless children or children in a situation of severe housing hardship, children with disabilities or specialised needs, children with a migration background, children with mental health problems, children in alternative care, national minorities, children from families

receiving social care, and children in prisons.

The NAP does include a range of key services that would be key to lifting children out of poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania. These include:

- Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing care services focused on families with risk factors;
- Education: Support for purchasing school supplies, additional benefits for children in general education;
- Healthcare: Providing more information and services for children with disabilities, enhance mental health, promote psychological resilience, develop healthy lifestyles, ensure availability of vaccinations;
- Nutrition: Improving the legal regulation of free school meals for pupils;
- Housing: More favourable conditions to rent social

housing, increasing subsidies, improving living environment for children with disabilities;

- Children in Alternative Care: Increase and differentiate the foster care allowances, strengthening of Foster Care Centres' activities;
- Other: Organising after-school activities, also for Roma children and children in migration, increasing monthly allowances for children, free positive parenting consultations.

However, VŠĮ Auto Moto group would like to see a focus on children's informal education and out of school activities, especially those children who have less opportunities and are most vulnerable.

The NAP includes information regarding a monitoring and evaluation framework that includes a Child Welfare Council, composed of governmental institutions,

non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and children. It is expected that this Council will review the implementation of the NAP every six months.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group believes that the indicators are relevant. The indicators include the number of children in temporary and permanent foster care, children with special educational needs, the level of reading ability and the number of children receiving pre-school education.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group has not been involved in supporting Lithuania's implementation of the Child Guarantee to date and recommends for a wide range of civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs, working with and for children to be actively involved. If this collaboration is meaningfully implemented the measures set out in the NAP could have a positive impact on the children most in need in Lithuania.

<sup>1</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country report for Lithuania only partially reflects the reality on the ground because it focuses on early childhood education, education, and healthcare mainly.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group agrees with the Country Report analysis stating that social indicators in Lithuania have improved, but the energy crisis and soaring inflation may reverse the positive trend and compared to 2019-2020. For example, the situation has deteriorated for single parents with dependent children.

Furthermore, the report provides an adequate analysis of early childhood education and care in Lithuania. It is only 21.4% of children aged under 3 in formal childcare, which is well below the 2021 EU average of 36.2%.

The arrival of Ukrainian displaced children has exacerbated the problem of limited early childhood education and care provision in urban areas.

Therefore, VŠĮ Auto Moto group particularly welcomes Lithuania's commitment to increase the participation of all children from 2 years of age in pre-primary education as from 2025.

Similarly, inequalities in school education remain a key challenge that is observed by the Country Report. It further explains that academic performance is closely related to socio-economic background where learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be attending the same schools.

Grouping learners by ability is also a common practice in lower secondary schools, but one that risks increasing the performance gap between learners from disadvantaged and more affluent backgrounds. Another issue is the overcrowding of public schools in the bigger cities.

The country analysis further summarises that Lithuania would benefit from tackling teacher shortages, increasing the relevance of higher education to the needs of employers, and promoting the skills needed for the green transition.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group identified an absence of engagement with stakeholders, including CSOs, in the Semester Process 2023.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

According to the VŠĮ Auto Moto group, the recommendations are positive, but they only marginally address the needs of children in Lithuania.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Lithuania, the European Commission made a relevant social recommendation to: 'Strengthen primary care and expand preventive care, including to make the healthcare system more resilient. Improve the planning and delivery of social services. Improve access to and quality of social housing'.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group welcomes this recommendation to solve the situation of vulnerable families when it comes to their access to social services as well as the provision of social housing. Social housing is a key component of support for disadvantaged families with children. This should be further developed and deployed across the country. Making the link between child poverty and social housing should be a priority for decision-makers.

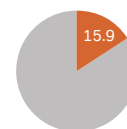
## “Country recommendation

Malta should take action to transpose the UNCRC into a comprehensive legislation, to eradicate any form of discrimination against children, and to safeguard children's human rights.

## Country Profile 2023



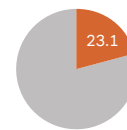
# Malta



### Child Population:

**82,677**

15.9% of total population



### Child Poverty:

**19,098**

23.1% (2022)

▼ -0.1% compared to 2021

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society \(MFWS\)](#)

## Children's Right in Malta

Malta has a [Minister for Social Policy and Children's Rights](#) responsible for children's rights. Malta also has [Commissioner for Children](#), who is responsible for promoting the welfare of children and the compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Key policies on children's rights in Malta include the [National Children's Policy](#) (2017), the [National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee](#), and the [Social Vision for Malta 2035](#).

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) identified several key areas related to children's rights and outlined their concerns.

### Child participation

In Malta, there is a lack of child participation mechanisms. MFWS is leading the [R.I.G.H.T.S Project](#). Collaborating with the Department of Local Government, Department of Education, and the Association

for Local Councils, which hopes to demonstrate the value of investing in child participation activities.

### Child safety and well-being online

The Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) is coordinating the [BeSmartOnline! Project](#), bringing together the [Office of the Commissioner for Children](#), the [Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes \(DLAP\)](#) and the [Malta Police Force - Cyber Crime Unit](#). BeSmartOnline! is the national Safer Internet Centre (SIC) for Malta, set up by the EU [Better Internet for Kids+ Strategy](#) and develops awareness raising and education activities for children, carers, and educators. It also provides a portal to report illegal online content, particularly child abuse material, and offer support to victims ([Childwebalert](#)).

In addition, MFWS is working in collaboration with [UN International Telecommunication Union \(ITU\)](#) to conduct a mapping of the relevant services

supporting children's safety online, carrying out a statistical exercise (using surveys) regarding their safety online to establish trends, and training more than 120 members of the Psychosocial Teams working in state, church, and private schools.

Initial findings from the survey on awareness of online abuse among children identified that 15% of the participating children in school Years 3-11 have experienced online abuse; 83% of which experienced cyberbullying, 54% experienced emotional abuse and 26% experienced sexual abuse. Of all respondents, 29% had received inappropriate or rude messages, 46% of which, received such messages from persons known to them.

The [Promotion of Online Protection \(P.O.P.-Up\) project](#) led by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, aims to continue with training of professionals and volunteers that work with and for Children, Parents and Children.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

Malta does not have specific policies or services for children in armed conflict. However, MFWS aims to identify gaps across the services, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and Trade, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Violence Against Children.

MFWS are conducting interviews with children in migration and families from conflict zones, authorities, NGOs, and other relevant stakeholders, to develop a manual with recommendations to address the gaps and needs of such children.

The aim is to produce a manual that will include guidelines and that can be used as an advocacy tool, disseminated at regional and global levels in 2024.

## Children in migration and refugees

Currently, the migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea on boats are not allowed to enter Malta. The [International Organisation for Migration](#) (IOM) reports on the high number of deaths by drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. MFWS have raised awareness about specific incidents, such as in [June 2023](#), where a boat with 400 people was left at sea with no rescue attempt launched from Malta. The Italian government later rescued the boat once it drifted into Italian waters.

According to the [2021 census report](#), there are 171 stateless people in Malta. The data is disaggregated by residence, gender, and age. Stateless children in Malta are deprived of access to services, including healthcare and education. There is no procedure for identifying and determining statelessness in Malta. Through various meetings

with entities working with children, MFWS has become aware of stateless children in Malta as their parents fled from their home country seeking asylum in different years and in different European countries. Family reunification is very difficult since their first port of call is different.

Family members who arrive in different European countries, are not given the possibility to reunite in one country. To be reunited, family members who arrived in different countries, often travel on a 3-month visa permit. During this time, unless they register for asylum upon arrival, after the visa expires, they become 'illegal'. The people travelling are mostly woman and the children, resulting in them becoming illegal, and at times invisible.

## Climate change and environmental impacts

In 2019 MFWS, gathered children's perspectives through

various Children's Hub Team consultation processes. Along with the child members of the [Children and Young Persons Council](#), they put together [99 proposals on aspirations for 'Malta and our society'](#).

Around 20,000 children from Malta and Gozo enthusiastically spoke and shared their ideas on what makes them feel happy, heard, safe, and healthy. For example, to create more open spaces that are fully accessible and inclusive for all children with different abilities and age groups, including children who are wheelchair users, or on the autism spectrum, or those who have hearing or visual impairments.

## Children's mental health

According to MFWS, there is a lack of resources regarding mental health for children in Malta. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are stepping up to provide such services. [The Malta Trust](#)

[Foundation](#) (TMTF), a sister organisation of MFWS, offers counselling services in schools through the [Blossom Project](#).

In 2022, MFWS and TMTF, collaborated with Dr Paulann Grech, a Maltese academic and expert on mental health, to embark on a joint [Skola Sajf \(Summer School\) initiative](#) to raise awareness regarding children's mental health. The project aimed to explore the experiences of young children aged between 5 and 7 years old and understand how children's mental health is being affected. Through this project, it emerged that children as young as 5 years old can communicate on aspects related to their mental health.

When given the time and space to express themselves, children can explain what they feel and experience well. Children participating in this project expressed that their personality, experience, familial

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4 To learn more, visit the website for the [Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool](#).

community, and neighbourhood context can greatly determine their mental health.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Malta

Malta has a [total child population of 82,677, 23.1%](#) of these children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has slightly decreased since 2021.

According to the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS), the groups of children most in need and are often forgotten in policy responses in Malta are children with disabilities, children of prisoners, migrant children, stateless children, LGBTQI+ children, children in poverty, children out-of-home care, children with mental health difficulties/behavioural/

substance problems, children in prison, children coming from armed conflict areas, victims of abuse including children coming from domestic violence environments, children in hospitals, children with chronic illnesses, for example children with Type 1 diabetes.

Different groups of children require targeted services. For example, children with disabilities require more relevant support according to their abilities. LGBTQI+ children must be represented, seen, and acknowledged. Reading books and textbooks used at school should include a representation of LGBTQI+ families.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the government of Malta should prioritise:

- An adequate living wage for children and families to have a quality of life, necessary nutrition, and effective and accessible access to education, sport and culture.
- That all children should be

treated equally and equitably, whoever they are and no matter where they are from.

- More investment in children's psychosocial services in schools.
- A review of the educational system, whereby all abilities are acknowledged, believed in, and appreciated by providing a more person-centred approach to education.

Every year, the MFWS team, in collaboration with the Malta Trust Foundation, conducts activities aimed at school children attending the summer school programme around Malta and Gozo. The main aim is to create awareness about various areas. The summer school initiative in 2022 focused on an activity based on the book '[The Hole in the Cloud](#)', by Prof Paulann Grech, and explored how children are experiencing worry yet are also resilient to these experiences. The project included 20 focus groups, with children aged 5 to 7 years attending Summer School in nine schools across the Maltese Islands.

In 2023, MFWS focused on a book written by a 16-year-old student, Angelina Bilocca, in Malta as part of her Systems of Knowledge school subject. Angelina decided to write the book after her experiences of discrimination as a half-Russian child living during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

She wrote the story to relate the message that, although people may look different from us, and this can be scary because of their differences, they are still people like all others and deserve respect. The book, '*Hidden Friend*', focused on diversity, equity and equality, acceptance and harmony for young children.

In its report '[Poverty takes away the right to childhood](#)': [Children's perceptions of poverty in four EU Member States](#), Eurochild provides an overview of the situation of poverty on the ground in Malta bringing children's voices into the conversation. The report is the final product of a series of consultations and surveys with children carried



out by four [National Eurochild Forums](#), among which the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Malta's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan (NAP) of Malta was published on 14 June 2022.<sup>1</sup> The NAP fails to identify several vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors and children of refugees/asylum seekers, children with disabilities, children in poverty, children in out-of-home care, and intersex children. A stronger and sharper

focus on the objectives of the European Child Guarantee is needed, such as breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and fostering equal opportunities for children in need.

Generalised policies are unlikely to sufficiently address risks faced by children in poverty and other challenging situations. More research is needed into why and how children are, or become, poor or socially excluded. Addressing economic fragility<sup>2</sup> is important but insufficient to address child poverty. No reference is made to the [Positive Parenting Policy](#) in reaching those at higher risk through early intervention.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) is not directly involved in supporting Malta's implementation of the Child Guarantee, as the NAP primarily focuses on governmental services with no input from NGOs. MFWS,

does however carry out several projects to fill the gaps across governmental initiatives, such as [Your Device, Your Right, Project Blossom, and the Mental Health App](#).

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

According to the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS), the 2023 European Semester Country Report for Malta did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. The Country Report failed to include groups of vulnerable children such as children with disabilities, children in alternative care, migrants, and asylum seekers, LGBTQI+ children, and children coming from armed conflict zones.

From an early child development perspective, there were minor gaps in the information provided. Again, there is no focus on children with disabilities, who are often excluded from the childcare system in Malta. Moreover, childcare services have become increasingly complex regarding parental consent when considering parents experiencing difficulties in their relationship.

The education data in Malta does not reflect reality. MFWS states a gap exists between how things are on paper and in practice. As it is evident by the low performance in [MATSEC examinations](#), the education system has flaws which hinder children's performances. The system needs to be inclusive and, as studies by MFWS show, education is still academically oriented and exam-based rather than focused on different skills and/or diversity.

1 The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

2 As stated on p. 19 of the [NAP](#).

The Semester Report should mention the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the continued exacerbated inequalities. A significant digital divide developed between children who could afford technology and those who could not. The [Covid & You project](#) by MFWS draws attention to the mental health problems/ difficulties, the increase in child poverty, and the many challenges children had in accessing education. To address this gap, the Malta Trust Foundation, in collaboration with MFWS, designed the project [Your Device Your Right](#) to provide equipment such as computers to families in Malta and Gozo.

Children with a migration background, including child refugees, are not mentioned in the Country Report, but should be a priority for the government of Malta.

Other concerns that continue to impact children in Malta are cyberbullying, abuse, sexual abuse, safety online and privacy

and data protection. To address this huge gap, MFWS designed and created the [Promote Online Protection Project — P.O.P-Up](#).

Children's mental health and wellbeing was not a priority in the Semester Report. This should be a priority for the government of Malta, as evident from the [Blossom project](#) by the Malta Trust Foundation which focuses on the provision of counselling in schools.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report must correspond to the needs on the ground in Malta. The education system must provide children with the skills needed for a successful future. There are few opportunities to be creative as a child in school, and the system reproduces and amplifies inequalities.

### Recommendations

- Classes in school should be mixed and not divided

according to marks; this would empower all children and create more innovative, inclusive, and accessible approaches to teaching.

- Tackling bullying must be a priority for all schools.
- All children must have access to quality, inclusive education, and healthcare.



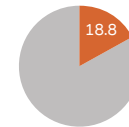
## “Country recommendation

The Netherlands should take action to decrease child poverty and look into achieving more structural solutions and taking measures targeted at specific groups of vulnerable children.

Country  
Profile 2023



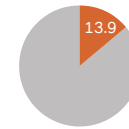
# Netherlands



**Child Population:**

**3,300,844**

18.8% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**458,817**

13.9% (2022)

▼ -1.0% compared to 2021

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights

Utrecht University, Strategic Theme 'Dynamics of Youth'

## Children's Rights in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands there is currently a caretaker State Secretary at the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport responsible for children's rights.

Key policies on children's rights in the Netherlands include the *Youth Reform Agenda*<sup>1</sup>, *Programme plan 2023-2026 Future scenario for child and family protection*<sup>2</sup> and the *Approach to tackle money worries, poverty, and debt*.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to the implementation of children's rights, Dutch members pointed out that the Netherlands dropped from its 4th place in the 2022 Kids Rights Index to the 20th place in the [2023 Kids Rights Index](#). There was in particular a decrease in the area of health and the largest decline in the area defined as

'enabling environments for child rights'. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted in their concerns in the Concluding Observations of 2022 that 'not all municipalities have an anti-discrimination service in accordance with the Municipal Anti-Discrimination Services Act' and that discrimination disproportionately affect children in disadvantaged situations.

### Child participation

While there are many different activities regarding child and youth participation at local, regional, and national level there is no integrated approach in the Netherlands. Each Ministry deals with children in its own way. To improve the situation it is recommended that the Netherlands implements the [Council of Europe's Child Participation Assessment Tool](#).

## Children in migration and refugees

The crisis in the Dutch asylum reception is hitting children the hardest, with harrowing living conditions in emergency shelters and problems with access to care and children who sometimes do not go to school for months. The Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights recommends that the government develops a national asylum reception programme, in which children's rights, such as the right to care and education, are embedded based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Access to mental health care for children with a refugee background is not always within range and it is therefore recommended that the Ministry of Justice and Security and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and

Sport work more intensively together and accessible information about the way mental health care is organised in the Netherlands needs to be made available. Moreover, children do not always have access to education, because they do not possess a residence permit.

