



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

# Growing up in lockdown: Europe's children in the age of COVID-19

2020 Eurochild Report

#PuttingChildrenFirst

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



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# Introduction

In February 2020 the COVID-19 virus started to spread in Europe. Since then our economies, societies, and daily lives have been turned upside down. This report reflects on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on children. It compiles information gathered from 25 countries across Europe, and provides recommendations for improving public policies in the short and long-term to support better outcomes for children and families. The assessment is accompanied by reflections on the 2020 European Semester. This report is based on information gathered until August/September 2020, and was released in November 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing problems of social inequality, with job losses pushing many families further into poverty and school closures creating a wider educational divide, impacting children's life chances, and their physical and mental health. It has exposed the lack of national policies to tackle poverty, particularly child poverty, and drawn attention to the need for a multi-dimensional approach. As a result, Eurochild and its members are calling for recovery plans that take children's needs into account, for national plans to reduce poverty, and for targeted support from the EU, including through implementation of an EU Child Guarantee.

# Acknowledgements

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- Romania (Romania); Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia - MODS, Mental Disability Rights Initiative-Serbia - MDRI (Serbia); Coalition for Children Slovakia (Slovakia); Slovenian NGO Network ZIPOM (Slovenia); Plataforma de Organizaciones de Infancia, FICE Spain (Spain).

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# 1. Summary of findings

## 1.1. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in Europe

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a huge strain on Europe's social and economic fabric, often exposing inherent weaknesses, with far-reaching effects, including on children's well-being.

The job losses that followed the onset of the pandemic put more families at risk of **poverty**, as many of the country reports underlined, including Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Italy and Slovenia. Food poverty in particular became more acute, a problem starkly illustrated in the Italy report which describes the situation in a district of Palermo with an increasing number of robberies at local supermarkets by people whose children were seriously at risk of starving.

The combination of financial stress, uncertainty over the future, and families being confined to the home

during the lockdown led inevitably to increased anxiety and **mental health problems**, a concern raised in the reports for Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Romania, Slovenia and Portugal. The report describes how children with no history of behavioural problems, are having trouble sleeping and are becoming increasingly aggressive. The Latvia report noted that during lockdown health services for children were not available, even in the most serious situations.

Sadly, those pressures led to an increase in **domestic violence**, as many country reports mentioned, including Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal and Slovenia.

**School closures** caused additional stress for children who missed the social contact and structure that

school provides. For children already living in poverty it meant increased hunger if they missed out on free school meals. Parents of school-age children had to home-school their children, often while also working from home.

Home schooling highlighted **the educational divide and the digital divide**. Many parents struggle to support their children's learning, particularly those with a low level of education themselves. Most education was delivered online while schools were closed, but many low income families are not equipped with computers, and often parents do not have the necessary technical skills. Teachers also had to adapt to delivering lessons on line, and their own technical skills and the support they received varied greatly. In Estonia there was big difference in the supply of support services

between regions. Latvia said schools were just not prepared for distance learning, while in Romania a shocking 32% of children had no access to online learning. Slovenia and Spain reported similar problems.

The work of **civil society organisations** (CSOs) supporting children in vulnerable situations became more difficult. As the England report points out, lockdown impeded the ability of professionals to reach children in the most vulnerable situations, with issues going undetected. At the same time CSOs often faced reduced funding, while the need for their services increased. Cyprus, the Czechia, Denmark, Latvia, France, Italy and Spain were among the countries to mention problems of this nature.

## 1.2. The impact of the pandemic on children in alternative care

Out of 25 country profiles 20 also looked at the situation of **children in alternative care**. As mentioned before there was heightened risk for children in precarious family situations caused by financial pressures and domestic violence. As a consequence, it is estimated that the **number** of children entering alternative care **will grow**, in some countries such as Greece, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia by as much as 30%.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis was felt just as keenly, if not more so, by children in out-of-home care. The children badly missed outside contact during lockdown, notably access to school, sports and other outside facilities, and worse still their own families. Being confined to their residential setting creates strains for both children and staff, with disputes breaking out and mental health suffering.

The reports from Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia and France were among those to highlight the stress the situation caused children in

alternative care. Belgium pointed out that not being allowed to go outside for weeks impacted heavily on children's mental well-being. At the same time, however, their supervisors went in and out with all the associated risks. Czechia's report sums up the problems faced: "All children had to stay in the facility for the whole time which meant an enormous increase in work for the professionals in these institutions. The need for extra staff was not met by the authorities so other organisations had to provide support. Education had to be provided on line which staff were not always equipped to deal with. ... Two months of social isolation led to many conflicts." There was no or very limited capacity to provide mental-health services to children who needed them.

The Finland report pointed to the lack of guidelines for carers in this situation. In Greece the Research Roots Centre explains how children living in residential settings became "invisible" during the corona virus crisis. There was no information

about what should happen if any child was ill, e.g. how to proceed, whether they should be tested, or if there should be any communication with their birth family, members from Bulgaria and Poland highlighted.

In Portugal, children who were placed in alternative care had to enter the institution alone and could not be accompanied and helped by their case manager. The child had to take the COVID-19 test and even with a negative result, it was compulsory to isolate for 14 days. After intervention of civil society organisations this measure was abolished.

Just as parents in family homes struggled with home schooling, staff in residential facilities do not necessarily have the teaching skills, digital skills or equipment needed to support online education. The reports from Czechia, Hungary and Romania, among others, also noted the lack of guidelines for staff, and the lack of personal protective equipment.

Most community support centres for families with children with disabilities were closed and the parents became overburdened when they had to take care of children alone. The children still feel the consequences of the lack of adequate support. On the other hand, children who remained in institutions could not be visited by their parents.

In the absence of sufficient government support, **NGOs often stepped in to help fill in the gaps**, for example to help with online learning. Their involvement could be made difficult however, for example in Serbia where civil society actors experienced significant challenges. NGO participation in decision-making on national and local levels in response to the crisis significantly shrunk and all measures were taken without the involvement of civil society.

**The need to step up deinstitutionalisation (DI) reforms for children in the care system** was mentioned in many of the

reports, but rarely in a positive light. Moreover, in response to COVID-19 reinstitutionalisation and significant delay to further transition from institutional to community- and family-based care was recorded in Poland. The limit for number of children per institution (14) was suspended. In Slovakia there have been positive changes, but there is more to be done. In Bulgaria the CSO group set up to monitor the government's action plan on DI has no access to information about the current developments, while recommendations given by the group were not passed on to the government. In Croatia a DI plan was introduced in 2011 but progress has been slow and with the onset of the crisis the process completely stopped. Czechia described a similar situation while in France the mechanisms to prevent the placement of children in institutions were suspended during lockdown. The Hungary report deplors that

there is no deinstitutionalisation reform in the country, while in Greece not enough is being done. Progress has also been slow in Poland and reforms have been delayed in Romania.

**Care leavers** generally find themselves in a difficult situation, often made worse by the pandemic. HHC Romania observed that the situation of care leavers became very difficult during the pandemic and there were no special services to support them, with very similar comments being made in Croatia. In France by contrast there was an obligation to support young adults leaving the child protection system during the crisis, but there is still a need for longer term solutions. There is no state policy with respect to care leavers in Bulgaria, although there is a provision for a care leaving plan which in practice means a meeting between a social worker and a care leaver to complete a

template. NGOs have stepped in with programmes and projects that aim to support care leavers. Slovakia noted that there were no special measures during the crisis to address the needs of young people ageing out of care. Mental health problems and depression caused by uncertainty increased among young people, and yet no adequate support was provided. Both Poland and the Netherlands pointed to the fact that young people leaving care are usually ill-prepared for an independent life.

The situation concerning **children in migration** does not look optimistic, and is particularly difficult for unaccompanied minors. In Greece, which faces many migrant arrivals, there is no centralised service to tackle the issues related to unaccompanied children. In Bulgaria unaccompanied children are guaranteed 24-hour care, provided by the International Organisation

for Migration (IOM). However, there is no central standard for the legal representation of unaccompanied minors, which remains largely a formality. In Poland, according to the law, unaccompanied minors seeking asylum are to be placed in institutional care facilities or in a professional foster family. In practice asylum seeking children are rarely placed in a professional foster family. During the pandemic, access to asylum procedures has been significantly restricted. In Spain there has been overcrowding in reception centres and a disruption of evaluation and referral processes. During the lockdown the administrative procedures were paralysed or slowed down. Unaccompanied minors who were studying have lost their opportunity to participate in educational activities.



## Summary of Ratings

Based on Eurochild's Members contributions to this report

Country	Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic	Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level	2020 Country-Specific Recommendations	Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children	Government's protection of children's right to participate
Croatia	●●○○○	●○○○○	●●○○○		
Cyprus	●●●●○	●●●○○	●○○○○	●●●●○	●●●●●
Czech republic	●●●●○	●●○○○	●●●●○	●●●○○	●●○○○
Denmark	●●●○○	●●○○○	●○○○○	●●●○○	
England	●●○○○			●○○○○	●●●○○
Estonia	●●●●○	●●●●○	●●●○○	●●●●○	●●●○○
Finland	●●●○○	●●○○○	●○○○○	●●○○○	●●●○○
France	●●●○○		●●○○○		
Germany	●●●○○	●●●○○	●●○○○		
Greece	●●○○○	●●○○○	●●○○○	●●○○○	●●●○○
Hungary	●●○○○	●○○○○	●●●○○	●○○○○	●○○○○
Ireland	●●●○○	●●●●○			
Italy	●●●○○	●●○○○	●○○○○		
Latvia	●●●○○	●●○○○		●●●○○	
Malta	●●●●○	●●○○○	●●○○○	●●●○○	●●●●○
Netherlands	●●●○○	●●○○○	●○○○○	●●●○○	●●●○○
Poland	●●●○○	●●○○○	●●○○○	●●●○○	●●○○○
Portugal	●●○○○	●●○○○	●○○○○		
Romania	●●●○○	●●○○○	●●●●○	●●●○○	●●●○○
Serbia	●○○○○				
Slovakia	●○○○○	●●●○○	●●●○○		●●○○○
Slovenia	●●●○○	●●○○○	●●○○○	●●●○○	●●○○○
Spain	●●●○○	●●●○○	●●●●○	●●●●○	●●●○○

## 1.3. Public policies

“A national strategy to tackle child poverty would be necessary even without the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>1</sup>

The above quote from Eurochild’s Estonian country profile refers to learning the lessons from the impact the COVID-19 crisis to be more strategic about the fight against child poverty, and reflects a view echoed in many of the other country profiles in this report.

Aside from the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, the reports looked at what was being done to invest in children which, Eurochild stresses, is an investment in the future of society. One of the most urgent needs is to **address child poverty**, and its impact on their development and their future. It can be concluded that where national strategies for reducing child poverty exist, concerns remain about their implementation; resourcing from national/municipal budgets; and lack of child participation mechanism. Yet

in most countries the political priority is not given to child poverty: Cyprus, the Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Serbia and Slovenia all said they do not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty. The Portuguese report stressed that “a national strategy to tackle child poverty is urgently needed, as 22% of Portuguese children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion”.

Unfortunately, **the 2020 Country Specific Recommendations (CSR)** don’t always address this seemingly obvious need. Eurochild’s member from Estonia said it was not fully satisfied with its 2020 CSRs as they do not directly address matters related to children. Members from France, Finland and Italy said children were not mentioned in the CSRs. The Hungarian contributors said its 2020 CSRs only partially reflect the main challenges, recommending social assistance and quality education for all. Colleagues from Spain also said its CSR does not make specific

mention of children, children’s rights and/or tackling child poverty. Similar concerns were expressed by members from the Czechia and Denmark.

The lack of attention to children’s needs and interested is reflected not surprisingly in the lack of structures and mechanisms to allow children to make themselves heard. **Children’s participation** was described as “insufficient” or “not sufficiently developed” in Belgium, Czechia, France, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia.

