

Promoting social cohesion and convergence

Guaranteeing access to services for children in the EU



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Authors: Daniel Molinuevo and Michele Consolini

Research manager: Daniel Molinuevo

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European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Telephone: (+353 1) 204 31 00

Email: information@eurofound.europa.eu

Web: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu>



Introduction

Fighting child poverty has become a central dimension of EU social policy. One of the European Commission's flagship social policy initiatives is the European Child Guarantee, established in 2021 by means of a Council Recommendation. The aim of the Guarantee is to tackle child poverty by ensuring access to key services (such as healthcare) and resources (such as decent housing) for children in need – defined as children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE).

The EU Member States have been requested to report every two years on progress in implementing their action plans to put the Guarantee into effect, with the first reporting due to take place by March 2024. Progress will be measured using a European monitoring framework that is being developed at the time of writing.

This policy brief aims to contribute to the monitoring of the Guarantee by analysing a set of indicators that have been selected to highlight the links between the Guarantee and other relevant EU frameworks and policy initiatives. In particular, this has been done in relation to the Social Scoreboard, due to its

importance for the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights. Wherever possible, differences between rural and urban areas have been analysed because of the relevance of this distinction for the accessibility of services.

The trends across the Member States and the degree to which their performance is aligning over time are documented by means of a convergence analysis. This analysis shows whether countries are moving in the right direction – converging upwards. Upward convergence entails improvement in the average performance of Member States towards meeting a policy target, together with a reduction in disparities between them, so that they move closer to the EU average. Convergence analysis is suited to examining progress on the Guarantee because it provides an overview of trends in what is a multifaceted policy initiative. The Guarantee covers many types of services and resources and several policy areas, and each has specific accessibility barriers that are experienced differently by different groups of children, depending on socioeconomic status and Member State.



Policy context

The EU has developed several policy initiatives (with corresponding monitoring frameworks) addressing the welfare of children since the establishment of the European Pillar of Social Rights at the 2017 Gothenburg Social Summit. Those that are relevant to the indicators analysed in this policy brief – which is not an exhaustive compilation of all relevant initiatives – are discussed briefly here.

The Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee (the Recommendation) supports the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights by promoting access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), education and school-based activities, healthcare, housing and healthy nutrition (Council of the European Union, 2021).

The Recommendation was requested by the European Parliament in 2015. In 2022 and 2023, the Parliament called for additional funding to be allocated to the Guarantee and asked the Member States to finalise their national action plans. In order to strengthen awareness of the Guarantee and to monitor its

implementation, the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs established a working group in May 2022. Together with Eurofound, this committee analysed the state of play regarding the national action plans at the end of 2022 (Molinuevo and Consolini, 2022).

The Guarantee addresses poverty and social exclusion following the approach and principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. These principles underpin a social Europe, and the Pillar has as one of its objectives reducing the number of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least five million by 2030. The Social Scoreboard measures Member States' progress in implementing the rights described in the Pillar and includes several indicators relevant to the Guarantee.

Since 2018, the Pillar's principles have featured in the European Semester, the EU's framework for the coordination and monitoring of economic and social policies. The national reform programmes submitted by the Member States as part of the European Semester

process are meant to refer to the Social Scoreboard indicators. The European Semester and the Social Scoreboard are mentioned in the Recommendation establishing the Guarantee, which notes that:

Progress in implementing this Recommendation should also be regularly monitored, for example as part of the Social Scoreboard in the context of the European Semester, including through the development of relevant monitoring indicators (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 18).

At the same summit at which the Pillar was presented, the idea of creating a European Education Area¹ was endorsed. The targets to be achieved in the Education Area by 2030 were set out in the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training for the period 2021–2030. Progress towards these goals is measured by the indicators of the European Education and Training Monitor.

The targets set for the Education Area regarding the use of ECEC services by children aged between three and the starting age for compulsory primary education were taken up in the 2022 Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care. This Recommendation revised the Barcelona targets set in 2002 regarding the participation rates of children in ECEC.

Since 2001, the Social Protection Committee (SPC) Indicators Subgroup has developed an EU-wide portfolio of indicators relevant to social issues, including children's access to services and resources. This includes a set of indicators on investing in children, added in 2012.

In 2021, the group developed a monitoring framework on childcare and support to children. This framework focuses on Principle 11 of the Pillar, which covers children's rights to affordable ECEC of good quality and protection from poverty.

Table 1 lists the 10 indicators for measuring children's access to key services and resources examined in this policy brief and the corresponding EU policies and monitoring frameworks.

¹ For information on the European Education Area, see <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/the-eea-explained>

Table 1: Indicators relevant to the Child Guarantee

	Social Scoreboard	Education and Training Monitor	Barcelona targets	SPC Indicators Subgroup	
				Portfolio of EU social indicators	Benchmarking childcare and support to children
Child poverty					
AROPE rate for children	✓			✓	✓
ECEC					
Children aged under 3 years attending ECEC	✓		✓	✓	✓
Children between the age of three and the starting age for compulsory primary education attending ECEC		✓	✓	✓	✓
Education and school-based activities					
General government expenditure on education	✓				
Early leavers from education and training	✓	✓			
E-schooling and digital skills	See note	✓			
Healthcare					
Unmet medical needs	See note			✓	
Housing					
Housing cost overburden	✓			✓	✓
Severe housing deprivation rate by tenure status	✓				
Healthy nutrition					
Daily access of children to fruit and vegetables				✓	✓
Ability to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day				✓	✓

Note: The Social Scoreboard includes indicators to monitor digital skills acquisition and unmet medical needs; however, they cover only individuals aged 16 years and over.

Key findings

- Among the indicators for which a convergence analysis was carried out, a trend of upward convergence was found for most of them: child poverty, participation of children in ECEC under three years of age, early school-leaving, housing cost overburden, severe housing deprivation and ability to afford a meal containing protein every second day. This is evidence that Member States' performance on these indicators has improved and differences between them have reduced. The trend in the indicator that looks at government expenditure on education was one of upward divergence, indicating improving performance across Member States overall but increasing disparities between them. The trend in the indicator that looks at ECEC participation of children between three and compulsory schooling age was one of downward convergence, indicating worsening performance across Member States overall with decreasing disparities between them.
- Child poverty decreased in the EU between 2015 and 2022. The rate fell steadily up to 2019; however, since 2020 there has been an increase in scores on this indicator. Nearly one-quarter of children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022.
- In 2022, 7,860,000 children living in cities in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This means that over one-quarter (25.5%) of children living in urban areas experienced that risk. This was the case for 6,806,000 children living in towns and suburbs (23.8% of children living in those areas) and 5,273,000 in rural areas (24.7%).
- In 2022, nine Member States had achieved a participation rate of 45% of children under age three in ECEC, the policy target set for 2030. For children between age three and compulsory schooling age, four Member States had achieved the 2030 target of 96%.
- The percentage of early school-leavers has decreased since 2007. In 2022, the EU average (9.6%) was somewhat above the target set for the European Education Area of less than 9% by 2030.
- In 2021, 5% of low-income households with children aged under 16 in the EU had unmet medical needs. In Hungary, the percentage was nearly three times the EU average (14.6%). In terms of urbanisation, the highest percentages of households with unmet medical needs were in towns and suburbs in Romania (24.5%), Hungary (24.2%) and Latvia (23.8%).
- In 2022, nearly one-quarter of children lived in households below the risk-of-poverty threshold that were experiencing housing cost overburden. Only 2.6% of children lived in households above the risk-of-poverty threshold that experienced this problem. Focusing on children who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the percentage living in households with housing cost overburden decreased from 28.4% in 2015 to 21.3% in 2022. National averages increased in only six Member States during that period.
- Between 2015 and 2020, the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in households experiencing severe housing deprivation decreased. The decrease was greater for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in households that owned their home than for households with tenant status.
- Most Member States witnessed an increase over time in the percentage of households with dependent children at risk of poverty or social exclusion that are able to access fresh fruit or vegetables once a day. The EU average increased from 83% in 2014 to 87.5% in 2021.



Exploring the evidence

This section presents an analysis of developments and the current situation regarding the different policies and services covered by the European Child Guarantee. The policy areas examined are ECEC, education and school-based activities, healthcare, housing and healthy nutrition.

To highlight the synergies between the Guarantee and other relevant EU policies, the analysis focuses on the indicators that monitor the initiatives described in the ‘Policy context’ section. In particular, the indicators that are part of the Social Scoreboard are analysed, as this strengthens the links between the Guarantee and the European Semester, as indicated in the Recommendation.

The analysis of trends is done mainly using a convergence analysis. In those cases for which data are available for only one or two points in time (for example, unmet medical needs), a convergence analysis is not possible, so a descriptive analysis is presented instead. Where possible, a descriptive analysis of urban and rural differences is also carried out, to examine territorial inequalities.

Trends in two indicators – expenditure on education and early school-leaving – are analysed from 2007 to 2021 and 2007 to 2022, respectively, which enables the impact of the Great Recession to be captured. For the other indicators, data are not available from 2007 or there are several breaks in the series, so these indicators are analysed from 2015 onwards; the AROPE indicator is available from that year, enabling a focus on children in need.²

The section begins with a short guide to the basics of convergence analysis. This is followed by a look at the group central to the Guarantee (children at risk of poverty or social exclusion) and the differences in child poverty between urban and rural settings.