## Climate change and environmental impacts

The Netherlands air pollution is negatively impacting on children's health: one in five children suffer from asthma due to air pollution.<sup>4</sup> Besides pollution, climate change increasingly impacts Dutch children, as the floods of July 2021 in the South of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany demonstrated.

Children growing up in the province of Groningen suffer [the consequences of earthquakes](#),

1 *Hervormingsagenda Jeugd 2023-2028, Annex to Kamerbrief voortgang Jeugd*, Rijksoverheid, Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, Ministry of Justice and Security, 2023.

2 Voor Jeugd en Gezin, *Programmaplan 2023-2026 Toekomstscenario kind- en gezinsbescherming, 2023*. Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, Letter of the government, *Toekomstscenario kind- en gezinsbescherming*, 2021.

3 *Kamerbrief Aanpak geldzorgen armoede en schulden*, Rijksoverheid, Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2022.

4 Longfonds, *Position paper Gezonde lucht voor gezonde longen*, 2022.

including increased anxiety and stress, due to gas extractions.

### Children's mental health

The proportion of young people (12-15 years old) with mental health complaints, which was exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, has decreased only slightly since the end of the last lockdown in early 2022. In June 2022, the Secretary of State launched an [Action Plan](#) to tackle mental health problems in five different domains: society in general, neighbourhoods, school, work and online. The action plan however has no clear objectives, terms and conditions and budget. Youth mental health care is struggling with the same issues since the 1980s, budget cuts, long waiting lists and low quality of care.

The [Dutch Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children \(HBSC\) study](#) revealed that the percentage of girls experiencing

emotional problems has almost doubled between 2017 and 2021 and the situation did not improve in 2022. Adolescents growing up in families with a low socioeconomic status or that grow up with one parent report relatively high levels of mental health problems.

### Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

#### Child poverty in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has a total child population of 3.30 million, of which 13.9% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That is nearly 460,000 children in need. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since recent years.

The groups of children most in need in the country are those

with a migrant background, children from single families, children with a disability, children from an ethnic minority, and children living in specific areas of the country.

From 2024 onwards, temporary benefits will end, meaning that households with one or more children living around the social minimum income level will be short of finances each month to pay for their basic needs – according to analysis by the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis in March and August 2023. The government's Commission for those living around the social minimum has recommended to implement a new system to prevent the rise in poverty, which includes an increase in child benefits.

An investment of 6 billion Euro is needed annually to counter poverty, but currently the government has pledged

to invest only 2 billion Euro. Discussions within Parliament are still ongoing, as of publication.

In the Netherlands, services are mainly focused on children in a family setting. Access to social benefits is needed to particularly support children that grow up in residential care or in precarious family situations including children with a parent without a residence permit; children growing up in homeless families; children whose parents had cuts to their social benefits; parents who do not use children's benefits for their children and parents with limited cognitive capabilities or who are illiterate. Currently these children have no access to social benefits.<sup>5</sup> To address this gap, it is recommended that Netherland's reservation to Article 26 of the UNCRC is withdrawn.

Accessible and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has several benefits for

<sup>5</sup> De Wildt, R., Jonker, M., Van Loon-Dijkers, L., Lünemann, K., *'Kinderen missen zelfstandig recht op sociale zekerheid, Het Nederlands voorbehoud op artikel 26 IVRK'*, Verwey Jonker Instituut, 2021.

children growing up in poverty. In the Netherlands, municipalities decide which toddlers should need support to access ECEC. The main indicator used is parents' (low) education level. However, municipalities cannot require parents to enrol their children in an ECEC-group. It is recommended that parents receive more information on ECEC.

A positive reform regarding accessible and affordable childcare that the government should pay 95% of the costs of childcare for working parents due to come into effect from 1 January 2025, has been postponed until 2027, due to high shortages in childcare staff.

The government has set a maximum hourly tariff for childcare for which parents receive a childcare benefit. In case there is a shortage of childcare staff,

which is currently the case in the Netherlands, staff salaries rise above the maximum tariff, meaning that poorer families are not able to pay for childcare anymore.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the Dutch government should prioritise to address the following 3 policy areas:

- address mental health problems among children and adolescents;
- guarantee access to early childhood education and care, particularly for children in need;
- ensure children not growing up in a family setting or in precarious family situations have access to social benefits.

A recent good example of a project that has helped children in need is the Team-Up project.

This project contributes to the psychosocial well-being of refugee children and children with a migration background through play and exercise. The programme has been specifically developed for children aged 6 to 18 years. Through play, children at Team-Up learn to deal with emotions such as fear, anger and sadness. The skills they acquire are linked to social-emotional themes. New children can immediately participate in the programme's activities because it is not necessary to speak each other's language; rather communication comes by playing and moving together, instead of talking.

Another example is the *JIM method*, your personal informal mentor, that allows a young person to select their own mentor to support with conflicts at home and to avoid placements into care. Research into the method has

seen small but positive effects for young people.<sup>6</sup>

## The European Child Guarantee

### The Netherlands' National Action Plan

The National Action Plan of the Netherlands was published in March 2022.<sup>7</sup> According to the Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights, the NAP should be a coherent strategy, but seems to be more of a list of activities.

The NAP fails to identify some of the children most in need in the country, namely children with migrant backgrounds. In 2022, 3 out of 10 children with parents with a migrant background were at risk of poverty, which was over 4 times higher than for children with native born parents (6.9%). Almost 40% of households

6 See Koper et al. (2022). *Resilience, well-being and informal and formal support in multi-problem families during the Covid-19 pandemic*; Sekreve et al. (2020) *Uiting van centrale concepten, onderliggend aan de JIM-aanpak, in het handelen van professionals binnen de specialistische hulp*, Het JIM-project fase 3 over trajecten bij Youké waarin met de JIM-aanpak wordt gewerkt; and Van Dam et al. (2019) *Natuurlijk mentorschap in de jeugdhulp, Duurzame oplossing voor een complex probleem*.

7 The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

with a breadwinner of Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian, Somalian, Syrian or Eritrean origin was at risk of poverty in 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Children from single parent families were also among those identified as a group of children that should be included in the NAP (15% of single families with children below the age of 18 were at risk of poverty in 2020). Children with disabilities (25.9% were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022) should also have been included in the NAP.

Nevertheless, the NAP does include key services, such as access to education, health care, housing, nutrition and early childhood education and care that are key to lift children out of poverty and social exclusion in the Netherlands. However, there is a need for more elaboration of how these services will address child poverty.

The NAP does not include robust indicators and a monitoring framework, and currently the only goal is to half child poverty by 2025. It is recommended that the Dutch government looks at the Portuguese NAP for a reference. It would be important that the implementation plan includes targeted indicators to be able to effectively monitor and tackle children and their families' 'financial uncertainties', poverty, and debts.

Civil society is not actively involved in implementing the measures or activities included in the NAP nor are aware of government plans to so involve them in the future.

The Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights believes further actions should be included in the NAP including effective and meaningful children and young people's participation in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the plan.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for the Netherlands outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely children with parents with a migrant background, and children with disabilities. However, clear recommendations are lacking.

This year's European Semester Country report for the Netherlands failed to include children in alternative care; children's right to be heard; children with a migrant background, including refugees; children impacted by the pandemic; children's mental health and well-being; children's rights in the digital environment.

The Dutch Coalition on Children's Rights recommends that the Dutch government invests more in monitoring and evaluating the well-being of Dutch children. In the Netherlands, youth wellbeing in the broader context is not systematically assessed and the measurements that exist are scattered. Utrecht University's *Better Well-Being Index* is currently being explored as a structured way to measure the development, prosperity, and well-being of children and adolescents.

Extending this Index, which captures eleven dimensions of well-being, to children and adolescents would provide a more complete 'picture' of their well-being, material living conditions, and quality of life in the Netherlands. It would also provide a framework to measure and track youth well-being and prosperity at local and national level, which is sorely lacking currently.

<sup>8</sup> *Armoede en Sociale Uitsluiting 2021*, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CSB), 2021.

Overall, the Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights was not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, the Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights welcomed the extra investment in quality education. However, monitoring of effective policy and investment in education (and child well-being in general) remains a great challenge.

During the last three years, the [Gelijke Kansen Alliantie](#) (Equal Opportunity Alliance) launched the *School and its neighbourhood project* in which schools, municipalities and civil society have cooperated to increase equal opportunities for children within their communities, villages, cities and regions. Giving every child an equal chance is a task for everyone, not just education. The project aims to strengthen the connection between the home situation, the institutions, and the school, thus facilitating the cooperation between municipalities, education, social

organisations, and the national government.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report do not correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground in the Netherlands. The social benefits system requires reform, as households with children living on the social minimum will be structurally short of finances as of 2024. It is therefore recommended that the government moves away from temporary measures towards more permanent ones.

The Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights pointed out that the Country Specific Recommendation only refers to improving access to high-quality and affordable childcare to tackle labour and skills shortages. No further references to children's rights are included.





## “ Country recommendation

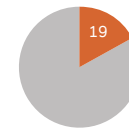
Northern Ireland should take action to properly account for the needs of children in budgetary decisions and budget-making processes.

Country Profile 2023



# Northern Ireland

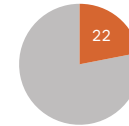
## Statistics



**Child population (0-14 years):**

**365,200**

19% of total population (2021)



**Poverty rate:**

**83,000**

18% (2021-2022)

▼ -4% compared 2019-2020

**RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):**

[Children in Northern Ireland \(CiNI\)](#)

## Children's Rights in Northern Ireland

Due to the arrangements for devolved government in Northern Ireland, responsibility for Children's Rights is complex and multi-layered. At regional level, the Northern Ireland Executive, (term for Northern Ireland's government), consists of 12 Ministers, none of whom are directly responsible for Children's Rights. The Ministers of Health and Education are directly responsible for key policies and programmes, such as children's social care, early years, and tackling disadvantage.

The Minister for Communities is responsible for social inclusion, including equality legislation and developing anti-poverty and disability strategies. The protection of human rights, under international treaty requirements, is considered 'reserved' to the UK government as the relevant

state party. [The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People](#) (NICCY) also has a specific role to promote and safeguard Children's Rights by advising government on policies, laws, and services it provides for children and young people.

Children in Northern Ireland identified several key areas related to children's rights.

### Child participation

Children's participation in policymaking and the decisions that affect their lives remains inconsistent and patchy across government departments in Northern Ireland. There are examples of good practice, such as the role of the Experts by Experience group of young people involved in the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services*, facilitated by the Voice of Young People in Care.<sup>1</sup> There is also a significant amount of work

ongoing across community and voluntary sector organisations and NICCY has a Youth Panel that informs their work.

However, despite all of these initiatives, which are largely supported by charitable grants, the level of meaningful consultation with children remains limited on the part of government departments in Northern Ireland. In March 2023, the Department of Education decided to end funding for the School Holiday Food Grant. According to CiNI, the Department failed to consult any of the children and young people that would be negatively impacted by the decision to end this scheme, many of whom would be more likely to experience food insecurity as a result of this policy.

Children should be included in all decisions that impact them. CiNI highlights comments from young people involved in their [Gets Active](#) project, many of whom

would have been entitled to Food Grants ended by the Government.

### Anti-child rights movements

Northern Ireland remains heavily influenced by the teachings and ideology of conservative Catholicism and Protestantism on a wide range of rights issues. Previously, there have been strong movements – supported by political parties – against same-sex marriage, abortion rights, relationship and sexuality education (RSE), transgender rights, and equal protection (a ban on physical punishment of children).

In 2023, it became apparent that the latest manifestation of these anti-rights sentiments centred around the regulations made by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on RSE. In response to new curriculum requirements for schools, announced in June, to make age-appropriate and

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<sup>1</sup> Kilpatrick, B, Overview of the Experts by Experience Reference Group: Key Messages – January 2022 to April 2023. Children's Social Care Services Northern Ireland, 2023.

comprehensive RSE compulsory, a [wave of disinformation](#) was filtered through school governance structures and parent groups claiming that primary age pupils would be taught inappropriate material.

According to [FactCheckNI](#), an independent fact-checking service, material was circulated by lobby group Truth Behind RSE NI, which included multiple false claims regarding the changes to the curriculum. In August, the Department of Education was forced to take the unusual step of writing to all principals to make them aware of the [false information campaign](#). The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission previously found, as highlighted in its [report](#) from June 2023, that RSE in Northern Ireland is inadequate and does not meet minimum human rights standards.

There should be wider public information campaigns and

education programmes to increase awareness of children's rights and challenge the misinformation that comes from anti-rights movements.

### Child safety and well-being online

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and other charities in Northern Ireland have continued to highlight the significant number of online grooming offences against children and the need for legislative reform. Much of the legislative competence in this area rests with the UK government at Westminster, where regulation of the internet and online communications remains a 'reserved matter'.<sup>2</sup>

The [Online Safety Bill](#) passed its final Parliamentary debate in September 2023, and will now become law. It includes duties on companies to better protect

children and young people from harm. It is essential that the new legislation is implemented properly, and effective enforcement is in place. Online platforms must respond and stop exposing children to preventable abuse and ensure their products no longer contribute to serious harm to children.

### Child protection systems

The [Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#) was established in 2012 to replace the Regional Child Protection Committee and conducts regular Case Management Reviews in accordance with guidance issued by the Department of Health. It includes key member organisations from the statutory, community and voluntary sectors to improve learning and enhance practice.

Alongside other charities and children's organisations, CiNI has

long campaigned for legislative reform to ban the physical punishment of children, otherwise known as 'Equal Protection' (from assault). Unfortunately, the legal loophole of the criminal defence of 'reasonable chastisement', whereby corporeal punishment by spanking or smacking, of a child still exists in Northern Ireland, and CiNI sees this as a major impediment to improving child protection systems. [Studies](#) show that physical punishment can have long term harmful effects on children.

Northern Ireland should follow the examples of Scotland and Wales and legislate to remove the defence of 'reasonable punishment' at the earliest opportunity, in order to provide all children and young people with equal protection from assault and physical abuse.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Northern Ireland context, 'reserved matter' refers to a decision that must be reserved for Westminster - central UK government - to determine, and not for devolved regions.

## Children impacted by war and conflict

Over 2,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Northern Ireland under government assistance schemes since the war started in 2022. As highlighted by the charity Barnardo's, children have often suffered trauma and loss, and are in need of specialist support, such as therapeutic services.

All child refugees must receive the support they need: protection and safeguarding, access to food, clothing and education, support with mental and physical well-being including trauma.

## Children in migration and refugees

Like other regions in the UK, the situation for many children and families that have been living in contingency accommodation such as hotels, for extended

periods is a major concern. Non-governmental organisations have continually highlighted poor mental and physical health, issues with access to food, access to education, limited play and recreation, and social isolation as significant problems faced by children and young people seeking asylum.

## Climate change and environmental impacts

NICCY has facilitated important contributions from children and young people regarding climate change adaptation, mitigation and environmental policy. However, official climate action and policy is still in its infancy in the region, and the first proposed Carbon Budget was published in June 2023, following the passing of the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act in 2022, which set out clear targets and timescales.

Government departments need to do much more to involve children and young people in this work and reflect their voices and concerns in policymaking in this area. The Youth Climate Association NI is a youth-led environmental activist group that campaigns for more action from government in the region.

## Children's mental health

According to official government statistics, the presentation of young people experiencing mental health crisis continues to be particularly acute within Emergency Departments at hospitals, with annual referrals increasing year on year. As highlighted by NICCY, numbers referred from Emergency Departments has more than doubled between 2018/19 (n=484) and 2021/22 (n=1,028). Waiting lists for mental healthcare remain a significant problem. In March 2022, the overall number

of children waiting for Child Acute Mental Health Services was 2106, the highest since 2017, when the Children's Commissioner started monitoring waiting times.<sup>3</sup>

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Northern Ireland

As of 2022<sup>4</sup> in Northern Ireland there were 83,000 (18%) children living at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2020.<sup>5</sup>

In Northern Ireland, a child is defined as an individual aged under 16. A person is also defined as a child if they are 16 to 19 years old and they are:

- Not married nor in a civil partnership nor living with a partner; and

<sup>3</sup> NICCY, *Still Waiting-Implementation* NICCY Progress Update Monitoring Report 4, 2023, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> For child population data in Northern Ireland, only data for children 0-14 is available. Also note the different sources for Northern Ireland's child population and poverty rates, giving rise to distinctions between the data.