There were also positive developments and examples of **good practice** to emerge from this situation. In Belgium, for example, CSOs joined forces to lobby the government, as a result of which there has been more attention to children and their rights. The Minister of Youth declared the profession of youth welfare workers an essential profession. In Latvia the government provided equipment such as computers for children in

poor families and distance learning training for teachers was provided by the government and an NGO. Other countries too, notably Spain, organised programmes to provide computers for children who needed them, while elsewhere, for example in France, free helplines were set up to help those in distress. In some countries TV channels were set up to deliver education to children in their homes, such as in the Czechia and Cyprus. The Cyprus report equally notes that the crisis meant that CSOs had to expand their digital capabilities, using new media to inform the public and setting up online programmes aimed at children.

In the field of children in alternative care too there have been examples of good practice. In Bulgaria CSOs have stepped in to help care leavers, supporting them with paying the rent for housing, and assisting them in accessing health care and continuing education. Many of the examples given however focused specifically on measures

1 Estonian Union for Child Welfare, Estonian country profile, this report.

to deal with the crisis. In Belgium a voluntary network was set up in Wallonia and Brussels embracing families who offered their help to children needing support during lockdown. In Ireland Child and Family Agency staff around the country worked with local partners to develop creative solutions to help children and families during the public health crisis. Social media was used to try and share good practice within the sector. Spain gave the example of government measures to support families in vulnerable situations and children in care and deal with the economic and social impact of COVID-19, as well as urgent measures to assist victims of gender-based violence.

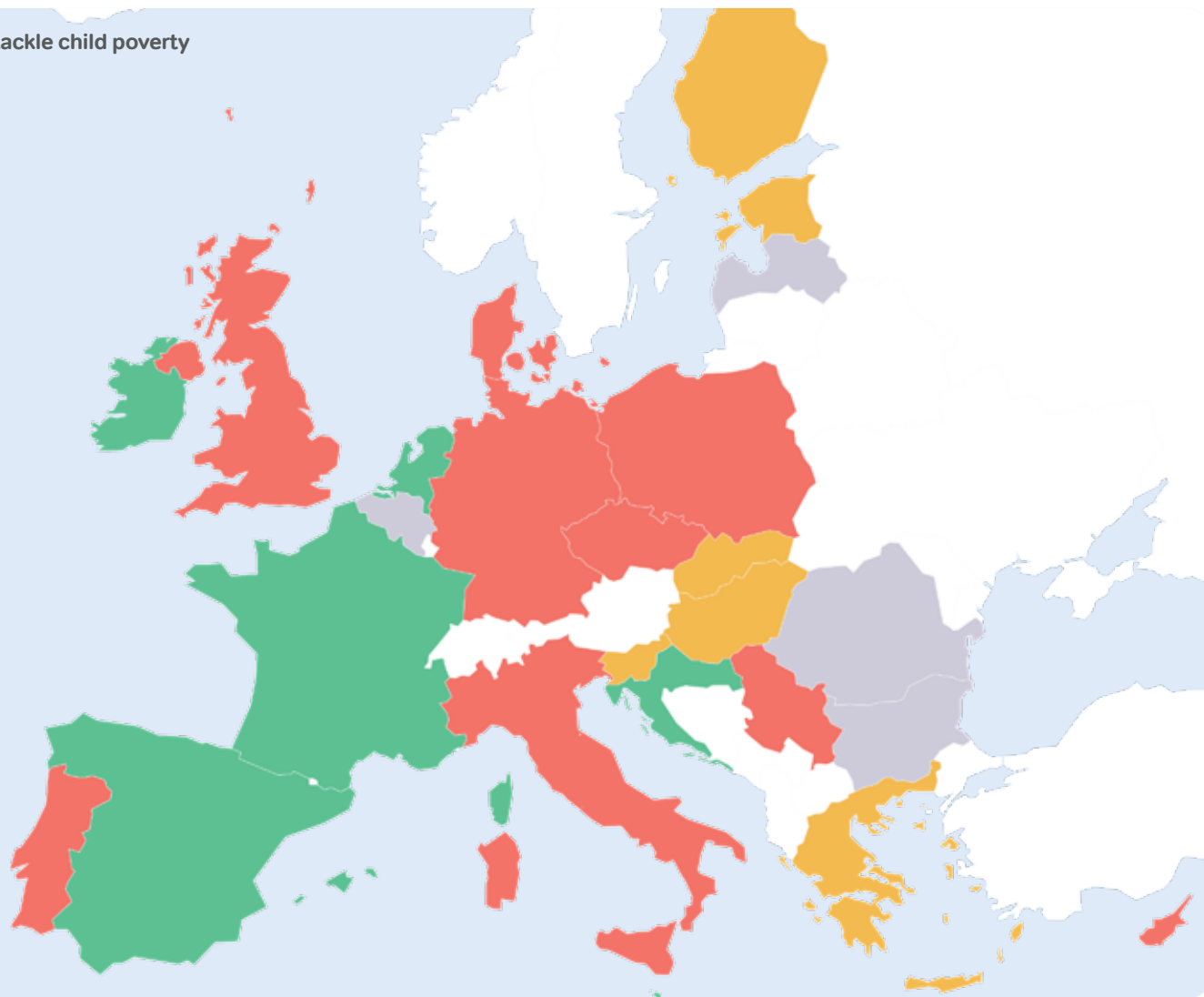
Some country reports looked at the use of **EU funds**, providing a mixed picture. Croatia stated that currently there are no funds allocated for the implementation of the legislative framework related to families in vulnerable situations and children in care. There have been calls for proposals but the process is too slow. In the Czechia, by contrast, it is reported that from 2016 to 2019 the Ministry of Labour implemented a project financed from the European

Social Fund (ESF) to support the transformation of the system for children at risk. In Estonia actions for improving the quality of substitution care and diversifying alternative care were supported through the ESF. Similarly, Poland reported that ESF funds were used to purchase computers and software to provide support for children placed in alternative care and to secure personal protective equipment. Spain received EU funds to help families in vulnerable situations and children in care during the COVID-19 crisis but there is not enough information on how the Spanish government is using these funds in practice. The Hungary report suggested similar issues over the transparency and accessibility of EU funds.

### Does your country have a national strategy to tackle child poverty?

Croatia	Croatia has a national strategy against poverty and social exclusion (2014 – 2020) in which children and young people are identified as one of the most vulnerable groups.
Cyprus	Cyprus does not have a proper national strategy to tackle child poverty.
Czech republic	Czechia does not have a separate national strategy to fight child poverty, despite the urgent need for one.
Denmark	Overall, the government does not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty. It has taken measures to mitigate the rise in child poverty by introducing a temporary child benefit for families with children from the age of 0-14.
England / United Kingdom	There is no strategy or targets to tackle child poverty in England. There has been a lack of political will by the UK government to re-introduce a strategy, while the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have developed their own child poverty reduction strategies.
Estonia	Estonia does not have a separate national strategy to fight child poverty. Yet, this topic is discussed in the Children and Families Development Plan 2012-2020.
Finland	There is an ongoing process to draw up a national child strategy, which may include a child poverty goal.
France	France has implemented a national strategy for preventing and combating poverty. A large part of this strategy is dedicated to children and young people.
Germany	Germany does currently not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty, although there are debates about a system that covers all services for children under one roof.
Greece	There is no specific national strategy for child poverty. However, from time to time, in the context of the poverty strategy in general, measures are provided for benefits or food business programs (such as meals in the school context) and others.
Hungary	There is no independent strategy but there is a social inclusion program for Roma people and for people living in deprived regions of the country. According to government statements this programme represents a national anti-poverty strategy.
Ireland	Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020" contains a target for the reduction of child poverty in Ireland. A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 outlines a plan to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less.
Italy	The measures to combat poverty are recent in Italy (starting from 2017) and have only indirectly dealt with children by providing an economical benefit to poor families more generally.
Malta	Yes, child poverty is mentioned in the National strategic policy for poverty reduction and social inclusion.
Netherlands	Yes, to combat child poverty, the Dutch government has formulated the document "four child poverty ambitions".
Poland	The government emphasizes that its policy reduces child poverty, but has neither an in-depth diagnosis of this phenomenon, nor has the government set specific targets in this regard.
Portugal	Portugal does not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty. However, the Portuguese Government has created a Committee to present a proposal for a National Strategy against Poverty until the end of 2020, which can be a crucial opportunity to put child poverty in the national political agenda.
Serbia	Serbia does not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty.
Slovakia	Slovakia has a national strategy against poverty with specific chapters referring to child poverty.
Slovenia	No, but there is a Development strategy of Slovenia 2030 which includes an element on protecting families and children.
Spain	Spain has a national strategy against poverty with an specific chapter to tackle child poverty.

### National strategies to tackle child poverty



## 2. Policy recommendations

1. **Set national targets to reduce child poverty and put children at the heart of recovery plans**
2. **Establish the European Child Guarantee**
3. **Promote a multi-dimensional approach to tackling child poverty**
4. **Maintain, strengthen and expand investments in deinstitutionalisation reforms**
5. **Better target available EU funding resources to reach children in need**
6. **Recognise children as equal partners and enable their participation**

Eurochild members urge governments to address some of the **most urgent needs** for children, including children in alternative care **to prevent the pandemic widening existing gaps**. Challenges include pre-existing as well as new divides created by the pandemic, such as that of ensuring equal access to online learning for all, addressing the need for mental health protection, and listening to children when making decisions affecting them. Governments need to provide adequate financial support to families in vulnerable situations, make services such as mental health protection services available for all, and ensure equal opportunities at school for all children, especially by providing computers and internet connection for all children in poverty.

**Eurochild recommends national policy and decision-makers to use the political commitment to children's rights and child poverty at EU level to steer a child-centred recovery.**

To do so, it is important in particular to:

**Set national targets to reduce child poverty and put children at the heart of recovery plans**

Grappling with a global pandemic and socio-economic crisis requires a shift in mentality in decision-making. The fact that inequality and social exclusion have surfaced as issues under COVID-19 can nonetheless act as a trigger for much needed, long-term policy reforms.

As countries are putting together their Recovery and Resilience Plans, there is a need to tackle **social inequalities** and ensure post-pandemic needs of children are addressed. Local communities need to be supported to be able to provide services based on universal and targeted care provisions: health care, education, early childhood education and care, and social services. There

is a need to frame tackling child poverty (see recommendation 4.)

The current high political momentum and attention to child poverty in Europe is unique. Eurochild urges every country to set a **concrete target** for reducing child poverty, as measured by the AROPE indicator within the framework of its multi-annual national strategy on child poverty (at least until 2030); and in line with the first Sustainable Development Goal<sup>2</sup> and urges the European Commission to recommend such ambitions through the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation.

## Establish the European Child Guarantee

Eurochild and its members are anticipating the upcoming Child Guarantee Council Recommendation and support the work that has been done in its preparation.

Eurochild supports that the Child Guarantee takes the shape of a Council Recommendation, as that will help hold Member States accountable to its realisation. We particularly welcome the proposal in the Roadmap on Council Recommendation for a Child Guarantee, to have both national strategies for tackling child poverty and social exclusion as well as “Child Guarantee National Action Plans” to hold Member States accountable to commitments and actions, budget allocations and impact.

Monitoring and evaluation of the Child Guarantee at European level will be essential. Eurochild recommends that the AROPE indicator be complemented by other key indicators that ensure a comprehensive understanding of child poverty and social exclusion. This should include a focus on early childhood development and the transition from institutional care to family- and community-based care. Coordination with the European and national statistical offices will be key to ensure comparable data collection across the EU.

Disaggregation by age of relevant indicators should be foreseen.

## Promote a multi-dimensional approach to tackling child poverty

Highlighting the **multi-dimensional nature** of the problems affecting children and youth, our members in France call for coordination of efforts across the policy spectrum. The Child Guarantee Council Recommendation should call on Member States to adopt multi-annual national strategies, covering at least the period until 2030, where that **entails all public policies intended to prevent and tackle child poverty and social exclusion.**

The European Child Guarantee Council Recommendation should reinforce the message to all Member States, as is done in the 2013 Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children, to “organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion, promoting children’s well-being,

through multi-dimensional strategies...”<sup>3</sup> The 2013 European Commission Recommendation provided a helpful framework for steering policies for preventing and tackling child poverty, which remains relevant to this day.

The Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee should also offer the guiding logic for such national strategies to cover:

- Access to adequate resources
- Access to affordable quality services, including healthcare and prevention, education, early childhood development support services, social services and family support to prevent family separation, housing, access to nutrition and culture and leisure activities
- Participation in decision making
- And be guided by the *investing in children* horizontal principles
- It is important to refer to the **whole policy spectrum in the national**

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/>.

<sup>3</sup> COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION of 20 February 2013 *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (2013/112/EU)

**strategies.** It is equally important that the national strategies address prevention as well as policy interventions – thereby also describing the universal policies they have in place for all children.

## Maintain, strengthen and expand investments in deinstitutionalisation reforms

For children in alternative care, the need for deinstitutionalisation is repeatedly prioritised by Eurochild members. Child protection reforms need to be supported through a wide range of services and actions, such as prevention and integrated networks of community and family-based care services. The need for harmonised systems is stressed in the report, as well as a call for support for young care-leavers. Appropriate protection for unaccompanied migrant children and a halt to detentions for migrant children needs equal attention.

## Better target available EU funding resources to reach children in need

The 2021-2027 EU budget is the opportunity to  **earmark funds**  to fight child poverty in Member States, through the European Social Fund Plus. At the time of writing this report an agreement has not yet been reached regarding Parliament's and Commission's proposal to set aside 5% of ESF+ resources in every EU Member State for action that support structural reforms to tackle child poverty.

As the enabling condition also provides for the establishment of national strategic policy frameworks on poverty reduction, including on child poverty, there is additional links between national child poverty strategies and the use of EU funding.

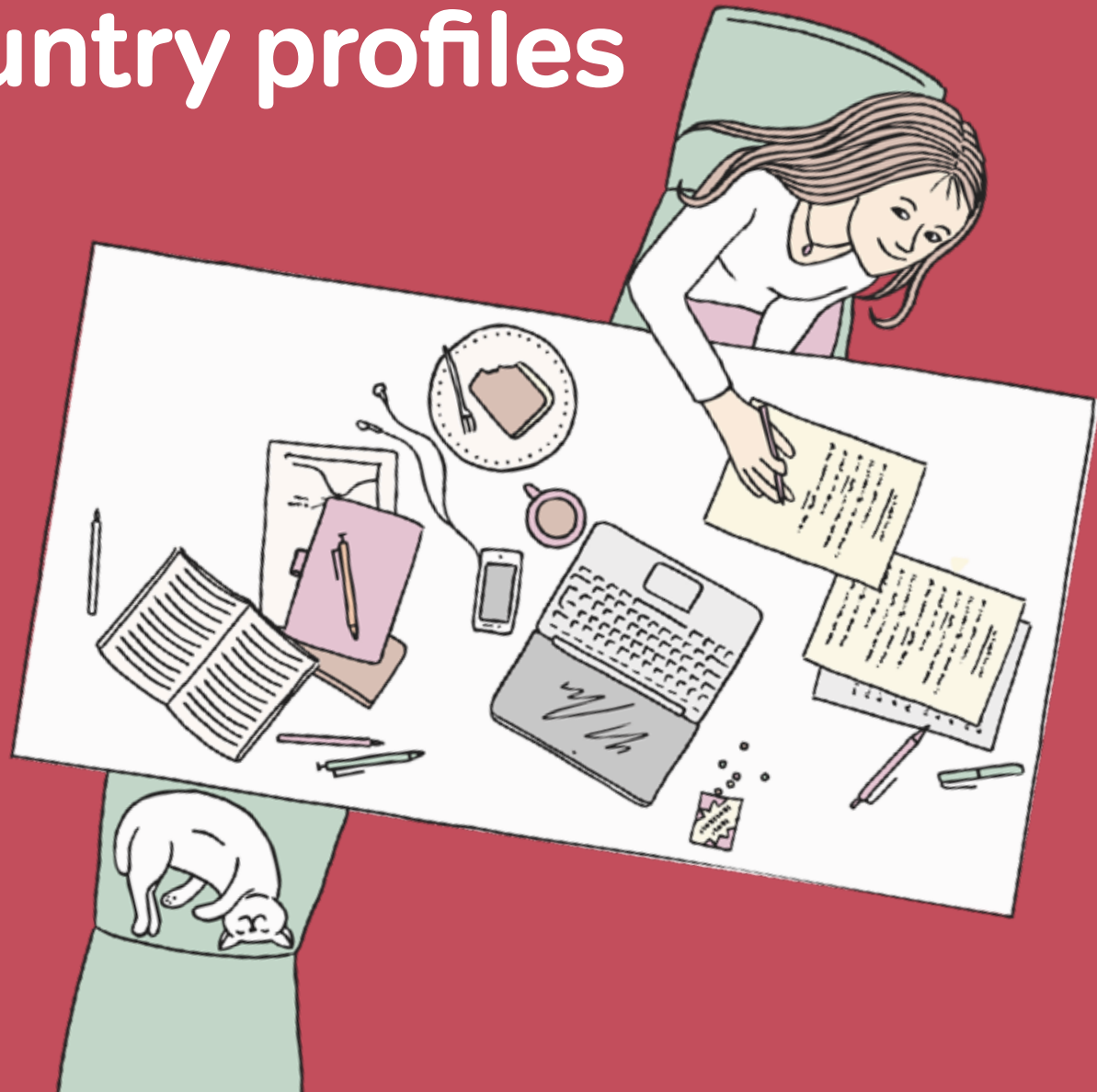
Eurochild furthermore encourages the strategic use of EU funding beyond ESF+ to promote investing in children, for example, European Regional Development Fund, InvestEU, ErasmusPlus resources.

## Recognise children as equal partners and enable their participation

Compared to the impact the crisis has been having on children, their voices remain underrepresented in decisions taken by governments. Yet, in the attempt to build back responsible, democratic societies with strong civic participation it is vital **the voices and rights of children are at the heart of the recovery process.**



# 7. Country profiles



# Belgium

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

**Child Rights Coalition**

**Flanders (CRCF), Maud Stiernet (independent researcher and trainer)**

**22.3%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2018	Wallonia-Brussels	<b>4,500<sup>2</sup></b>
	German speaking community <sup>1</sup>	<b>28-36</b>
Institutions for children with disabilities/boarding schools	Wallonia (2020)	<b>6,000 (available places)</b>
	Flanders (2017)	<b>1,275 (youth in care full time) 225<sup>3</sup> (during a week) 949</b>
Number of children in family-based/foster care	German community (2019)	<b>75</b>
	Flanders (2019)	<b>7,756<sup>4</sup></b>
	Wallonia	<b>n/a</b>
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		<b>1,220<sup>5</sup></b>

### Alternative recommendations

- The government should assess properly the effect of the measures on the psychological health of children and young people. The effect of certain rules needs to be carefully considered, especially for those who grow up in a vulnerable situation, such as residential care. Children have the right to human contact, to relaxation and to empathy. There needs to be a fair balance between the risks and the children's needs.
- Take a better account of children's best interests and listen to their voices.
- Homogenise digital learning between the different school systems and make sure everyone has access to all the tools needed for her/his type of learning.

1 A maximum of nine children in one residential facility.  
2 4500 jeunes dans les centres d'hébergement de l'aide à la jeunesse.  
3 Aide à la jeunesse: les internats de la FWB fort sollicités.  
4 Steeds meer kinderen kunnen terecht in een pleeggezin.  
5 Aida - Ecre - Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen; Statistics.

## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus have had profound consequences on children and young people. The government, however, did not take into account the perspective, voice and interests of children and young people. When it comes to child-oriented sectors, such as education, youth care or leisure, the best interests of the child were not sufficiently taken into account.

A study by AP Hogeschool and the Antwerp youth sector in mid-April shows strong signs of demotivation among children and young people, of escalating tensions in families, of loneliness, depression or just increased aggression. This is not only the case in families in vulnerable situations. The signals from civil society are numerous and disturbing.

### Positive developments

During the COVID-19 crisis, many civil society organisations joined forces to lobby and put pressure on the government to take the

perspective of children into account. Since then there has been more attention to children and their rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that children in more vulnerable situations need to get more support in very different domains. Their housing situation, the financial pressure that they were living under and the lack of space all added to their difficulties. The Minister of Youth declared the profession of youth welfare workers an essential profession. There was a call for increased funding for organisations working with children

in vulnerable situations and children living in poverty.

The COVID-19 crisis also made it very clear that school plays a big role in the lives of children. This was also recognised by the government and a lot of efforts were made to reopen the schools as soon as possible. Pre-teaching was put in place and efforts were made to distribute computers to those living in more vulnerable situations.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

According to Eurostat figures from 2019, nearly one in four children in Belgium is at risk of falling below the poverty line. The percentage of children born every year into a disadvantaged family has risen from

6.4% in 2004 to 12% in 2015. The poverty risk in Wallonia is almost twice as high as in Flanders and the difference has increased in recent years.

Despite this divergence, similar trends can be observed in Belgium's three regions, most notably

decreasing adequacy of social protection for the working-age population and an increasing gap between poverty rates among the highly skilled and among the low skilled.

Structural long-term measurements for children living in poverty are

necessary but there seems to be a lack of ambition there. The coronavirus crisis is putting additional pressure on the current situation of children from families in vulnerable situations. Civil society organisations urged the government to take concrete and structural

measures to fight against the precariousness of children.

### Children's participation

Beyond their rights to be heard in the judicial system, children's right to participate is not sufficiently developed especially for children from vulnerable groups. During the COVID-19 crisis, children were not consulted and sufficiently taken

into account in the development of measures, particularly children above 12.

An article by the Children's Rights Commissioner drew attention to the impact of the corona measures on children and young people.<sup>6</sup> Children and young people were not consulted on any measure imposed by the government to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, neither in

the mid nor long term perspective. This is evident from complaints to the Complaints Line of the Children's Rights Commissioner.<sup>7</sup> In the #jongerenovercorona survey conducted by the Children's Commissioner, the Children's Rights Coalition and the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre in Flanders, more than half of the young people in a residential facility said that they were not allowed to participate in co-

designing the rules. Albeit the period of lockdown and related restrictions were unreasonably difficult for children and young people, the findings revealed that they are not seen and heard enough. Their perspective is insufficiently weighed against other interests. In particular, children and young people who are less visible, in a facility or with a disability still feel the daily impact of the strict rules.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

During lock-down in Wallonia and Brussels the 'réseau de solidarité relais enfant' network was created. This network works on a voluntary basis embracing families who offer their help<sup>8</sup>. A Facebook group called "répît solidaire" was also set up, with a similar purpose.

Children in residential facilities were not able to receive visitors during the lockdown and were not

able to visit home, which was very difficult for them. The report<sup>9</sup> by the Children's Rights Commissioner for Flanders stresses that this forced extra separation from the family, deeply affected parents and children and could not be justified. The fact that children were not allowed to go outside for weeks also impacted heavily on their mental well-being. However their supervisors went in and out with all the associated risks. Even after some measures were lifted these young people stayed

inside and were not allowed to walk or cycle like young people living at home.

Most community support centres for families with children with disabilities were closed and the parents became overburdened when they had to take care of children alone. The children still feel the consequences of the lack of adequate support. On the other hand, children who remained in

institutions could not be visited by their parents.

Strict rules still apply today. In some facilities, young people have to be quarantined for nine days to undergo a second COVID-19 test. During the first nine days, they do not participate in education and cannot go to the canteen. If children or young people are visited by their parents, social distancing needs to be respected. Young people do not understand that, since there

<sup>6</sup> Kinderen en jongeren worden nog altijd geïsoleerd door strenge coronaregels.

<sup>7</sup> Flemish Child Rights Commissioner's online survey #jongerenovercorona: children called corona stupid, boring, exhausting, annoying and a "life waster".

<sup>8</sup> Des familles d'accueil pour les enfants dans le besoin.