Measuring convergence

EU averages sometimes mask huge differences in how Member States perform. Simply comparing EU and national averages at two points in time does not tell the whole story about a trend in an indicator. Identifying disparities between Member States is therefore

² A more detailed explanation of this indicator and an analysis of trends in child poverty can be found at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/convergence-hub/convergence-european-child-guarantee>

critical because overcoming disparities is key to achieving an ‘ever closer union’, one of the core principles of the EU.

To better understand trends and disparities over time, we use a convergence analysis³ to see whether countries are moving in the desired policy direction. In the case of the Guarantee, the desired policy direction means better access to and higher uptake of services, together with more uniformity in performance between countries.

The size of the disparities between Member States is assessed using the standard deviation, which measures the distance of countries from the EU average. Being closer to the average implies a performance more in line with other countries, so a low standard deviation is preferable.

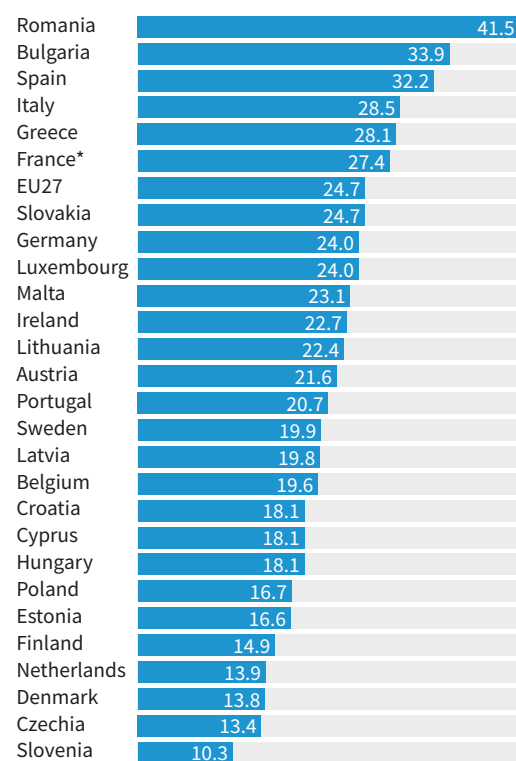
There are four possible outcomes of a convergence analysis:

- upward convergence, meaning improving performance towards meeting a policy target and a reduction in disparities across Member States
- upward divergence, signalling improving performance but increased disparities across Member States
- downward convergence, signalling worsening performance combined with a reduction in disparities across Member States
- downward divergence, the worst-case scenario, in which deteriorating performance is coupled with increased disparities across Member States

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

The analyses in this policy brief focus mostly on children in need, defined in the Recommendation as people under the age of 18 years who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In 2022, 24.7% of children were in this situation in the EU, with percentages in Spain, Bulgaria and Romania of over 30% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: AROPE rate for children, EU27 and Member States, 2022 (%)

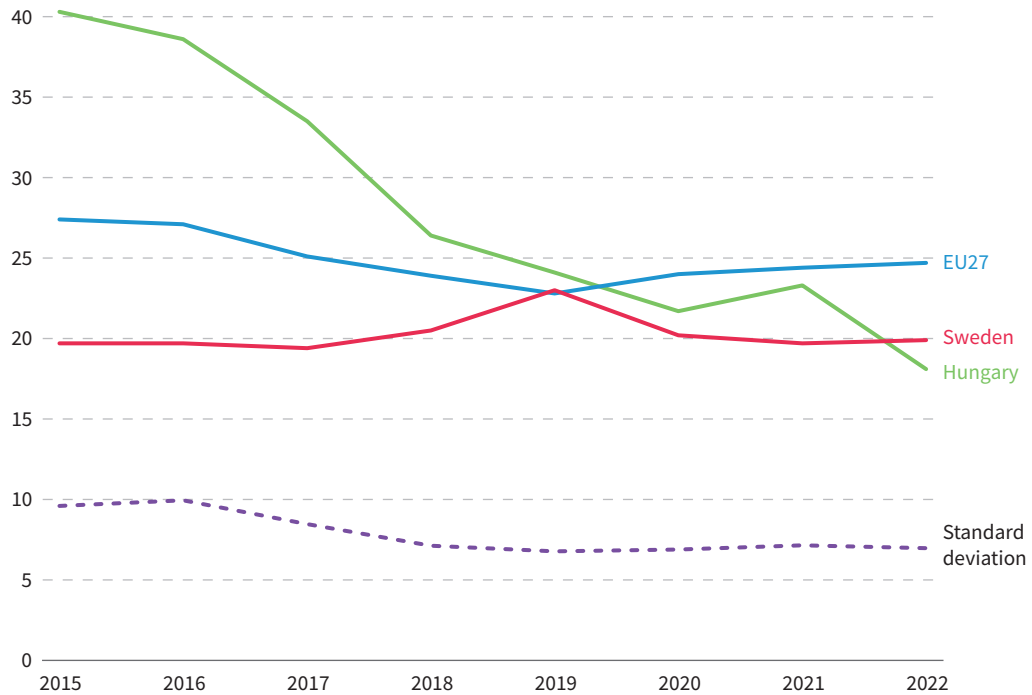


Note: *Data for France are provisional.

Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) (TEPSR_LM412)

³ A detailed description of the convergence methodology can be found at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/convergence-hub/convergence-methodology>

Figure 2: Upward convergence in the AROPE rate for children, EU27, average (%) and standard deviation, EU27 and selected Member States, 2015–2022



Notes: The standard deviation is calculated based on the unweighted EU27 average to fully capture the convergence dynamics that would otherwise be hidden by the weights. There is a break in the EU27 average series in 2020.

Source: EU-SILC (TEPSR_LM412)

Between 2015 and 2022, the EU average percentage of children at risk of poverty or social inclusion decreased (Figure 2). The decline was continuous until 2019; however, the rate increased thereafter. During the same period, disparities between the Member States narrowed, which is reflected in the decrease over time in the standard deviation. Therefore, the pattern of the AROPE indicator was one of upward convergence during this period.

Some of the countries that had a high AROPE rate for children in 2015, such as Hungary and Lithuania, have seen the rate drop below the EU average since 2020. Romania also experienced a significant decrease but still remains well above the EU average. Conversely, for some of the countries that in 2015 had a low AROPE rate for children, such as Austria and Sweden, the average rate remained stable over the whole period, improving over

time by only a few percentage points. Hence, there was a catch-up process, with countries that were lagging behind in 2015 improving faster than countries with a better starting point.

Urban–rural divide in AROPE rate for children

The Recommendation urges the Member States to ‘address the territorial dimension of social exclusion, taking into account the specific needs of children according to distinctive urban, rural, remote and disadvantaged areas’ (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 20).

The AROPE rate for children differs according to the degree of urbanisation – that is, according to whether they live in cities, towns and suburbs, or rural areas. In 2022, 7,860,000

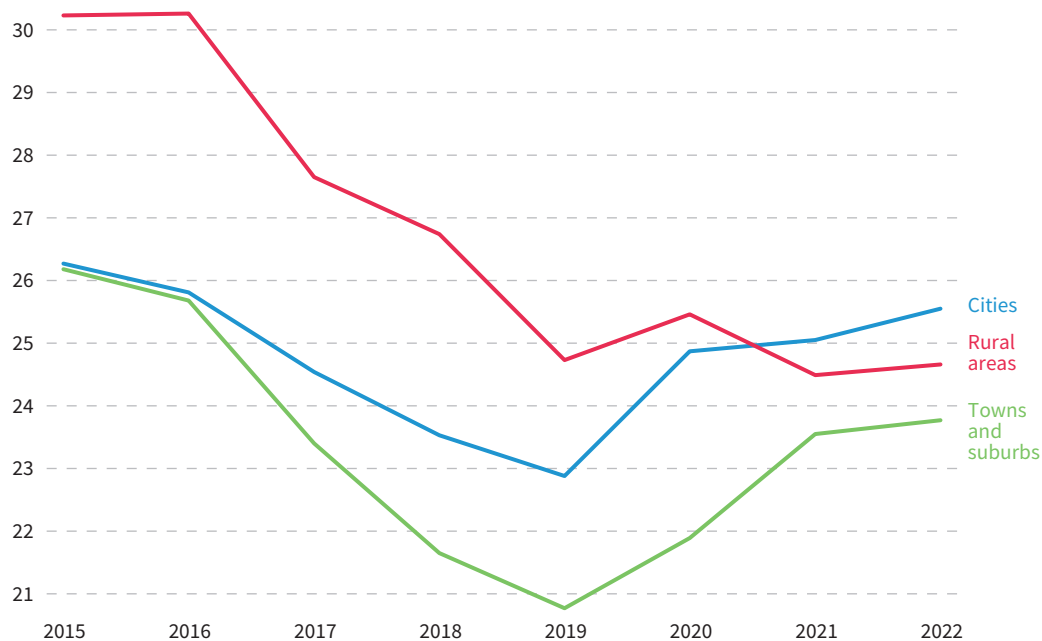
children living in cities in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This means that over one-quarter (25.5%) of children living in urban areas experienced that risk. This was the case for 6,806,000 children living in towns and suburbs (23.8% of children living in those areas) and 5,273,000 in rural areas (24.7%). Between 2015 and 2022, there was an overall decrease in AROPE rates across all degrees of urbanisation. It should also be noted that AROPE rates increased between 2021 and 2022 across all degrees of urbanisation (Figure 3). In terms of disparities between Member States, these were greatest in respect of rural areas, although they decreased over time. Disparities also decreased in towns and suburbs. As for cities, there was a constant increase in disparities between Member States in the AROPE rate for children.