Source: Census 2021 Population and household estimates for Northern Ireland: Statistical bulletin.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2021/22.

- Living with parents / a responsible adult; and
- In full-time non-advanced education or in unwaged government training.

According to Children in Northern Ireland, long-term trends show that children are at a higher risk of living in poverty than the overall Northern Ireland population, in both relative and absolute measures. While official government figures show that the percentage of children living in poverty has decreased from 22% in 2020 to 18% in 2022, these measures – based on income levels – fail to capture the impact of the extreme rise in the cost of living during that period.

Consumer price inflation rose from 1% in July 2020 to 10% in July 2022 and remains stubbornly high at 6.8% in July 2023. This severe hike in living costs has put an enormous financial strain on low-income families. In March 2023, the annual change in food prices was 19.2%, the highest rate seen for over 45 years. The

Food Foundation in the UK has reported that the most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 50% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the government recommended healthy diet. The Consumer Council NI estimates that the discretionary income of the lowest earning households has fallen for seven consecutive quarters since 2021, and was roughly £19 a week for the last quarter of 2022.

All of these complex, interconnecting factors highlight the difficult social and economic backdrop to Northern Ireland’s current political crisis and the 2023/24 Budget, which was criticised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in June 2023. The Committee stated that the UK government should ‘withdraw the budget for Northern Ireland for the period 2023-2024 and fully consider the equality and human rights implications for a new budget, taking all possible steps to mitigate any adverse impact on children’s rights.’

The Northern Ireland Budget was set by the UK government in the continued absence of its regional Assembly and Executive (since February 2022), due to a boycott by the Democratic Unionist Party in protest against the Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland agreed between the European Union and the UK. It has led to funding cuts across departments, affecting areas such as Special Educational Needs, Food Grants, healthcare and grants to charities working with children.

It is clear that Northern Ireland urgently needs the restoration of its political institutions and locally accountable politicians to make decisions regarding budgetary allocations. However, in the continued absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, government departments should be prioritising the needs of children and young people and protecting them from any disproportionate and cumulative harm arising from the Budget, as is their duty under domestic law and according to international human rights conventions.

## Recommendations

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, and prevent longer-term, cumulative harm to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, government departments in Northern Ireland should:

- Conduct a Child Rights Impact Assessment of their budget decisions and undertake intersectional analysis to understand the cumulative harm of funding cuts on the most disadvantaged.
- Mitigate the worst impacts of the budget cuts and reallocate resources in order to reinstate funding for Special Educational Needs, the School Holiday Food Grant, children’s healthcare, and grants to charities that support children and young people.

## Promising practices to address child poverty in Northern Ireland

CiNI’s Gets Active Project Youth Advisory Group, conducted peer research from December 2022 to May 2023, through a survey focusing on the impact of the cost

of living with 210 young people, aged 11-25, across various areas of Northern Ireland. They asked questions about issues related to poverty, financial hardship, and the cost-of-living crisis. The results indicate severe levels of deprivation experienced by some young people, with 1 in 5 saying they were hungrier and 1 in 3 experiencing feeling cold more often compared to the previous year.<sup>6</sup>

The young people then used this evidence to develop a manifesto, *[‘The Best Start in Life: The Gets Active Youth Advisory Group’s Local Government Manifesto 2023’](#)*, which included key pledges for political parties such as providing free breakfast and after-school clubs, and free holiday programmes that include food, activities and trips for children and young people.

### Recommendation

More sustainable funding and support from the government is needed to ensure that children and young people’s voices are heard, and to allow impactful projects, such as the Gets Active Project, to continue.



<sup>6</sup> The results of this survey are due to be published towards the end of 2023. Please follow our website: [www.ci-ni.org.uk](http://www.ci-ni.org.uk) for further updates on the Gets Active Youth Advisory Group project.

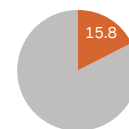
## “ Country recommendation

Portugal should activate the effective participation of children and young people in the design, monitoring and evaluation of public policies that concern them. Portugal should also take action to reduce inequalities in access to basic services, including improving the timely access to high quality services for all, particularly to children.

Country  
Profile 2023



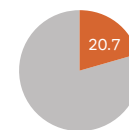
# Portugal



**Child Population:**

**1,636,138**

15.8% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**338,681**

20.7% (2022)

▼ -2.2% compared to 2021

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Sergio Costa Araujo \(Individual member\)](#)

[Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso Foundation](#)

[Instituto de Apoio à Criança](#)

## Children's Rights in Portugal

In Portugal, key policies for children's rights are spread across several ministries. The [National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People](#) (CNPDPCJ) is a national public institution endowed with administrative autonomy and own assets, operating under the guardianship of the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security.

As an integrant within the Portuguese system, CNPDPCJ coordinates all actions taken towards the promotion of children's rights and the protection of children and young people in Portugal. The National Commission also contributes to reinforcing the implementation of European and international legislation on the promotion and the protection of the rights of the child at national level – namely conventions and protocols Portugal is State-Party to, including, above all, the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

In December 2020, the Portuguese government approved the [National Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#), for the period of 2021-2024.

Another important role related to children's rights is currently played by the [National Child Guarantee Coordinator](#), under the responsibility of the Minister for Labor, Solidarity and Social Security. the National Action Plan of the Child Guarantee is the document that adequately collates some of the key thematic policy areas.

As general recommendations for fulfilling children's rights in Portugal, Eurochild members recommend that the Portuguese government:

- reinforces the importance of the right to play for a child's healthy development;
- reinforces campaigns to raise awareness against corporal punishment and all kind of violence against children;

- invests in parental training.

In addition, Eurochild members identified several key areas related to children's rights.

### General recommendations

#### Child participation

The [National Strategy for Children's Rights](#) includes child participation in its priorities. Nevertheless, it is not clear to what extent the priorities are being implemented and how they are evaluated in practice.

According to our members, in Portugal, there is no culture of openness to the participation in decision-making of others than governmental bodies, be they organisations, technicians, specialists, researchers, families, or children. Democratic participation in Portugal needs to be improved.

A National Council for Children and Young People was created on [the initiative](#) of the National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and Protection of

Children and Young People, within the scope of another project called Positive Parenting. On its website, the National Commission states that it is a reference entity for the effective implementation of the rights of all children and young people in Portugal, particularly in terms of their participation in public decision-making.

The debate surrounding the right to vote in Portugal at the age of 16 was recently launched. Although most political groups agree that this possibility should be part of the constitutional review, the party in power expressed its disagreement. A study currently underway promoted by the Francisco Manuel dos Santos Foundation states that the Portuguese society still does not agree with such a change - of the 84% of respondents who answered the related question, 60% said they were in favour of maintaining the voting age at 18.



## Child safety and well-being online

The Ministry of Education along with [Centro de Internet Segura](#) have developed a series of tools to raise awareness among children, parents, and the whole school community on how to navigate the internet safely. Additionally, there are small projects that warn of the dangers of the digital world for children developed by civil society organisations, some of them also involving the active participation of children. More broadly, this is a topic that has been present in the media space, but without much progress in practice.

A lot still needs to improve in terms of children's well-being and safety online in the country. For example, while Portugal has a National Cybersecurity Centre, it has yet to develop a specific national strategy for a better Internet for children.

Our members recommend the implementation of a National Strategy with an action plan to safeguard children's rights in the

digital environment, including their safety and well-being online.

## Child protection systems

The latest [CASA report](#), which presents an overview of the situation of children in alternative care in Portugal, includes the indicators for children in alternative care proposed by the DataCare project conducted by Eurochild and UNICEF. Eurochild members in Portugal consider this as a step forward in data management which allows better understanding of the system and to better tackle the needs of children without parental care.

## Children in migration and refugees

Portugal has put in place a reception system to support Ukrainian refugees including children. According to Eurochild members, other migrants and refugees in Portugal come mainly from Greece, Italy, Türkiye, and Egypt.

## Climate change and environmental impact

In Portugal, one in four children is affected by the severe and extreme drought the country is facing. Although Portugal was encouraged by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to take immediate action, our members do not have information on that.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Portugal

Portugal has a total child population of 1,636,138. Of which 20.7% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to almost 340,000 children in need in Portugal. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion decreased from 22.9% in 2021.

According to our members, the rights of all children up to 3 years living in Portugal are neglected,

and children with disabilities, children in alternative care, and children in vulnerable families are the most forgotten ones. These children need access to high-quality health services, early childhood education and care (ECEC) and social services, more effective social protection, and parenting support. Additionally, children in alternative care need policymakers to act on their responsibilities towards deinstitutionalisation.

Our members think that policies regarding the following issues need to be put in place:

- Healthcare: Portugal should take action to reduce inequalities in access to healthcare, by improving the timely access to high-quality health services for all, with special attention to children. One way to achieve this is to subsidise private and third-sector healthcare providers that complement the national healthcare system so to satisfy unmet healthcare needs with community-based integrated health services. Portugal has

one of the highest out-of-pocket health spending in the EU (30% of the health expenses are paid directly by families), and the waiting times for a specialised medical appointment (only available in hospitals) are too long, especially for children.

- Early learning – ECEC needs to consider early child development and must have educational intentionality, namely by having professionals responsive to specific needs of the children under their responsibility and parenting support.
- Income - Portuguese families need adequate financial support, as the usual social transfers are known not to be very effective in tackling poverty and social exclusion. The current context of high inflation creates even more challenges.
- Education alternative curriculums - It is also important to consider the need of Education alternative curriculums for those children

and young people who have drop out school at an early age.

Eurochild members welcome the creation of a [Complement Children's Guarantee for Children](#) which, according to official documentation, is described as support given to children and young people aged 3 to 17, whose families are in extreme poverty. As it is a very recent measure, there are still no data to assess the effectiveness of the measure.

A recent intervention that is helping children and their families in Portugal is the [PRIMEIROS PASSOS, infância saudável, vida Feliz project](#). This initiative supports children from families in poverty and social exclusion, in particular single parents, and migrants, from the municipality of Vila Nova de Gaia (District of Porto), with 303,854 inhabitants, of which an estimated 4,630 are children up to 2 years old. The project is promoted by [Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Vila Nova](#)

[de Gaia](#), and its mission is to reduce and prevent vulnerability in the first 1,000 days and since 2018, the project has impacted the healthy development of 167 children, including through adequate nutrition, medication, diapers and hygiene items, clothing and various equipment.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Portugal's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The [National Action Plan of Portugal](#) (NAP) was published in January 2023.<sup>1</sup> The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children in situations of

abandonment or severe housing deprivation, children and young people with disabilities, children and young people with a migrant background, children and young people from Roma communities, and children integrated in alternative childcare structures.

Moreover, the NAP does include all key services that would be key to lift children out of poverty and social exclusion in Portugal, including those essential to ECEC, education, healthcare, nutrition, and housing.

The NAP includes indicators and a monitoring framework. However, these are already existing general indicators, namely, the national coordination will be working with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on new disaggregated indicators regarding children under six years.

Eurochild members are not directly involved in supporting

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<sup>1</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

Portugal's implementation of the Child Guarantee and they believe that the implementation will be ensured through public institutions. The funding will come mostly from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRP).

The NAP tries to articulate the majority of already existing policies and measures regarding vulnerable children and young people; however, it lacks some innovation.



## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for [Portugal](#) did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground because it failed to include most issues related to children's rights, including the rights of children in alternative care, children's mental health and well-being and children with a migration background.

Child poverty and social exclusion are only mentioned on the Social Scoreboard, as a headline indicator, and the impact of the pandemic on children is only mentioned briefly in relation to education - because the pandemic may have increased inequalities among students.

The main challenges of the education system are identified,

and include the quality and equity of education, (low) participation in early childhood education, ageing teacher population, and teacher shortages.

However, solutions are only presented as plans and intentions. For instance, the intention to expand the pre-school network aimed to provide free access to all 3-years-olds is dependent on funding or on new legislation to recruit teachers.

Overall, Eurochild members in Portugal were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, members assessed that the only issue slightly related that was incorporated is the plan to expand the pre-school network. The aim is to provide free access to all children aged three. Currently, universal access is to four years old. Children below the age of three are out of the education system and without

educational guidelines - because ECEC for those ages is only aimed at allowing parents to work.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

Members feel that [the Country Specific Recommendations](#) (CSR) correspond to reform needs in Portugal, but strictly from an economic point of view. There are no recommendations, directly or indirectly, related to children.

While the first years of life are crucial for health and well-being throughout the life course, the country report, and thus the CSR, is not at all framed within a vision in which investment in the early years of life is essential to the development, balance, or sustainability of a society.

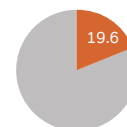
## “Country recommendation

Romania should take action to increase the children's participation in the decisions that affect them and should create and strengthen the child participation mechanisms in a way that consultation and participation processes become meaningful and have a long-term impact.

Country  
Profile 2023



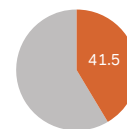
# Romania



**Child Population:**

**3,737,960**

19.6% of total population



**Child Poverty:**

**1,551,253**

41.5% (2022)

▼ -0.2% compared to 2021

**RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):**

[Hope and Homes for Children – Romania](#)

## Children's Rights in Romania

At national level, the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities is the main body regulating child protection and children's rights in Romania. The Ministry has a dedicated department in this respect – The National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoptions (NAPCRA).

Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) – Romania identified key policies on children's rights in Romania to include child safety online, well-being and mental health, child protection systems, and children impacted by war and conflict (including children in migration and refugees).

### Child safety and well-being online

Child safety online is an important subject in Romania and there are several active initiatives – some civil society-led, and others led by authorities. For instance, the Romanian Police

carried out a three-year project aimed at developing the capacity of the national and regional child protection agencies to act against online bullying and to increase children's safety online. NAPCRA also foresees a chapter regarding online safety for children in the future strategy for the promotion and protection of children's rights. In addition, Save the Children Romania has been implementing a longstanding EU-funded programme, which includes research, studies and publications regarding online safety for children, online bullying and ways to use the internet in a safe and creative manner for children.

### Child protection systems

The vast majority of the services related to the child protection system are state-owned (and funded) and there are only a few private services. All services (state or private) are registered with NAPCRA and report to it through the county child protection agencies. To HHC – Romania's knowledge, there

are no unregistered services for children in Romania (it is not legal to function as a service for children – or adults for that matter – without a license provided by the state authorities).

### Children impacted by war and conflict

Romania has put in place a set of legal provisions regarding support for refugees and the support they would receive (money, access to free health care, access to education for children and to work for adults, etc).

Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, a new law has decreased the monthly amount of money refugees are entitled to and has introduced a cap to the overall finances they receive. Around 7,300 children from Ukraine are currently enrolled in the Romanian educational system and for most of the children; the main challenge to access education is the language barrier.

### Children's mental health

There is a concern for children's mental health in Romania. Targeted measures are foreseen as part of the new national strategy for the promotion and protection of children's rights, which is currently being developed, as well as measures in initiatives of the government and authorities.

The Ministry of Health carried out an EU-funded project that aims to support developing community services for the children's mental health. While the right to access services for mental health is guaranteed in Romania by law (as part of the right to medical care), these services are scarce and unequally distributed between urban and rural areas.

### Climate change and environmental impacts

While climate change is a current challenge for society in general and children in particular, it is not regarded as an important one in Romania, at least by the decision-

makers. A recent study by Save the Children shows that over 70% of children are willing to make changes in their lives in order to minimise their carbon footprint and to reduce climate change, but the same study shows that there is no official data at country level as to what exactly is the impact of climate change on children.

There are campaigns in schools (together with classes of ecology and environmental protection) on climate change and its effects, but overall children believe that Romania is less responsible in this than many of the Western countries.

### Child participation

Child participation is encouraged to a certain extent, but in many instances, it remains just a box that needs to be ticked within a programme or an official initiative. A delegation of children did participate in the drafting of the new Child Protection Strategy, but for the National Action Plan of the Child Guarantee (an initiative that would certainly benefit from

the input of children) there were none invited – at least to HHC – Romania’s knowledge.

There are national and local organisations of children and youngsters (including young care-leavers), that are formally registered and could constitute a valuable partner for dialogue, but in many instances, they are not acknowledged.

### Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

#### Child poverty in Romania

Romania has a total child population of 3.7 million, 41.5% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to more than 1.5 million children in need in Romania. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has slightly decreased with 0.2% since 2021. Overall however, the percentage has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. In terms of age categories, children between

the age of 12-15 have the highest deprivation rate, affecting over 50% of the children of this age.