<sup>9</sup> Kinderen en jongeren worden nog altijd geïsoleerd door strenge coronaregels.

has been enough distance already. The Commissioner suggests it is important that children and young people should be reassured and comforted by their family and strict rules should be relaxed.

Carers and professionals working with children supported children during that difficult period. However in their opinion some rules were 'inhuman'. They further mentioned difficulties related to home schooling and the lack of outdoor activities<sup>10</sup>. In August 2020, the youth help and information line 'Awel' received twice as many calls about self-harm and depression as in August 2019.

Some new institutional structures were opened but only for a short period of time for groups of children from 0 to 6 years, and closed in June 2020<sup>11</sup>. Since the beginning of lock-down, 110 young people were taken into centres for delinquent youths (institutions publiques de protection de la jeunesse – IPPJ). 35% of those

placements were motivated by the failure to respect lock-down rules to protect the health of majority population<sup>12</sup>.

### Progress on child protection

Belgium is organised into three communities: the French community, the Flemish community and the German community, therefore information about children in alternative care is scattered. Residential care still prevails in Belgium. It includes children removed from their families and children with disabilities in particular. There are still several residential settings for up to 15 children where children of various ages live in one facility.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the report<sup>14</sup> shows that the number of children, young people and adults in foster care continues to rise. At the end of 2019, 7,756 children and young people were growing up in foster families in Flanders. That is

638 more than the year before, or an increase of 9%.

In 2017, the Flemish government reformed the financing of care for the disabled. In doing so, it met the long-standing demands of people with disabilities. People with a disability are given a personal budget to organise their care. Parents of children with disabilities are entitled to make decisions and apply for personal budgets. In practice it does not work well since there are limited funds allocated to this purpose<sup>15</sup>.

### Children in migration

In addition to the 130 institutional places created in 2018, 18 more 'Youth in shelter' centres were opened in August 2020 by the NGO Caritas. Three new structures were built to accommodate 18 - 35 unaccompanied minors in 2020. Funding is ensured by Fedasil<sup>16</sup> and the youth welfare budget. In

2019, EUR 917,000 - or 23% of the youth welfare budget - was spent on addressing the needs of unaccompanied minors.

<sup>10</sup> L'aide à la jeunesse en temps de confinement: "Ils avaient un grand sentiment d'injustice".

<sup>11</sup> Parlement de la communauté française, Session 2020–2021, 8 Septembre 2020, Charleroi: 16 enfants placés en urgence dans une structure d'accueil

<sup>12</sup> Parlement de la communauté française, Session 2020–2021, 12 May 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Le Bateau Ivre... Maison d'accueil

<sup>14</sup> Steeds meer kinderen kunnen terecht in een pleeggezin

<sup>15</sup> Heeft de nieuwe financiering van de gehandicaptenzorg het leven van mensen met een beperking verbeterd?.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.fedasil.be/en>

# Bulgaria

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

### Contributors:

[National Network of Children Bulgaria \(NNCB\)](#); [For Our Children Foundation Bulgaria \(FOCFB\)](#); [Hope and Homes for Children Bulgaria \(HHCB\)](#); [CEDAR Foundation](#); [Social Activities and Practice Institute \(SAPI\)](#); and [SOS Children Villages Bulgaria](#).

# 33.9%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019		
Institutions for children with disabilities	0	0
Institutions for children 0-3	13	256 (0-3) 170 (over the 3 years) 406 are children with disabilities, 20 children without disabilities
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019	268	2,876 (including young adults)
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2019		6,496
Number of children in kinship care		4,548
Number of adoptions		500 (national adoptions)
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		620 unaccompanied children <sup>1</sup> 524 unaccompanied children <sup>2</sup>

### Alternative Recommendations

Bulgaria should take action to:

- Keep families together including re-integration to prevent institutionalisation of children by engaging families, professionals and communities in the process.
- Establish more alternative services and family-based care for children in vulnerable situations as well as promote adoption and fostering to guarantee children aged 0-3 years will grow up in a family environment.
- Ensure that young people ageing-out of care will receive adequate financial and personnel support to start their independent life.

1 According to the State Agency for Child Protection  
2 According to the State Agency for Refugees

## Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on children in alternative care

The divergence of opinions expressed by the government and by scientific experts led to confusion among the public. This situation was exacerbated by a lack of clarity in the guidelines and regulations on how to react to the COVID-19 crisis. Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had to adopt their own procedures for working in a pandemic to respond to their clients' needs.

The measures taken by the government such as the provision of non-interest-bearing loans, financial compensation for employers or food donations were mainly aimed at employers, poor families, the unemployed and schools.

At the end of March 2020, the Council of Ministers published Decree No. 55 determining the conditions and procedures for the payment of compensation to employers in order to maintain employment in emergency

situations<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, the majority of NGOs will not be able to benefit from these compensations because one of the conditions for receiving the aid is to declare a 20% reduction in sales revenue.

Concrete measures to support families with children have been:

- Parents who have lost their jobs and single parents are entitled to receive BGN 375 as a one-off financial assistance.
- Amendments to the law to reduce VAT on baby food, baby diapers and baby hygiene items, as well as for books from July 2020 to December 2021.
- Families of eighth graders will receive BGN 250 to cover part of the expenses for the beginning of the new school year<sup>23</sup>.
- Under the Food and/or Basic Material Assistance Operational

Programme 1,400 tons of food were distributed to 58,300 individuals and families, including families with children were supported.

On the other hand, the civil society organisation members of the National Network for Children (NNC) supported over 6,500 children in 3,200 families with 4,404 food packages in March and April 2020. These donations, which came from the emergency programmes and private philanthropists and amounted to BGN 135,454, provided food including formula for newborns, medicines, disinfectants, PPE and various social services. They have also distributed more than 400 electronic devices to children in poor families as part of the initiative called "Old Devices for a New Beginning". Moreover, civil society organisations provided 24h/day 7 days per week telephone help lines and other means of consultation. Additional humanitarian support was given

to 42 families by For Our Children Foundation.

NNC's members working with poor families reported that there were many families that needed to survive on BGN 5-10 per day, which they earned by collecting and selling herbs and plastic, window cleaning, etc. The number of extremely poor families increased due to staff cuts or forced unpaid leave. There is a real danger that children who have been recently reintegrated into such families will be abandoned again.

NGOs also reacted promptly to address the needs of children at risk by mobilising staff and resources to reach out to communities and families and children in vulnerable situations. They came to help at the most difficult time.<sup>4</sup>

Most children in Small Group Homes (SGH) are children with disabilities who are very vulnerable and fragile health-wise. During the lockdown

<sup>1</sup> The measure is 60/40 = 60 % workers' insurance income, and 40% for the employer, but only if the company keeps the jobs despite the crisis.

<sup>2</sup> To be granted the aid, the average monthly income of a family member for the previous 12 months must be lower than or equal to BGN 450.

<sup>3</sup> It is a measure for supporting families with children 13-14 years old, because children start a new grade and the text books are not provided by the school/state. The benefit is received if the average monthly income of a family member for the previous 12 months is lower than or equal to 450 BGN.

<sup>4</sup> Picture.1, Picture.2

the service providers, including NGOs, ensured PPE for staff, work materials and other hygiene items. The Cedar Foundation and the Bulgarian Coalition Childhood 2025 explain that social distancing was not possible in an SGH setting as many of the children require intensive care that cannot be provided without close contact with the staff. SGH staff have had to cope with an additional workload in order to comply with all the regulations (disinfection, reporting, etc.) as well as carry out new activities and therapies in order to address the children's mental health needs.

The lack of access to day-care centres and other social services during the lockdown posed extra strain on the service provider who was supposed to replace day-care centres and provide some therapies in the facility. Online learning was one of the biggest challenges due to lack of technical equipment and lack of personnel to support it. For a long time, there was no clarity about what steps to take in case a child or a member of staff became infected,

since isolation in a small group home setting was not possible.

## Challenges for civil society organisations (CSOs)

There has been a significant increase in the expenses of the small group homes (for food; protective equipment; disinfection materials; medication; devices for online learning; psychological support, etc.). Social services are generally underfinanced, and the crisis put additional strain on them. Yet, there has been no financial support from the state for NGOs and/or social services (including small group homes) at a time when fundraising from other sources e.g. attracting private donors, has become more difficult.

There was an urgent need to reorganise work with clients and colleagues. Within a few days, social service providers shifted consultations and meetings to the

virtual space. Group trainings were initially postponed until the virtual meetings were organised for group formats.

## Initiative

A survey<sup>5</sup> conducted by the Social Activities and Practice Institute (SAPI) in collaboration with Sofia University found that care professionals (including psychologists) and social workers encountered the following main challenges: technical; on content and process level; difficulties in establishing a deeper connection with new clients; managing institutional collaboration and communication; specialists' attitudes vis-a-vis lockdown and social distance; fears over the unknown; professional pessimism; quick adaptation to the new situation by using new approaches and tools<sup>6</sup>.

## Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

The prolonged isolation, along with the economic consequences for families (such as loss of employment and income) has given rise to other types of crises in families - increased cases of domestic violence, neglect, online bullying, conditions for deteriorating mental health, or psychological problems for both families and children. These risk factors required the intervention of highly qualified specialists in the field in order to identify them in a timely manner and undertake the necessary measures. However, these needs have been met only partially, therefore Bulgarian child rights NGOs are urging the authorities to invest in increasing the capacity of specialists in the child protection system, with a view to build a better professional system for early warning in the presence of risk factors.

5 Sofia University together with SAPI conducted a survey "Community-based Social Services during the State of Emergency" in the period 26 April – 6 May 2020. The survey included 119 respondents from 113 social services across the country. Participants mainly work in Community Support Centres, followed by representatives in Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration, which make up about one fifth of all participants.

6 СОЦИАЛНИТЕ УСЛУГИ В ОБЩНОСТТА В УСЛОВИЯТА НА ИЗВЪНРЕДНО ПОЛОЖЕНИЕ ... резултати от проучване сред професионалисти.



## Initiative

During the period of isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hope and Homes for Children - Bulgaria (HHCB) focused its work exclusively on prevention of separation, applying the model of active family support. They managed to support 151 families and their children from the districts of Sofia, Burgas, Vidin, Vratsa, Veliko Tarnovo, Sliven, Stara Zagora, Kardzhali, Haskovo, Yambol and Pleven in the field and through numerous consultations. They also maintained constant communication with the Child Protection Departments on the local level. Furthermore, they have developed and applied another model of work – the District De-Institutionalisation Coordination Mechanism (DDICM) – an instrument and platform for gathering of resources, authorities and decision-makers for concrete cases of children (0-3 years old) and families at risk. The organisation established 21 DDICMs and at the moment is working with 12 DDICMs in Sofia, Burgas, Vidin, Vratsa, Veliko Tarnovo, Sliven, Stara Zagora,

Kardzhali, Haskovo, Yambol and Pleven<sup>7</sup>.

## Progress on child protection and care reform

Bulgarian CSOs have been raising the issue of the lack of effectiveness of the Permanent Expert Working Group on De-Institutionalisation (DI) for several years. The group was established in 2010 to monitor the implementation of the Action plan on DI in Bulgaria, as well as to discuss and give recommendations to the government about different aspects of the DI process. However, it has turned into a group that only produces monitoring reports, but has no access to information about the current developments in the implementation of DI reform or future plans in this respect. In a few instances, the recommendations given by the group were not passed to the government, and as a result, no feedback was received or action taken. The crisis made it even

harder for the group to function in a meaningful way, as all requests from the NGO members for online meetings were declined.

According to the government's plans, the assessment of the children in the remaining institutions needs to be carried out by the end of 2020. The deadline for training the staff in the new small group homes and the medical staff in the maternity wards is also planned until the end of 2020. These activities are all part of the Agency for Social Assistance's project under Human Resources Development Programme (HRDP) (2014-2020). Given the crisis, it is expected these activities will be delayed. Similarly, the process of closing down specialised institutions has been stopped including moving children from institutions to small group homes or foster families.

