



The State of Children in the European Union

2024

The State of Children **in the European Union**

**ADDRESSING THE NEEDS AND RIGHTS OF THE
EU'S YOUNGEST GENERATION — 2024**

Contents

Foreword	6
Aims and scope of this report	9
An overview of children in the European Union	10
Demographics of children in the European Union	13
How are children doing?	16
Physical health	18
Mental well-being	20
Skills	22

Foreword



Mr. Bertrand Bainvel

UNICEF Representative
to the European Union
Institutions

Director, Partnerships
Office, Brussels

© Frédéric Moreau de Bellaing/2023

The year 2024 is of tremendous importance for the children in the European Union (EU) and the fulfillment of their rights. The EU, under the close watch of a newly elected Parliament, will be embarking on a new five-year Strategic Agenda to be implemented by a new College of Commissioners. The EU's cohesiveness, competitiveness, prosperity and overall future will depend on its success in navigating the environmental, social and economic transitions and in placing the current, as well as new, generations of children at the core of the European project.

The EU is one of the most equal and prosperous regions in the world. Yet, the rights of far too many children within its borders are under threat or even denied. Too many children in the EU face persistently high rates of poverty and social exclusion, mental health challenges, and environmental dangers such as air pollution. Rapidly developing new technology is exposing them to risks, but also tremendous benefits if managed properly and children are empowered with digital skills and literacy.

It's therefore vital that the EU consolidates and capitalizes on its past and current achievements in the promotion of child well-being, including the adoption of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child in 2022, and the European Child Guarantee. At the same time, it will also need to adapt to the multiple and often intertwining challenges and crises facing children in the EU today in its new strategies, policies, plans and budgets – from mental health to climate change, the cost-of-living crisis to digital transformation. Addressing these challenges also offers concrete opportunities for meaningful positive change.

It is against this background that the UNICEF EU Representation Office in Brussels, in partnership with UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, has produced *The State of Children in the European Union 2024*. In addition to UNICEF Innocenti's own analyses, the report and accompanying briefs have relied extensively on existing data and studies, as well as inputs from the whole UNICEF family, including the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, and UNICEF National Committees present in the EU.

This report aims to inform the EU's vision for all its children in this pivotal year by examining child well-being in the EU and making recommendations for EU decision makers and policy makers. The report focuses, in particular, on four highly critical issues for children in the EU: poverty, mental health, the environment, and the impact of digital technologies. Four short accompanying policy briefs are also available on these topics which further spotlight these issues and provide more detailed calls on how the EU can take action.

Over the years, the EU has taken great pride in championing child rights. These rights are as relevant as ever in helping the EU respond to multiple internal and external challenges – both for children living in the EU today and for future generations of children. The EU can rely on its strategic partnership with UNICEF to promote and protect their rights. We hope that this report and briefs provide a timely and concise evidence base for this vital work.



A B C D E
F G H I J K
L M N O P
Q R S T U
V W X Y Z
0 1 2 3 4
5 6 7 8 9



Aims and scope of this report

This report summarizes analyses by UNICEF on child well-being and progress for children in the European Union (EU) during the period of the current EU legislature, 2019-2024, and identifies key issues for the next political cycle.

The report includes:

A broad overview of key issues and trends in the EU relevant to children.

A set of policy actions relevant at EU level which are centred on children.

It is accompanied by more in-depth briefs looking at four key policy areas – poverty, mental health, the environment, and digital technologies – which are having a major impact on child well-being now and which will have a significant bearing on their future prospects. By initiating new policies, proposing new legislation, promoting the adoption of best practices by member States, as well as designing financial incentives, the EU has ample opportunities to address these issues in its next political cycle.

An overview of children in the European Union



In the past five years, the 27 countries of the EU have faced major challenges – new and old – with variations according to national contexts:

- In 2020 and beyond, the **COVID-19** pandemic reaped a terrible human cost and at times brought countries to a standstill. This had a tremendous impact on children’s mental health and education.
- The effects of **climate change** are becoming increasingly evident with dramatic storms, floods, droughts and forest fires. Children in the EU are impacted, as environmental damage affects their health, livelihoods, disrupts their access to basic services and impacts their mental health.
- **Digital transformation**, including recent developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI), continues to bring both new benefits for child development and learning and new risks and challenges as they relate to their protection from harmful content, behaviour, and wrong or misleading information.
- The shape of the population is changing with falling birth rates, ageing populations and changes in family structures contributing to a new **demographic transition**. In many of the EU’s rural areas, adequate and timely access to health services for children and sustained access to education are facing increased demands. Pressures on social protection systems relating to meeting the needs and rights of an ageing population also risk undermining services for the most vulnerable children.
- **Migration**, both within and towards Europe, has been a major subject of political debate and issue for policymakers to address, including how to provide services for and successfully integrate migrant and asylum-seeking families and children. This is set to continue in the new political cycle as a result of both the need of EU countries to sustain competitiveness in the face of a demographic decline, and the impact of violence, instability and a lack of opportunities for young generations in many countries of origin.
- Older problems have re-emerged. Since 2021, as countries began to recover from the pandemic, **inflation** has once again become a challenge for European economies, while at the same time eating into the household budgets of families.
- 2022 saw **war** return to European soil, for the first time since the end of the Balkans conflict in the 1990s, posing security threats and affecting a large number of children from Ukraine, in countries across Europe.

Climate change is impacting children in the EU, as environmental damage affects their health, livelihoods, and access to services.

Inevitably, all of these factors have fundamentally shaped the lives of children in the EU:

- There are increasing concerns about children’s **mental health**, with evidence of worsening trends in many countries.
- There are also **physical health** challenges, including those due to climate and environmental degradation and air quality. Immunization rates fell during the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years increasing numbers of children have become overweight/obese.
- The pandemic also affected children’s learning and heightened educational inequalities. At the same time, children increasingly need to develop new **skills**, including digital literacy, to support their futures.
- **Child poverty** continues to deny opportunities for millions of children and increase their risk of social exclusion.

Underlying these trends in child well-being are a number of core issues for policy makers to address. Some are mainly within the remit of national policy but can benefit from incentives provided by EU initiatives. Others have more scope for EU-level policy interventions.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected children’s learning and heightened educational inequalities.

Demographics of children in the European Union



There were an estimated 81 million children¹ in the EU at the beginning of 2022, amounting to around 18 per cent of the total population (446 million). The number of children had declined by around 1 million in the previous decade while the total population had grown by 6 million.²

On 1 January 2022, around 2.5 million children (3.7 per cent) under 15 years old had been born outside the EU 27.³ This does not include refugees who fled the war in Ukraine after its significant escalation in February 2022. It is estimated⁴ that a third (33 per cent) of these 6 million refugees in Europe are children.

In addition, in 2022, the number of children arriving in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, Cyprus and Malta increased significantly by 46 per cent, reaching around 35,200 compared to 24,147 in 2021. Among them, 18 per cent were girls and 82 per cent were boys. Notably, about 67 per cent of these children arriving in Europe in 2022 were unaccompanied or separated.⁵



There were 48.2 million households with children in the EU in 2022 (*Table 1*). This is just under a quarter of all households in the EU. The number of households with children has fallen by over 1 million in the last decade, while the number of households without children has grown by 14 million⁶. This is due to a combination of factors, including declining birth rates, an ageing population and increasingly diverse living arrangements, for example, more single-person households. This has implications on child poverty and risks of social exclusion, as well as parental and grand-parental care, guidance and support. Of the households with children:

- Just under two thirds are households headed by a couple, in which it is estimated that 68 per cent of children live.
- Around 12 per cent of children are estimated to live in single-parent households.
- Almost a quarter of households are defined as ‘other’ – often multi-generational households – in which an estimated one in five (20 per cent) of children live.

Table 1. Types of households with children, EU, 2022 (thousands)

	Child	2 children	3+ children	Households (number and %)	Children ⁷ (number and %)
Single	3,669	1,926	554	6,149 (13%)	9,459 (12%)
Couple	12,399	13,776	4,459	30,634 (64%)	55,556 (68%)
Other	7,784	2,694	958	11,435 (24%)	16,522 (20%)
Total	23,852	18,395	5,970	48,217	81,537

Source: Data browser, ‘Number of households by household composition, number of children and age of youngest child (1 000)’, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfst_hhnhtych/default/table?lang=en, accessed 4 November 2023.

How are children doing?