According to Hopes and Homes for Children (HHC) – Romania, there are a few vulnerable groups of children, each one with specific issues; however, there are a series of challenges that cascade into others. This includes children in old-type institutions, children in deprived families, and young care-leavers as the groups that need to be prioritised when it comes to targeted actions.

For instance, children from families in deprived situations cannot have their basic needs covered due to the rising cost of living and high rates of inflation. These children are at risk of school abandonment, particularly children living in rural areas, where they can start contributing to the family income by being engaged in fieldwork. Furthermore, children living in informal settlements do not have equal access to health services and education.

The support packages provided by the government are effective to a certain degree, but they do not remove the vulnerability situation, they only address its effects. While there are local initiatives and programmes for this category, there is no strategy or national plan to address their needs.

Additionally, initiatives to hastily close old-type institutions add extra vulnerability for children, as they need to be properly prepared for their transition into alternative, family-type services or into their families, while the youngsters need preparation to transition into independent living.

HHC – Romania shares that there is a lack of state-provided affordable accommodation for young care leavers, as there are still pre-conceived ideas regarding these youngsters at the level of some communities. Since the end of 2022, there is a National Housing Strategy, which considers these young care leavers as a vulnerable category, but time is still needed for the strategy to take effects.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the Romanian government should prioritise setting up a national approach to consistent interventions for care leavers that includes preparing the youngsters for their transition into independent life. In addition, there is an immediate need to implement the national prevention programme.

A recent promising practice is HHC – Romania’s long-standing national prevention programme, in cooperation with the local and county authorities in Romania. Over 37,000 children were supported to remain with their families, in more than 27 counties across the country. The needs of families are assessed, and the corresponding intervention is put in place to avoid redundancies in allocating resources or targeting other areas, where families do not need support. The sustainability of the interventions is ensured

by involving the authorities in carrying out the assessments and involving local governments in carrying out the monitoring of the families.



## The European Child Guarantee

### Romania’s National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee’s implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan of Romania was published on the European Commission website in November 2023.<sup>1</sup> During an event organised in Bucharest on December 6th, 2022, civil society were consultant on a draft. Further analysis will be carried out to identify to what extent the suggested amendments made by Hope and Homes for Children – Romania have been incorporated.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year’s European Semester Country Report for Romania outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely children living in poverty and social exclusion, children in their early years of development, and children abandoning school.

Hope and Homes for Children – Romania was not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, HHC – Romania welcomed inclusion of the call for 150-day centres for children as part of wider investments made to help prevent family separation and

<sup>1</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

support children from vulnerable communities. The snapshot that the report presents in terms of poverty rate in Romania has accurately captured the situation for children. HHC – Romania are concerned that the measures listed in the country report will take time to be implemented and make a real impact for children.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations do not mention children in particular, but they do mention vulnerable households, presumably including children, which need to be protected from further increases in energy prices.

As there is no explicit mention of children, HHC – Romania cannot determine whether the recommendations respect children's rights. However, the recommendations do aim to ensure an adequate standard of living for families, in line with Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that: 'States

Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development'.





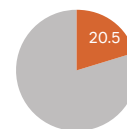
## “ Country recommendation

Serbia should take action to prioritise the development and implementation of a Child Guarantee programme aligned with the European Child Guarantee.

## Country Profile 2023



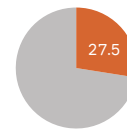
# Serbia



### Child Population:

**1,193,080**

20.5% of total population (2021)



### Child Poverty:

**328,097**

27.5% (2021)

▼ -3.1% compared to 2020

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia](#)

[Pomoc Deci](#)

## Children's Rights in Serbia

In Serbia, there is no specific cabinet minister solely responsible for child rights. However, there are several key mechanisms and institutions that work towards the protection and promotion of child rights.

[The Council for the Rights of a Child](#) a crucial oversight body that guides the government in safeguarding children's well-being and rights, remains inactive. Although the Child Rights Council was re-established on March 30, 2023, by the Government of Serbia, no meetings have been held until now. The Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia has repeatedly called for the establishment of the Council for the Rights of the Child, emphasising the need for adequate budget, technical resources, and human resources to ensure its effectiveness in safeguarding and promoting children's rights.

Ministries involved in child-related agenda include the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs (children's welfare), the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue (child rights policy and monitoring), and the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography (family protection, population policy, birth rate policy).

Serbia has no comprehensive Law on Child Rights. The child-related agenda is incorporated into the legislation on education, health, home affairs, justice, social welfare, child protection, and other laws. Although Serbian law guarantees all children the right to live free of discrimination, Roma children, children with disabilities and children in rural areas do not exercise this right.

There are several gaps in existing legislation, such as absence of the Law on Child Rights, and the Ombudsman for Children which have not been adopted yet despite the consultation to inform the legislation had already started in 2019. The revision of Family

Law to introduce and define the concept of 'child', to prohibit physical punishment of children, underage marriages, and specify other fundamental issues related to upholding children's rights, remains pending. Furthermore, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of a Child on communication procedures has not been ratified yet.

Another major barrier constraining realisation of children's rights is the absence of new National Action Plan for Children since 2015, when the previous one came to an end.

### Child participation

Children's opinions are not taken into account sufficiently in Serbia and there are only limited opportunities for children to take part in discussions on issues affecting them. There are "Children's Parliaments" in each secondary school in Serbia however, this is restricted for secondary schools and does not have a proper mechanism to avoid

tokenistic child participation. According to the Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia and Pomoc Deci, Serbia needs to ensure that children are recognised as an expert in their own lives and to give them the opportunity to meaningfully participate through systematic and structured mechanisms.

### Anti-child rights movements

In recent years, far right-wing politicians and movements in Serbia have increasingly taken public stances that deny or downplay the importance of child rights and prioritise 'parents' rights'.

Although majority of civil society organisations (CSOs) working with and for children in Serbia have advocated for many years to legally prohibit corporal punishment, there are strong anti-child rights movements against this legislation. These groups support so called 'traditional family values' and 'parental autonomy' that take precedence over child rights.

## Child safety and well-being online

With the increasing use of the internet and digital devices by children, they are more exposed to various online risks, including cyberbullying, online harassment, inappropriate content, and privacy concerns.

[Research by UNICEF](#) in Serbia has shown that 86% of children aged 9 to 17 use the Internet daily. However, many children lack the necessary digital literacy skills to navigate the online world safely.

The Government of Serbia has taken some [steps to promote awareness and safe internet use](#). [The National Contact Centre for the Safety of Children on the Internet](#) was established in 2017 to facilitate reporting<sup>1</sup> and support to children via the 19833 hotline and raise awareness through the *Smart and Safe platform*. However, concerns about the

level of protection for children online remain and more policies addressing it are needed.

The Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia and Pomoc Deci call for the introduction of measures promoting safe digital experiences by children and the reporting of harmful content, especially online abuse. Teachers and families must be provided with support to enhance social media literacy skills.

### Child protection system

The child protection system is well regulated in Serbia. However, there are gaps when it comes to compliance with the international standards and the implementation. Despite the deinstitutionalisation reforms, there are still young children deprived of parental care, placed in institutional care. Children with disabilities, who are overrepresented in residential

care, usually live there from early years until adulthood and then they are moved to other institutions.

The *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2020-2023*, identifies more than 20 types of violence against children, including physical, peer violence, sexual and online violence as well as child marriages. However, the plan for 2022-2023 has not been developed yet. Nor has the Working Group for the implementation and monitoring of the Strategy been established.

The *General Protocol for Children's Protection from Violence*, adopted in February 2022, identifies different types of violence against children, however the concrete actions have not been developed yet to enforce its implementation.

Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia and Pomoc Deci

welcome the *Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence* (2017), but a stronger emphasis should be placed on the protection of children as victims and witnesses of domestic violence. Another positive development is a draft of the new *Specific Protocol for Protection of Children from Violence in Sport and Recreational Activity Settings* that was presented in March.

### Children in migration and refugees

Serbia is a transit and destination country for migrants and refugees, including children, fleeing conflicts, or seeking better opportunities. These children often face a precarious situation during their journey or while residing in Serbia.

In their attempt to enter EU, refugees and migrants frequently arrive in southern Serbia. According to [Save the Children](#), in

<sup>1</sup> Cyberbullying, sexting, trafficking, identity theft, fraud, other illegal activities, and other forms of exploitation of children.

the first quarter of the 2023, the number of registered refugees and migrants continued to rise in most countries along the Balkans route. The majority of these individuals are young people, according to [the UNHCR report](#). As of July, there are 95 unaccompanied children in Serbia.

Children of refugees and internally displaced persons are frequently exempt from social benefits therefore, they mostly struggle to make their ends meet. There is no systemic effort to address this problem.

### Climate change and environmental impacts

Serbia is experiencing the effects of climate change that significantly disrupts the lives of children. [Research by Friends of Children of Serbia](#) reveals that most children have concrete proposals to mitigate the impact of climate change. Regrettably,

only 5.7% respondents have noted that child participation has influenced any public policy.

The proposed actions include educational programmes, peer education, and concrete activities. For example, as a result of the [DIALOGUE from ECO anxiety to ECO action](#) project, the *Youth guidelines for children's involvement in environmental protection* were created. The guidelines are based on input from 30 children and young people (ages 14 to 23) who were involved in the project.

In addition to improving access to clean water, reduction of air pollution, and enhancing of climate resilience it is crucial to establish the transparent procedures for stakeholders' participation to allow children to shape the sustainable development policies.

### Children's mental health

According to a [UNICEF survey](#), 21.9% of children reported nervousness at least once a week, 10.8% of school students reported bad mood and 4.1% of the total population showed symptoms of depression. The number of mental health centres and community-level service networks is insufficient, and coordination between services is poor or non-existent. The institutions such as counselling centres, psychiatric hospitals, and daily clinics cope with high number of patients and are not accessible in rural regions. Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia and Pomoc Deci call for reform of mental health system in Serbia to be able to identify mental health issues at an early stage and to provide adequate treatment because delays have long-term consequences for children.

### Child-friendly justice

Children in the juvenile system face many challenges related to the obsolete justice system in Serbia. There is neither adequate pre-trial detention, nor the programmes at the community level for integration of juvenile offenders under 14 years old who are not criminally responsible. This is in contrast with the international standards. There [have been various project initiatives](#) and funding support including from the European Commission. However, as proposed by the *NGOs' coalition informing 2022 Serbia Progress Report*, a sustainable, systemic solution that would be in line with the relevant international standards is yet to be found.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Law on Free Legal Aid, children in conflict with the law are eligible to receive free legal aid, but other safeguards and support mechanisms need to

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<sup>2</sup> Serbia 2022 Progress Report, Written Submission from the Coalition for Monitoring Child Rights in Serbia, Belgrade, April 2022.

be developed to ensure children are not harmed by the justice system.

### Child trafficking

The current national legislation prescribes provisions for prevention and punishment of child trafficking. Its effective implementation is hindered by lack of data based on the indicators to identify child victims in all stages and for all forms of child trafficking. Moreover, according to the contributors to this report, professionals such as criminal police, labour inspectors and social workers should undergo a special training. The *standard operating procedures for Child Protection* should be adopted as well as the protection programs for child victims.

No significant progress has been achieved in the field of the prevention and elimination of child marriages, despite the efforts of the National Coalition to End Child Marriages, which consists of more than 20 CSOs and institutions dedicated to promoting children's

rights and the eradication of the harmful practice of child marriages in the Republic of Serbia.

### Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

#### Child poverty in Serbia

In Serbia, there is a lack of attention to tackle child poverty. According to Eurostat data, the risk of poverty for children was 27.5% in 2021, above the general poverty risk rate was 21.2%, but just under the general rate of risk of poverty or social exclusion at 28.5%. Household with dependent children, especially those consisting of two adults with three or more dependent children, face the highest risk of poverty at 38.8%. Despite this, child poverty is not recognised as a priority in public policies.

Children from marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as Roma children, children with disabilities, children living in rural areas are most in need.

Children from minority groups (Roma children) face multiple forms of discrimination leading to poverty and social exclusion. Roma children also face significant barriers in accessing healthcare, due to lack of information, missing health infrastructure in the settlements, and discriminatory attitudes of healthcare providers.

Additionally, the problem of child marriages in Serbia is predominantly among the Roma population. In Serbia, 22% of young women from the poorest households, and 56% young women from Roma settlements are married before their 18th birthday. When it comes to education, only 7% of children aged 3–4 years from Roma settlements attend pre-school education.

When it comes to children with disabilities, the community-based services and support to families are the biggest gaps. According to the Initiative for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - MDRI-S (2021), children with developmental disabilities make

up about 80% of children who live in institutions, where they are often mixed with adults and where they are threatened with lifelong segregation. This is due to ineffective support for families to keep their children at home.

Children in remote rural areas are particularly at risk because services are limited, and poverty is higher due to limited economic opportunities. Families in these regions struggle to provide for their children's basic needs, including food, clothing, and housing. Moreover, rural areas lack other social services and support systems available in urban centres.

Children living in poor families struggle most to break inter-generational transfer of poverty. It affects 10.6% of children aged 0–13 who lived in absolute poverty in 2020.

As the above survey discloses, families with children are more impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and on-going war in Ukraine. Almost all households

are experiencing rising costs, and a quarter of them have reduced income. One-fifth of households are barely making ends meet. Preliminary projections indicate a likely increase in child poverty, with between 25,000 and 50,000 additional children falling into absolute poverty, with those living in households on agriculture the most likely to be affected.

To address the needs of families in adversity and contribute to reducing child poverty and social exclusion, Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia and Pomoc Deci recommend the government develops policies and allocate funding to ensure: decent and adequate living conditions; quality education for all children; protection from all forms of violence and exploitation; quality and affordable health care and environment; and full support to live and grow up in a family that is a safe and supportive place.

## Countries in Accession

Every year, the European Commission publishes the Enlargement Package that assesses the state of play in accession countries, including progress concerning upholding human rights and children's rights. Eurochild and its members in Serbia contributed to the [2023 consultation on the Enlargement Package](#) to provide a child-rights perspective and insights on the situation for children in need.

The top priorities for Serbia regarding children:

1. The European Child Guarantee should be extended to the countries in accession. Serbia would benefit from being part of this policy and funding instrument to tackle child poverty and social exclusion systematically. All children in Serbia should have equal access to services and support for their well-being.

2. The proposed EU Legislation to Prevent and Combat Child Sexual Abuse should be reflected in the relevant laws not only in EU countries but in the relevant legislation in the accession countries with the same standards – this to be required within the accession process legislative harmonisation with EU laws.
3. Prioritise reform of the child protection systems to ensure the well-being and rights of all children are fulfilled. Children should be prevented from all forms of discrimination, abuse, and violence.
4. Develop and improve a comprehensive legal framework dedicated to the protection of children's rights. This legal framework should encompass all aspects of child rights, providing a clear and robust foundation for safeguarding children's well-being and ensuring their full participation in society.

In Serbia, all new legislation must be subject to public consultation. However, due to the shortage of time (usually 2 weeks), or the lack of opportunities, this is rarely exercised by NGOs. A good example of public consultation is the [working group focusing on the development of the deinstitutionalisation strategy](#) facilitated by the Ministry for Human Rights and Dialogue that involves a member of Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia, the Mental Disability Rights Initiative-Serbia - Affiliate of Disability Rights International.

Pomoc deci currently implements EU-funded projects: *the Children's Rights, UP!* project is [developing gender equality from early years](#); tackling child sexual abuse; and the [ECD+ project - early childhood development and care for marginalised Roma communities](#)

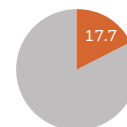
## “Country recommendation

Slovenia should ensure more accessible and multidisciplinary treatment of children and adolescents in the field of mental health.

## Country Profile 2023



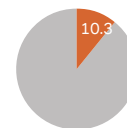
# Slovenia



### Child Population:

**376,390**

17.9% of total population (2021)



### Child Poverty:

**38,768**

10.3% (2022)

▼ -0.7% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth \(SAFY\)](#)

## Children's Rights in Slovenia

There is no specific public body or an institution that oversees the implementation of children's rights in Slovenia. There are primarily two ministries responsible: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Currently they implement the [Programme for Children 2020-2025](#), which was adopted in 2020 and aims at ensuring equal opportunities for all children.

The programme focuses on family environment and housing deprivation, children's health, inclusive preschool and school education, culture and cultural arts education, the most vulnerable groups of children, and preventing the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Another component seeks to enhance the participation of all children in public life, ensure life without violence and develop and deploy child-friendly procedures in the public sector.