Bulgarian children's rights organisations suggest the COVID crisis has in a way supported a positive development in child protection. The new Social Services

Act (SSA) entered into force in July 2020 after six months of delay because there were many public disputes and protests initiated by conservative groups. These protests were suspended and the situation required effective solutions that the new law ensures. Children's rights CSOs were pleased with this development as it included their recommendations based on their direct experience of working with children and families.

## Care leavers

There is no state policy with respect to care leavers in Bulgaria. There is a general provision for preparation of a care leaving plan which in practice means a meeting between a social worker and a care leaver to complete a template. To address this, NGOs have programmes and projects that aim to support care leavers. Based on their experience they have been making recommendations to the government for a holistic approach, but there was no commitment on the state level so far. During the

<sup>7</sup> During the pandemic HHC – Bulgaria provided consultations only to the members of the DDICMs. From June 2020 the sessions of the DDICMs started to function in line with the all epidemiological requirements and such meetings were held in Haskovo and Stara Zagora with the participation of 33 members and with discussions on the challenges and plans for work, status of Homes for medical and social care for children in the pandemic.

current pandemic, no services or support have been offered by the state to care leavers, despite their vulnerability.

CSOs have been filling that gap in Bulgaria. They have been in contact with young people leaving care, supporting them with paying the rent for housing, and assisting them in accessing health care and continuing education. Currently, SOS Children's Villages is working on a project to support young people leaving alternative care which aims to support 210 young people from all over the country<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, SAPI piloted a pathways tool with five care leavers. Young people were supported in the planning process via phone and online apps. Despite the original difficulties care leavers found it very useful.

## Children in migration

National Network for Children Bulgaria publishes annual Report Cards to assess the situation and well-being of children. Its

2020 Report Card included the recommendation to optimise the procedures for the transfer of information between the state authorities in order to ensure reliability and accuracy in the number of unaccompanied children<sup>9</sup>. In Bulgaria unaccompanied children are guaranteed 24-hour care, provided by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

The opening of the Safe Zone is a positive development in ensuring the safety and care of unaccompanied children. However, the number of children who left before the end of their procedure and for whom there is no information about their location still remains very high. According to data provided by the IOM, it concerns 178 children, which is 91 % of all children accommodated in the Zone. The Safety Zone does not have the status of a social service and children can be there during the procedure for granting international protection. Till the end of 2019, 196 unaccompanied children were accommodated there. According to the Agency for Social Assistance

16 unaccompanied children have been accommodated in the social residential services.

Because of the lack of equal standards, the legal representation of unaccompanied minors remains largely formal. For example, the municipalities have different practices, such that in once case one representative represents 318 unaccompanied children while in another three representatives represent 147 children. Bulgarian children's rights organisations are calling for improvement because this approach violates children rights.<sup>10</sup>

## EU funds

During the lockdown, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) reported that the implementation of projects had been suspended during the entire lockdown. A significant amount of funds from the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (HRDOP) are allocated to policy reforms where the majority of these funds are for pre-designed

projects implemented by the state authorities. To respond to the emerging needs under the HRDOP, BGN 45 million were transferred for social patronage and BGN 20 million for paying an extraordinary up to BGN 1,000 per month for the medics who work in places where COVID-19 infection is present.

<sup>8</sup> Up to date, 30 young people are supported - Picture.

<sup>9</sup> Мерки за ограничаване на разпространението на COVID-19.

<sup>10</sup> Information from the National Network for Children Report Card 2020.

# Croatia

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:  
**FICE Croatia, Coordination of Associations for Children**

**20.7%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2018	<b>38</b>	<b>6,259<sup>1</sup></b>
Institutions for children with disabilities	<b>25</b>	<b>5,437</b>
Institutions for children 0-3	<b>13</b>	<b>822</b>
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2018	<b>3</b>	<b>210</b>
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2018		<b>2,276</b>
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2020		<b>181</b>

<sup>1</sup> These numbers include all services provided by the institutions to children and not only those in the accommodation. In Croatia there are ten more institutions for children and youth with behavioural problems in which there are a total of 1,108 children.

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government should ensure consistent and timely measures for schooling during the COVID-19 outbreak, including the possibility of after school activities for children with working parents.
- The government should ensure the availability of mental health protection services and psychological support for children, adolescents and family members.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- The government should ensure widespread high-speed internet access to rural and underdeveloped regions, IT equipment for all public services (education, social welfare,

health) and investments in the digital skills of child care professionals.

- The government should ensure flexible working hours for parents.

#### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- The government should guarantee adequate child and social protection for the groups of its population in the most vulnerable situations, including young people who have left state institutional care. There is an utmost need for safety nets, including financial and personal support for care leavers.
- The government should establish a network of social services for families in vulnerable situations.
- The government should make more efficient use of EU funds to finance the above mentioned priorities.



## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

##### Healthcare

The government abolished any kind of visits or physical contact for children in hospitals and their parents during and after the lockdown. The measure was somewhat relaxed thanks to the work of NGOs and child care professionals; the Ministry of Health, in cooperation with the National Public Health Department, allowed daily visits lasting for 15 minutes.

##### Social Protection assistance

We registered very limited access to social services during the lockdown. The Ministry of the Interior did not report an increase in family violence but child care professionals reported that there was an increase that was not investigated by the police, who dedicated all its capacity to the implementation of anti-epidemic measures.

##### Online schooling

Online schooling was implemented during the national lockdown (March – May 2020) and organised on two key principles: (a) access to education for all students, with an appropriate level of digitalisation according to age, (b) the possibility of monitoring distance learning. The Ministry established cooperation with national public and private television channels (HRT, RTL) that broadcasted school contents for children up to 11 years (lower school grades) while older children used different digital tools and platforms.

##### Nutrition

Due to the lockdown, schools stopped providing meals for students; this heavily affected children living in poverty.

#### Negative developments<sup>1</sup>

##### Mental health

We witnessed increased anxiety, fear, insecurity and depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic compounded by the earthquake in Zagreb and two surrounding counties (March 2020).

##### Difficulties due to online schooling

Teachers, parents and children often did not have the digital skills required and there were serious problems with internet connectivity in all areas of the country, especially the underdeveloped and rural areas. Free school meals for disadvantaged and poor children were stopped.

##### Lack of family support measures

There were insufficient measures in place to help children and families cope with COVID-19.

##### Difficulties experienced by NGOs

Civil society organisations were not included in the government measures to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquake in Zagreb. Moreover, pre-financing of the approved projects funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) was reduced from the contracted 40% to 20%. NGOs were also faced with a lack of digital skills and the financial means to purchase digital tools and IT equipment.

<sup>1</sup> More info on Kako smo? Život u Hrvatskoj u doba korone

### Good practice

- Online psychosocial support on a volunteer basis<sup>2</sup>
- A media campaign to enable parents to visit/stay with children in hospitals<sup>3</sup>

- Free online education for online psychological support for child care professionals<sup>4</sup>

### Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children

During the lockdown, NGOs were engaged in providing online support for child care professionals and were faced with a number of difficulties, the majority of which were

connected to outdated IT equipment and the lack of digital skills among professionals. Particularly in small communities and rural areas without internet access, teachers used to go once a week from door to door leaving bags with homework for children, and collecting them in the same fashion the following week.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Croatia has a national strategy against poverty and social exclusion for 2014 - 2020 in which children and young people are identified as one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

During 2019 and until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, large investments were made in expanding the network of preschool institutions, mostly thanks to

European funds, aiming to increase the number of children in pre-school education.

A national strategy is fundamental to efficiently addressing child poverty and the risk of exacerbating it as the result of limited access to public services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the years before the COVID-19 crisis, the government did not make significant progress in the protection of children's rights. In particular:

- Social protection – in spite of the long-lasting reform of the national social protection system, there is still a large number of children in institutions, and too little is being invested in the development of a foster care network.
- Justice – the risk that children's rights are violated during divorce proceedings and endangered by the long and complicated trials and court procedures. The Minister of Justice announced that there will be no Family Courts in the forthcoming justice reform.

### EU influence on national developments

The EU's involvement in promoting children's rights in Croatia has been insufficient. In order to change this, each Member State should be obliged to address children's issues in the national recovery and resilience plans when applying for future EU funds.

The 2020 Country Specific Recommendations mentioned the limited internet connectivity,

<sup>2</sup> Telefonski brojevi za pružanje psihološke pomoći; Kako si?; Besplatno on-line psihološko savjetovanje za mlade

<sup>3</sup> Zahtijevamo promjenu pristupa djeci na bolničkom liječenju; COVID-19 i pravo djeteta da roditelj boravi uz njega u bolnici; Petición za osiguranje prava svakog djeteta na boravak uz roditelja tijekom bolničkog liječenja

<sup>4</sup> Za stručnjake mentalnog zdravlja: Video snimke 6 webinarâ o telefonskom i e-savjetovanju i besplatni priručnik "Halo, pomozite!"; Edukacija za liniju psihološke podrške u COVID 19 krizi; Online stručni skup: „Pandemija COVID-19 i mentalno zdravlje djece i adolescenata: prijetnja i prilika“

especially in rural areas that prevent telework and distance learning and

amongst vulnerable groups, such as students from disadvantaged

families or those with disabilities. Yet, generally speaking, the

Recommendations were judged as unsatisfactory.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The pandemic accompanied by the earthquake in the city of Zagreb in March 2020 revealed the weaknesses of social protection in Croatia where the most vulnerable population including children in care and care leavers were the most affected. The most outstanding challenges have included: lack of material support for the organisations concerned e.g. personal protective equipment (PPE), medical supplies, a sudden cut in the funds to the NGOs in various fields, and a significant delay in announcing the results of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) open competitions.

During the lock-down, the main challenges for children living in institutions were the complete isolation from their biological

families, friends and their wider social network. Children were facing mental health problems without adequate support. Residential settings were not equipped to contain the virus because they lacked the necessary PPE as well as the extra space needed for infected children. Moreover, after the March earthquake in Zagreb, the alternative care institutions were closed down and a significant number of children were returned to their biological families, who could not provide suitable living conditions and support. In the chaos caused by the virus and underdeveloped support and services for families and children at risk, institutions provided at least a minimum standard of safety and security, following strict government protocols on COVID-19.

The main challenges for foster families and children in foster families were the complete lockdown and isolation within foster homes, which meant foster parents had to take

over responsibilities they do not have in “normal” circumstances such as the online schooling of all children and dealing with the various psychological effects of complete lockdown, isolation from their friends and family, and potential online abuse because children spent a lot more time online.

Moreover, FICE Croatia points out that there was no communication between the government and civil society organisations, which worsened the already very fragile working relationship that has been established. To respond to the emerging challenges, the government issued a recommendation for action in social welfare institutions including specific protection measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic for the work of social service providers, organisational measures in relation to medical and other services that are provided by the service providers and guidelines for the prevention and

control of the COVID-19 epidemic for non-institutional social services providers including foster families or organised housing.

Regrettably, FICE Croatia highlights that the crisis has completely stopped all child protection reforms and de-institutionalisation processes. All alternative care providers strictly followed the lockdown restrictions and interaction with the outside world was interrupted. The Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy has responded to the most pressing crisis situations only.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

There were no gatekeeping mechanisms available to help families in vulnerable situations during the pandemic. FICE Croatia

outlines that these mechanisms are not systematically provided by the social welfare sectors even in “normal” times.

More attention needs to be given to developing adequate policies and systematic monitoring of the reasons for separating children and young people from their families. The last data provided by the 2017 Report by the Children’s Ombudsman in Croatia shows that poverty is the main factor that separates children from their families.

## Progress on child protection and care reform

The reforms process started in Croatia in 2011 when the government endorsed the deinstitutionalisation plan for the transformation of social welfare homes and other legal bodies providing social services in Croatia 2011-2016. The overall transition from institutional to family-based and community-based forms of care shows slow signs of progress. A total of 6,256 children, including 5,437

children with disabilities were still growing up in institutional care in 2018 in Croatia.