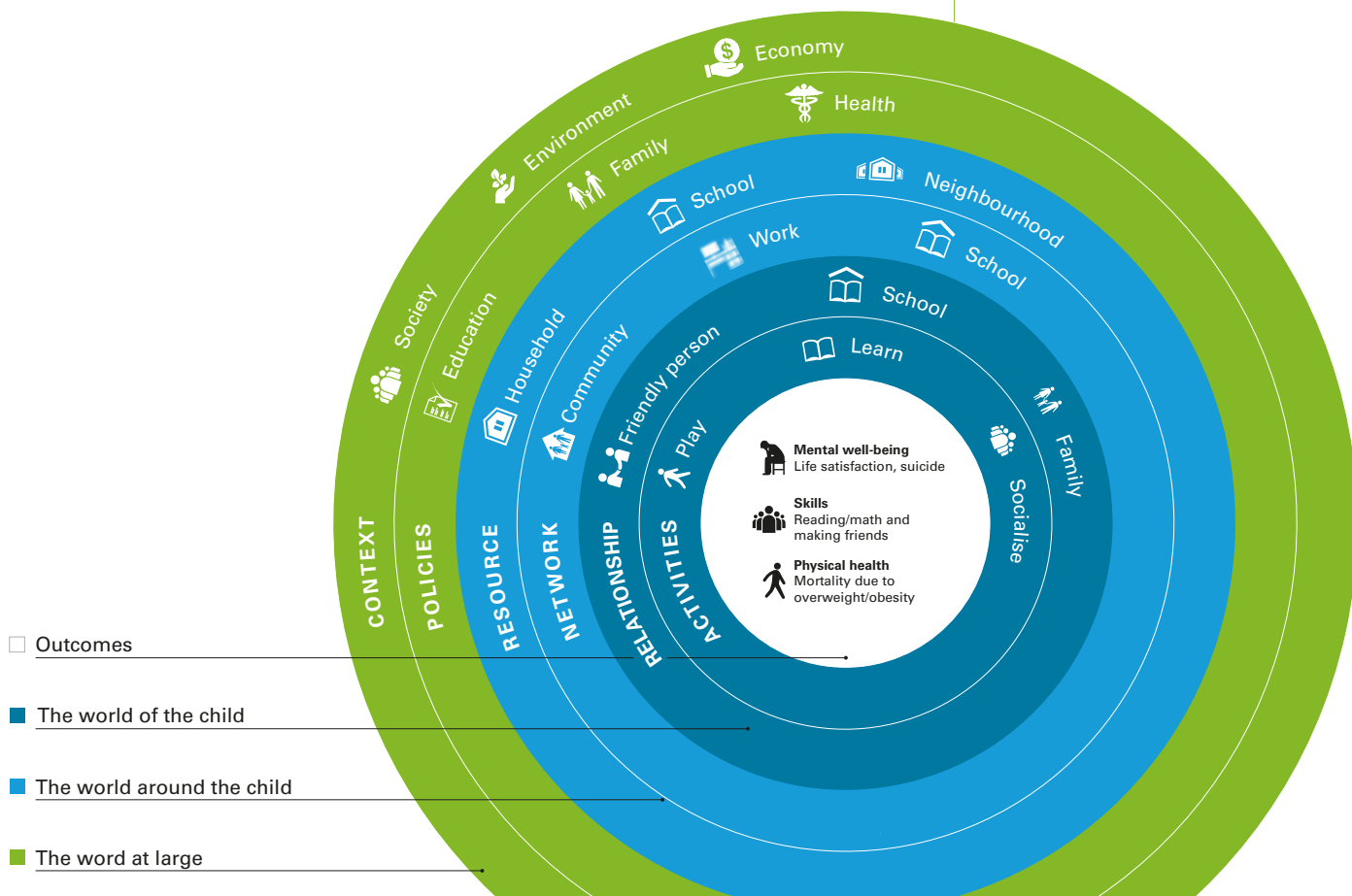


Monitoring the situation of children effectively requires child-focused organizations and advocates to discuss and adopt appropriate frameworks. These frameworks must support the analysis and understanding of the situation of children in relation to their enjoyment of rights as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Such frameworks must incorporate both the direct life experiences and interactions of children as they grow and develop, as well as the broader environment and how it contributes to, or threatens, the realization of their rights.

UNICEF has been at the forefront of monitoring child well-being in EU (and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development / OECD) countries through its Innocenti Report Card series initiated in 2000. The 16th edition of this report⁸, published in 2020, presented a new framework for child well-being⁹ (Figure 1). This is influenced by ecological frameworks of child development¹⁰ and places the child at the centre of a number of systems, beginning with the way they spend their time and their relationships with those closest to them, and extending to the broad societal context.

Figure 1. Child well-being in context (framework from Innocenti Report Card 16)



The framework in this report is used in two ways. **First, we present evidence on key well-being outcomes of relevance to children in the EU:**

Physical health

Mental well-being

Skills development

The report then analyses four areas of focus and particular relevance to debates at EU level, the first two in the sphere of policies and the second two in relation to broader contextual factors as they impact children:

Economic factors and child poverty

Mental health services provision

Environmental factors

Digital technologies

Physical health

Generally, in global terms, children in the EU benefit from strong health care, high attainment of education by their parents and caregivers, including among women, access to safe water and sanitation, good nutrition and, as a result, many key health indicators are very positive. As seen in *Table 2*, **child mortality** is very low in global terms.

Table 2. Child and adolescent mortality rates in the EU and globally, 2021

MORTALITY RATE PER 1,000	EUROPEAN UNION	GLOBAL
0 to 4 years old ¹¹	3.5	38.1
5 to 14 years old	0.7	6.2
15 to 19 years old	1.1	4.6

Source: IGME, UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 'Child mortality, stillbirth, and causes of death estimates', <https://childmortality.org/>, accessed 18 November 2023.

The incidence of obesity and overweight has become a major concern within the EU.



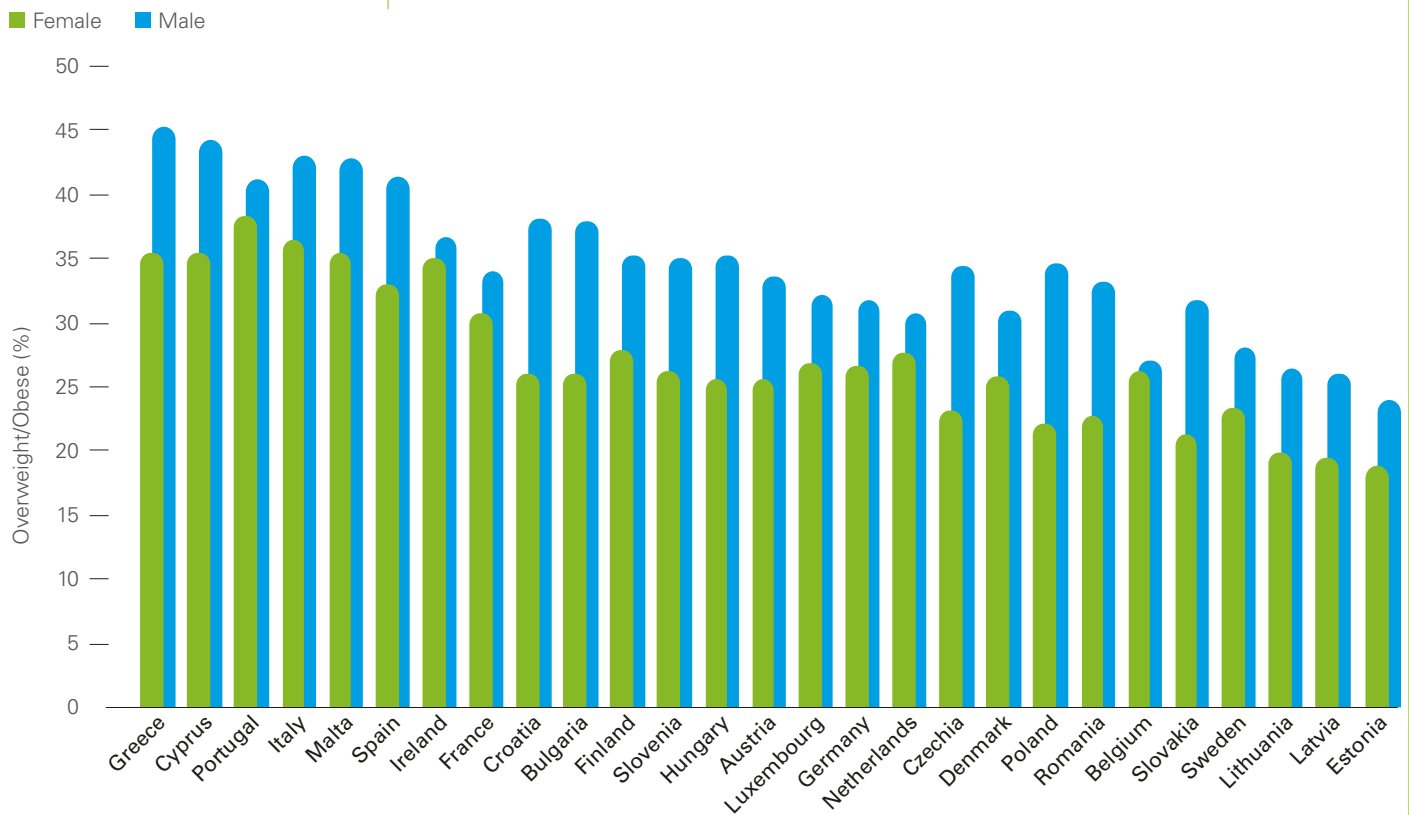
Nevertheless, there are specific issues related to child mortality in the EU:

- **Road traffic injuries** rank among the most common causes of death among children and young people aged 10 to 19 years old.
- **Suicides** are also a common cause of death among young people aged 15 to 19. This topic is covered further in the next section on mental health.