Children's rights are also regulated by several laws that mostly have broader implications such as Act on Prevention of Domestic Violence that includes the prohibition of corporal punishment of children.

### Child participation

Children's right to participate is one of the key rights embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) but does not have an adequate national framework in Slovenia. Children's participation is very limited, dependant on the interest of individuals and civil society organisations (CSOs) that facilitate children's right to be heard and speak out.

The Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY) leads the *Children's Parliaments programme* where children discuss the topic close to their everyday lives and propose recommendations. This programme aims to close the gap of non-existing structures by offering space for children to

meaningfully participate in public decision-making.

According to research about child participation in Slovenia brought forward by the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, children's participation is the best opportunity for children to contribute to public policies. However, to enshrine child participation in different policies and across the sectors, Slovenia needs a national strategy, which must include a manual for decision-makers on how to enable a safe and inclusive space for children to express their opinions.

### Child safety and well-being online

According to SAFY, children's safety online requires a more systematic approach in Slovenia, since there is no adequate existing legal framework. SAFY's experience working with children has shown that children are open to receive information as well as training. The same applies to parents and teachers who lack

the skills on how to teach children on the dangers of internet.

To prevent the abuse of children in the digital environment several awareness raising projects were realised by civil society organisations on the [identification and prevention](#) and [awareness and prevention](#), and by the government on [general awareness of loopholes in virtual environment](#). However, a more systemic and targeted approach is needed at national level, implementing policies that create safer digital spaces for children and go beyond traditional awareness raising.

### Education

Education reform has currently been carried out in Slovenia with digitalisation as the main ambition. Emotional and social education should also be considered when revising the school curricula.

### Child protection systems

In Slovenia, the child protection system is scattered and needs enforcement. The *Act on*



*Prevention of Domestic Violence* prohibits all forms of violence against children. However, this legislation is not translated well into practice. SAFY calls for prevention support programmes for families and caregivers at risk to ensure families are assisted before children are separated from them.

Despite the high awareness of children's rights and of child protection against all forms of violence, there are still violations of children's rights - including the absence of a zero-tolerance policy for corporal punishment and child marriages. Moreover, there is a lack of research on corporal punishment of children in families in Slovenia, which is another obstacle to adequate policy responses. Another emerging issue is peer violence. Moreover, the current child protection system is a bureaucratic mechanism without any aspiration to reach out and speak to children in a child-friendly manner.

## Children in migration and refugees

The Office of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for the Support and Integration of Migrants is responsible for children with a migrant background arriving in Slovenia. Thanks to Temporary Protection, most Ukrainian children have been integrated well into the Slovenian communities as well as schools.

However, the situation looks somewhat different for other children with a migrant background who are not provided with services they are entitled to. Since 2017, there have been attempts to establish adequate accommodation facilities, and care and custodial arrangements for unaccompanied children - but without much success.

Slovenia should improve the guardianship system and strengthen foster care for unaccompanied and separated children with a migrant

background. It is also necessary to provide a more holistic form of support for these children in schools, as a remaining obstacle for a better education attainment for all children with a migration background is the language barrier. This is further exacerbated by the shortages of skills and personnel to teach Slovenian as a foreign language.

## Climate change and environmental impacts

In regard to the awareness of climate change and its environmental impacts, Slovenia does not pay sufficient attention to it, neither in public discourse nor in school curricula. In this area, the country follows the policies and measures of the EU but is facing major challenges in achieving the set climate goal to become a carbon-neutral society by 2050. In recent years, the majority of [greenhouse gas emissions](#) have been mainly caused by transport, followed by the energy sector, industry and agriculture, and the waste sector.

## Children's mental health

Mental health of children and its inadequate treatment had been an issue even before Covid-19 pandemic's lockdowns. During the pandemic, SAFY's [TOM telephone](#) (national helpline) was the first point of contact for children with mental-health issues. In 2020-21 there has been alarming statistics among young people's mental health, compared to the period 2015-19. 67% increase of mental problems, of which 27% reported depression, and a 3.7-fold increase of suicidal tendencies, which means every 13th call/contact. In 2022, the situation had slightly improved and the most issues children reported to suffer from were misunderstandings and conflicts with peers, family, psychological problems, school, and bullying.

Children themselves, during the Children's Parliament meetings, have identified mental health of children and young people as the central topic of discussions. Even if they voice their problems, there are several practical

obstacles to reaching the help they seek. For example, there are long waiting lists to get appropriate specialists (e. g. child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists). SAFY points out children's mental health must be prioritised for public policy and investment, because children themselves voice this need so immensely.

### Child-friendly justice

In the area of child-friendly justice, SAFY calls for the establishment of specialised courts for children and the adoption of the guidelines for the interrogation of children. Child-friendly procedures must be developed to ensure children are not victimised for the second time.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Slovenia

Slovenia has a total child population of 376,390, of which 10.3% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. Children most affected by poverty and social exclusion include children who live in single-parent family, children in families with both working parents whose income does not cover all monthly costs, children with special needs, and children in families with long-term sick parents or children.

Families and children from the Roma community also struggle, and experience social exclusion by struggling to access the main services such as healthcare and adequate housing, as well as facing stigmatisation that often leads to bullying and peer violence.

The Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY) argues that to improve the situation of families at risk, a revision of social benefits and child allowances is necessary. For families with children with disabilities, assistance and a funding scheme should be available to be able to get access to or purchase medical devices. Assistance programmes and community centres should be created to support parents find employment and remove the burden of childcare from parents alone.

To address existing gaps, SAFY proposes to modernise the social security system, reduce kindergarten fees, and remove the hidden costs of primary education. Although primary education is free for all children in Slovenia there are other costs that parents need to cover such as school supplies, school meals, excursions, and so on. Special attention should be given to students from the Roma community to ensure they do not

drop out of school prematurely.

As a humanitarian NGO, SAFY raises funds from donor organisations to implement projects and actions to reduce poverty and help families in need. The most recent is a national-wide help for financial and material support for families that lost homes in the devastating floods that took place in August 2023. With the start of the school year, SAFY helps families in need with school supplies, collecting donations for music and sports activities for children that live in poverty.

SAFY's annual *Full School Bag campaign* focuses on the collection of school supplies. With help from different donors (individuals and companies), 137,800 pieces of school supplies and more than 41,900 Euro of financial aid were collected in the last three years.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Slovenia's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level. The National Action Plan of Slovenia was published on 20 April 2023.<sup>1</sup>

The NAP identifies almost all groups of children most in need. The only group that is not included are child victims of violence and abuse. These children are particularly vulnerable because of their stigmatisation, social exclusion and discrimination. They also need to be provided with further support for their successful integration into social life.

The intended measures to reduce poverty and social exclusion are well-designed and the Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY) hope they will be translated into practice. In regards to child protection, Slovenia took a step forward by establishing a House for Children (following the model of the Icelandic Barnahus).

The national monitoring and evaluation framework for NAP's implementation was supposed to be developed in June 2023, however it has not been publicly published yet. In addition to this, information about the progress on NAP's implementation has not been made public nor has the ambition to include CSOs in the design, monitoring, implementation, and evaluation of proposed measures.

As far as the allocated funding is concerned, according to the NAP, it will be funded by different ministries through already existing programmes implemented by schools.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country report for Slovenia only partially reflects the reality on the ground because it focuses on early childhood education and education mainly. It fails to mention the difficult situation of children growing up in poverty and social exclusion – regardless of the fact Slovenia has one of the lowest rates of child poverty.

The analysis of Early Childhood Education and Care covers well the situation in Slovenia. In general, the kindergartens are well organised with professionals working with young children. What was overlooked and is missing for young children is the lack of infrastructure, such as the playgrounds and community-

based centres, for extra-curricular activities in many cities in Slovenia.

According to the Country Report the education system is performing well, which does not show the full picture because Slovenia faces a significant shortage of teachers on all levels.

The Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY) supports the Country Report's analysis and recommendation to increase language support for children with a migrant background. However, SAFY outline the Report's failures to feature children's mental health despite its prominence after the Covid-19 pandemic. Slovenia has launched an initiative to establish centres providing mental-health care for children and adolescents. Some centres are already working, but due to a shortage of specialists, there are still long waiting times for many children to get treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

SAFY calls on decision-makers, including the European Commission, to prioritise children's rights in the digital environment, including their protection from online abuse. Awareness raising initiatives about the harmful effects of digital devices and services must be translated into policies and interventions reaching children.

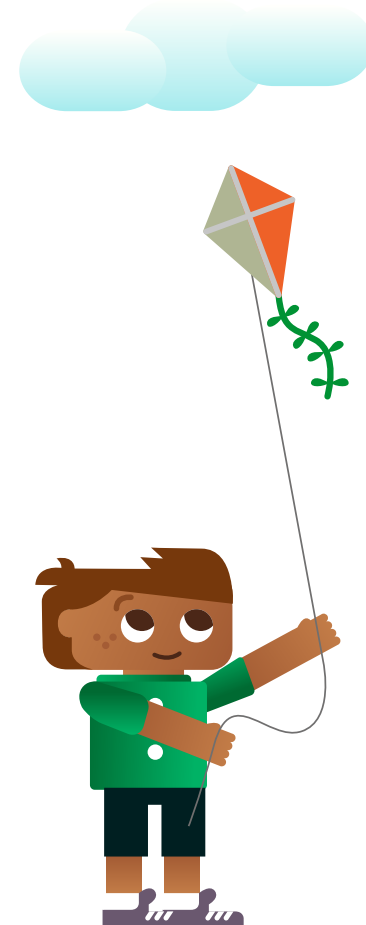
Slovenia's Country Report is well aligned with decision-makers' general perception of the situation of children in Slovenia as being satisfactory, with no major challenges to address. However, this is in contrast with what SAFY and other CSOs active in children's rights witness.

The most promising comment is on the green and digital transformations in education explaining that "Slovenia aims to train 20,000 education professionals and managers – close to half of the teaching population – in digital and green skills, and in skills for environmental sustainability and financial literacy."

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

Country Specific Recommendations for Slovenia depict well the overall reform process needed in Slovenia including the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience plan as well as acceleration of the deployment of renewables to increase the implementation of energy efficiency measures.

However, Slovenia has ongoing school and health reforms that deserve adequate attention to ensure children's rights are respected in the proposed policies.



## “ Country recommendation

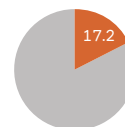
Spain should take action to increase public support for parenting, in line with the Directive (EU) 2019/1158. (Plataforma de Infancia)

Spain should take recommended measures to implement the Organic Law for the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against violence. (FEDAIA)

## Country Profile 2023



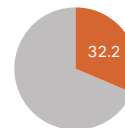
# Spain



### Child Population:

**8,138,086**

17.2% of total population (2021)



### Child Poverty:

**2,620,464**

32.2% (2022)

▼ -1.2% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Plataforma de Infancia](#)

[FEDAIA](#)

## Children's Rights in Spain

Within the Spanish Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, there is a [General Direction of Children's and Adolescents' rights](#) headed by the National Coordinator of the Child Guarantee in Spain. The [Childhood Rights Observatory](#) belongs to the Ministry of Social Rights and 2030 Agenda, with observatories in charge of reporting on the situation of children in each of Spain's 19 autonomous communities. Furthermore, there is a High Commissioner against Child Poverty, which depends on the Presidency of the government.

During the current legislature, great progress has been made in relation to childhood, particularly the [Organic Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence](#) (LOPIVI). Additionally, Plataforma de Infancia and

FEDAIA highlighted the [Strategy for the Eradication of Violence against Children](#), the [Strategy on Children's Rights](#), and the [State Council for the Participation of Children and Adolescents](#). Another key policy is the [education law](#) (LOMLOE), passed in 2020.

Plataforma de Infancia and FEDAIA identified the key challenges in relevant areas related to children's rights in Spain and provided recommendations.

### Child participation

Following the reform of the Organic Law on the Legal Protection of Minors (LORJM) in 2015, children have a recognised right to be heard when they are mature enough, which is presumed from the age of 12, but not in all cases. Despite this reform, no other necessary regulatory modifications have been made to guarantee that

children under 12 years of age are heard.

The government should strengthen and consolidate robust child participation and children association mechanisms at local, regional, and national level and ensure children's meaningful involvement in the design, monitoring and evaluation of all policies that affect them without limit of age.

All public policies must have a transversal focus on children's rights. This means that public policies must include the participation of civil society and children in each of the phases of the public policy cycle, including transparency and accountability mechanisms.

### Child safety and well-being online

From 2011 to 2020, the number of underage victims of crimes

committed online almost tripled, for both sexes. [In 2020, 1,403 complaints were filed that had a boy as the victim and 2,024 complaints in which the victim was a girl](#). The official and public data and statistics, disaggregated by age and sex, are still insufficiently able to identify different forms of violence directed towards children online.

To transform the digital environment into a safe environment for children, the [LOPIVI](#) establishes collaboration with platforms and service providers, as well as the configuration of age verification mechanisms, content labelling, and so on. However, the LOPIVI does not establish measures to effectively prevent children and adolescents from having access to adult content. Furthermore, since 2018 Spain has a pending law aimed at guaranteeing the rights of children and their safety online.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Additional Provision 19 of Organic Law 3/2018, of December 5, on the Protection of Personal Data and guarantee of digital rights (BOE no. 294, of December 6, 2018).

It is essential to guarantee that future laws on the protection of children in the digital environment considers General Comment 25 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Online access and use must be effectively regulated to prevent minors from being exposed to pornographic, violent, or inappropriate content and internet providers and other companies should be legally obliged to report suspicions of online child sexual exploitation.

### Child protection systems

Plataforma de Infancia and FEDAIA are very pleased and welcome that the Spanish government is currently working on a deinstitutionalisation strategy.

According to the latest official available data from 2021:

- There are 56,902 children in the Spanish protection system; 18,455 children in foster care; and 16,177 children in residential centres.
- There are 1,039 children under 6 years of age in residential

care, despite legislation stating that residential care shall not be agreed for children under 3 years of age, except in cases of duly accredited impossibility, and shall be avoided for children under 6 years of age.

- 97.71% of unaccompanied migrant children are in residential care.

Authority intervention should focus on family support programmes and on providing legal guarantees for the procedures related to the withdrawal of guardianship to prevent children from entering the protection system. Foster care should be promoted as a priority measure and deinstitutionalisation measures must be urgently taken for children under 6 years of age.

Residential settings must guarantee the respect of a rights-based approach, by ensuring that they are safe, of good quality, flexible, participatory, with individualised care, maximum of 6 children per place, and with accessible and adapted communication mechanisms.

Working with families of origin to favour family reintegration for children is absolutely essential.

The rights of adolescents transitioning into adulthood must be respected, as part of the State's obligations to support their independent living.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

Spain continues to sell weaponry to countries involved in armed conflict, including those [that recruit and use children in these conflicts](#).

The country should legislate to suspend the sale of defence material and deny new authorisations for the transfer of such material to countries involved in armed conflict, where serious violations against children are committed or might be committed, as stated in the annual reports of the UN Secretary-General. The Inter-ministerial Regulatory Board of Foreign Trade in Defence Material and Dual Use should consider these criteria.

Spain should modify *article 112 of the Royal Ordinances of the Armed Forces* to include the protection offered by the Optional Protocol regarding the participation of boys and girls in armed conflicts.

### Children in migration and refugees

Spain has showed an inadequate response to the migration crises, including the concern regarding the lack of official data on the arrivals of migrants, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, lack of legal aid, difficulties in identifying vulnerable individuals, and lack of resources. The country also presented various challenges in relation to the identification of children seeking international protection, and lack of a child-focused approach in the asylum procedure with the repatriation of migrant children and other vulnerable individuals not complying with the legally established guarantees of protection.

As of January 2022, the Committee on the Rights of the

Child has issued 15 views against Spain and it has declared that the current age determination procedure in the country violates children's rights. Moreover, the country has seen an increase in the criminalisation and stigmatisation of unaccompanied migrant children, hate content on social networks, and in the media's treatment of news regarding unaccompanied migrant children.

The unaccompanied migrant children must be treated as children first and a plan for 'the Prevention of the Criminalisation of Unaccompanied Migrant Children' must be adopted.

The new age assessment procedure for unaccompanied migrant children needs to incorporate the opinions of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The common information system provided in the *Model for the management of migratory contingencies for unaccompanied children and adolescents* must be effectively implemented.

The access to the international protection procedure must be guaranteed to all children. A procedure for the identification of individuals in vulnerable situations at the border must be adopted and professionals must be trained on the conditions and needs of the most vulnerable children.