The long expected law on foster care came into force in January 2019 with the ambition to promote the development of family based-care including increasing a number of family-based care placements. In 2018 there were 2,276 children living in foster families compared to 2017 when 2,263 children were placed in foster care.

## Care leavers

The situation has been particularly difficult for care leavers, since the pandemic has had a serious effect on the labour market, and caused many people to lose their jobs. In addition to the lockdown and isolation, care leavers could not get the proper psychological, expert or financial support they needed, except in some cases of alternative care providers like SOS Children’s Villages, who organised online counselling and offered additional financial support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation was

especially critical for those young people whose accommodation ended or who decided to leave their accommodation due to the deterioration of relations with care providers during isolation. In one period of time they could not find substitute accommodation at all – even homeless shelters.

Care leavers within the group of students without grants struggled since without jobs they were not able to pay all their expenses. During the lockdown they were among the first who lost their jobs. As this group of care leavers does not have other sources of income their living conditions became very difficult. FICE Croatia points out there was no systematic support offered by the social welfare sector to care leavers or additional services organised to help them overcome the effects of the pandemic.

## Children in migration

In April 2020, among the 380 asylum seekers accommodated in the reception centre in Zagreb, almost 40% were under the age of 18 (141), 40 children were aged 0

to 3 and there were ten pregnant women. At the beginning of May 2020, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Croatia took over the coordination of all activities to help children and families housed in the reception centre for unaccompanied minors and asylum seekers.

## EU funds

Currently there are no funds allocated for the implementation of the legislative or policy framework related to families in vulnerable situations and children in care. There were calls for proposals directed at providing services to families in vulnerable situations and children in care, however no funds have been decided and allocated so far. For example, it took more than two years to get the results of the Call for Proposals within the ESF aimed at the further strengthening of social services supporting the deinstitutionalisation process. The NGO sector in Croatia calls for the process to be sped up and made more transparent. Furthermore, until now no funds have been allocated in response to COVID-19.

# Cyprus

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
Pancyprian Coordinating  
Committee for the Protection  
and Welfare of Children

23%

.....  
Children at risk of poverty or social  
exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Alternative recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the short term:

- Make sure all children continue their education
- Make sure parents do not lose their jobs and income
- The EU must provide emergency funds to Member States

#### Supporting children and families in the long term:

- Identify housing problems and subsidise families in poverty to live in better conditions
- Social services should be reinforced, including mental health support services for children in vulnerable situations
- The EU must provide earmarked funding to fight child poverty in Member States





## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations :



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Negative developments

##### Confined to the home in poor housing conditions

Housing is an important social determinant of health. COVID-19, and the actions taken to mitigate its spread, highlighted the central role of the home in people's lives. With the country in lockdown, people must stay in their homes with very limited exceptions, exacerbating inequalities in housing and the repercussions for health.

##### Reported increase in domestic violence (not specifically against children but mostly against women)

The pandemic and the lockdown triggered an unprecedented increase in domestic violence for reasons including increased stress, cramped and difficult living conditions, and breakdowns in community support systems.

##### Reported increase in poverty

The economic effects of the pandemic are likely to push many families into poverty.

##### Impact on civil society organisations

- Difficulty in communicating with members that were not "internet ready"
- Decrease in funding after losing funding from banks and the private sector
- Working from home meant less contact with people on "the ground"

#### Positive developments

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, civil society organisations have shifted to remote-working models, leading them to increase their digital capabilities. These new ways of working have also led organisations to expand different Help Lines and to use the media to inform the public. TV and online programmes have

been developed especially for pre-school children.

#### Measures implemented by the government

- Online continuation of education for elementary and high school children, including free provision of tablets to those in need.
- 60% salary subsidy for all people having to stay home to care for children when schools were closed (the other 40% was to be paid by employers – from March to October 2020)
- "Rescue packs" for small size companies provided they do not fire any staff at least till the end of 2020 (further measures to be decided in the next months in order to secure jobs).

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Cyprus does not have a proper national strategy to tackle child poverty. The impact of the economic crisis limited the capacity of the state to properly invest in social policies. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to make the situation even worse. The government reacted fast in implementing measures to mitigate the socio-economic effect of the pandemic, but it is far from sufficient for it to improve the situation of children in poverty.

### Access to financial resources in the family

Preventing the closure of stores and loss of jobs remains the main challenge to mitigate the economic implications of the crisis. The government was quick in reacting to the pandemic and setting measures to support salaries, online education, and access to health care. Children's access to services will not be substantially affected but access to free services might be limited

or impeded following the crisis. Cyprus is still far from going back to universal services or benefits, excluding education that remains free and universal. The new National Health Care System (in place since June 2019) is universal but co-payments and the percentage of salaries paid by people in order to be "in" the system are high and a burden on the low-waged and low-pensioners.

### Views on the Semester process

Fighting unemployment is a critical issue, however, NGOs regret that the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSR) did not mention social issues or children.

### Children's participation

The government set up mechanisms to listen to children and has made significant progress since 2018. Children were on the agenda and civil society organisations were hopeful there would be a strategy in place to fight child poverty and

social exclusion. However, the COVID-19 crisis disrupted these efforts.

Face-to-face communication has been impossible and even though – children use technology for recreation, they are not used to "impersonal" ways of communicating. There is a need to involve children under 12 and marginalised children in consultations or formal child-led bodies in a substantial way.

Despite the existing Communication Mechanism between ministries, the presidency and children, the recognition of the Children's Parliament as an "equal partner" in the Parallel Parliaments, the existence of Formal School Councils (by law) and the willingness of the political system to listen to children there is room for improvement. The Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC) is calling for a change in the law allowing individuals under the age of 18 to form their own NGOs (child-led

organisations) and structures that include children under 12.

# Czechia

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

Alliance for the Rights of the Child, DCI Czechia, NGO Big Dipper North

13%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019	207	6,553 <sup>1</sup>
Institutions for people with disabilities	204	1,823
Institutions for children 0-3	26	265 <sup>2</sup>
Number of children in family-based/ foster care in 2019		20,295

1 Statistická ročenka školství – Statistical yearbook of education

2 Bývalé kojenecké ústavy v roce 2020.

### Alternative recommendations

#### Children in Alternative Care:

- The government should assess thoroughly the impact of the COVID-19 crisis to build back better by strengthening personnel capacities of institutions and preparing feasible guidelines to ensure child needs are fulfilled including their participation in education.
  - Family counselling services should be reinforced
  - The government should harmonise the fragmented child-protection system currently administered by three ministries<sup>1</sup> to be able to coordinate and cooperate during the crisis situation such as COVID-19 and provide adequate support to vulnerable children and young people in alternative care.
  - Introduce an Act on Children and Youth, implementing the
- Develop a long-term strategy for the rights of the child and short-term national action plan on investing in children.
  - Set up a Ministry for Family, Children and Youth.
  - Set up an Ombudsperson for Children.
  - Support civil society organisations active in this field, especially those promoting the rights of the child.
  - Ensure child friendly justice.
  - Actively promote the Child Guarantee at the EU level.
  - The government should provide schools with financial aid in order to ensure that all children have a laptop and Internet connection to use for online learning activities.

#### To support children and families, the government should:

Convention on the Rights of the Child and respecting the principle of acting in the best interest of the child.

1 Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family; Ministry of Health; and Ministry of Education.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



# Child Poverty - Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

## Negative developments

Home schooling is an important problem to address because online lessons and homework were not accessible to all the children. It proved to be especially difficult for families already experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, school tests raised serious difficulties, notably when preparing children for the test to get to secondary schools and for the high school graduation exam.

Visits to children in hospitals or social facilities had to be banned or restricted.

NGOs also daily face serious challenges due to the coronavirus. Many social services had to be stopped because of the pandemic, for example, while physical workshops, seminars and conferences had to be postponed or cancelled.

NGOs have registered an increase in cases of domestic violence.

## Positive developments

### Financial benefits



The government provided financial benefits for parents staying at home in order to care for children when schools were closed down. The benefits amounted to up to 80% of the daily wage and were prolonged from nine days to the end of the school year.

### TV educational programmes



A public national TV channel has been created to provide education to those children that had to stay at home.

### Child benefits



The government proposed a bill to introduce substitutional maintenance payments for children of a single parent.

## Examples of good practice

Numerous workshops were set up to sew facemasks in buildings that had been closed to the public (like theatres), and the masks were then distributed for free.

The Czech Children and Youth Council (national umbrella NGO) successfully lobbied the government to allow children's vacation camps to open during the summer break.

Volunteers from several NGOs (e.g. the Red Cross and Scout) were also buying and delivering food and medicines to families under quarantine.

An initiative of medicine students was assisting those families and homes with nursing.

## Example of bad practice

**A ban on visits in prisons was imposed during the lockdown. Later, visits for one person at a**

time were allowed, but it meant children were still prevented

from visiting their detained or imprisoned parent. Now, only

one minor (more siblings are not

allowed) may accompany an adult visitor once a month for one hour.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Czechia does not have a separate national strategy to fight child poverty, despite the urgent need for one. This clearly shows that, in recent years, children have not been a priority for politicians, media and society in general.

The country has not established a coordinated system and comprehensive strategy for the rights of the child. Responsibilities are divided among several ministries which do not communicate with each other and resist any changes to the status quo.

### EU influence on national developments

The EU has not been able to pressure the government to implement child-centred legislation. It should issue more binding guidelines on the issue and monitor their implementation more efficiently.

The EU should advocate for school meals to be free for all children. In the process, priority should be given to the food provided to children in kindergartens, and then in elementary schools.

The EU should also call for the state to provide kindergartens free of charge for all children from the age of three years and free of charge afternoon courses at elementary schools. This would help to ensure homework assistance in all those

cases in which parents are not able to assist their children.

The EU should call for the state to prevent domestic violence and offer mediation services to families free of charge.

The 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations were generally well drafted, but lacked any mention of children that could have been used to better protect children's rights in the country.

### Access to financial resources and services of high quality

The government's effort to ensure adequate resources and services to families and children is reasonable, but should improve.

The Prime Minister promised in a public statement in June 2020 to

establish an office of Ombudsperson for Children. The bill was drafted but not adopted; the government failed to push for it.

Czechia needs to implement a vast number of political instruments in the future in order to ensure adequate resources and services. The most urgent are:

- promoting job sharing practices
- establishing a shorter working week
- setting up universal child benefits and universal basic income
- investing in education in order to ensure that all children enjoy the same opportunities.

### Children's participation

In 2005, the School Education Act established student parliaments

in schools. Participatory structures exist in some municipalities and regions, such as the National Children and Youth Parliament. However, these operate on a

voluntary basis, without their own budgets, and without being regulated by law.

A representative of the Children and Youth Parliament was invited to participate as a full member of the governmental advisory body (Committee for the Rights of the

Child) at its last session, on 16 June 2020.

Individual participation at the courts of justice has improved since 2015.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Similar to other countries the Czechia announced a lockdown between March and May 2020 which lead to the closure of most public institutions including schools. At the same time, strict measures on personal protection and social distancing were introduced.

In the Czechia there are three ministries that oversee child protection. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responsible for social services and the social and legal protection of children; the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports administers institutional care for children from three to 26 years and leisure-time facilities for children and youth; and the Ministry of Health

covers institutional care for children under three years. As observed by Eurochild member the NGO Big Dipper North during the pandemic, different ministries have released different guidelines, in some cases contradictory to each other.

Children, vulnerable children in particular, did not have access to the usual channels which provide help such as schools, other relatives, day-care centres or even special therapy centres. Big Dipper North points out that civil society organisations were forced to come up with innovative solutions such as counselling and provision of therapy over the phone, skype and other online platforms.

This extraordinary situation has put an extra strain on residential care facilities: institutions for children and social residential services (e.g. shelters for mothers with

children, facilities for immediate assistance to children). All children had to stay in the facility for the whole time which meant an enormous increase in work for the professionals working in these institutions. The increased demand for extra personnel remained unmet from the authorities. Instead other organisations and individuals including private philanthropists and universities provided support. Furthermore, some workers in residential facilities took voluntary weekly shifts remaining in the building for 24h and longer according to the needs. Children (aged three to ten) of health- and social-care professionals were allowed to attend kindergartens and schools thanks to regional authorities' decision.