Both of these factors cause more deaths of males than females in the 15 to 19 age group.

Beyond mortality, the incidence of obesity and overweight has become a major concern within the EU, as well as globally. Estimated rates¹² of children and young people up to 19 years old being overweight/obese in 2019 (*Figure 2*) vary from between 20 and 25 per cent in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to around 40 per cent in Cyprus and Greece. Rates for males are higher than for females in all countries. The proportion of children aged 5 to 19 who are obese in the World Health Organization (WHO) European region¹³ is predicted to rise from 13 per cent of boys and 8 per cent of girls in 2020, to 15 per cent and 10 per cent in 2025, and then to 18 per cent and 12 per cent by 2030.¹⁴

Figure 2. Estimated rates of overweight and obese, children and young people aged 0-19, 2019



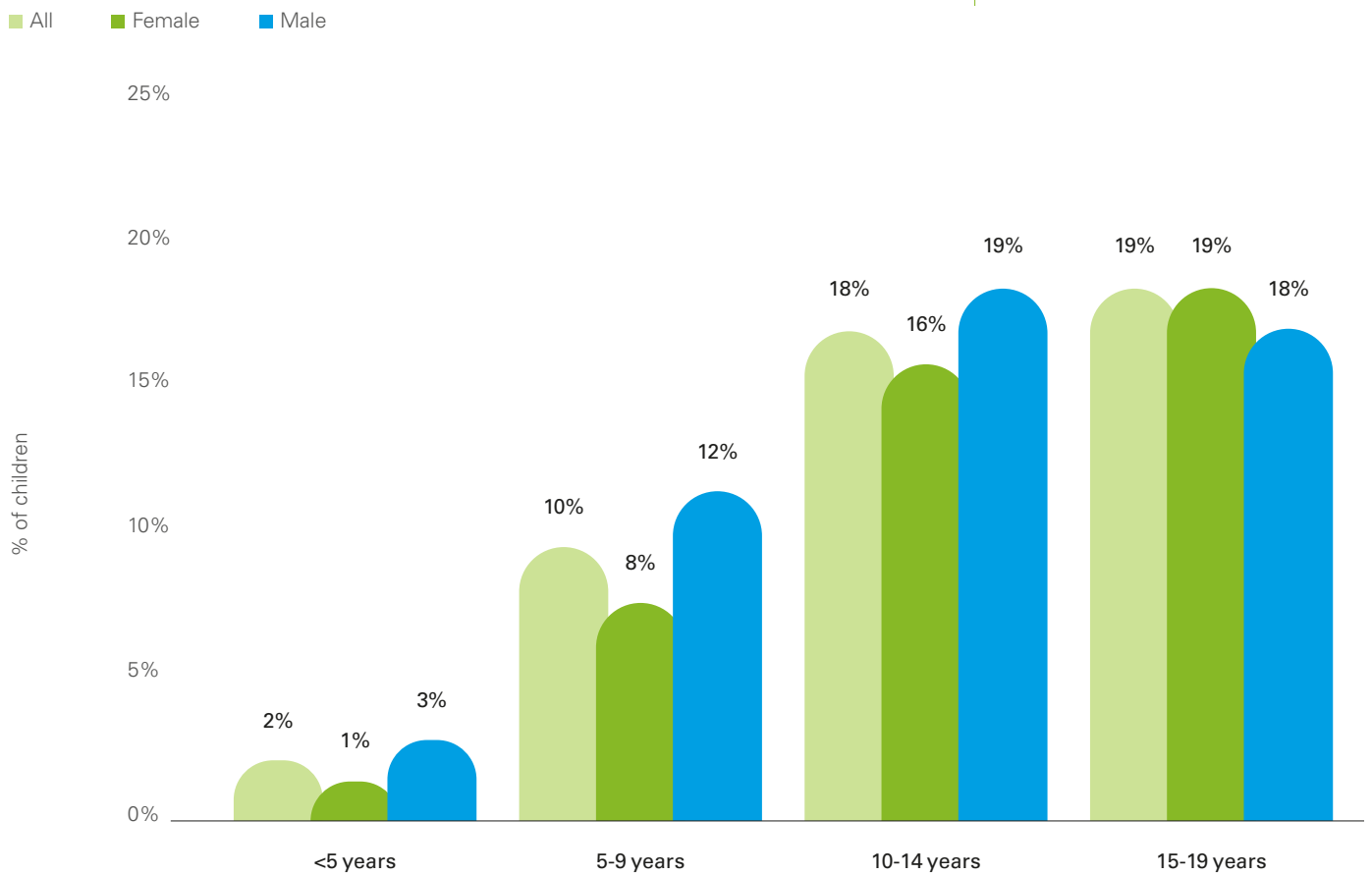
Source: Okunogbe Adeyemi et al., 'Economic impacts of overweight and obesity: current and future estimates for eight countries (Data supplement)', et al. *BMJ Global Health* 2022; 7:e009773. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009773

Mental well-being

The mental health of children is also a subject of debate, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and children's concerns about the environment. Mental well-being is a term used not only to incorporate mental health problems but also positive feelings such as happiness, life satisfaction, and a sense of purpose.

It has been estimated that around 11.2 million children and young people (13 per cent) aged up to 19 suffer from a **mental health condition** (Figure 3). The figures for the older age group include 4 per cent suffering from depressive disorders and 8 per cent from anxiety disorders¹⁵ Males were much more likely than female to suffer mental health conditions up to the age of 14, while slightly more females than males have conditions in the 15 to 19 age group.

Figure 3. Estimated prevalence of mental health conditions aged 0-19, EU, 2019

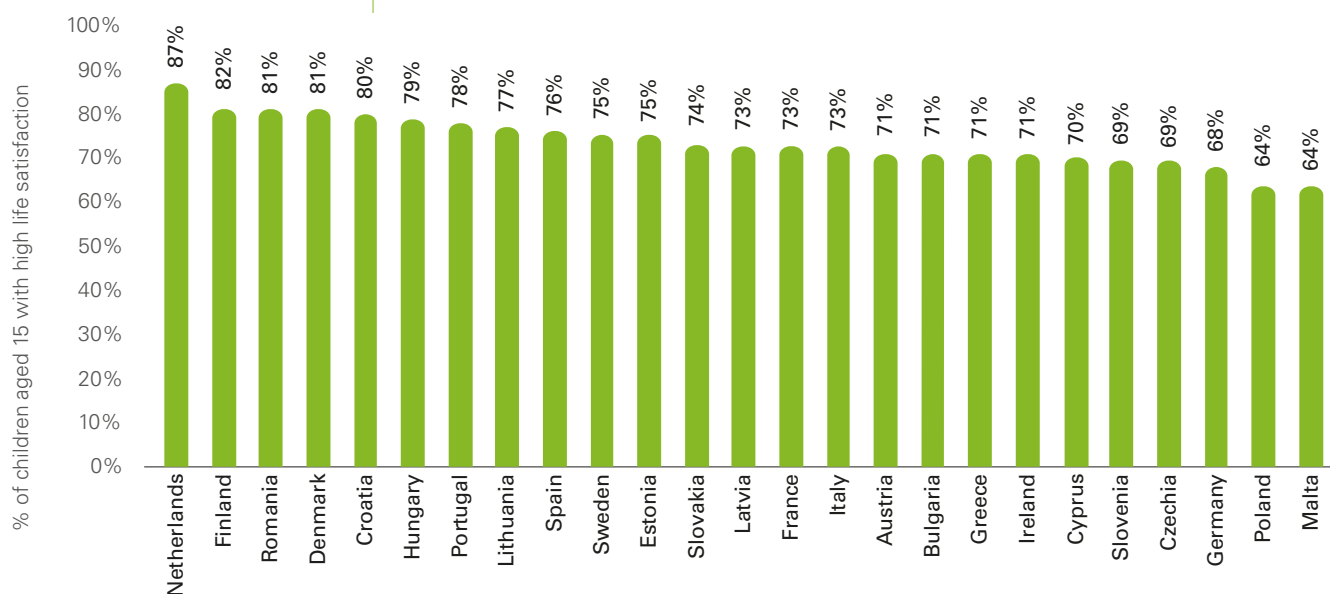


Source: 2019 Global Burden of Disease Study, <https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-results/>, accessed 20 January 2024