The repatriation of unaccompanied migrant children needs to be put in place only when it is based on a rigorous analysis of the children's best interest and when their safety and well-being in the country of origin can be ensured.

### **Climate change and environmental impacts**

The right of children to a healthy environment has begun to form part of the political agenda at the national level. Young people have played an essential role in defending this right.

The political agenda must prioritise the fulfilment of the *Declaration on Children, Youth*

*and Climate Action* and establish mechanisms to monitor its fulfilment. Children's participation in the governance and decision-making mechanisms of the environmental agenda must be ensured.

There is also a need to improve the knowledge about the impact of environmental degradation and climate change on children.

A child-friendly approach to the new urban development plans must be ensured, by paying special attention to the creation and maintenance of green spaces that take into account the rights of children as well as to prioritise infrastructures that help reduce the impact of heat (blue zones), such as water fountains, access to public swimming pools, and so on.

### **Children's mental health**

Despite an alarming increase in the child population affected by mental health problems, the necessary support measures are still not being established.

There is a need to implement a 'National Mental Health Policy for Children and Adolescents' by mainstreaming the child-rights approach in the new National Mental Health Strategy and the right to mental health in the new *National Strategic Plan for Children and Adolescents*.

The specialty of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology should be created, and all schools should have a psychologist as well as invest in awareness raising programmes.

## **Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities**

### **Child poverty in Spain**

Spain has a total child population of 8.13 million, 32.2% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022. This is the third highest rate in the EU, although the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021 (33.4%). This decrease is mainly thanks to



urgent actions in the social and economic fields implemented by the government of Spain to address the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Escudo Social measures).

The worrying rate of child poverty and social exclusion in the country indicates [the need to allocate more and better public resources to the fight against child poverty](#). For example, Spain dedicates only around 1.6% of GDP in child protection policies, when the European average is 2.5% of GDP.

Households with 3 or more children are the most affected by poverty in Spain and single-parent households are especially vulnerable. Other groups of children in need are the children whose parents are immigrants, who have a poverty rate of 71.1%, and the teenagers (between 13 and 17 years), who have the highest risk of poverty rate among children (35%).

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, the Spanish government should:

1. Guarantee access of the most vulnerable children and families to the Minimum Vital Income (Ingreso Mínimo Vital) scheme approved in May 2020, which provides cash benefits to individuals and families with incomes below the at-risk of severe poverty. The effective implementation of this measure must be ensured, and the necessary assistance must be provided to apply for its concession, among other issues.
2. Increase [family and parenting support](#), for example by establishing universal parenting aid through refundable deductions in personal income tax. The aim of this measure is to increase financial support to cover the costs of raising children, to reduce inequality in access to tax benefits by households with lower incomes and prevent and reduce child poverty and its intensity.

3. Guarantee universal and free access to early childhood education and care (0-3 years), with a special focus on the most vulnerable children and families and ensure a greater number of places are available.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Spain's National Action Plan

The National Action Plan (NAP) of Spain was published on 11 July 2022.<sup>2</sup> The NAP rightfully identifies the children most in need in the country, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, Roma children, children in the child protection system, children living in single-parent households, children experiencing severe housing deprivation, children in conflict with the law, and victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation.

Moreover, the NAP explains the challenges that Spain faces in relation to access to education, health, and adequate housing, and provides recommendations to ensure the rights of children, especially those living in vulnerable situations.

The NAP includes indicators and a monitoring framework. Deadlines are established for follow-up reports, to create spaces for knowledge exchange, and to carry out interim and final evaluations by 2030. It will be crucial, however, that they are effectively implemented and that the measures are adjusted to the real needs of children and their families in Spain.

Plataforma de Infancia has participated in the creation of the indicator to measure the evaluation of the NAP and will continue promoting the implementation of the Child Guarantee in Spain through their work.

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<sup>2</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

The fact that regional Children's Councils are not regulated represents a major problem in Spain. Therefore, the Child Guarantee in Spain should help establishing a common regulation for children's meaningful participation.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country report for Spain did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. The Country Report failed to include children in alternative care. The only reference to deinstitutionalisation is that ESF+ will also support housing for deinstitutionalised children.

The European Semester does not provide much information on education in Spain. Although programmes such as the

*Programme for Educational Guidance, Advancement and Enrichment* (PROA+) has led to greater investment in education, there is still little investment in infrastructures, scholarships and grants, school services, training, or programmes to improve and support the quality of education.

With regard to early school leaving, the [early school dropout rate](#) in Spain in 2022 stood at 13.9%, still far from the 9.7% average rate in the EU. Another important educational issue in Spain is segregation, which affects the quality, equity, and accessibility of education. The lack of free and accessible places for 0-3 years, the lack of inclusive education for children with developmental disorders, or the administrative obstacles that some children face to attend school, especially migrant children, are other educational challenges that Spain must face.

Although there have been improvements in defining ways to listen to children and ensure they

exercise their right to participate, there are still major gaps especially when it comes to the participation of children from the most vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers and children in alternative care. Children on the move are still in many situations treated as foreigners rather than as children first.

Although Plataforma de Infancia and FEDAIA have not been involved in the Semester Process 2023, they have met with the European Commission to monitor the development of Spain's policies based on past recommendations.

Plataforma de Infancia and FEDAIA regretted that in the Country Report for Spain there are not many specific commitments related to investing in children. They found useful, however, that the report mentions the government's commitment to improve access to early childhood education and care in all autonomous communities. However, it fails

to include a comprehensive and holistic reference to the importance of early childhood development.

### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report do not mention the reforms that Spain needs to have a clear child-rights focus. For example, in the report, education is considered only to achieve better qualifications in the labour market, not as a right of children and adolescents.

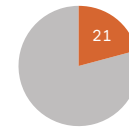
## “ Country recommendation

It is essential to prohibit the use of solitary confinement in Sweden's compulsory care institutions and ensure that all staff receive adequate and continuing training and capacity building in how to apply a human rights-based approach in their work.

Country Profile 2023



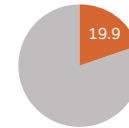
# Sweden



### Child Population:

**2,198,240**

21% of total population (2021)



### Child Poverty:

**437,449**

19.9% (2022)

▲ +0.2% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Barnens rätt i samhället (Children's Rights in Society) (BRIS)

## Children's Rights in Sweden

Sweden has a Minister for Social Services – this is the first minister to have sole responsibility for social services. Eurochild member Barnens rätt i samhället (BRIS) finds this positive, to underline the importance of social services (an important area for ensuring children's rights).

Children's rights are included in the Minister's portfolio, together with disabilities and social services, and the Minister is one of four in the larger Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. BRIS also see this as a challenge with four ministers in the same department, and there is the risk that the ministers will not have sufficient time to collaborate and work together for children's rights outside their portfolios.

With Save the Children and UNICEF Sweden, BRIS has

repeatedly [requested that a minister be appointed specifically for children's rights in Sweden.](#)

BRIS identified several key areas with recommendations for children's rights in Sweden.

### Child participation

According to a [recent study from the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society](#), in Sweden, only two out of ten young people aged 13-25 years feel they have the opportunity to express their opinions to decision-makers in their municipality. About four out of ten young people say that they want to influence issues concerning their municipality, a decrease compared to 2015. Reasons for not wanting to participate are mainly lack of knowledge, time, and trust.

Children are rarely consulted in governmental inquiries, even when the issues reviewed directly

concern them. Some children might receive information from civil society organisations (CSOs) and The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, who meet children, but not from children directly. For example, the inquiry on a new social services act<sup>1</sup> and the inquiry on children suspected of crimes.<sup>2</sup>

BRIS conducts an annual survey in which Sweden's municipalities are asked to assess how they live up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The first survey was sent out in 2019 before the Children's Convention became Swedish law.

Earlier this year, BRIS published the results of the 2023 [survey](#), which states that young children who contacted the BRIS confidential children's helpline reported that adults who witnessed them being maltreated yet did not act upon them. There is a risk that young children's perspectives are not highlighted

in research and practice. 176 of Sweden's 290 municipalities responded to the 2023 survey. [BRIS' latest report](#) aligns with previous years findings that most municipalities need strategies for involving children in decisions.

Many municipalities in Sweden stated that they do not carry out strategic work on children's participation, especially children under six years old. Sweden must ensure that even the youngest children participate in decisions affecting them.

BRIS recommends that the Swedish government establishes regulations with implementation plans to ensure non-discriminatory, relevant, and meaningful involvement of children in community issues at national, regional and local levels. National legislation, including the [Föräldrabalk](#) (Parental Code), should be amended to be better in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC

1 Government official report, *SOU 2020:47 Hållbar socialtjänst*.  
2 *Förbättrade åtgärder när barn misstänks för brott, SOU 2022:1*.

and be implemented in practice for every child. Governmental inquiries on issues of concern for children should be required to involve them directly.

There is a need for Sweden's judicial system to better support children with disabilities. All professionals in courts need to be trained on Article 12 of the UNCRC, including how to assess a child's maturity, and specific aspects of relevance for children with disabilities in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Police engaging with children with disabilities should be specialised to do so, and there is a need to ensure children with disabilities have access to alternative and complementary communication and other necessary support in all legal proceedings.

### **Anti-child rights movement**

In general, there is a positive attitude towards the rights of children in Sweden, but there are tendencies where children's

rights are questioned in the wider society. This is often experienced by children from vulnerable groups, including:

- Children seeking asylum;
- LGBTQ+ (HBTQ+), especially children wanting to change their gender;
- Children as criminal offenders;
- Children in custody battles, for example, when fathers are fighting custody and the rights of children are undermined.

There is also a substantial lack of trust in social services. This is not explicitly an anti-child rights movement, but it directly affects children's rights to social services and care in Sweden.

### **Child protection systems**

There are several areas for improvement regarding child protection systems in Sweden. The government has proposed a [new Social Services Act](#). BRIS has long wanted to see changes in the Social Services Act with a greater focus on preventive work and not only in reaction to crises. This is what needs

to be improved in the current system. In addition, there needs to be improved resources and social work should have a wider context, rather than only preventing young criminal offenders.

In August 2023, the Swedish government announced that they would investigate the possibilities for staff in schools, social services, and healthcare settings to inform the police if they believe they are working with someone in the country illegally. If such a practice is implemented, Eurochild member is very concerned that this will have a negative impact on individuals' trust in state authorities and may negatively affect children's rights to access education and health care. Disinformation about social services is currently being [actively debated](#) in Sweden.

Care in closed institutions is governed by the Statens institutionsstyrelse (SiS – The Swedish National Board of Institutional Care), which has

been massively criticised by several child rights organisations. BRIS calls for the institutional care of children to be reformed, including a review of how such care should be carried out and if SiS is the appropriate provider.

A top priority must be changing the law permitting solitary confinement of children in care. It is also essential to ensure that all staff in Sweden's compulsory care institutions receive adequate and continuing training and capacity building in how to apply a human rights-based approach in their work.

### **Children impacted by war and conflict**

In Sweden, the situation is very stressful for children seeking asylum and children from Ukraine. In accordance with recommendations from BRIS and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, several areas require more attention by the Swedish government, as set out in the [2022 Report from CSOs working with Child Rights](#).

The daily allowance for children seeking asylum and families with more than two children should be increased. More financial support should also be available for single-parent families, undocumented children and other children in disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

All children should have their asylum claims individually assessed, and measures should be taken by the Swedish government to ensure that the implementation of the new [Aliens Act](#) is in line with the UNCRC. The new Act should also be revised to include child-specific forms of persecution, and there should be an assessment of alignment and further gaps with the UNCRC, including child rights impact assessments. Finally, assurances are needed from authorities that the legislation and its implementation do not infringe on children's right to family reunification.

BRIS has also just published a [new report](#) on how children in migration are received in Sweden.

The report looks into children's and parents' experience from the fleeing to Sweden and the importance of recovery for displaced children. The report shows that how children are received are just as important for children's mental health as the experience of being displaced.

### Children impacted by the pandemic and the exacerbated inequalities

BRIS received many reports from children stating they were alarmed that the Swedish national helpline was shutting down. For BRIS, this could risk more children living with violence at home, more conflicts at home, increased anxiety, and a general risk to systems supporting children's lives. BRIS made [several recommendations to the government of Sweden](#), including that a national mapping of children's well-being after the pandemic must be carried out.

### Climate change and environmental impacts

Children are affected by the debate on climate change. BRIS has received an increase in [comments from children](#) who are concerned about climate change and how it will affect them and their future.

**“I feel bad about the future. Partly terrified because the world will perish, either because of overpopulation or because we have destroyed it too much. But I am also afraid for war and nuclear weapons.”**

**– Quote from a child**

### Children's mental health

Children's mental health is the most common reason for children contacting the BRIS helpline. There are many shortcomings

regarding children's mental health in Sweden. In a [recent national debate](#) featuring several experts on children's mental health, in Sweden's national news media (Dagens Nyheter), BRIS asked for more knowledge on why an increasing number of children in Sweden are dealing with mental health issues.

There are also areas for improvement in the Swedish healthcare system. The waiting list for specialised psychiatric care for children and adolescents (Barn- och ungdomspsykiatri - BUP) is too long. The initial healthcare professional that children have contact with, often lacks knowledge of child healthcare.

### Children in the judicial system

BRIS is very concerned with the current government's solutions to gang-related crime, focusing on more punitive precautions against children to address criminal involvement. In March 2023, the [UN Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), strongly urged Sweden not to go ahead with

the suggestion of lowering the age of criminal offence from 15 to 12 years old. A [government investigation](#) was also presented in August, suggesting prisons for children.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Sweden

Sweden has a total child population of 2,198,240, of which 19.9% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to nearly 437,449 children in need in Sweden. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased in recent years.

According to [Statistics Sweden](#), in 2020, 8.5% of children living at home had a low-income standard, meaning the family incomes were lower than necessary living

costs. This was more common among children with a migration background.

Save the Children Sweden conducted a [recent survey](#) in Sweden in the spring of 2023 and found that child poverty is growing due to inflation and the economic crises in Sweden.

According to BRIS, the groups of children most in need are children in asylum, children in foster care, children in the judicial system, children from racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ (HBTQ+) young children.

Key services needed to support these children are a strengthened welfare system, priorities on social insurance such as housing allowance, more inclusive schools that provide good quality education for all children, accessible and affordable housing that is not segregated<sup>3</sup>, and stable incomes that are high

enough for families to live off and increased financial allowances for asylum seeking children.

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, BRIS recommends that the Swedish government should prioritise:

- The development of children's rights in the judicial system, and not lower the criminal age, or open special prisons for children.
- Addressing the need for developments in health care regarding adequate and timely children's mental health services.
- Making child poverty a key priority in Sweden and relocating resources to social security.
- A national budgeting process with a child rights analysis.
- Municipalities develop child participation strategies and ensure they involve children, even young children, in all decisions that impact them.

## The European Child Guarantee

### Sweden's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The NAP of Sweden was published in March 2022<sup>4</sup>. The NAP rightfully identifies the following key target groups of children for support:

- Children living in economic disadvantage - 208,000 in 2019;
- Minors who are homeless or in a situation of severe housing hardship – 572 children evicted in 2021; 33.8% of people who are homeless reported being parents in 2017; 6,000 children in shelters;

<sup>3</sup> There are strong socio-economic and ethnic dimensions when it comes to families living in poorer neighbourhoods in Sweden.

<sup>4</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

- Children with disabilities – 22%, or approximately 1 in 5 children;
- Children with a migrant background in socioeconomically deprived areas – 30% of people born outside Europe live in overcrowded housing;
- Children in alternative care – 27,300 children, most in family-based care;
- Children without access to early education – 4%, approximately 15,800, of children aged 3-5 do not attend preschool or educational care;
- Nutrition challenges – 1 in 5 pupils are overweight or obese;
- Young people not in employment, education, or training – 1,800 young people, aged 15-19.

The NAP also includes key services on education, healthcare including mental health and dental care, school-based leisure facilities, housing, and alternative care, which would be key to lifting children out of poverty and social exclusion in Sweden.

## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report and Recommendations for Sweden reflected some of the realities on the ground in Sweden. Barnens rätt i samhället welcomed the inclusion of the inequalities of education in Sweden and the need for better training for early years staff.