The Member States with the highest AROPE rates for children in rural areas in 2022 were Bulgaria (48.3%) and Romania (56%), while the

best-performing countries were Malta (2.6%), the Netherlands (8.9%) and Slovenia (8.3%). The improving trend was halted by the pandemic, which did not affect disparities per se but influenced the distance of Member States from the frontrunners.

In towns and suburbs, the AROPE rate for children declined until 2019 and has increased since then. Bulgaria (37% in 2022) and Romania (36%) had the poorest performance, whereas Belgium, the Netherlands and Slovenia had the lowest rates in 2022 (all around 10%). Overall, child poverty rates in towns and suburbs were reduced in most Member States between 2015 and 2022. The highest increase over time took place in Denmark, where the percentage doubled (6.3% in 2015 to 12.8% in 2022). The AROPE rates of some of the best-performing countries worsened over the period, especially in Denmark and Finland.

Figure 3: AROPE rate for children, by degree of urbanisation, EU27, 2015–2022 (%)



Source: EU-SILC (TEPSR_LM412), Eurostat calculations

For cities, the trend was one of improved performance but with increases in disparities across the Member States (except between 2021 and 2022, when there was a decrease in disparities). When it comes to national averages, these decreased between 2015 and 2022 in 21 Member States. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is apparent in 2020 with the worsening of the EU27 average. More than one-third of children in Austrian, Belgian and French cities were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022. In Hungary and Poland, the percentage was approximately one-tenth. In Hungary, the share decreased from 28% in 2015 to 10% in 2022. Portugal also experienced a sharp decrease: from 33% in 2015 to 16% in 2022.

ECEC

In her 2023 State of the Union Address, President von der Leyen noted that millions of parents – mostly mothers – are struggling to reconcile work and family, because there is no childcare. The 2022 Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care asks the Member States to ensure that by 2030 at least 45% of children under the age of three participate in ECEC for at least one hour per week. Participation in ECEC is understood as children being cared for through formal arrangements other than by the family. The indicator measuring this target is included in the Social Scoreboard, and in 2022 the EU average was 35.9%. Only Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden achieved a participation rate of at least 45%.

For children between the age of three and the starting age for compulsory primary education,⁴ the target set in the 2022 Recommendation is the same as the benchmark set in the EU strategic framework for a European Education Area: at least 96% of children in that age group should use these services by 2030. In 2022, 87.1% of children in that age group in the EU participated in ECEC services for at least one hour per week. Only Belgium, Hungary, Spain and Sweden achieved the 2030 target.

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

The 2022 ECEC Recommendation also asks Member States to ‘take the necessary steps to close the participation gap in ECEC between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and the overall population of children’ (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 8).

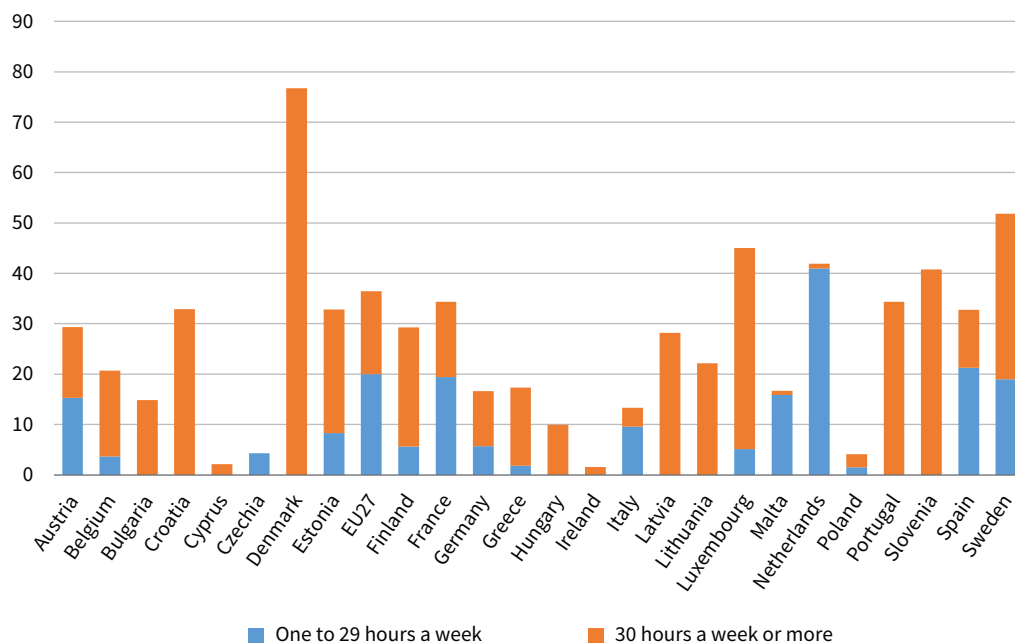
Under three years

Data regarding the participation in ECEC of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion are available up to 2022, albeit with several gaps in data for many countries (see Figure 4). Focusing on the percentage of these children under the age of three, the countries with the highest and lowest participation rates for children at risk of poverty that year were Denmark (76.7%) and Ireland (1.59%), respectively. It must be noted that in both countries, these percentages correspond only to the percentage of children using ECEC for at least 30 hours a week on average. The data for children using ECEC for between 1 to 29 hours are not available in either of these countries due to low sample sizes.

In 2022, 36.4% of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU used ECEC for at least one hour a week. This is higher than the average in 2015 (28.8%). As disparities between Member States decreased over time, we can describe this as upward convergence.

⁴ The starting age for compulsory education in each Member State can be found at <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/compulsory-education-europe-20222023>

Figure 4: Participation rate of children under age three at risk of poverty or social exclusion in ECEC, by duration, EU Member States, 2022 (%)



Notes: Duration refers to the average number of hours of weekly use. Data for Romania and Slovakia are not available. Data for use of ECEC for between 1 and 29 hours a week are not available for Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal and Slovenia. Data for use of ECEC for 30 hours or more are not available for Czechia. **Source:** EU SILC (ILC_CAINDFORMAL), Eurostat extraction.

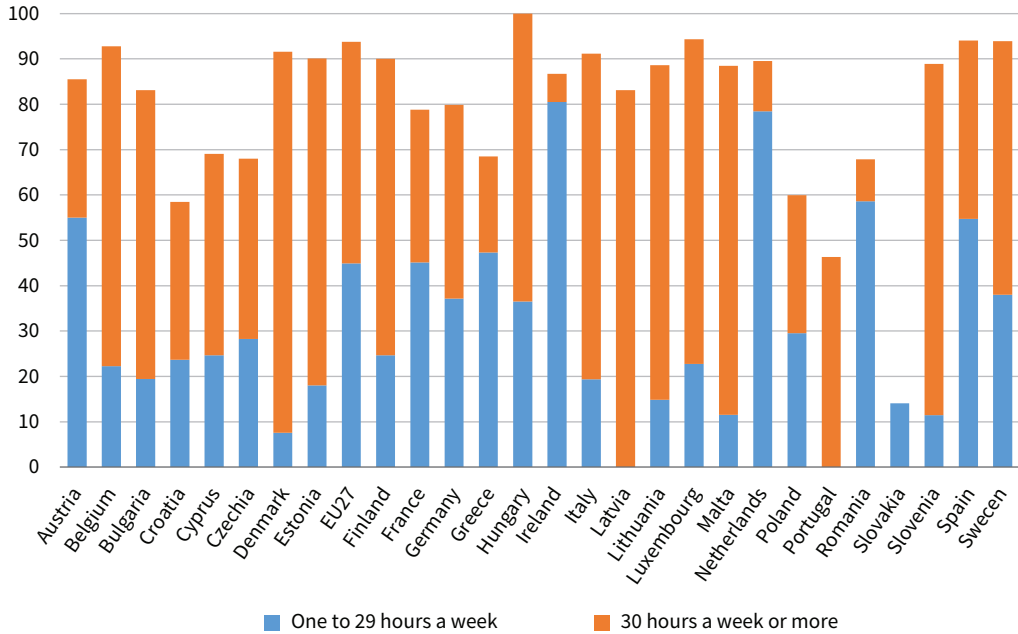
Aged between three and compulsory schooling age

The participation rates in ECEC of children aged between three and compulsory schooling age and classified as at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022 are displayed in Figure 5. In 2022, 93.7% of children in that age group at risk of poverty or social exclusion used ECEC for at least one hour per week. Hungary (100%) and Luxembourg (94.3%) had the highest participation rates that year. Slovakia (14%)

and Portugal (46.3%) had the lowest rates, but data were not available for all the average weekly hours in either of the countries (see notes in Figure 5).