Suicide is one of the leading causes of mortality in this age group, accounting for around one in six (17 per cent) deaths. There were around 930 suicides of young people aged 15 to 19 in the EU in 2020. There is, however, an improving long-term trend with a reduction in the rates by 20 per cent between 2011 and 2020. Around 70 per cent of young people aged 15 to 19 in the EU who commit suicide are male.¹⁶

Across 25 EU countries for which data are available, fewer than three-quarters of children (71 per cent) aged 15 had high **life satisfaction** (a self-rating of more than 5 out of 10) in 2022 – ranging from 64 per cent in Malta and Poland to 87 per cent in the Netherlands (*Figure 4*). Rates of high life satisfaction were higher among males (78 per cent) than females (64 per cent). The average rate of high life satisfaction across 23 countries for which data are available fell by around 5% between 2018 and 2022. This equates to over 220,000 fewer children aged 15 in 23 EU countries having high life satisfaction in 2022 than in 2018.¹⁷

Figure 4. Life satisfaction among school children aged 15 years old in 25 EU countries, 2022



Source: PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment, 'PISA Database', <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/>, accessed 15 January 2024.

Notes: Data is not available for Belgium, Cyprus and Luxembourg

Skills

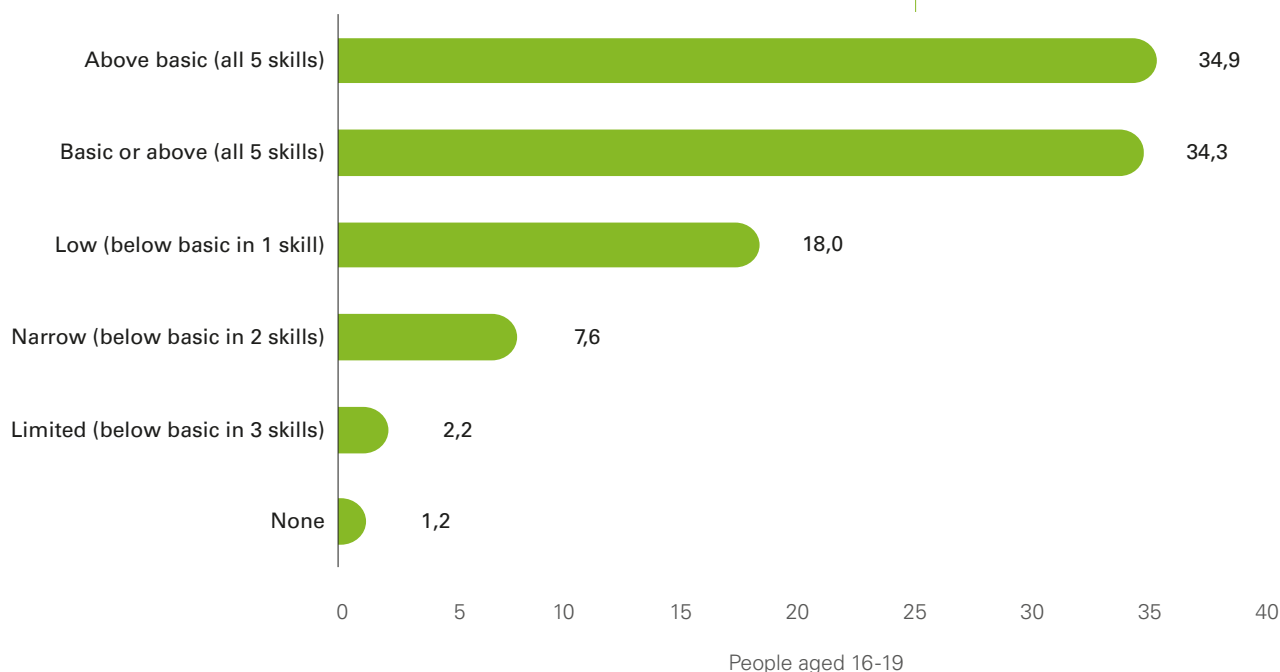
Children and young people need to develop an increasingly wide range of skills in preparation for adulthood. While traditional academic and vocational skills remain important, the value of interpersonal skills are increasingly recognized in both professional and personal spheres, and the evolution of digital technologies requires an additional set of competencies.

In terms of traditional **academic** competencies, in 2022¹⁸, around two in every five children (40 per cent) aged 15 years old (around 1.9 million) in the EU had not achieved basic proficiency in both reading and mathematics, leaving a major gap to fill. Levels of basic proficiency fell, on average, by about 6 per cent from 2018 to 2022 across 26 EU countries. On average, girls of this age tend to have substantially better reading skills than boys while there is a tendency for boys to do better at mathematics, although the difference is not always clear.

There are also some data available on children's confidence in their **social skills**. In 2022, almost one in four school children aged 15 (23 per cent, which is over 1 million children) did not agree that they could make friends easily at school. Boys tended to be more confident in this respect than girls.

Digital skills are becoming increasingly necessary for work and for life. Recent data on young people aged 16 to 19 years old in the EU shows that many lack all of the basic digital skills. *Figure 5* shows a categorization of young people's levels of five skills: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem solving. Just over a third (35 per cent) of young people had better than basic skills in all five aspects, while a further third (34 per cent) had at least basic skills in all five. There was no consistent gender difference in these skills – in 18 countries females were more likely to have 'above basic' skills than males, while in nine countries the pattern was reversed.

Figure 5. Digital skills among young people aged 16 to 19, EU, 2021



Source: Eurostat: Data browser, 'Individuals' level of digital skills (from 2021 onwards)', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_SK_DSKL_I21/default/table, accessed 24 November 2023.

Key policy areas

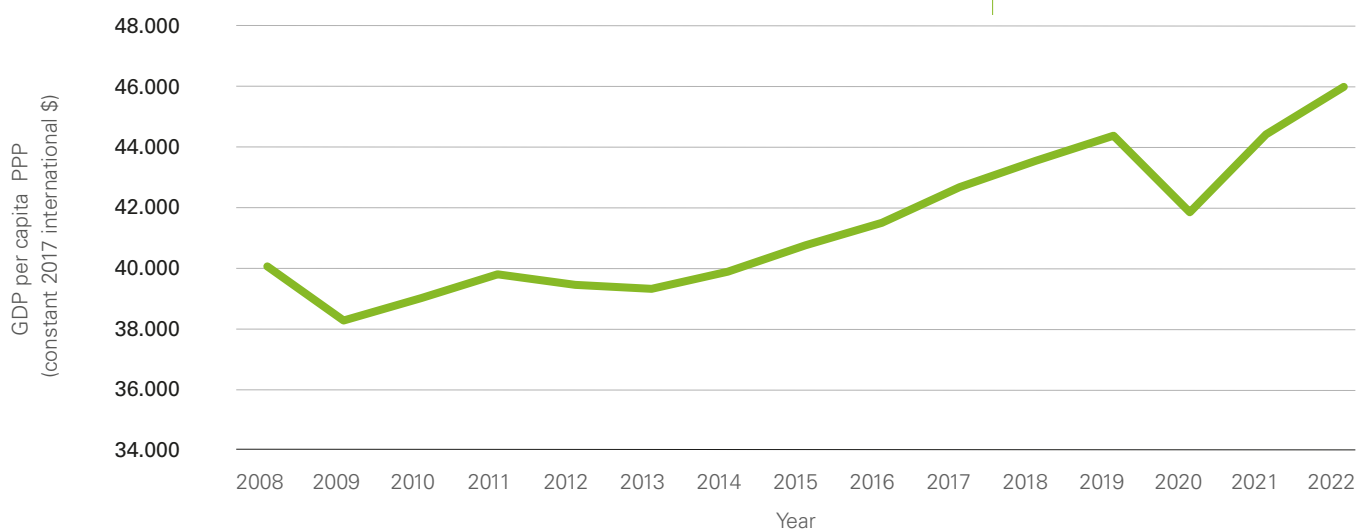


In this section, four key policy areas which have a major bearing on children’s rights and well-being are analyzed: poverty, mental health services, the environment, and digital technology. For each of these areas more detailed policy briefs are available as separate documents.