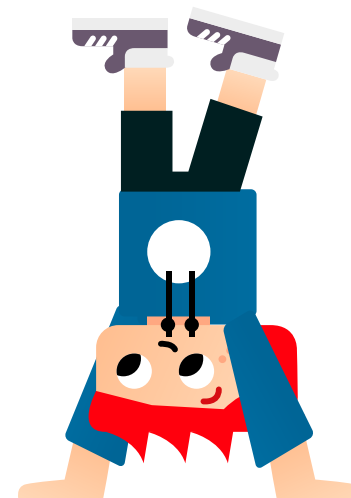
However, BRIS identified many priorities not included in the Report or Recommendations. Some of these were included in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Sweden](#) (March 2023), namely:

- Children's rights in alternative care, especially children in SiS. SiS requires reform, and the government needs to promptly revise the law that still permits

the isolation of children in these care facilities.

- Concerns about the current development within the Swedish school system. Equal access to high quality education within the education system is crucial and BRIS is worried that disadvantaged groups are being marginalised.

Overall, BRIS was not involved in the Semester Process in 2023 and the recommendations in the Country Report do not correspond sufficiently to reform needs in Sweden.





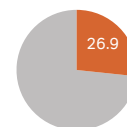
## “Country recommendation

Türkiye should take measures to develop social work practices that include prevention, protection, and intervention in children's well-being at micro and macro levels.

Country  
Profile 2023



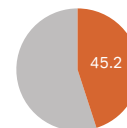
# Türkiye



**Child Population:**

**22,738,300**

26.9% of total population (2021)



**Child Poverty:**

**10,283,297**

45.2% (2021)

▲ +1.8% compared to 2020

**RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):**

Hayat Sende Youth Academy Association

## Children's Rights in Türkiye

The Ministry of Family and Social Services is responsible for Children's Rights in Türkiye. It is also responsible for monitoring the implementation of the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

There is a [sub-committee](#) covering different topics of children's rights in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM).

### Child participation

Eurochild member Hayat Sende observes that meaningful participation of children in Türkiye appears to be lacking. Despite the government's numerous programmes aimed at promoting children's participation, it seems that these initiatives do not genuinely prioritise and value the opinions of children.

### Child safety and well-being online

The Ministry of Family and Social Affairs in Türkiye has launched a [campaign](#) aimed at safeguarding children online, and different projects are currently underway to protect children in various aspects of their lives. However, a critical challenge in ensuring the protection of children in the digital realm is the lack of awareness among families and teachers about their crucial roles in keeping children safe online. Further, the scarcity of quality time that families spend with their children also serves as an additional barrier to children's protection.

### Child protection system

In Türkiye, the Ministry of Family and Social Services plays a central role in child protection and alternative care processes. Caseworkers, the majority of whom are social workers, assess the socioeconomic and psychological well-being of children and their families. The process usually commences with

the Ministry of Family, but the protection order is granted by the Ministry of Justice based on social inquiry reports.

Two key national laws govern the field of child protection: [Child Protection Law 5395](#) and [Social Services Law 2828](#). Most regulations related to children's rights are derived from these laws. However, while these legislations outline measures for children growing up under state protection in detail, they offer limited guidance for children from other vulnerable groups. Specific groups such as children in contact with the law, refugee children, and children with disabilities are mentioned in the legislation, with the expectation that they will benefit from various services. Unfortunately, these laws lack a detailed framework for implementation.

More comprehensive legislation is required tailored for each of these groups of children. In the absence of detailed legal frameworks, circulars issued by the Ministry are often used as guidelines.

However, these circulars are typically not made accessible to the public and do not offer a holistic service implementation model. Consequently, different interpretations arise, depending on individual perspectives within the Ministry. This has negatively impacted the accountability of implementation.

The Child Protection Law encompasses five primary injunctions, or state interventions, designed to ensure the protection of children. These injunctions are applied in some cases when children remain with their families and in other cases when they are placed in alternative care. In 2021, 607 children were placed under care, while 6,107 children received support through these injunctions:

1. Counselling Injunction: Training and psychosocial support for parents concerning the care of their children.
2. Education Injunction: Special monitoring of a child's school attendance.
3. Care Injunction: Protection and care of children under state

- supervision in alternative care.
4. Accommodation Injunction: Shelter provision for individuals with children or pregnant women.
  5. Health Injunction: Guarantees the child's access to health services and ongoing health monitoring.

In the execution of these injunctions, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Labor share responsibilities with the Ministry of Family and Social Services.

Although the legislation assigns responsibilities for child protection based on a division of tasks among these various ministries, in practice, child protection is often treated as the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Family and Social Services.

The capacity of the child protection system is inadequate. Following the war in Syria, mass migrations, and earthquakes, the number of children requiring protection

has surged. However, the system's capacity has not grown accordingly. Consequently, the system currently only offers immediate protection and lacks preventive measures, counselling, empowerment, and more. There is a significant absence of coordination among governmental bodies responsible for monitoring children at risk.

The welfare of at-risk children and those under state protection is of utmost concern. The protection system exhibits delayed responses to potential risks, leading to the identification of many children as victims of violence and abuse at an advanced age. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of monitoring and follow-up of services. For instance, modifications are introduced annually to the alternative care system, yet authorities do not assess its effectiveness. There are no consequences for professionals who fail to safeguard children, resulting in a system reliant on the discretion

of individuals. This, in turn, fosters a reckless approach among professionals.

Another substantial issue within the child protection system is the conflation of various disciplines such as social work, psychology, and sociology. While each possesses distinct skill sets, the government has enacted laws that categorise all these professions as 'social work/services officers'.

Consequently, individuals from diverse backgrounds, including teachers, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, and even nurses working within the Ministry of Family and Social Services are tasked with responsibilities that should be carried out by trained social work professionals. This situation has adverse consequences, as teachers or sociologists are ill-equipped to identify and intervene effectively with traumatised children. Ultimately, children suffer as a result of this practice.

## Children impacted by war and conflict

The child protection system applies uniformly to all children, regardless of their nationality, whether they are citizens from Türkiye or not. All children, including Ukrainian, Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan children, receive equal support in Türkiye. However, a significant issue arises for children under state alternative care. Children from Türkiye, upon leaving state care, have access to various financial and employment opportunities.

However, children of other nationalities do not have access to these services after they reach the age of 18. This is problematic because continued support after leaving care is crucial for the well-being of these children.

## Children's mental health

Currently, there is no comprehensive strategy in place to safeguard the mental health of children. While hospitals do have psychiatrists, psychologists,

and social workers, access to these professionals is often limited to families who visit the hospital. Government hospitals, in particular, allocate very brief periods for mental health care, typically around 10-15 minutes.

Private mental health services come with high costs, making it challenging for families to access qualified care when a child requires mental health support. Additionally, identifying children in need of mental health assistance is difficult due to the absence of implemented prevention and protection strategies.

## Education

Mental health supports for children in schools also appear to be lacking in Türkiye. This is especially important given the widespread effect that digital products have on children's and teenagers' mental health. Teachers often struggle to identify and intervene when children are at risk. Although schools have counsellors (known as PDR teachers - Psikolojik Danışmanlık

ve Rehberlik), they may be unable to provide comprehensive assistance to children and families, due to schools and community systems lacking the necessary tools and support structures.

Hayat Sende strongly recommends the introduction of social workers within schools. Their holistic approach and understanding of children's support needs can help prevent and mitigate risks more effectively.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Türkiye

Türkiye has a total child population of 22,738,300 (2022). In 2021, the child poverty rate stood at 45.2%, marking an increase in child poverty levels from 2020 (43.4%).

This surge in poverty across Türkiye can be primarily attributed to economic disparities and

imbalances in recent years. The repercussions of this trend include a heightened risk of neglect, child abuse, child labour, and early marriages within impoverished families. The most effective means of mitigating these risks is for adults to actively participate in the labour market and secure an adequate income. Without this, safeguarding children from these hazards becomes exceedingly challenging. Children residing in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, those raised by single parents, Roma children, and migrant children are particularly vulnerable.

## Countries in Accession

Every year, the European Commission publishes the Enlargement Package that assesses the state of play in accession countries, including progress concerning upholding human rights and children's rights. Eurochild and Hayat Sende contributed to the [2023 consultation on the Enlargement Package](#) to provide a child-rights perspective and insights on the

situation for children in need. To address the pressing issues in Türkiye, the five policy priorities have been identified:

1. Stabilising the economy and providing financial support for families and communities to ensure a stable economic environment - extending financial support to families and communities are essential steps to alleviate child poverty.
2. Implementing prevention and protection initiatives at the local level to establish prevention and protection mechanisms in localities such as villages, neighbourhoods, and rural areas to safeguard vulnerable children.
3. Establish community-based support structures to assist families and children in need.
4. Expand the social work profession to address emerging needs of children such as abuse and bullying and develop the prevention programmes and counselling for children at risk.
5. Ensure adequate education and skills for professionals involved in social services, psychological support, and prevention

programmes. Regular monitoring and evaluation by responsible public authorities is needed to ensure children receive the best quality support.

Influencing national policy is a complex endeavour. This complexity arises from the constant changes that occur with each new ministerial appointment. While Hayat Sende has been invited by the government to participate in various policy meetings and have proposed several policy initiatives, it remains a challenging and uncertain process. While it shows promise, participation in these meetings does not guarantee the shaping of policy.

Furthermore, Eurochild member from Türkiye is actively engaged in several EU-funded projects aimed at driving positive change:

- the [Hand in Hand, Empowering You](#) project to strengthen the organisation's capacity and eliminate the labelling and discrimination faced by young people.
- the [UN Women, Strong Civil Society](#) project aims to eliminate all kinds of discrimination against women and girls in public and private spaces.
- the [Let's Break Down Social Walls](#) project, with the support of the European Union's Civil Thinking Programme, aims to address erroneous discourses in the media and society towards children and young people under state protection and create a common more constructive communication with and for these children and young people.



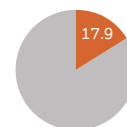
## “Country recommendation

Ukraine should develop a national strategy on children's rights and ensure governmental programmes respect, protect and fulfil each right defined by the UNCRC.

Country Profile 2023



# Ukraine



**Child Population:**

**7,348,531**

17.9% of total population (2022)



**Child Poverty:**

Data not available

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Ms. Polina Klykova, founder of [Children's Rights Info](#), children's rights activist and defender (Individual member)

## Children's Rights in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 put into place a comprehensive range of changes to those responsible for children's rights and policy development. From August 2011 to June 2021, there was a [Commissioner \(Ombudsman\) of the President of Ukraine for Children's Rights](#). This position was regulated by a relevant Act that defined responsibilities and authorities and worked within the Office of the President of Ukraine. However, in June 2021, this position was abolished. Ms. Daria Herasymchuk is currently the [Advisor - Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights and Child Rehabilitation](#).

Currently, a range of authorities focus on children's rights in Ukraine, namely:

- The Parliament's Ombudsman on Human Rights. Its Secretariat

includes the Department for Monitoring the Observance of the Rights of the Child, Family, Youth and Sports. The Representative of the Ombudsman for the Rights of Children, Family, Youth and Sports is Iryna Suslova, who is responsible for constitutional human rights fulfilment, at time of publication.

- The General Prosecutor's Office in the Department for the Protection of Children's Rights and Combating Domestic Violence. Yulia Usenko is Head of Department. The Office ensures the law implementation in criminal proceedings when the case is related to childhood protection<sup>1</sup> and in cases of children in contact and conflict with the law.
- The National Police of Ukraine. Bogdan Vasyl is the Head of the Department responsible for preventing crimes committed by minors, working with children who tend to commit crimes,

searching for missing children, and preventing child abuse.

- The Ministry of Social Policy<sup>2</sup> includes the Department of Children's Rights Protection, the Directorate for Overcoming Difficult Life Circumstances (term changed to *Crises Families*), and an Expert Group on ensuring and protecting children's rights.
- The Ministry of Justice includes the Directorate for International Law, the [Department on International Legal Assistance](#), and the Division on International Legal Assistance in Civil Matters. Olha Zozulia is the Head of the Division, which is responsible for processing cases of international child abductions under the [Act on Implementation of the Hague Convention of Abductions in Ukraine](#).
- The Ministry of Education, with its Directorate for the Preschool, School, Out-Of-School and Inclusive Education – led by

Director General Eresko Oleh. Key [responsibilities](#) are related to ensuring children's right to education.

- The [Ombudsman for Education](#) is Serhiy Horbachov, assigned by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, ensures rights in education and works with appeals from pupils/students, their parents, and educators.

### Key policies on children's rights in Ukraine

- Legislation framework – the Law of Ukraine on Childhood Protection is a key national act aligned with the UNCRC, and has the same or similar articles focused on children's rights. Children's rights are mostly related to the Civil Code and Family Code but are also cross-cutting rights in many national acts.
- Governmental policies and programmes – although a range of policies refers to children's

<sup>1</sup> Childhood protection' (охорона дитинства) is the term used in Ukrainian national legislation which is similar to both 'child welfare' and 'children's rights' protection.

<sup>2</sup> Note – the Department for the Children's Rights was in this Ministry before March 2020.

rights in Ukraine, some are not kept up to date and are conclude without being reviewed or replaced. For example:

- ° Current programmes: the [National Strategy for Reforming the Justice System for Children](#) (2018-2023) and the [Concept of the State Social Program for Children's Health Improvement and Recreation](#) (2021-2025);
- ° Outdated programme with no replacement, the [State Social Program "National Action Plan for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child"](#) (2018-2021).

Ms. Klykova identified several critical areas on children's rights and provided various recommendations.

### Child participation

Children are experts in their own lives and should

participate in decisions that affect them. However, often, this is practised in Ukraine as question-and-answer sessions and simply quoting children, which can be tokenistic. There is a lack of awareness of child participation requirements and techniques regarding decisions that affect them by Courts and administrative decision-makers, e.g., Child Protection Services. Often, the children who provide input to members of the national or local councils and other entities, such as school settings, are 'high achieving' children with good marks. However, children from so-called 'problematic families', children with disabilities, minority children and children from diverse communities are not often given such opportunities.

There are no safe and confidential processes for children to report issues to a professional or representative

in Ukraine. Children's comments are often ignored or reported to those who are violating children's rights.

### Recommendations

Ukraine should introduce obligatory child participation training for judges and Child Protection Services professionals and establish minimum frameworks and standards for meaningful engagement with children and young people, including those from diverse backgrounds, by local Councils and other entities. Additionally, Ukraine should establish requirements for all entities, specifically for national non-governmental organisations, to ensure and implement practices on safe and confidential processes for children to report to a professional or representative about any issues that concern them.

### Child safety and well-being online

Research on [Sexual abuse of children and sexual exploitation of children on the Internet in Ukraine](#) (2020) states that 95% of school-aged children have access to the internet at home<sup>3</sup>. The same research shows that over one year, 14.4% of children in Ukraine were asked about their intimate body parts online, 11% received intimate pictures, 8% were asked to send their intimate photos, 3.4% were asked to touch themselves sexually in front of a web-camera, 1% had intimate meetings offline with people they had met online.

Penalties related to child abuse online in Ukraine includes an [Administrative Code](#) that ensures a penalty for bullying within educational settings<sup>4</sup>. Online grooming of children and producing/dissemination/viewing/possession of Child Sexual

<sup>3</sup> See slide 26 for further information. The study was conducted by Child Rescue Service in partnership with Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for the Rights of the Child with Proinsight Lab Agency, as a research complementor/contractor.

<sup>4</sup> Only bullying between school participants, including online bullying, e.g., student-student bullying, student-teacher bullying.



Exploitation and Abuse Material (CSEAM) is a criminal offence. However, the National Strategy 2021-2026 on child protection in the digital environment has never been adopted.

### Child protection systems

The Ukrainian legislation framework recognises the need for child protection from all forms of child maltreatment and defines entities responsible for identifying, reporting, and responding to such cases. In practice, there are a few obstacles to ensuring effective child protection: issues in multisectoral collaboration; limited working hours of child protection services (CPS), and CPS professionals are not required to have specific training before they get a position and authority to decide on behalf of children.

### Recommendations

It is essential to enhance and encourage multisectoral collaboration among entities working with children, with adequate training available for all entities with a responsibility for child protection. There must be minimum qualifications and training for CPS professionals covering child-specific knowledge and skills. At least one CPS professional should be available 24/7 to ensure children are adequately protected.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

Since the full-scale war, it is fair to say that every child has been impacted by the war in Ukraine. The depth of impact and the scope of rights violated include but are not limited to rights to life, health, education, family, identity, information, and participation. Each child's

experience is different, but no child has escaped the consequences of war.