The EU27 average in 2022 was 93.7%, which is lower than the average in 2015 (96.3%). There were more disparities between national averages in 2015 than in 2022 (albeit with a spike in disparities in 2020). The trends apparent from 2015 to 2022 can thus be described as downward convergence.

Figure 5: Participation rate of children between three and compulsory schooling age at risk of poverty or social exclusion in ECEC, by duration, EU Member States, 2022 (%)



Notes: Duration refers to the average number of hours of weekly use. Data for use of ECEC for between 1 and 29 hours a week are not available for Latvia and Portugal. Data for use of ECEC for 30 hours or more are not available for Slovakia.
Source: EU SILC (ILC_CAINDFORMAL), Eurostat extraction.

Education and school-based activities

Expenditure on education

The Social Scoreboard monitors Member States' spending on education; the indicator in question measures total general government expenditure on all levels of education as a share of gross domestic product (GDP). Focusing here on pre-primary, primary and secondary education, our analysis shows that in 2021 EU average expenditure on those three levels of education was 3.5% of GDP. Romania (2.1%) and Ireland (2.3%) allocated the lowest share of GDP to education, while Sweden (5.2%) and Belgium (4%) allocated the highest (Figure 6).

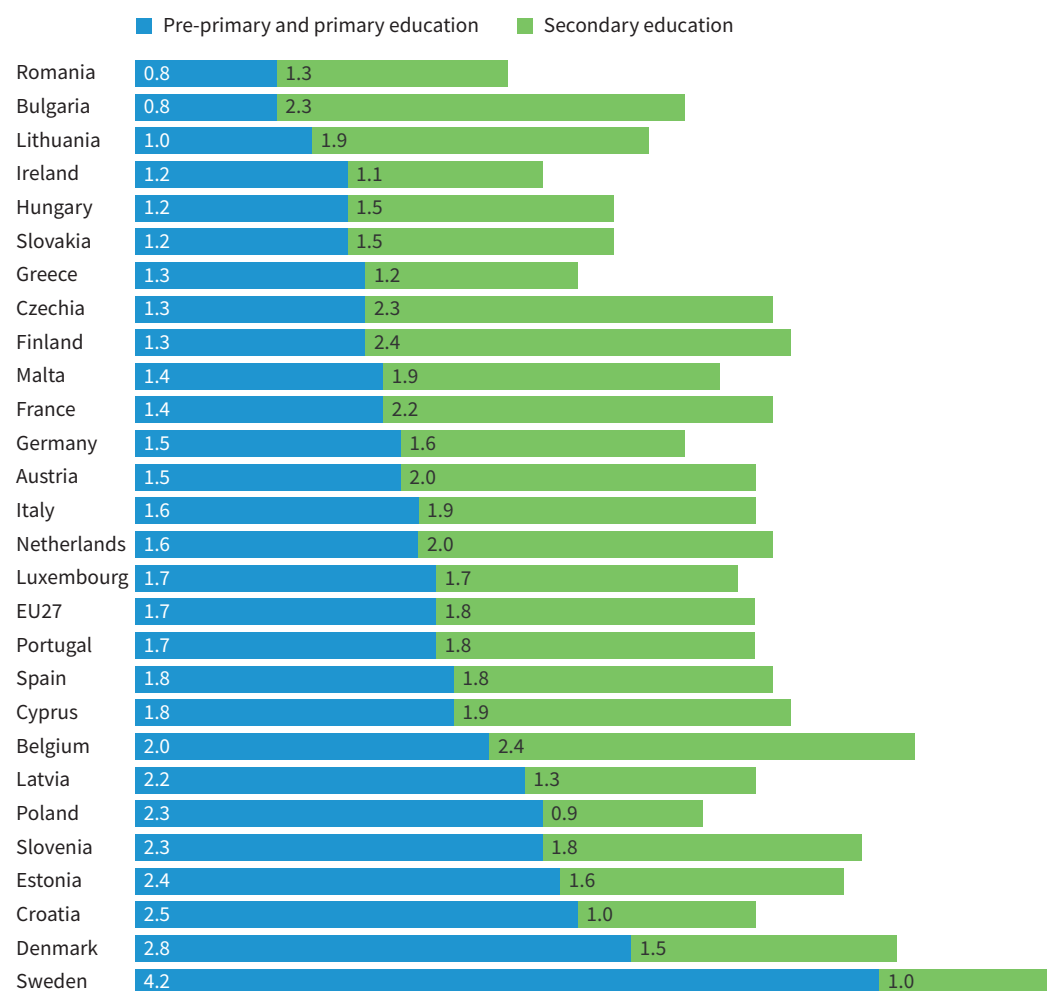
Looking at the situation from 2007 to 2021 shows a very slight increase in the EU27 average, from 3.4% of GDP in 2007 to 3.5% in 2021. Over the period, the best performers

were Sweden and Denmark, whereas Slovakia and Romania spent the lowest shares of GDP on education.

A catch-up effect is evident: the distance between countries that started off with lower expenditure and the better performers has narrowed. Disparities between countries increased during the economic crisis, however, so the trend between 2008 and 2013 was one of divergence. The standard deviation in 2021 is similar to that in 2007, but still slightly higher. Overall, the trend for 2007 to 2021 can be characterised as upward divergence.

Fifteen Member States increased their share of expenditure on education, while the share decreased in twelve. Looking just at pre-primary and primary education, only five Member States decreased their spending: Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal and Romania. The biggest decrease took place in Hungary, whereas Czechia had the highest increase. Regarding secondary education,

Figure 6: Total general government expenditure on pre-primary, primary and secondary education, EU27 and Member States, 2021 (% of GDP)



Note: Data for France, Germany, Portugal and Spain are provisional.

Source: EU-SILC (GOV_10A_EXP)

18 countries decreased their share of expenditure between 2007 and 2021, with Latvia and Poland decreasing spending most sharply. Bulgaria increased spending most over that period.

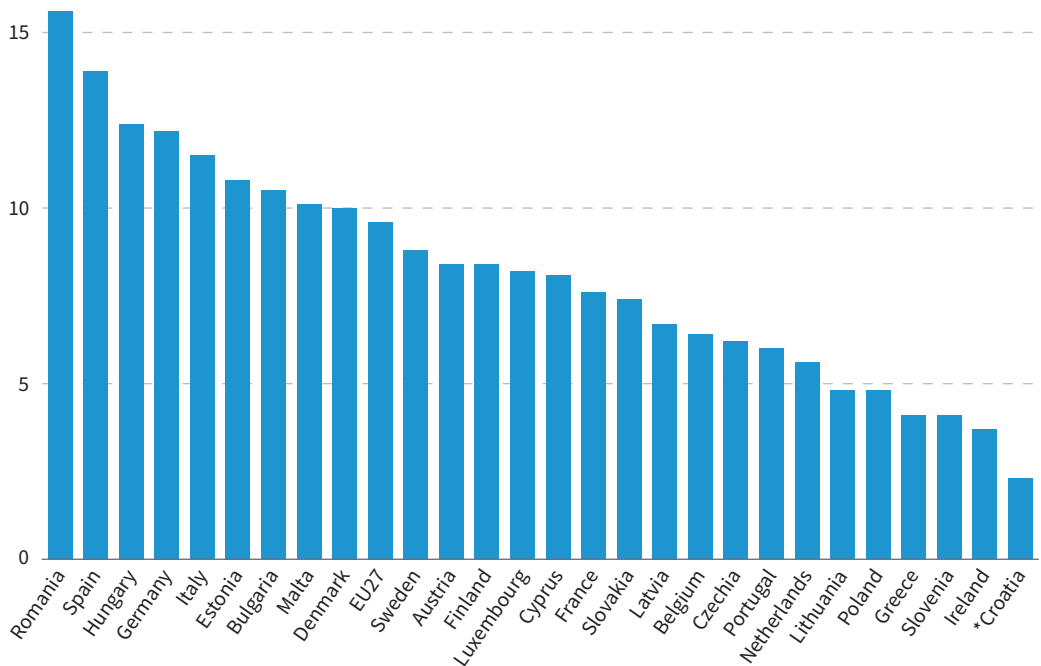
Early school-leaving

The EU strategic framework for achieving a European Education Area by 2030 includes the target of reducing the share of early school-leavers to less than 9% by 2030. The indicator that monitors early school-leaving

(which is included in the Social Scoreboard as well as the Education and Training Monitor) measures the share of the population aged 18 to 24 with at most lower secondary education who were not in any form of education or training in the four weeks before they were surveyed.

In 2022, the EU average early school-leaving rate was 9.6% (Figure 7). Breaking down this group by where they lived in terms of degree of urbanisation, 8.6% of early school-leavers in the EU lived in cities, 10.6% in towns and suburbs, and 10% in rural areas.

Figure 7: Early leavers from education and training, EU27 and Member States, 2022 (%)



Notes: Population aged 18–24 years. * Data for Croatia have low reliability due to low sample size.