Child poverty

When the current EU political cycle began in 2019, EU countries had had seven or eight years of uninterrupted economic growth since coming out of the 2008-10 global recession. This trend was rudely interrupted in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there has been some recovery since, the longer-term economic outlook remains unpredictable (*Figure 6*). In addition to hitting families’ purchasing power, such economic shocks can also hinder the reduction of child poverty by affecting the fiscal, and political, space necessary for governments to maintain existing services and invest in new initiatives to support vulnerable families.

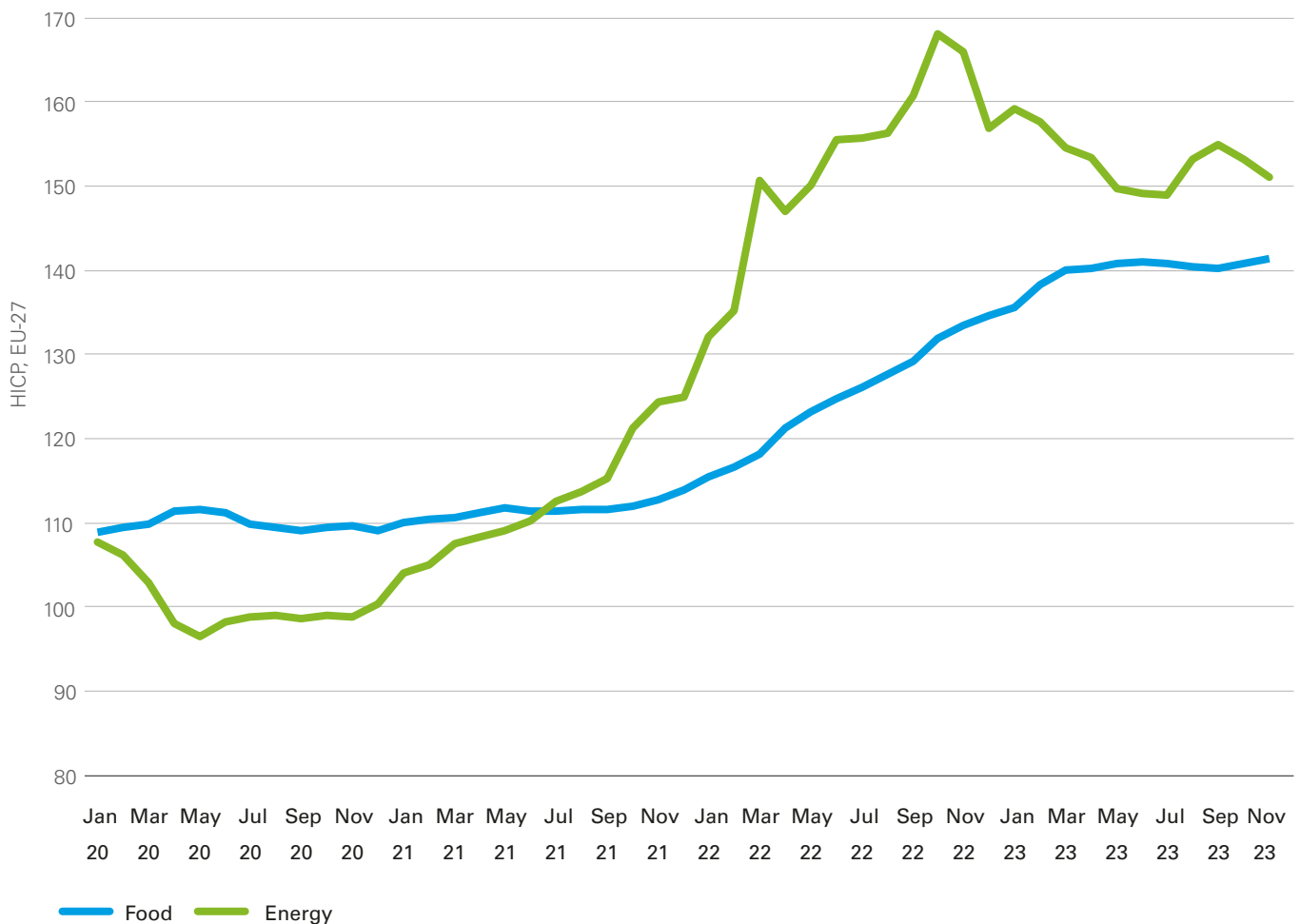
Figure 6. Economic growth in the EU27, 2008 to 2022



Source: World Bank, 'GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$)', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?end=2022&locations=EU&start=2008>, accessed 21 January 2024

A second major economic challenge that has recently re-emerged is **inflation**. Energy prices started rising in early 2021 as economies began to restart after the worst period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was followed by an increase in food prices from the end of 2021 (*Figure 7*). This inflation presents a challenge, in particular to low-income families who spend a large proportion of their money on basic goods and services.

Figure 7. Consumer prices in the EU, 2020 to 2023



Source:

- Food. Eurostat: Data browser. 'HICP – food'. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/teicp010/default/table?lang=en>, accessed 16 January 2024
- Energy. Eurostat: Data browser. 'HICP – energy'. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/teicp250/default/table?lang=en>, accessed 16 January 2024

In view of this uncertain recent and current economic situation it is important to monitor statistics on child poverty. The lead indicator used within the EU is the 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion' (AROPE) rate. This counts all children who live in households experiencing at least one of the following: severe deprivation, low income, and/or low work intensity.

Figure 8 shows the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The pattern reflects the macroeconomic picture discussed in previous paragraphs. Between 2015 and 2019 there was a promising decrease of 3.1 million children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. However, there

was then an increase of 1 million in 2020 and then further small increases in 2021 and 2022. These recent changes appear to reflect the challenging economic situation in the EU. It should be noted that the increase from 2019 to 2020 may not be wholly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and that more recent changes could have technical explanations (see footnote).¹⁹ The safest conclusion is that the progress up to 2019 has stalled and figures are currently broadly static. This represents a challenge because the EU has set a target of reducing the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 5 million by 2030. Clearly this target is realistic given there was a reduction of more than 3 million in four years in the last decade, but it will require renewed impetus to achieve.

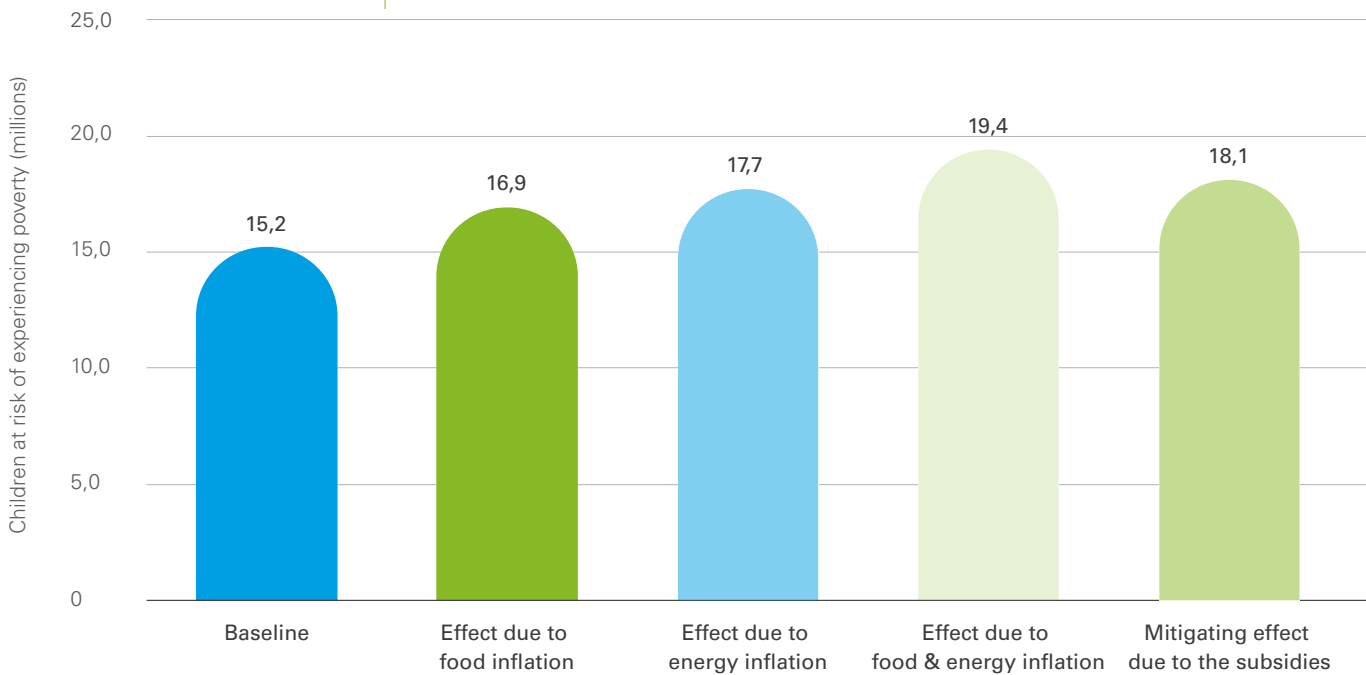
Figure 8. The number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, EU, 2015-2022