An extra challenge was to guarantee progress on education in all

residential settings. Social workers were helping children to attend online education. In some cases, one social worker assisted five to eight children of different ages without adequate technological equipment. Other challenges included postponement of medical treatment, growing mental health problems of children and the burden of compliance with very demanding hygiene guidelines.

Residential facilities recorded a higher number of escapes by children and it took some time before the Ministry of Education offered some recommendations on how to proceed when a child returned. In general, there was a lack of basic information and support on how to take care of children in non-standard conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs issued an order allowing

visits by parents to institutional care facilities as well as allowing children to stay (visit) outside the institution. However, many institutions banned the visits (both in and out) to protect children and staff.

Two months of social isolation lead to many conflicts between children and between children and carers because there was no mental-health support to either children or carers to help them face this extraordinary situation. The Big Dipper North NGOs highlights how determined the pedagogues/carers working in institutions were since they took over all roles of: a substitute parent, a teacher, a medical doctor and a psychologist to ensure the wellbeing of children.

Foster families felt the greatest burden when the schools and kindergartens were closed. It was challenging to manage home education (according to school demands) as well as to secure technical support for this type of education. One of the parents always had to stay at home with the children and could not work. They also approached sponsors to obtain laptops so that children

could follow the school assignments correctly. Due to the closure of ambulance or day-centres foster families received the various types of support via online counselling. Contact between biological parents and children was not restricted, but there was less contact by mutual agreement among the foster family, the biological family and the service provider in order to protect the health of all. In most cases everyone cooperated and temporarily limited face-to-face contact.

Most NGOs in Czechia are financed from multiple sources (grants, donors, state subsidies and self-financing). As the economy has slowed down this was reflected in the income of NGOs (some grants were suspended, the number of donors was reduced because their own business went bankrupt, etc.). Although some services for families and children are funded by the state, NGOs still need to seek additional funding because the subsidy is only available for some activities. Usually there is only project funding by the government, no core funding. The Big Dipper North NGO points out that the financial sustainability of NGOs providing social services

is a long-term problem. EU funds are available to pilot or innovative projects in the field of prevention however, the sustainability of these projects is not secured by other means of funding.

Since the traditional support mechanisms were not in place (schools, community centres, other relatives) telephone and help line services received more demands. They have not recorded higher rate of violence against children.

## Progress on child protection and care reform

The transformation of the care system for children at risk in the Czechia was approved by the government in 2012 in the National Strategy for the Protection of Children's Rights and in the National Action Plan for its implementation (for the years 2012-2015, not fulfilled, the foreseen follow-up plan has not been adopted by now). The progress towards deinstitutionalisation of children in alternative care has been very slow.

As the Child and Family Association points out, the placement of children under three years in institutional care in the Czechia is unusual not only for an EU country, but also for the rest of the developed world. They also believe that in the vast majority of cases, institutional care is unnecessary, in addition to increasing spending on institutional health and social care, money which could be spent more efficiently on supporting families at risk and the development of family-based care. New legislation and an amendment to the Act on the Social and Legal Protection of Children introduced in June 2020 by the Czech government has offered some progressive solutions, see below.

The aim of the amendment is to ban placing children under three in institutional care and increase the remuneration for foster parents. The amendment introduces the restriction of the placement of children under three years in institutional care. Out-of-home placement and services should be provided to only those children under three years old whose condition requires intensive specialised health care.

The amendment also introduces an obligation, therefore, for all institutional facilities to notify social and legal protection bodies for children, because currently, many children are placed in children's institutions by their parents on the basis of a contract with the facility, without informing social and legal protection bodies who cannot then offer timely assistance to families. DCI Czechia suggests that this practice should be prevented by law.

According to the government there is a long-term shortage of foster carers, particularly for short-term care, partly due to the fact that their remuneration has not been increased since 2013. The amendment to the Act on the Social and Legal Protection of Children attempts to respond to this by increasing it up to CZK 22,000 (EUR 800) a month.

The amendment also comes with a care allowance of CZK 15,000 (EUR 555) per month for young adults when they become too old for

alternative care in order to support them in their further studies. Higher education is key to their further professional employment and independence from state social support systems. The amendment also provides for assistance to these young people in finding and maintaining housing.<sup>2</sup>

Although the amendment was long-awaited the professionals including the Child and Family Association pointed out its weaknesses.<sup>3</sup> They regret that the adopted government proposal does not reflect the recommendations of experts in the care sector and does not respond to the long-term efforts to introduce a comprehensive concept<sup>4</sup>.

## EU funds

There were specific calls for proposals to tackle the issues of vulnerable families and children. For example, the Ministry of Labour implemented a project financed from the European

Social Fund (1 January 2016 to 30 June 2019) "System development and support of instruments for the social and legal protection of children". The project focuses on: supporting the transformation of the system for children at risk; strengthening inter-ministerial and multidisciplinary cooperation; support for social and legal protection bodies for children and other key actors in the field of networking services for vulnerable children and their families. Its ambition was to create service networks at the local, regional and national levels to ensure modules for lifelong learning for social workers and the development of family-based care.

A large amount of EU funds managed by the Ministry of Education was spent on the inclusion of children who are socially excluded or at risk in mainstream education. Eligible applicants included schools, school facilities and NGOs. The aim was to integrate disadvantaged children into education to be able to achieve

better educational outcomes and increase their chances for better employment and living standards. There were also systemic projects that aimed at adjusting the current legislation and funding support measures for children and families from disadvantaged communities (e.g. a teaching assistant).

<sup>2</sup> MPSV prosadilo významnou pomoc pro pěstouny a ohrožené děti

<sup>3</sup> Otevřený dopis k návrhu novely zákona o sociálně-právní ochraně dětí ochráně dětí

<sup>4</sup> They consider a new measure that introduces different remuneration for short- and long-term carers unfair and not justifiable. They insist that long-term care is desirable from the point of view of the child's needs and, as a number of studies have shown, also more economical for the state than institutional care. There is still an insufficient number of long-term foster parents too, which is why hundreds of children, who could otherwise grow up in a family background, are placed in institutional care completely unnecessarily every year. The remuneration for caring for one child is insufficient (CZK 12,000/EUR 444 per month), and does not correspond to the minimum salary (CZK 14,600 = EUR 540). If the foster parent is not employed, he/she even has to pay extra for health insurance. Other support services for foster families remained underfinanced too.



# Denmark

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

Joint Council for Child Issues (Børnesagens Fællesråd); Geert Jorgensen (child rights expert & independent consultant)

**13.2%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of small residential settings	Number of children
Total number of children in alternative care		<b>11,428<sup>1</sup></b>
Residential care in 2019	<b>370</b>	<b>4,660<sup>2</sup></b>
Children with disabilities & children 0-3		<b>1,905 + 28</b>
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2015		<b>7,540<sup>3</sup></b>
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		<b>217<sup>4</sup></b>
Small Group Homes (SGHs)		<b>1,501</b>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statistikbanken.dk/ANBAAR15>

<sup>2</sup> More accurate information is not available. All Danish social services are registered in the national portal Tilbudsportalen, but they are registered after the services they provide and many have more than one service and thus appear as more than one institution or group home. Thus having no accurate figures for the number of institutions and group homes today, a guess is that there are approximately 120 institutions with an average of between 15-18 places, and approximately 250 group homes with an average of between eight to ten places for children and young people including 18 years and above.

<sup>3</sup> Due to registration problems Statistics Denmark has said that they expect that from 2021 it will again be possible to distinguish between the different forms of foster care. 2015 is the last year where it is possible to find a divided statistic: Number of children in family-based/foster care: 5.936; Number of children in kinship care: 879.

<sup>4</sup> Tal på udlændingeområdet pr. 30.09.2020.



## Alternative recommendations

### Supporting children and families in the short term:

- It is crucial that all children get back to school, day-care and other activities outside their home as soon as possible. Schools, sports clubs, communes must therefore try to reach out to the most vulnerable part of their communities and ensure that they are not left behind in this process. The re-opening of this structure will help to discover potential issues with children, such as domestic violence that is currently witnessing a stark increase.
- The government should provide families who suffered financially due to the lockdown period with financial aid. For instance, it

could prolong existing measures such as wage compensation, unemployment benefits or student loans for persons with low income. Furthermore, it should specifically support financially unstable families with children.

- It is important to make sure that children in vulnerable situations do not fall behind in school. Extra measures must be taken to make sure that these children are supported.
- It is crucial to keep supporting the most vulnerable groups of society.<sup>1</sup>

### Supporting children and families in the long term:

- The government should prepare an emergency plan in order to promptly react

if another lockdown should prove necessary, ensuring that children in vulnerable situations will be protected. In this regard, the government should ensure adequate educational equipment, especially for children in vulnerable situations, in order to ensure children's right to education during times of home schooling.

- The government should consider that focus on general health would benefit the population as a whole as well as the most vulnerable groups. Hand hygiene, open spaces, sleep, nutrition, outdoor activities and sports may help brake another wave.
- In Denmark, the number of child infections have dropped after the corona outbreak due to better hygiene and smaller groups of

children in child nurseries, day-cares and schools.

- With regard to day-care and children in vulnerable situations, factors such as smaller groups and the fact that children have been in "family groups" with one adult as a contact, instead of several, have had a positive impact on their well-being (FOA<sup>2</sup>). This insight should be taken into consideration by the government for the future.
- Remain focused on the value of supporting children and families in vulnerable situations to break the cycle of disadvantage, enable them to thrive and avoid larger costs in the future.

<sup>1</sup> As an example, see the agreement made by the Danish government and supporting parties that insures help for vulnerable groups: Aftale om initiativer for sårbare og udsatte grupper i forbindelse med COVID-19.

<sup>2</sup> Mindre børnegrupper har været godt for børnenes trivsel.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### The government's support to families and children during the crisis

The government provided financial aid for civil society organisations working with children in vulnerable situations. Additional student loans were made available and the period that unemployment benefits could be paid was extended by two months.

Furthermore, the government supported the labour market with a system of compensation for lost wages (lønkompensation).

#### Negative developments

Children and families had to face numerous challenges including unemployment and a lack of adequate equipment for home schooling such as computers and Wi-Fi connection. There was also

insufficient stimulation for children due to the lack of resources in their homes.

Civil society organisations (CSO's) had to deal with a number of hurdles such as difficulties in funding; a rising demand among children and families for basic necessities such as food and computers for home schooling and digital learning. CSO's also struggled to plan activities due to uncertainties about the future.

#### Good practice

Many civil society organisations provided financial aid, counselling and "activity" packages to use during lockdown. There have been a lot of examples of resourceful people who helped families with sick members and families in vulnerable situations by buying supplies and basic necessities or providing child care.

Several NGO's have made a big effort to give children in vulnerable situations and their families the opportunity to go to summer camps

after a long time without social contact with other children.