Source: EU Labour Force Survey (EDAT_LFSE_30)

Romania (15.6%) and Spain (13.9%) had the highest rates of early school-leaving in 2022, while Croatia (2.3%; note, however, that data reliability is low) and Ireland (3.7%) had the lowest rates.

The EU average decreased from 14.7% in 2007 to the 2022 rate of 9.6%. There was also a decrease in disparities between Member States, with no year-on-year increase over the whole 15-year period. The trend therefore was one of upward convergence.

Countries that started with high rates of early school-leaving caught up over time with better performers. However, there are breaks in the time series for all countries in 2014 and 2021, which makes the comparison of trends over time difficult. Bearing this in mind, the data indicate that in 2007–2010 the country with the highest early school-leaving rate was Portugal; in 2011–2014 it was Spain; and in 2015–2022 it

was Romania. Early school-leaving increased in only four countries between 2007 and 2022 (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia and Sweden). These increases were small, with the biggest increases being around 1% in Czechia and Hungary. In contrast, falls in the rate were substantial: the largest decrease was -30% in Portugal, followed by Malta (-20%) and Spain (-17%).

E-schooling and digital skills

The European Education Area target for digital skills is that by 2030 the share of low-achieving students in their eighth year of schooling in computer and information literacy is less than 15%. At present, no specific indicator is available to monitor trends in digital skills acquisition among children in all Member States. The Social Scoreboard measures only the percentage of individuals aged 16–74 who have basic or above basic overall digital skills.

Progress in achieving the European Education Area target is measured with an indicator from the International Computer and Information Literacy Study, which is conducted every five years. The latest data are from 2018 but include results for just six Member States (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Portugal). All six have a share of low-achieving students above the 2030 target of 15% (European Commission, 2022). The next edition of this study takes place in 2023, but it will not include all Member States.

The Recommendation establishing the Guarantee mentions the provision of educational materials, including digital educational tools. The use of and satisfaction with these tools were measured by Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey in 2020 and 2021* by means of questions about the type of support received for online schooling of children and views about specific aspects of online schooling.⁵ In the summer of 2020, parents and guardians in the EU overall reported that the amount of support that they received for online schooling was adequate. However, they were not satisfied with its quality, did not find the experience positive and were not keen to repeat it in the future. In spring 2021, parents' satisfaction with online schooling had decreased. The percentage of parents who said that they would like more online schooling in the future for their children also decreased compared with 2020.

Healthcare

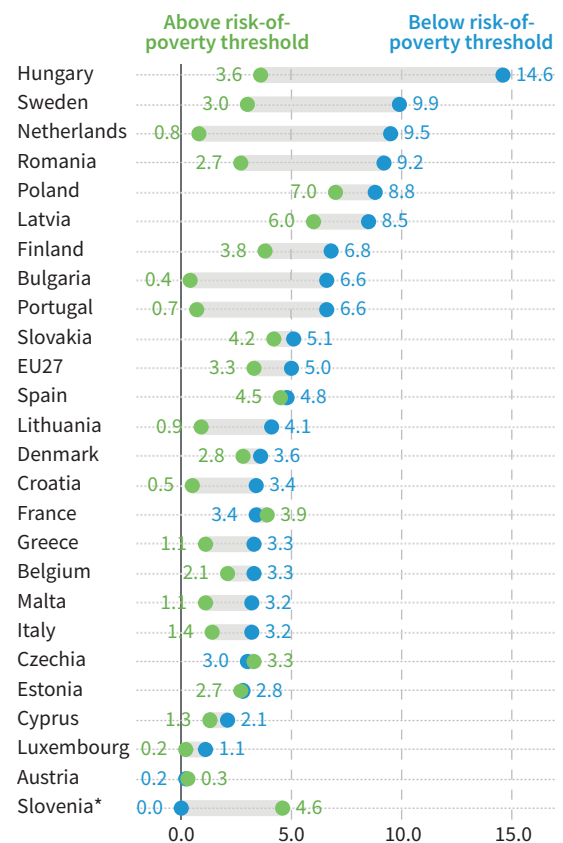
Unmet medical needs

To examine children's access to healthcare, this policy brief looks at the percentage of households with children under 16 years of age that have unmet medical needs. The Social Scoreboard measures only the unmet needs of the population aged 16 years old and over.

Data for this indicator are available for 2017 and 2021; since there are only two points in time, a convergence analysis has not been carried out.

Figure 8 shows the percentages of households with children under 16 that had unmet medical needs in 2021, according to whether households were below or above the risk-of-poverty threshold (60% of the median equivalised income), in the EU and the Member States. In 2021, 5% of low-income households with children had unmet medical needs in the EU. In Hungary (14.6%), the percentage was

Figure 8: Unmet needs for medical examination or treatment in households with children under 16 years of age, by risk of poverty, EU27 and Member States, 2021 (%)



Notes: Data for Ireland and Germany not shown due to low reliability. * Data for Slovenia are not significant.

Source: EU-SILC (ILC_HCH14)

5 More information about the experience of online schooling can be found at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19/quality-of-public-services>

nearly three times the EU average, while the shares in the Netherlands, Romania and Sweden were 9–10%. These four countries also had the biggest percentage point gaps in unmet needs between low- and high-income households. Austria (0.2%), Luxembourg (1.1%) and Cyprus (2.1%) had the lowest percentages of low-income households with children with unmet medical needs in the EU.

The differences between 2017 and 2021 cannot be documented for all the Member States due to issues with the reliability of the 2017 data. However, among those countries for which data are available, the unmet needs of low-income households decreased most in Belgium (from 7.8% in 2017 to 3.3% in 2021, a drop of 4.5 percentage points), followed by Romania (-2.5 percentage points) and Cyprus (-2 percentage points). Unmet needs increased most for low-income households in Poland (8 percentage points), Spain (4 percentage points) and Latvia (3.7 percentage points).

When it comes to differences between urban and rural areas, at EU level 4.4% of low-income households with children under 16 in cities had unmet medical needs in 2021; the percentage was 5.6% in towns and suburbs and 4.9% in rural areas.

Again, low reliability and lack of statistical significance prevent comparison of the 2021 data with the 2017 data for many countries and make it difficult to assess the situation in individual countries in 2021. Nevertheless, the data indicate that the highest percentages of unmet needs in low-income households with children were in towns and suburbs in Romania (24.5%), Hungary (24.2%) and Latvia (23.8%).

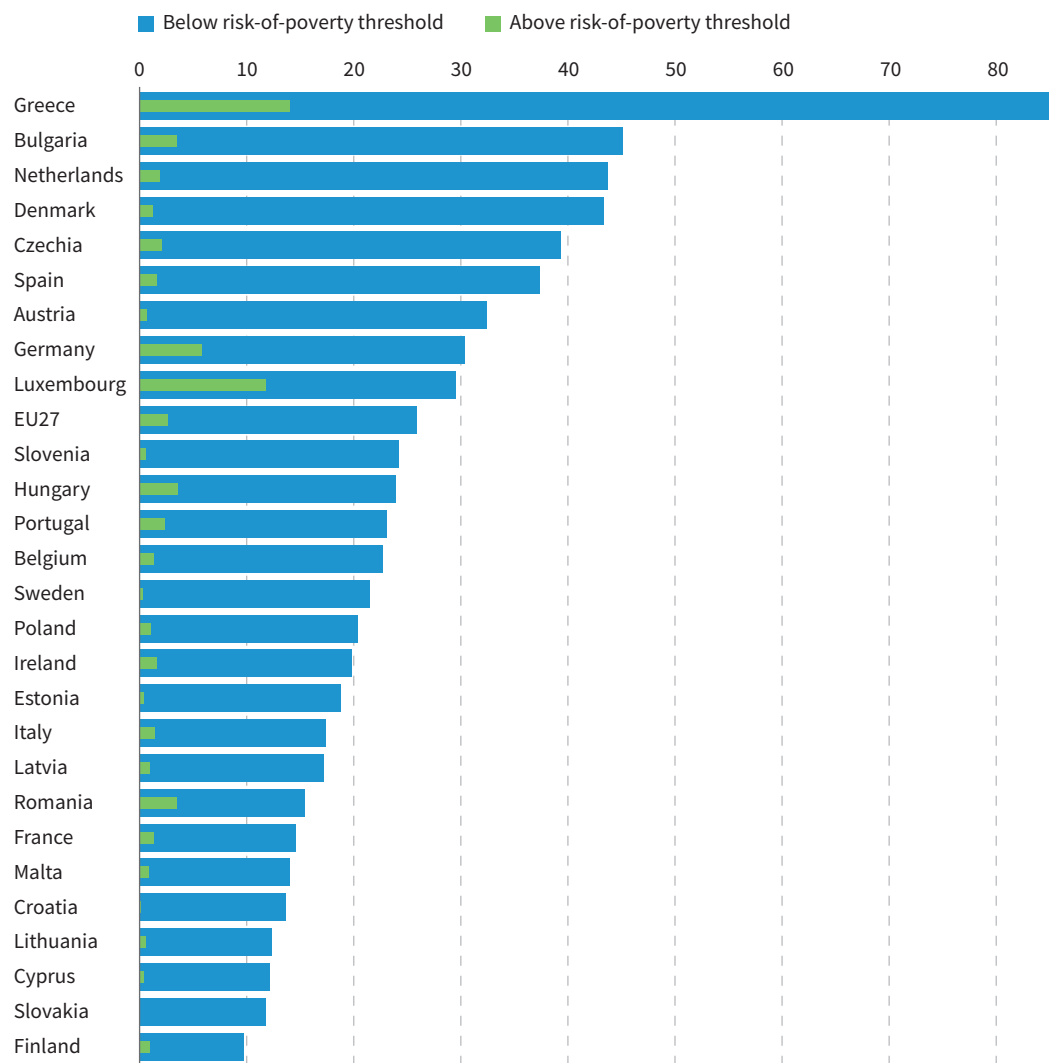
Housing

The SPC Indicators Subgroup benchmarking framework on childcare and support to children includes an indicator measuring the gap in the proportion of children living in households with housing cost overburden according to whether the household is above or below the risk-of-poverty threshold (as measured by the AROP indicator). The Social Scoreboard also includes an indicator regarding housing cost overburden and another measuring severe housing deprivation rate by tenure status. Both are analysed in this section, focusing on the situation of disadvantaged households with dependent children.