Source: Eurostat: Data browser, 'Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion - EU2030 target [ilc_pecs01__custom_9436226]', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_pecs01__custom_9436226/default/table, accessed 20 January 2024.

The effect of the recent cost-of-living crisis will also affect child poverty, and this will not yet be fully apparent in the figures presented previously. Analysis by UNICEF Innocenti (*Figure 9*) estimated that over 4 million additional children in the EU would have been below the poverty line in real terms²⁰ by the end of December 2022 due to food and energy inflation, but that actions taken by governments had reduced this number to 2.9 million children.

Figure 9. Estimates of impact of inflation on child poverty in real terms, to December 2022



A more detailed policy brief on child poverty is available as a separate document.

Source: Richardson, Dominic, et al., 'Children and the Cost-of-living Crisis: How food and energy inflation has increased poverty in households with children in the European Union', UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1787

At the time of writing, the most recent overall inflation rate for the year to December 2023 was +2.9 per cent, compared to a peak of +10.6 per cent in late 2022. However, the inflation over recent years is still built into current prices and wage increases have not kept pace. Additionally, food inflation – a key aspect for low-income families – is still at an annual rate of +6.1 per cent.²¹ Children in poorer households therefore remain vulnerable to current economic uncertainties. The positive actions taken in 2022 may need to be repeated and reinforced to prevent greater numbers of children falling into poverty.

Mental health services

Countries in the EU have increasingly acknowledged the importance of mental health for their population's well-being and their overall economies. They have been working to improve the accessibility and quality of mental health services but current funding for mental health care still tends to lag behind funding for physical health and is inadequate to address the shortage of services needed to meet demand.

As shown in the previous section on mental well-being, many young people in the EU suffer from mental health conditions, including

depression and anxiety. It is important to intervene early not only to improve the lives of young people in the present but also because the majority of adult mental health problems manifest before the age of 18. Thus, investing in child and adolescent mental health can also play an important early preventative function.

Among 17 EU countries for which data are available²², the cost of mental health care is typically either fully or partly included in basic health care coverage (e.g., basic health insurance, services covered by national health systems). However, the latest Eurostat figures²³ show that 3.7 per cent of people in the EU reported unmet mental health care needs due to financial reasons in 2019. The proportion was higher (4.4 per cent) among young people aged 15 to 24.

Details of expenditure specifically on mental health care in the EU is scarce. **Expenditure on mental health** (all ages) tends only to be a small percentage of total health expenditure in EU countries.²⁴ Expenditure on mental health hospital facilities in the EU in 2022 averages at around 1.7 per cent of total health expenditure in all EU countries and close to zero in some²⁵, although hospital facilities are only one aspect of mental health care provision.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** raised concerns about mental health, including of adolescents. In some EU countries during the pandemic, rates of depressive disorders are reported to have doubled.²⁶ The effects of the pandemic disproportionately affected young people relative to older age groups. There was some subsequent improvement but the long-term trajectory remains unclear. At least 11 EU countries increased psychosocial and mental health support in primary and secondary schools during 2021/22 and expenditure on mental health care services for young people also increased in some.

Environmental concerns may also have an impact on child and adolescent mental health. Evidence on this topic is limited but a study²⁷ which included three EU countries illustrates the levels of concern. Almost two thirds (65 per cent) of young people aged 16-25 in Portugal, 58 per cent in France, and 44 per cent in Finland, were extremely or very worried about climate change. The phrase 'eco-anxiety' has been used for this phenomenon, although *The Lancet* notes that "To a degree, worries and anxieties related to the climate crisis are a normal response and need not be pathologized, but they can develop into more intransigent mental health issues or exacerbate pre-existing anxiety".

In summary, there remains under-investment and a shortage of mental health services in EU countries, as elsewhere. Furthermore, there is evidence of a substantial, and potentially growing, need for such services among children and young people.

[A more detailed policy brief on child and adolescent mental health is available as a separate document.](#)

The environment

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of extreme weather events globally, and this is attributed to the effects of climate change. The EU countries have not escaped these events with recent serious incidents of flooding, forest fires, water shortages and extended heatwaves in many countries.

In 2022, 85,000 people across 16 EU countries were displaced from their homes due to weather-related disasters.²⁸ This figure will include many thousands of children in the EU. While this scale of displacement is relatively small compared to an average (2016-21) of over 7 million children displaced annually across the globe²⁹, the risk of such events and extended impacts in Europe is increasing.

The environmental threats to child well-being do not, however, only relate to climate change. UNICEF Innocenti's Report Card 17 analysed the full range of environmental factors that may impact children's development, well-being and futures. These factors range from pollutants in the air, water, food and other substances in the immediate environment of the child; as well as housing conditions and the quality of the local area, for example, road safety and access to green space.

