

European Quality of Life Survey 2016

Introduction

The European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) is an established tool for monitoring and analysing quality of life in the EU. Carried out in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2016, the EQLS documents the living conditions and social situation of European citizens. It includes subjective and objective measures: reported attitudes and preferences, as well as resources and experiences. Eurofound's approach recognises that 'quality of life' is a broad concept and encompasses individual well-being as well as the quality of public services and quality of society. The current report provides an overview of multiple dimensions: it examines subjective well-being, standard of living and aspects of deprivation, care responsibilities and work-life balance; healthcare, long-term care, childcare and other public services; and social insecurity, social exclusion and societal tensions, trust, and participation and community engagement.

This report covers the 28 EU Member States. It uses 2016 EQLS data and information from previous survey rounds as well as other research to assess trends in European societies. Ten years after the global economic crisis, it reviews social progress and aims to identify remaining or emerging challenges.

Policy context

The policy agenda at EU level increasingly emphasises the importance of the social dimension of Europe in cohesion and convergence. The EQLS provides a means to measure outcomes of progress, such as well-being and social inclusion. A range of data can serve to complement the social indicators used to monitor policy outcomes, particularly regarding implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Many aspects of quality of life are determined at national and local levels, and the survey evidence regarding country differences can be an impetus for further analysis by Member States and, also, for mutual learning. The survey's comprehensive coverage of the EU informs reflection on convergence and divergence across the Union.

Key findings

- Overall, there has been progress in quality of life in the EU from 2011 to 2016, with some dimensions having recovered to the pre-crisis levels of 2007. A decrease in material hardship and increase in satisfaction with standard of living occurred across all income quartiles in comparison to 2011. However, the level of difficulties in making ends meet is still higher in seven countries than it was before the crisis in 2007. In 11 countries, more than half of the population report difficulties in making ends meet.
- Country differences in terms of quality of life remain extensive, but these are nuanced and cannot simply be captured in homogenous country clusters. Nonetheless, multiple disadvantages are still more pronounced in some societies than in others.
- Life satisfaction in the EU over the last decade has remained at a relatively high level: 7.1 on average on a 1–10 point scale in 2016. It increased between 2011 and 2016 in some Member States, especially in Hungary, Estonia and the UK, while satisfaction with standard of living increased most in Hungary, Bulgaria, Estonia and Poland. In Greece, Italy and Spain, life satisfaction declined during this period, which continues a downward trend evident from before the economic crisis.
- Ratings for the quality of public services have increased overall; in particular, satisfaction with healthcare and childcare improved in several countries where ratings were previously low. The perceived quality of public services still varies markedly across Member States, and people in lower income groups report less improvement in the quality of services.

- In urban neighbourhoods, more people have become concerned about air quality. With regard to neighbourhood services, inadequate access to recycling facilities is among the issues highlighted, while access to banking in rural areas is a problem in some countries. Compared to the previous survey, a lower proportion of people in the 2016 EQLS feel close to others in their local area; this is especially the case in rural areas, where this dimension is important for social inclusion.
- There is a general improvement in quality of society indicators, including a decline in feelings of social exclusion, an increase in participation in clubs, societies or associations, and increased trust in national institutions. In particular, young people (18–24 years) registered the highest increase in trust in other people, possibly indicative of a new cohort less scarred by the crisis.
- Perceptions of tension between poor and rich people, management and workers, and old and young have decreased; on the other hand, rising tensions between different religious and ethnic groups are reported and – although to a lesser extent – tensions between people of different sexual orientation.
- There are persistent inequalities on some indicators and it is clear that the rising tide of the post-crisis recovery has not lifted all citizens equally. For low-income groups, improvements on several dimensions were more limited in terms of overall quality of public services, perception of social exclusion and risk to mental health (women in the lowest income quartile being consistently at higher risk over the last decade). However, the self-reported health of the population, which had deteriorated in the aftermath of the crisis, is now better than it was in 2007, including in the lowest income quartile.
- There are a range of insecurities and uncertainties expressed. These include a decrease in certainty about being able to retain one’s own accommodation, substantial concerns about having insufficient income in one’s old age in two-thirds of Member States – with 13% of people in the EU extremely worried about this – and, in a number of countries, less optimism about the future of one’s children in comparison to one’s own future.

Policy pointers

- The greatest improvements in quality of life have been registered among the second highest income quartile – a positive development for some of the middle class in the EU – which also invites reflection on how this progress could be extended to other groups, both in terms of individual quality of life and effectiveness of public services.
- The situation of the long-term unemployed has worsened; policies should take into account that risks for mental health have increased in this group, and their feeling of social exclusion is particularly high. When designing measures, it would be appropriate to further examine the composition and changing characteristics of those in long-term unemployment.
- To address the problem of indebtedness and arrears, actions could be targeted better if, in addition to the more commonly considered consumer and mortgage debts, they take into account rent, utilities, phone and informal debts. The latter types of debt are more common among low-income groups and they may be symptomatic of a risk of over-indebtedness.
- Measures to promote resilience should include improving people’s access to sources of support – both social networks and institutions – as people who feel they can rely on support feel more resilient.
- To respond to a deterioration in work–life balance, policies should target workers with fixed-term contracts and those in blue-collar jobs, as well as people with care responsibilities, in particular, younger and middle-aged women.
- To address the growing need for long-term care, as well as to help sustain and increase overall employment, policies should include measures for informal carers who are in employment – and also for those who are not in employment. Addressing the situation of the latter group merits greater attention, as they are subject to a range of disadvantages, and may encounter difficulties finding other roles once their care duties cease.
- The planning of services for ageing societies should include developing quality measures to address the low ratings of long-term care by both users and non-users of such services.
- Older people report lower life satisfaction and greater difficulties in making ends meet in a number of countries, especially in eastern Europe; this has been identified in both the latest and in previous surveys and suggests that the effectiveness of social security provision needs to be addressed.

Further information

For information on the EQLS, please see <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eqls2016>

The report is available at eurofound.link/ef1733

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