Housing cost overburden

Housing cost overburden is experienced when a household spends more than 40% of its disposable income on housing costs after removing housing allowances. In 2022, around one-quarter of children below the risk-of-poverty threshold experienced housing cost overburden, whereas only 2.6% of children above the threshold experienced this problem. The biggest gap was in Greece (a difference of nearly 72 percentage points), whereas in Finland it was only 8.7 percentage points (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Children living in households with housing cost overburden, by risk of poverty, EU27 and Member States, 2022 (%)



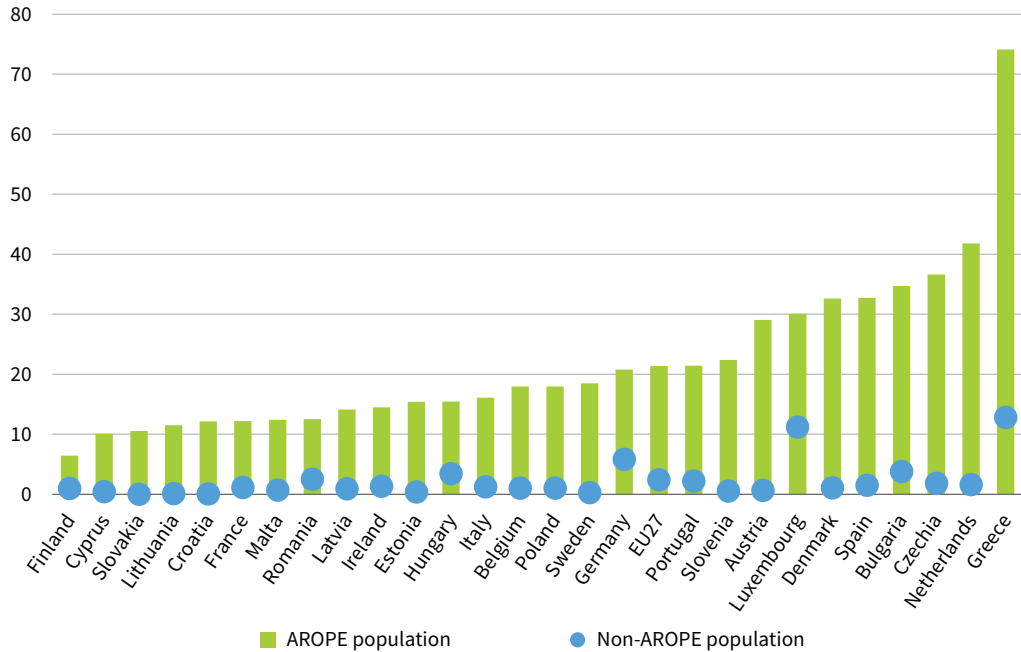
Note: Data for France are provisional.

Source: EU-SILC (ILC_LVHO07A)

Data are also available for 2022 for children distinguished by AROPE status; these are shown for the EU and the Member States in Figure 10. In terms of children who were experiencing housing cost overburden in 2022, the biggest differences between those who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion and those who did not face such risks could be found in Czechia, Greece and the Netherlands.

These three countries were also the countries with the highest rates of housing cost overburden among children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The lowest rates could be found in Finland and Cyprus, which also had the smallest gap between children who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion and those who weren't and were experiencing this issue.

Figure 10: Children living in households with housing cost overburden, by AROPE status, EU27 and Member States, 2022 (%)



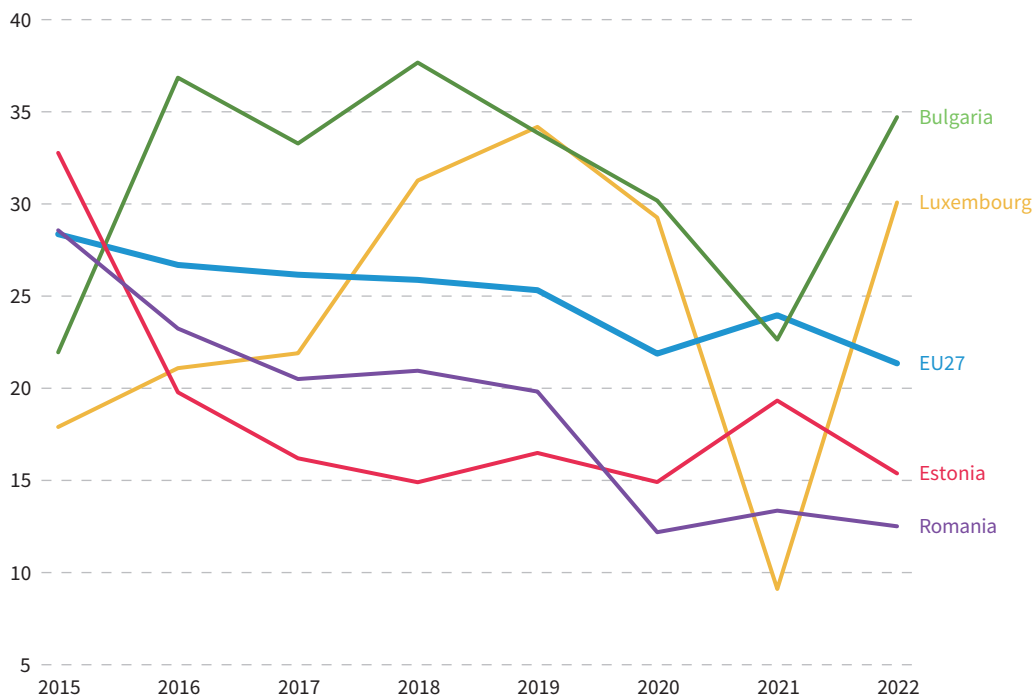
Note: AROPE status determined using the modified AROPE indicator (updated in 2021).

Source: EU-SILC (ILC_LVHO07A), Eurostat calculations

The percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion living in households with housing cost overburden at EU level fell from 28.4% in 2015 to 21.3% in 2022 (Figure 11). The biggest decreases at national level took place in Estonia (-17 percentage points) and Romania (-16 percentage points).

National averages increased in this period in just six Member States, with the largest increases in Bulgaria and Luxembourg (both around 12 percentage points). Disparities across countries decreased between 2015 and 2021, signifying upward convergence.

Figure 11: Children of AROPE status living in households with housing cost overburden, EU27 (%)



Source: EU-SILC (ILC_LVHO07A), Eurostat calculations

Severe housing deprivation rate by tenure status

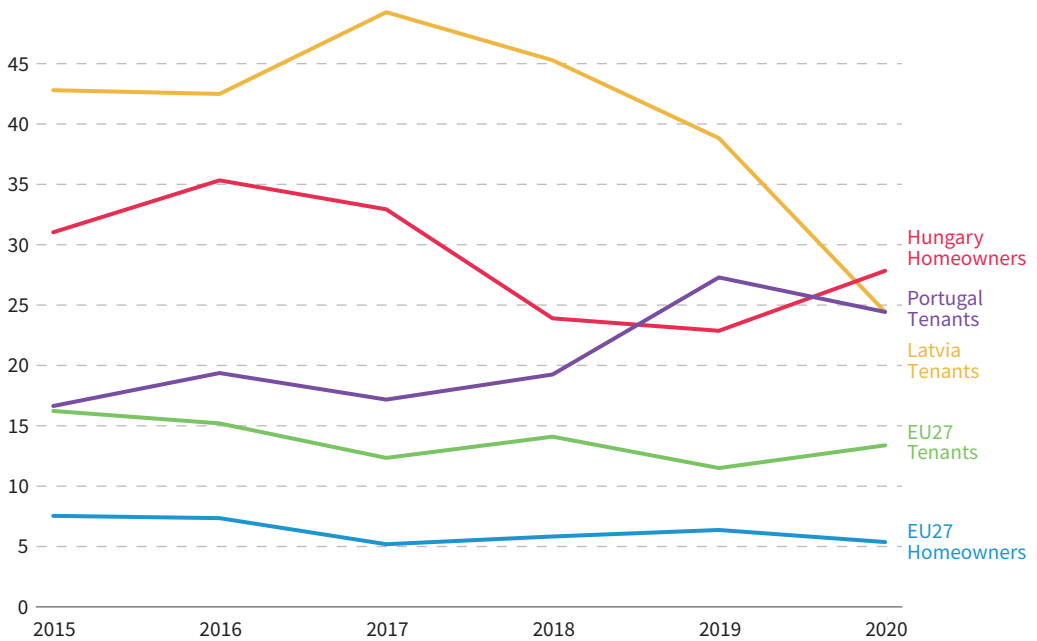
A household experiences severe housing deprivation when it occupies an overcrowded lodging and suffers at least one of the following deprivations: leaking roof, lack of indoor toilet or shower for personal use, or lack of light. Tenure status refers to whether the household owns the property or is a tenant at market price.