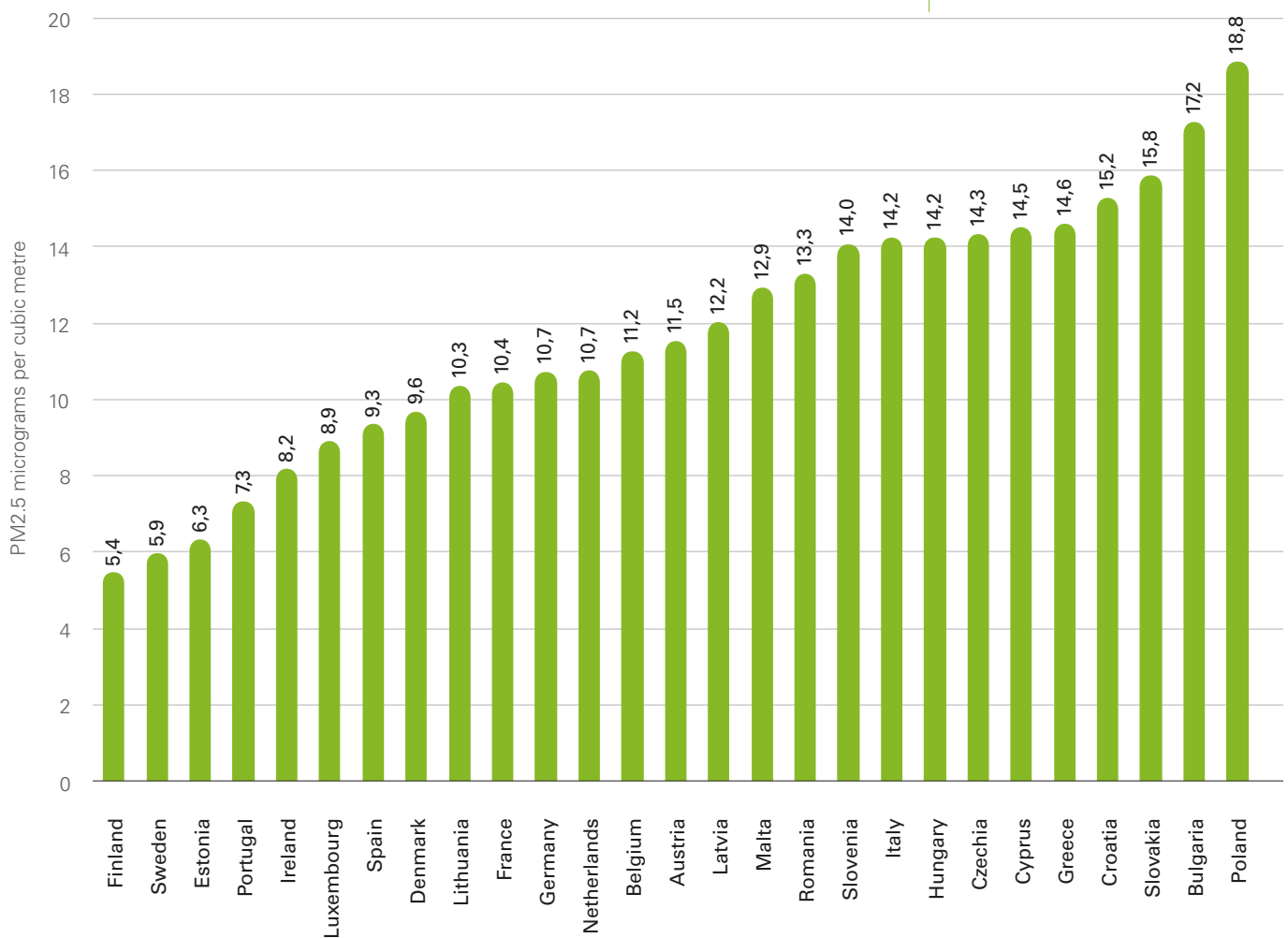


As an example, it is estimated that there were 472 deaths of children and young people under the age of 20 in the EU in 2019 due to outdoor **air pollution**. The large majority of these children (437 or 93 per cent) were under the age of one year. Boys were more likely (0.59 per 100,000) to die of air pollution than girls (0.49 per 100,000).

Outdoor air quality (measured by the presence of fine particulate matter - PM_{2.5}, see *Figure 10*) has been improving in the EU in general since 1990. However, progress in some countries has been slow in recent years. Ongoing action and attention is therefore required to maintain historic progress and continue to reduce this form of pollution so that all children can grow up breathing healthy air.

A more detailed policy brief on children and the environment is available as a separate document.

Figure 10. Levels of air pollution in EU, 2019



Source: World Health Organization, 'Global Health Observatory Database: SDG Indicator 11.6.2 Concentrations of fine particulate matter (PM2.5)', [https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/concentrations-of-fine-particulate-matter-\(pm2-5\)](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/concentrations-of-fine-particulate-matter-(pm2-5)), accessed 11 January 2024

Digital technologies

Technological advances have fundamentally changed the lives of all people in the EU, bringing new benefits and challenges. In 2006, when the oldest of today's children were born, over half of the population of the EU already had access to the internet.³⁰ A year later the first smartphones were put on the market. By 2019, when the current European Parliament was elected, 83 per cent of people in the EU had access to the internet.

The pace of technological change continues. In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a new issue for policymakers and the general population to grapple with.

While there are tangible risks to children in relation to rapid technological change there are also substantial benefits. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the value of digital connectivity for maintaining children's learning online during periods of school closures. This also drew attention to the phenomenon of the '**digital divide**'. Some children missed out on learning during this period due to a lack of suitable resources at home, thus potentially increasing educational inequalities and disadvantages.



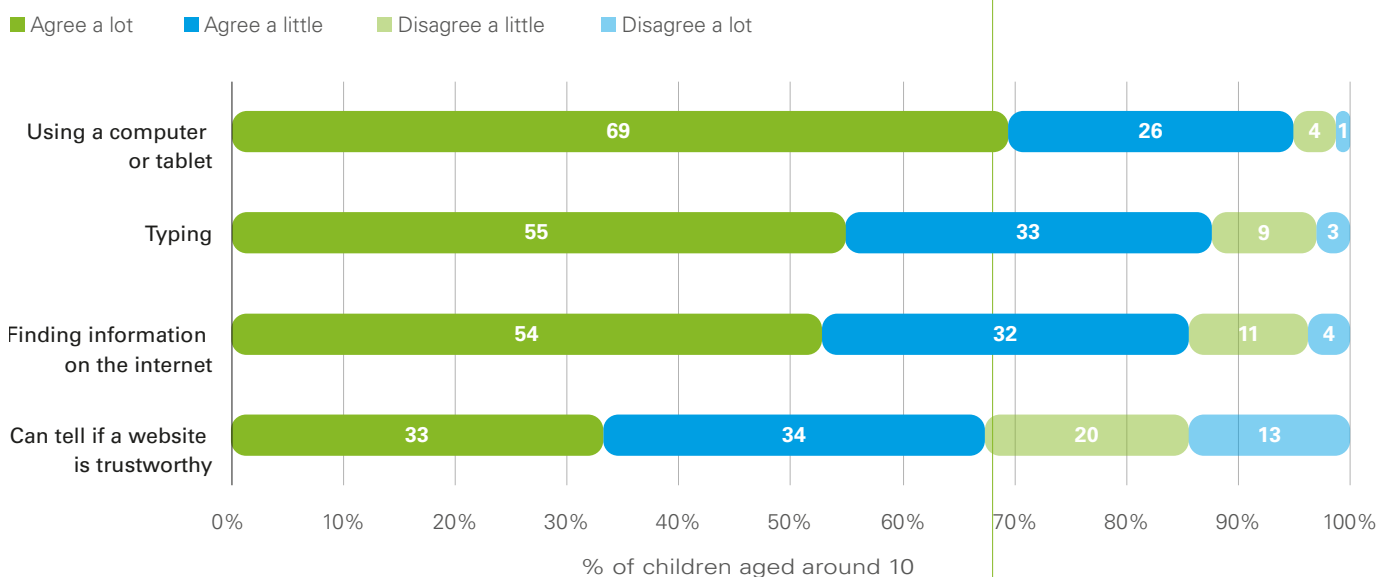
In relation to other risks and benefits of digital technology³¹:

- It is a common belief that regular use of digital technology is damaging to children’s mental health, yet the evidence on this topic is far from clear. There are mixed research findings including studies that show the benefits of digital use and the negative impact of children being digitally excluded.
- There are other clear risks to children (as for adults) in terms of loss of privacy, cyberbullying, and sexual exploitation. It is important that efforts are made to provide children with the skills to navigate these risks, and to support and protect them while at the same time respecting their developing capacities as they grow towards adulthood.

Digital skills are becoming increasingly important not only as a means of managing the previously noted risks but also promoting social inclusion and learning during childhood, as well as employability. A recent picture of children’s self-assessed digital skills at the age of around 10 years old in 21 EU Countries in 2021 is shown in *Figure 11*. While the large majority of children stated that they had basic skills in using digital equipment, more than 1 in 10 children were not confident with typing and finding information on the internet, and one third did not agree that they could tell if a website was trustworthy. These statistics highlight the challenges that remain in ensuring that children in the EU are equipped with the digital skills for their lives in the present and in the future.

A more detailed policy brief on children and digital technologies is available as a separate document.

Figure 11. Children’s self-assessed skills at around 10 years old, 2021



Source: ‘PIRLS 2021 International Database’. <https://pirls2021.org/data/>, accessed 2 November 2023.

Note: Covers 23 EU countries – missing are Estonia, Greece, Luxembourg and Romania.

General conclusions and recommendations



The analyses contained in this report have highlighted a few critical issues to be considered in the next EU political cycle. Many of them can benefit from a consolidation of ongoing efforts and investment. It is equally clear, however, that an acceleration of efforts and increased levels of financial investments will be needed. In many cases, actions will be designed and led by the governments of EU member States within their own contexts. But it is clear that many areas will benefit from EU-level support, through knowledge sharing, policy formulation, new legislation, as well as financial incentives. The following recommendations are formulated with this in mind.

1. Safeguard and strengthen recent progress made on children's rights

In an election year which will shape the future for children in the EU, it's vital that its institutions and decision makers ensure children stay high on the political agenda 2024-29. The opportunity afforded by the adoption of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child in 2022 and the gains it has promoted in embedding child rights in EU policies, actions and investments must not be lost, but built on. More specifically, UNICEF is calling for:

- **The European Child Guarantee to be fully implemented and have the financial resources to be accelerated and scaled up.** This is essential if the EU is committed to reaching their EU 2030 target of reducing the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion from around 20 million to 15 million.
- **The launch of a comprehensive, multi-sectoral mental health strategy based on socio-ecological, inclusive and human rights approaches.** The European Commission's Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, adopted in June 2023, is a commendable step in the right direction, but this must be built on with a strategy with specific, actionable objectives, timeline, budget, and indicators.
- **Ensure children stay high on the political agenda regarding the impacts of a changing environment on their well-being and health.** This should include an impact assessment of the Green New Deal on children and future generations, supporting the design of environmental legislation and policies which protect the health and well-being of children, as well as joining efforts to make COP30 a children's COP.