Children were evacuated across and out of Ukraine during the first hours of the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022. According to UNICEF, in March 2022, 57% of children in Ukraine (4.3 million children out of 7.5 million) experienced some form of displacement (1.8 million crossed the border, and 2.5 million were internally displaced. In many situations, children crossed the borders without their fathers. These numbers have increased over the past 20 months. As published by UNHCR (2023), over eight million individuals left Ukraine, and over five million people were internally displaced within Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

### Recommendations

At international level:

- International Humanitarian Law

(IHL) must consider children's rights. War impacts childhood, and this was reflected in relevant Declarations adopted after the World Wars. Still, current IHL acts were adopted before the UNCRC and should be reviewed.

- There must be clear penalties for rights violations on children, for example children not being able to go to school because of war and conflict, and a clear mechanism for identifying those responsible and setting penalties.
- Regardless of direct or indirect participation, children (and adults) must receive compensation (financial compensation as victims). Moreover, a child's right to participation in courts must be recognised, considering UNCRC General Comment 12, their participation should be required as a victim of war and conflict.

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<sup>5</sup> The numbers of internally displaced people are reducing this year, for more info see here: <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraina-zvit-pro-povernennya-v-ukraini-16-23-sichnya-2023-roku>.

At national level:  
The Ukrainian Government should ensure clear definitions of children who have suffered due to war (the term already exists and is given to children who received injuries, were abused as a war crime, or were illegally taken outside of Ukraine, but it should be reviewed). Local authorities should be made fully aware of the status so they can effectively provide for children and ensure their access to relevant governmental guarantees.

### Parental abductions

Another issue that has emerged from the full-scale war is parental abductions. Open borders helped evacuate (and save) children without the need of permission from both parents to cross the border. During spring-autumn 2022, there were many requests from fathers who were trying to find their children as their wives

had stopped any communications and did not disclose their location<sup>6</sup>.

There continues to be challenges around documenting issues of divorce manipulations and child abandonment due to their illegality in Ukraine. Still, numerous people search for opportunities to give up maternal rights, aiming to ensure the lone parent status for a father<sup>7</sup>.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Ukraine

To meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Ukraine adopted a [strategy to overcome poverty](#), including child poverty, in 2016. In [2021](#), Ukraine calculated household poverty and social exclusion to identify the

situation and achieve the SDGs. The definition and metrics used are included in this [Act](#) approving the government's approach to assessing poverty.

In April 2022, the World Bank published data on poverty in Ukraine, showing it had 'increased from [5.5% to 24.2% in Ukraine in 2022](#), pushing 7.1 million more people into poverty with the worst impact out of sight in rural villages'.

In April 2023, the Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, in partnership with UNICEF, [published a brochure](#) on child poverty, emphasising the high risk of 'sudden' poverty (caused by damage to homes, internal displacement, and so on) becoming 'chronic' poverty. The report states that in 2022, poverty levels increased from

39.1% to 60.2%, and child poverty increased from 43.2% to 65.2%.

Government-issued standards on living in Ukraine are detached from reality. These standards are based on two distorted/unrealistic calculations:

1. The 2016 ['market basket' in Ukraine is very limited](#). For example, it states that for 6–18-year-olds it is enough to have one pair of pants and one dress for two years.
2. The prices that are considered as needed to ensure this minimum basket are not market-based, so it is impossible to ensure even this 'market basket' with minimum living wage (minimum income).

The current minimum wage in Ukraine is approximately 160 Euro, which cannot cover the costs of the 'market basket' and is far from ensuring a good quality of life.

<sup>6</sup> Cases and additional information are provided on page 12 of the brochure *Childhood in War. Part 1* <https://childrenrights.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/childhood-in-war-082022.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Some of these attempts are described on p. 10-11 of the brochure *"Childhood in War. Part III"* <https://childrenrights.info/dytynstvo-u-period-vijny-chastyna-3-pravo-na-sim-ju/>.

The war has resulted in additional expenses (property damage, moving costs, and so on) and income issues (retirements, family members who provided family are in the army with lower income than they used to have).

## Countries in Accession

Every year, the European Commission publishes the Enlargement Package that assesses the state of play in accession countries, including progress concerning upholding human rights and children's rights. Eurochild and its members contributed to the [2023 consultation on the Enlargement Package](#) to provide a child-rights perspective and insights into the situation of children in need.

According to Ms. Klykova, to advance children's rights as part of the EU accession process, Ukraine should prioritise:

- Collecting a wide range of relevant data on children and using this data to prioritise policy decisions. The data should be made available

through open sources.

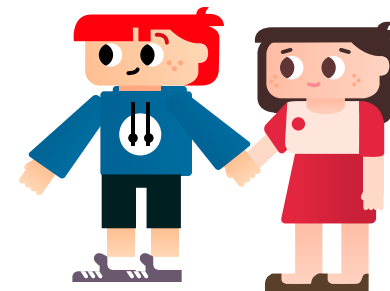
- Developing and implementing a minimum framework for child participation at local levels and ensuring the diversity of children councils.
- Ensuring a National Strategy for Children's Rights (supported by a relevant action plan) and ensuring all government programmes fulfil children's rights.
- Developing rights-based programme to support childhood in the post-war period.
- Creating a national office responsible for monitoring, evaluating, reporting, and advocating children's rights.

Regarding shaping national policies in Ukraine, Ms. Klykova highlighted that civil society organisations and children are often involved. Some ministries and local administrations organise consultations, and public hearings or form civil councils with citizens and civil society organisations. However, monitoring and evaluating such activities is impossible as there

is no follow-up after the events, and often no changes to the programmes and policies being reviewed or considered. Petitions initiated by civil societies are used to advocate for a range of topics in Ukraine. However, Ms. Klykova is unaware of petitions focusing on children's rights.

## EU Funding in Ukraine

Ms. Klykova has not been involved in an EU-funded project. However, she is aware of funders (EU and European) that have funded projects in Ukraine, such as youth and arts projects funded by the [House of Europe](#), the [Access to Justice](#) project funded by the European Union, and the [Council of Europe](#) who have funded projects on youth, democracy, and violence.



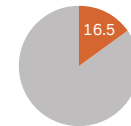
## “ Country recommendation

Wales should take action to introduce legislation to fully and directly incorporate the UNCRC into Welsh law without delay.

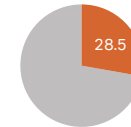
## Country Profile 2023



# Wales



**Child population (0-15 years):**  
**513,000**  
16.5% of total population (2021)



**Child Poverty:**  
143,640  
28% (2022)  
▼ -3% compared to 2020

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Children in Wales](#)

## Children's Rights in Wales

The priorities for the Welsh government are set out in its [Programme for Government](#). It includes reform of services for care experienced children, expansion of childcare and programmes for pre-school children, a revised child poverty strategy and implementation of a new schools' curriculum for Wales.

A supplementary [Children and Young People's Plan](#) was published in 2022 and provides more detail.

There is no named cabinet minister for children in Wales. Although Children in Wales and others have repeatedly [called](#) for this, it has been [rejected](#). The Welsh government consider it sufficient to have collective responsibility for children across the cabinet. The cabinet member responsible for children's rights is the Deputy Minister for Social Services.

Children in Wales identified several key areas related to children's rights.

### Child participation

The Welsh government provides core funding to Children in Wales, the national umbrella organisation representing over 250 organisations and professionals who work with children and young people across a variety of sectors. This enables the voice of children, through the [Young Wales project](#), to be fed into the national policy debate on a regular basis.

Recommendations on strengthening child participation in Wales<sup>3</sup>:

- Ensure that national and local arrangements for children's participation promote a rights-based approach, are sustainable, embedded, adequately funded, and monitored against national

standards, and include opportunities for children to discuss the issues of importance to them.

- Ensure there are equitable opportunities for younger children and those most marginalised and vulnerable to participate at a local and national level.

### Child safety and well-being online

The Welsh government has published a report, [Enhancing digital resilience in education: An action plan to protect children and young people online](#), and is working with the UK government to support the [Online Safety Bill](#), adopted on September 19 2023.

In its recent [State of Children's Rights in Wales report](#)<sup>4</sup>, Children in Wales provided a range of recommendations, including:

- Periodically review the Welsh Enhancing Digital Resilience in

Education Action Plan.

- Ensure that the UK Online Safety Bill is implemented without delay to improve protections for Welsh children online.

### Child protection systems

The [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#) support evidence-based and consistent safeguarding practices across agencies and across Wales. They include supplementary guides on children who may have been trafficked, child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. There are also national plans on child sexual abuse, legislation on [violence against children](#), and guidance on keeping children safe in [education and schools](#).

The UK-wide Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse review included [six recommendations](#) for Wales.

3 Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group, State of Children's Rights in Wales, p. 26-27, 2023.

4 Online safety recommendations are on p. 31-32.

In a recent report<sup>5</sup>, Children in Wales provided a range of recommendations on child protection, including:

- Implement and apply relevant recommendations to Wales from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.
- Ensure that preventative and protection measures are strengthened to address all forms of violence against children.
- Ensure that children who have experienced abuse can access appropriate, child-centred therapeutic services when needed.

### Children impacted by war and conflict

Wales has welcomed many children from the conflict in Ukraine (approximately 6,000 adults and children). The Welsh government has provided a wide range of support to Ukrainian people, many of these can be found on the [government website](#).

There is also a [Sanctuary](#) website created to help everyone to understand their rights. This website also provides information on Wales and where to find help. Information is also provided for children on a national helpline in Wales: [What's Happening Between Russia and Ukraine](#)<sup>6</sup>?

### Children in migration and refugees

Asylum is a UK government responsibility. The Welsh Parliament refused to give consent to the (now) Illegal Migration Act in a parliamentary debate and vote and has been critical about it. Children in Wales provided a [written response](#) focusing on children's rights. Children in Wales points out the different approach that Wales is taking to welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, including the positive steps towards becoming a [Nation of Sanctuary](#), in comparison to UK government.

### Climate change and environmental impacts

The [Young Wales's Report](#) to the UN (2023) identifies climate changes as a key priority with the following recommendations:

- Embed lessons, resources, and more campaigns on climate change into the curriculum to raise awareness of the reality now, what is being done, and what can be done with practical advice on how children and young people can make a difference.
- Provide clearer recycling bins, more safe walkways to school and support more outdoor activities such as gardening and litter picking.
- Reduce industrial impact on the climate and offer more incentives for eco-friendly industries.
- Listen to children and young people on climate change.

### Children's mental health

The Welsh government published their [NEST framework for children's mental health and well-being](#) in 2023. The NEST framework aims to improve mental health and well-being services for babies, children, young people, and their families.

Mental health is a significant issue amongst children in Wales, aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. The Children in Wales publication [State of Children's Rights in Wales](#) outlines the situation for children regarding mental health and provides eight recommendations for the Welsh government. These include:

- Invest in timely, appropriate, and universally accessible early intervention support for all children, alongside integrated multi-agency community-based support services for the 'missing middle'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See p.28-36 for child protection system recommendations in the State of Children's Rights in Wales report.

<sup>6</sup> The service provided is independent from, although funded by the government.

- Publish a new mental health strategy that fully encompasses the specific needs of all children, including those with protected characteristics and experiencing poverty, and make infant mental health an explicit priority, alongside ensuring that reporting and accountability mechanisms continue to feature strongly.
- Publish statutory guidance to enable school staff to deliver the mental health duty as part of the new curriculum.
- Provide a well-resourced specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), accessible at the point of need, with greater accountability through improved performance data collection, and implement consistent rights-based transitional planning arrangements to adult services.

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

Wales has a total child population of **513,000 (0-15 years)**, of which **28% live in poverty and social exclusion**. The children most in need are children in lone-parent households, some Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) families, children in a house with a disabled adult/child, non-working households, and asylum-seeking children.

According to Children in Wales, the most concerning groups of children are those in working families living in poverty, especially those who do not qualify for many benefits and have been hit hard by the cost-of-living crisis.

The key indicator of child poverty is the percentage of children living in households below 60%

of the median UK household income (after housing costs). The statistics are stark: the most recent evidence suggests that 28% of children were living in relative income poverty in the three financial years ending 2020 to 2022. Children living in a household where no adult is working remain at higher risk of relative income poverty (43%) compared to children living in a working household (26%). Moreover, there was a 40% likelihood of people from a BAME group living in relative income poverty compared to a 22% likelihood for those from a white ethnic group. 31% of children who lived in a family where there was a disabled person were in relative income poverty compared with 26% of those in families where no one was disabled.<sup>8</sup> The services needed to tackle child poverty are free school meals as the number of families accessing food banks is growing,

family support, early intervention services, money advice, and financial support services. To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, Children in Wales call on the Welsh government to prioritise:

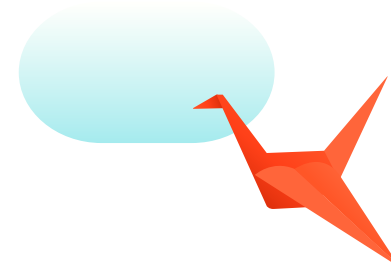
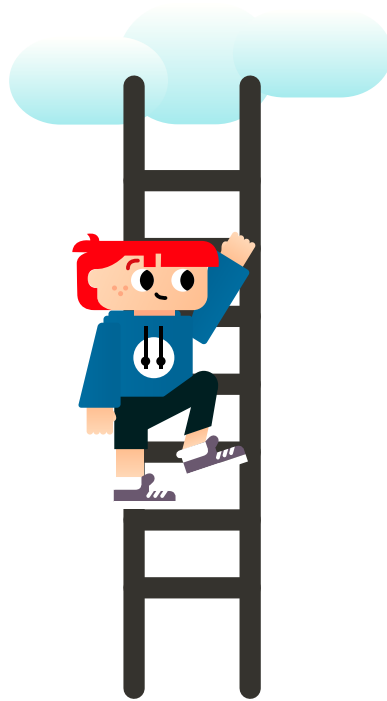
- automatic enrolment and extension of free school meals across all ages;
- implementation of statutory school uniforms and other school cost guidance;
- introducing a Welsh Benefits system and ensure that all families are receiving their full entitlement to benefits.

A recent example of an intervention demonstrating good practice where children, families, and communities have been supported, and poverty has been overcome or mitigated against is [\*The Tackling the Impact of Poverty on Education Programme\*](#). This initiative works across Wales with schools to help them identify and implement no and low-cost

<sup>7</sup> The 'Missing Middle' refers to the lack of 'intermediate' service options, for children who fall between different levels of support. See *State of Children's Rights in Wales*, p. 53-56.



<sup>8</sup> Welsh government, *Consultation on the draft Child Poverty Strategy for Wales, 2023*.

solutions to tackling child poverty. The [price of pupil poverty guide](#) sets out the steps schools can take, and the project offers bespoke advice and support, whole-school training of all staff and guidance for schools to develop their own action plans.





# Statistics explained

The arrow (  /  ) displayed on the cover for each country report reflects an increase or decrease in the 2022 (or 2021/2020) child poverty rate for that country over the previous year.

Data on population and child poverty provided in this publication were retrieved from [Eurostat](#). There are no data currently available from Eurostat for child poverty in Ukraine. As UK countries are not a geopolitical entity for which Eurostat provides data, data included in this report draws from the [UK Government Office for National Statistics](#).

Eurostat data is derived from EU-SILC (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions), compiled annually. AROPE is the main headline indicator to monitor the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan poverty target. It reflects the share of the population fulfilling at least one of the following three conditions:

- at risk of poverty, meaning below the poverty threshold,
- in a situation of severe material deprivation,
- living in a household with a very low work intensity.

Population numbers are rounded to the nearest person. The most recent data on [children at risk of poverty or social exclusion \(AROPE\)](#) was taken from 2022, 2021 or 2020 data, depending on availability.

[More information on child poverty rates in Europe](#)

[More information on AROPE methodology](#)

# Other recent Eurochild Publications

## Child Poverty

- [Poverty takes away the right to childhood](#)
- [Leveraging EU influence to deliver change for families in adversity in Bulgaria](#)

## Child Guarantee

- [European Child Guarantee National Action Plans at a glance](#)
- [EU Child Guarantee Game and child-friendly explainer](#)

## Children in Alternative Care

- [Children in alternative care in the Child Guarantee National Action Plans](#)
- [Better Data for Better Child Protection Systems in Europe – technical report on data on children in alternative care across Europe](#)

## Digital

- [Protecting children's rights in the digital environment](#)

## Early Childhood

- [Quality Housing for All Young Children – From the Start](#)
- [Response to the European Commission's Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health](#)

## Child Participation

- [DAY – Democratic Activation of Youth](#)
- [Reaching In: strengthening marginalised children's participation in decision-making](#)

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