The percentage of children who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion and who lived in households that owned their own home and that experienced severe housing deprivation rates went from 7.54% in 2015 to 5.37% in 2020.

In the case of households that rented at market prices, the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and facing severe housing deprivation went from 16.23% in 2015 to 13.38% in 2020. Similarly, disparities between Member States reduced for both groups. Hence, there was upward convergence.

The latest year for which data are available is 2020. As Figure 12 shows, the highest severe deprivation rate for homeowners could be found in Hungary. The highest rates of severe deprivation for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in households with tenant status could be found in Latvia and Portugal.

Figure 12: Severe housing deprivation rate for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, by tenure status and selected EU Member States, 2015–2020 (%)



Source: EU-SILC (TEPSR_LM440), Eurostat calculations

Healthy nutrition

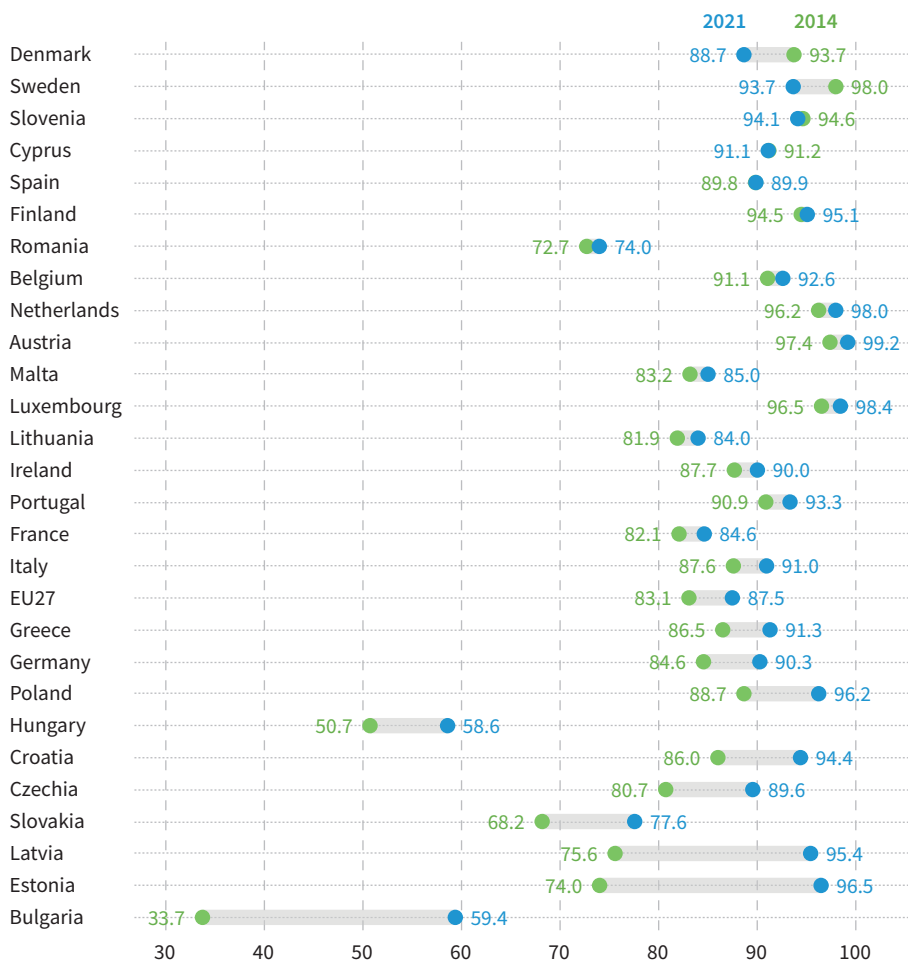
Ensuring access to at least one healthy meal each school day (a broader concept than access to school meals) is one of the objectives of the European Child Guarantee. Furthermore, the Recommendation establishing the Guarantee states the need to provide access to healthy nutrition outside school days. EU-SILC includes two indicators that allow children’s access to healthy meals and nutrition to be measured. The first concerns access to fruit and vegetables, and the second deals with the affordability of food with protein such as chicken, fish or any vegetarian equivalent.

Daily access to fruit and vegetables

The EU-SILC modules on child deprivation carried out in 2014 and 2021 provide information on access for children to fruit and vegetables once a day in households with dependent children aged up to 15. The indicator records whether there is access, and if not, whether this is the case because the household cannot afford it or whether there is no access for other reasons.

As Figure 13 shows, most Member States witnessed an increase in the share of households with dependent children of AROPE status with daily access to fruit and vegetables. The EU27 average increased from 83.1% in 2014 to 87.5% in 2021. Bulgaria, Estonia and Latvia recorded the biggest increases (25.7, 22.5 and 19.8 percentage points, respectively), while Sweden and Denmark recorded the biggest decreases (4 and 5 percentage points, respectively).

Figure 13: Households of AROPE status with dependent children that have daily access to fruit and vegetables, EU27 and Member States, 2014 and 2021 (%)



Notes: Households with dependent children up to age 15. Data for 2014 and 2021 were calculated using the modified AROPE indicator.

Source: EU-SILC child-specific deprivation module, Eurostat calculations

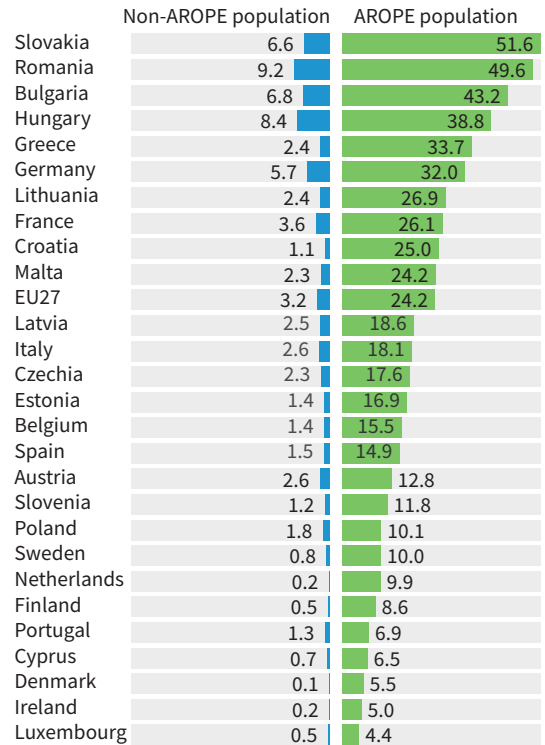
Ability to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent)

EU-SILC includes an indicator on child-specific deprivation regarding the affordability for households of one meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) once a day for children aged up to 15 years. However, it is available only for 2014 and 2021. For that reason, the indicator examined here, which is available on a yearly basis, is one that measures the share of households with children that are unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or a vegetarian equivalent every second day. The highest percentages among households at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022 were recorded in Slovakia (51.6%) and Romania (49.6%), both around twice the EU27 average (Figure 14).

The share of households with children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU that could not afford a meal containing protein decreased from 24.6% in 2015 to 24.2% in 2022. While the EU average rose to 25.2% in 2016, it decreased in each subsequent year to 2019, when it fell to 19.1%. It then rose to 23.3% in 2020, fell in 2021 to 19.3% and rose again in 2022 (Figure 15).

Between 2015 and 2022, the national averages decreased in 16 Member States. The biggest drops took place in Bulgaria (-23.5 percentage points) and Czechia (-19.7 percentage points). The Member States with the highest increases were Germany (10.9 percentage points) and Spain (6.7 percentage points).