More detailed recommendations on child well-being and 1) poverty, 2) mental health, 3) the environment and 4) digital technologies are available in separate policy briefs.

- **Update and enforce legislation to protect children from recognized and emerging risks of violence in the digital environment, while at the same time addressing the digital divide and equitable access to digital learning and promoting digital skills and literacy.** In the digital space, the EU should adopt a balanced approach to risk management and barriers to access, including in the area of Artificial Intelligence (AI) – these systems can and must protect, provide for, and empower children.

Priority must be given to reaching the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children – whose rights are most under threat or denied – including refugee and migrant children, those with disabilities, groups facing discrimination, and children affected by conflict. Article 3 of the Lisbon Treaty explicitly requires the EU to promote the protection of the rights of all children.

2. Increase investment in children in the EU

Measures to promote children’s rights must be included in current and future EU funding opportunities and instruments supporting the triple transition (digital, green and social) and aiming at strengthening resilience and recovery. This can help ensure that transitions under such funds are just and do not leave the most vulnerable behind. **The EU should also support and incentivize action by member States through the sharing of best practices and strong monitoring.** This can include differentiating between spending to ensure children meet their basic needs (for example, immunization and healthcare) with expenditure which can be seen as an investment in the child population (such as equal access to quality childcare), and which should be increased. **Increasing the fiscal space for more investment in children** should also be prioritized, through raising the current EU budget, and its financing, through a mix of increased contributions from member States and the exploration of innovative financing instruments and new European-level taxes.

3. Strengthen governance for children

The impact on child rights and future generations should be systematically considered in all future EU policy making and legislation. This includes establishing **impact assessment mechanisms** to assess the consequences of policy actions and decisions on children, as well as exploring best options for an EU governance that represents children, upholds their interests and holds EU institutions to account.

A more detailed paper on strengthening child rights governance in EU institutions, is available as a separate document.



Strengthened child rights governance in EU institutions would include options for a permanent body to protect and promote children's rights or horizontal oversight at Vice-President level at the European Parliament; as well as enforced European Commission structures under the political leadership of a Vice-President; as well as an informal Council of the EU configuration interested in upholding children's rights. A comprehensive EU governance for children should also include their **meaningful and inclusive participation**.

4. Improve the evidence base with a new EU data collection strategy that includes children

Despite the excellent work of European statistical agencies there are still important gaps in evidence on child well-being in the EU. In its recommendations to EU countries, the Committee on the Rights of



the Child has **underscored the need for centralized, integrated, and comprehensive data collection systems that cover all areas of the CRC and its Optional Protocols**. Emphasis is placed on disaggregated data, considering factors such as age, disability, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of the situation of all children.

There there are little EU level comparative data on child and adolescent mental health, children's experiences of violence, or children in alternative care. Additionally, child-related Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators are not well reflected in the EU SDG monitoring framework. And in many areas, there is a lack of disaggregated data, making it difficult to assess inequalities and track progress in their reduction.

This stems from a broader gap in data-gathering directly from children and young people. Generally, there is little comparative evidence across the 27 EU countries on children's experiences. Many themes will remain lacking in evidence until this major gap is addressed with a new data collection strategy that includes children. **UNICEF therefore recommends the establishment of a Eurostat task force on statistics on children to improve the availability, integration and disaggregation of statistics on children.**

Finally, **in its foresight undertaking, the EU must include the impact of future trends on children and their rights, from both vulnerability and opportunity perspectives**, so as to ensure consideration of the needs and rights of current and future generations of young EU citizens. Employing foresight methods with children and youth can also help map potential futures, especially in the digital space, that inform anticipatory policies fit for our age.

Endnotes

1. For the purposes of this document, unless otherwise stated, a 'child' refers to any person under the age of 18, as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Where other terms like 'young person' are used, the age range is specified.
2. Eurostat: Data browser, 'Population on 1 January by age and sex', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan_custom_8562170/, accessed 4 November 2023.
3. Eurostat: Data browser, 'Population on 1 January by age group, sex and country of birth', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_pop3ctb_custom_8562219/default/table, accessed 4 November 2023.
4. UNHCR, 'Regional protection profiling and monitoring: Protection risks and needs of refugees from Ukraine', <https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/330?sv=54&geo=0>, accessed 21 January 2024
5. UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM, 'Refugee and migrant children in 2022', 2022, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/103910, accessed 4 January 2024.>
6. Eurostat: Data browser, 'Number of households by household composition, number of children and age of youngest child (1 000)', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfst_hhnhtych/default/table?lang=en, accessed 4 November 2023.
7. Assuming that the average number of children in household with more than three children is 3.5. This equates approximately to the total estimated number of children in the EU as above
8. UNICEF Office of Research, 'Worlds of influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries, Innocenti Report Card 16', UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1140>, accessed 4 November 2023.
9. Subsequently a key reference point for a similar framework developed by the OECD.
10. Bronfenbrenner, Urie, 'The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design', Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1979.
11. Refers to per 1,000 live childbirths.
12. Okunogbe Adeyemi et al., 'Economic impacts of overweight and obesity: current and future estimates for eight countries (Data supplement)', BMJ Global Health 2022; 7:e009773. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009773
13. Broader than the EU.
14. World Obesity Federation, 'World Obesity Atlas 2023', World Obesity Federation, London, 2023. <https://data.worldobesity.org/publications/?cat=19>
15. These two percentages are not mutually exclusive as some young people may suffer from both.
16. Eurostat: Database, 'Causes of death - deaths by country of residence and occurrence (Intentional self-harm)', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/HLTH_CD_ARO_custom_9438377/default/table, accessed 20 January 2024.
17. Data cited in this section is calculated from the databases of the PISA studies in 2018 and 2022. PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment, 'PISA Database', <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/>, accessed 15 January 2024.
18. PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment, 'PISA Database', <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/>, accessed 15 January 2024.
19. (a) The increase from the figures in 2019 to 2020 should not automatically be attributed to the pandemic as the data for the low

income component of AROPE refers to income in the previous year. In fact, income poverty rose between the 2019 and 2020 datasets but this reflects household income changes between 2018 and 2019. Therefore, there was already some upward trend in child poverty before COVID-19

(b) The two countries with the largest child populations in the EU, France and Germany, changed their survey methodologies in recent years and their new data is marked as not strictly comparable with older data. Therefore, the smaller changes in AROPE between 2020 and 2022 may be due to methodological changes.

20. This means that although household income may have remained stable, the substantial inflation caused many households' living standards to fall below the poverty threshold.
21. European Central Bank, 'Inflation and consumer prices', https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/macroeconomic_and_sectoral/hicp/html/index.en.html, accessed 21 January 2024.
22. OECD, 'A new benchmark for mental health systems: Tackling the social and economic costs of mental ill-health', OECD Health Policy Studies, 2021, <https://www.oecd.org/health/a-new-benchmark-for-mental-health-systems-4ed890f6-en.htm> accessed 23 November 2023.
23. Eurostat: Data browser, 'Self-reported unmet needs for specific health care-related services due to financial reasons by sex, age and educational attainment level', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_ehis_un2e_custom_8660769/default/table?lang=en&page=time:2019, accessed 23 November 2023.
24. 'A new benchmark for mental health systems'
25. Eurostat: Data browser, 'Health care expenditure by provider', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_sha11_hp_custom_9439130/default/table, accessed 23 November 2023.
26. OECD, 'Health at a glance: Europe 2022, State of health in the EU cycle', OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance-europe/>
27. Hickman, Caroline et al., 'Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey', The Lancet Planetary Health, volume 5, issue 12, December 2021, pp. E863-E87. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)
28. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre: 'Global Internal Displacement Database', HYPERLINK "<https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/>", accessed 9 February 2024.
29. UNICEF, 'Children displaced in a changing climate: Preparing for a future already under way', UNICEF, New York, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/children-displaced-changing-climate>, accessed 17 December 2023.
30. Our World in Data, 'Internet', <https://ourworldindata.org/internet>, accessed 19 November 2023.
31. Stoilova, Maria et al., 'Investigating Risks and Opportunities for Children in a Digital World: A rapid review of the evidence on children's internet use and outcomes, Innocenti Discussion Paper 2020-03', UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, February 2021, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1183>



ISBN: 978-92-806-5442-4

Cover photo credits: © UNICEF/UN0821353/Moldovan

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), February 2024