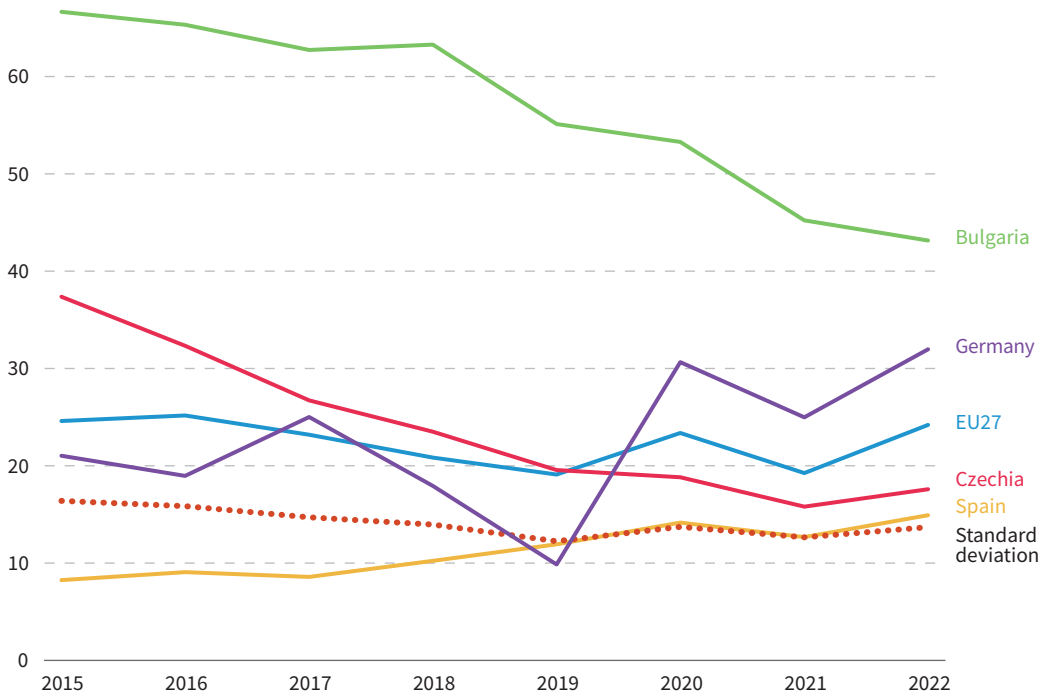
Figure 14: Inability of households with children to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day, by AROPE status, EU27 and Member States, 2022 (%)



Notes: AROPE status is determined on the basis of the modified AROPE indicator.

Source: EU-SILC (ILC_MDES03), Eurostat calculations

Figure 15: Inability of households with children of AROPE status to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day, average (%) and standard deviation, EU27 and selected Member States, 2015–2022



Source: EU-SILC (ILC_MDES03), Eurostat calculations

Disparities among the Member States reduced, signifying upward convergence. Moreover, poor-performing countries improved their performance faster than the best-performing ones, signalling a catching-up process. Notwithstanding, a small but detectable effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was recorded, with a slight increase in disparities in 2020 compared with 2019.

Concluding remarks: Aligning the Guarantee with the European Semester

The Council welcomes the Commission's aim to ... monitor progress in implementing this Recommendation, including its outcomes and the impact on children in need, also as part of the Social Scoreboard in the context of the European Semester (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 22).

This policy brief has presented an analysis of indicators relevant for monitoring the effectiveness of the European Child Guarantee (the findings are summarised in Table 2). Whenever possible, the analysis broke down the data of the Social Scoreboard indicators according to AROPE status, highlighting the links between the Guarantee and the European Semester. Links have already been created with components of the Semester such as the Joint Employment Report and the country reports. Further links could be established with other components of the Semester. A motion for a European Parliament resolution on the European Semester in 2022 called for a further revision of the Social Scoreboard, with the disaggregation of data by age and other factors to identify social divergences and the impact of policies on various socioeconomic groups (European Parliament, 2022). The analysis here is a step in this direction, providing data on children and by poverty status.

In addition to these indicators, paying more attention to workforce issues (such as labour shortages in the ECEC sector) in areas covered by the Guarantee would contribute towards

increasing the quality and accessibility of services. Eurofound will support these endeavours by carrying out research on this topic in 2024 and 2025.

Table 2: List of indicators, time period analysed and convergence results

Indicators	Period	Result
AROPE rates	2015-2022	Upward convergence
ECEC		
Under three years	2015-2022	Upward convergence
Between three and compulsory schooling age	2015-2022	Downward convergence
Education and school-based activities		
General government expenditure on education	2007–2021	Upward divergence
Early leavers from education and training	2007–2022	Upward convergence
E-schooling and digital skills	2018, 2020 and 2021	n.a.
Healthcare		
Unmet medical needs	2017 and 2021	n.a.
Housing		
Housing cost overburden	2015–2022	Upward convergence
Severe housing deprivation rate by tenure status	2015–2021	Upward convergence
Healthy nutrition		
Daily access of children to fruit and vegetables	2014 and 2021	n.a.
Ability to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day	2015–2022	Upward convergence

Note: *n.a., not applicable.*



Policy pointers

The previous sections analysed indicators that are featured in the European Semester and other relevant EU initiatives. This section provides some pointers on to how to link the Guarantee with the EU green and digital policy agenda. It also provides some pointers on how to improve the disaggregation of data, especially regarding the urban–rural divide.

Location matters; let's measure it more rigorously

The urban–rural divide and other geographical imbalances are featured in the European Semester. For example, the country-specific recommendations have over the years pointed out geographical disparities in the availability of services relevant to the Guarantee. It follows that, in addition to considering *what* measures should be implemented and *for whom*, it is also important to consider where these are implemented. Location matters because of the differences within each country in the supply of

and demand for services. This policy brief has analysed differences by degree of urbanisation in the indicators for which this is possible. The analysis shows that children living in towns and suburbs are more likely to experience unmet healthcare needs and that the rate of early school-leaving is higher in rural areas.

At the moment, data broken down by NUTS 2 region are available for all four poverty indicators featured in the Social Scoreboard on the Eurostat website. However, at the time of writing, they are not available specifically for children. Developing the data available would help to ensure that funding focuses on the areas of each country where it is needed most. The EU Rural Pact – an initiative to encourage cooperation between public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia and citizens on rural issues – and its associated activities would also benefit from more data and information specifically about children.

Linking the Guarantee and the digital and green transitions more closely

In line with the Just Transition Mechanism, ensuring a fair transition to a green economy implies better and more efficient dwellings for everyone. Guaranteeing better living conditions for disadvantaged children would result in more opportunities to exit intergenerational poverty. The analysis in this policy brief shows that the percentage of children living in households with housing cost overburden is greater among children that are at risk of poverty or social exclusion than among households not at risk. Furthermore, households at risk of poverty or social exclusion are more likely than those not at risk to experience severe housing deprivation, especially when they do not own their house.

Other recent studies show that low-income households are more likely than others to live in noisy residential areas and polluted neighbourhoods and to experience energy poverty (Molinuevo and Consolini, 2022; Eurofound, 2023; Eurofound and EEA, 2023). These issues are dealt with only indirectly in most of the national action plans implementing the Guarantee, which raises concerns regarding the cost of the just transition for those at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Energy poverty could take a dramatic turn with climate change, and it is important to take this into account in implementing the Guarantee.

Preventing steep rent increases and supporting vulnerable households when they face unexpected housing costs are paramount to

ensuring a more level playing field for vulnerable children. Several energy directives are in place to help vulnerable people stay afloat amid high energy costs, such as the Fit for 55 package and REPowerEU.

The Renovation Wave Strategy is providing investment in making housing more energy efficient, which could also help tackle affordability and housing deprivation issues for low-income households.

Digitalisation is given a lot of prominence in the European Semester. The *Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee* states that 'tackling child and family poverty under the Child Guarantee also means tackling digital deprivation'. The Recommendation establishing the Guarantee also refers to digital skills and the digital divide. A few national action plans (such as the Maltese plan) include measures to enhance digital connectivity. More countries could benefit from incorporating measures in this domain in their rollout of the Guarantee.

However, the indicators currently available make it difficult to monitor developments. This is concerning since the data available from Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey show that satisfaction with the quality of online schooling decreased during the pandemic; attitudes after the pandemic may have shifted. Synergies between the Guarantee and the Digital Education Action Plan and key performance indicators measuring progress towards the targets set out in the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030 could help remove this gap.



Resources

All Eurofound publications are available online at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu>

Council of the European Union (2021), 'Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee', *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 223, 22 June.

Council of the European Union (2022), 'Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030', *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 484, 20 December.

Eurofound (2021), *Education, healthcare and housing: How access changed for children and families in 2020*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Eurofound (2022), *Living, working and COVID-19 (Update April 2021): Mental health and trust decline across EU as pandemic enters another year*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Eurofound (2023), *Unaffordable and inadequate housing in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Eurofound and EEA (2023), *Green, clean and keen to converge? A convergence analysis of environmental quality of life in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

European Commission (2022), *European Education and Training Monitor*, Brussels.

European Parliament (2022), *Motion for a European Parliament resolution on the European Semester for economic policy coordination: Employment and social priorities for 2023*, 2022/2151(INI), Brussels.

Molinuevo, D. and Consolini, M. (2022), *Analysis of the Child Guarantee national action plans: Trends in Member States and support for refugees*, European Parliament, Luxembourg.

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The European Child Guarantee was established in 2021 to ensure that children in need have access to a set of key services. This policy brief analyses trends and disparities in children's access to early childhood education and care, education, healthcare, nutrition and housing. This is done using a convergence analysis, which tracks whether Member States are improving in respect of specific performance indicators and whether disparities between them are expanding or narrowing. The analysis, where possible, also looks at the differences between urban and rural areas and between children living in households with different levels of income and risk of social exclusion. The indicators chosen for analysis highlight the links between the Guarantee, the European Semester and the Social Scoreboard.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