#### Challenges in supporting families and children

Many of the challenges that children were experiencing before the outbreak have been worryingly exacerbated. A telling example concerns psychological challenges such as depression, anxiety or stress. The following passage from an applicant for financial support is a good illustration of the many challenges the lockdown brought:

*I am early retired and have chronic pains, a psychological disorder (borderline) and anxiety. I am, as many other families, under pressure because of corona. But my resources, both mental and physical, are a huge challenge. I have to be a full-time mum, aunt, teacher and replace the missing friends. My son usually attends boarding school and it definitely shows that I now have a teenager at home with a huge appetite. Besides that, I had to buy video games for the computer so he can play with his friends and be social in that way. My daughter has problems with her weight and therefore follows a special diet that is quite expensive. Besides that, she needs a lot of exercise so I have invested in outdoor activities that we all three can do together. I call that our physical education. I have also introduced cooking classes and at the same time I have to give feedback on their papers. All this takes extra energy from my side. I have to be able to accept that it is chaotic and not knowing what the future will bring reinforces my anxiety. So yes, I am working overtime both mentally, physically and economically.*

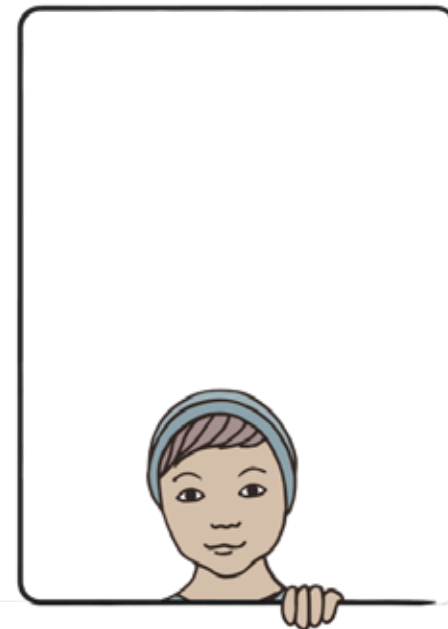
## Sources

- Survey<sup>3</sup> about pedagogues' impression of children's well-being under Covid restrictions indicating that many children are thriving when activities are organised in smaller groups.
- Report<sup>4</sup> from UNICEF showing that children in Danish schools are behaving very responsibly when it comes to keeping their distance and maintaining good hygiene. Three quarters say they miss their friends.
- A detailed report<sup>5</sup> based on a survey in Danish schools showing that 92% miss their friends and almost as many miss their out-of-school activities. At the same time qualitative answers from the survey show that the children with mental challenges and their parents are having a harder time dealing with the schools' shut-down.

3 [Mindre børnegrupper har været godt for børnenes trivsel](#)

4 [Børn og unge under Corona-krisen](#)

5 [Nødundervisning under corona-krisen...et elev- og forældreperspektiv](#)



## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

The former national poverty limit introduced in June 2013 was abolished in 2015. As of 2020, Denmark still does not have an official poverty threshold. Using the OECD definition of poverty, however, we can conclude that by 2017 child poverty was on the rise, with 64,500 children in families living below the poverty threshold. This was partly due to a 2016 piece of legislation known as 'the benefits ceiling' which put a cap on the total amount of income one person can receive in social benefits. This law heavily affected persons receiving unemployment benefits or integration benefits.

The government has taken measures to mitigate the rise in child poverty by introducing a temporary child benefit, active since January 2020, for persons who

have children from the age of 0-14 and are affected by the above-mentioned legislation. Furthermore, a commission has been formed with the purpose of re-evaluating the current unemployment benefit system.

Overall, the government does not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty. Time will tell whether the commission will come up with recommendations to ensure lower child poverty in Denmark.<sup>6</sup> Without a national poverty target, as proposed in the sustainable development goals (SDGs), it seems very difficult to tackle child poverty without measuring it first. Having a national strategy, and first of all a national poverty limit, would make it easier to justify measures in order to help the most vulnerable.

### Overall improvement in the protection of children's rights

The current government has introduced a temporary benefit for those under the benefit ceiling and migrants. This temporary benefit is supposed to remedy the rise in child poverty of the last five years caused by the reduction in unemployment benefits and the imposition of the benefit ceiling.

Unfortunately, the government's will to implement laws to improve the rights of children in vulnerable situations is not always reflected in reality. Children in care have been specifically targeted in these discussions. While we welcome the focus on children in care, the law proposes more early forced adoptions instead of preventive measures that could help families stay together and give the children lasting relations with their parents.<sup>7</sup>

### Recommendations

- Introduce an official national poverty target, based for instance on the definition by EUROSTAT (AROE), or the OECD.
- Abolish the benefit ceiling.
- Apply a non-discriminatory principle when taking steps to abolish child poverty in Denmark.

### EU influence on national developments

- The EU was inefficient in pressuring the government to implement child-centred legislation.
- The 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations were negatively evaluated. The recommendations encourage

<sup>6</sup> The government has set out a plan to secure the most vulnerable in this time of crises: [Aftale om initiativer for sårbare og udsatte grupper i forbindelse med COVID-19](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Faktaark... "Barnet først"](#).

the state to adopt all necessary measures to counter the pandemic and support the economy. But if it does not include measures that ensure help and support for the most vulnerable, the state will risk failing many families and children in need. The EU should highlight more efficiently the potential of *investing* in children in vulnerable situations, for which without adequate measures by the government inequalities will be carried into adulthood, creating further expenditures for the state.

## Access to financial resources and services of high quality

The government reasonably ensured adequate resources and services to families and children. The Danish system of unemployment benefits is totally digitalised. This means that in order to seek the benefits you must be able to read, write and have computer skills. Many people in vulnerable positions do not have the necessary resources to figure out what types of help they are entitled to and what rules and laws to follow. The consequence is that often they

do not receive the help they need. This again has an impact on their children who will not have the same opportunities as their peers. This difference has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving behind many children in vulnerable situations.

Furthermore, only a very small number of children in vulnerable situations and adults on unemployment benefits do sport in their spare time. This is an issue for the general health of this group and a big challenge for the years to come.<sup>8</sup>

## Recommendations for the government

- Support public housing.
- Help children in institutional care/family care to take an education.
- Provide additional help in schools with children in vulnerable positions.
- Support children in institutional care/family care in the passage from childhood to adulthood.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Like many other countries, with the increased spread of COVID-19, Denmark closed schools changing to a web based approach. This has been a challenge for both children

and schools. Some schools have managed better than others in terms of quality, support and scope. Having found that discontinuing everyday life and teaching would have much worse impacts on children in vulnerable situations, schools for children with special needs, which are usually smaller than other schools, were held open

with guidelines to prevent the spread of the virus. The varied extent and quality of online teaching has also been a big challenge for group homes and institutions, as well as the absence of many possibilities for sports and leisure activities.

The Danish government decided to extend the first phase of a controlled

reopening in April 2020. Measures include the establishment of partnerships across authorities, civil society, cultural institutions, private actors and the public sector that can develop initiatives that counteract loneliness and vulnerability and support socially disadvantaged children and young people.

<sup>8</sup> Danskernes Motions..Og Sportsvaner.Under.Genåbningem; Socialt.Udsatte.I.Idrætten...Definitioner.og.eksisterende.viden.

New methods will be found to enable visits from family and relatives in a medically safe manner, and in the coming days, the parties will discuss the individual initiatives in more detail with the relevant ministers and authorities.

### Children in vulnerable situations must return to school

The government has agreed to set aside DKK 60 million in 2020 for local efforts that can help close the academic gaps faced by students in vulnerable situations as a result of the closure, such as turbo courses, learning camps, specially designed teaching courses in the schools and extra homework cafes. The detailed implementation will be clarified and negotiated by the Ministry of Children and Education with the children and education spokespersons<sup>9</sup>.

In 2020 DKK 14 million were allocated to the preparatory basic education - FGU<sup>10</sup> to

enable individual initiatives to be launched locally for students, who are particularly vulnerable to interruptions in their education. Moreover, a further DKK 10 million was allocated for renewed grants to selected voluntary organisations, sports associations and scout corps, including Lær for Livet, Julemærkehjemmene and Muskelsvindfonden. The funds must be used to strengthen the associations' and organisations' outreach work and efforts with a focus on children and young people in vulnerable situations: their learning and well-being in day care, school and leisure time, including homework and learning activities, leisure sessions, summer camps, family friends, etc.

The Family Court's child experts remained in contact with the children with the purpose of ensuring support and relief through a hand-held process and answering the child's questions. At the same time, insight is created into the

child's current situation and thus the opportunity to act if needed.

Families in vulnerable positions who are struggling on a daily basis with abuse, loneliness, mental or financial challenges, and who have had a particularly difficult time during the COVID-19 pandemic, could search for help from the following organisations: Mentorbarn, Børnehjælpsdagen, Børns Vilkår, Dansk Røde Kors, Blå Kors, Mødrehjælpen, KFUM's sociale arbejde, Red Barnet and Kirkens Korshær that received an extra funding of DKK 13.5 million in 2020. The funds can be used for purely practical things such as basic necessities, medicines and food, but also to reduce waiting lists, increase the organisations' outreach work and increase staffing for advice, help and support. Furthermore, voluntary social associations, sports associations and scout organisations as well as non-profit housing associations, folk high schools and cultural institutions, which hold holiday

stays for the target group, can apply for funding. The funds will support holiday stays, day trips or music and cultural events for families, children and young people in the summer of 2020, autumn of 2020 or in the winter of 2020/2021 to enable socially disadvantaged families and children to attend holiday camps or pursue day trips.

Very importantly, a Student Counselling programme was launched to initiate outreach activities as well as create additional opportunities for counselling of the most vulnerable and mentally vulnerable groups of students as well as for initiatives in connection with the gradual opening of the higher education institutions and for increased visibility of the Student Counselling's offers.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children into alternative care

There is no indication of gatekeeping mechanisms other than those

<sup>9</sup> Aftale om initiativer for sårbare og udsatte grupper i forbindelse med COVID-19.

<sup>10</sup> The preparatory basic education (Forberedende Grunduddannelse - FGU) is aimed at young people who are under 25 years of age and are not yet ready to start or complete another upper secondary education. It can be for professional, personal or social reasons. The purpose of FGU is that you can subsequently continue on a vocational education, a high school education or in a job. FGU consists of different educational tracks, which can be adapted to your needs and interests.

existing in the Social Service Law. Prevention of placement and the aim of reuniting the child with the parents are fundamental in the law (though not always in practice).

The main reasons for children entering alternative care are: worrying behaviour by the child; significant or permanent impairment of physical or mental functioning in children; worrying behaviour of parents and other forms of neglect; school problems and abuse against a child<sup>11</sup>.

### Progress on child protection and care reform

Initially there was a mainstreaming of group homes in Denmark. In 1997, a survey showed that the average number of children in group homes was 5.6. Seventy-four percent were established by and around a couple living together with the children as a form of foster family with some staff assistance. In the past 20 years this has changed and the group homes have moved towards institutions. Most of them can be still categorised as ‘small

group homes’ that accommodate 8 – 10 children, and the rest, especially the largest, might more correctly according to UN definitions be called ‘institutions’. According to their national organisation, the most common size of Danish institutions for children and young people is 20 – 24 places in four groups.

In February, the Ministry of Social Affairs stated that it intended to introduce a ‘Law of the Child’ to strengthen the efforts to support children and young people in vulnerable situations so that they receive the right help and support early in their lives. The starting point of the law is that the child exists in his or her own right and that their needs are put first to a greater extent. The Minister for Social Affairs has encouraged contributions to the work of writing the proposed law. However, this work has been postponed during the lockdown, but it was planned to continue it in August. Professionals, researchers and parent organisations have raised concerns that although many of the ideas behind the proposal are good, it has too little focus on the

connection between the child and their parents and the cooperation of the care setting, the local municipality and the birth family.

### Care leavers

There is no indication of any special efforts to support specifically young care leavers during the pandemic.

It is supposed to be dealt with under the existing paragraph in the Social Service Law. According to Eurochild’s Danish member the emphasis is unfortunately on “*can*” rather than “*must*” which makes it highly likely there will be differences between municipalities and insufficient support to many care leavers.

People working with aftercare observed young people finding it difficult to get in contact with local municipalities and case workers during the period where a lot of the municipal staff were working online or from home.

### Children in migration

If granted asylum, migrant children are placed in a local municipality, which administers their case. The number of unaccompanied minors in the past five years has declined significantly from 2,144 in 2014 to 217 in 2019.

Currently, there is one Reception Centre in Denmark run by the Danish Red Cross on behalf of the Ministry of Foreigners and Integration. Here the unaccompanied minors stay for several days. Afterwards they are moved to one of the Refugee Children’s Centres under the Ministry of Foreigners and Integration, run by one of the local municipalities where they stay while their case is examined by the Ministry. When their case has been settled they pass on to one of the local municipalities that decides where to place them. It can be in kinship care if they have relatives living in Denmark, foster care, group homes, institutions, supported independent living or other placements.

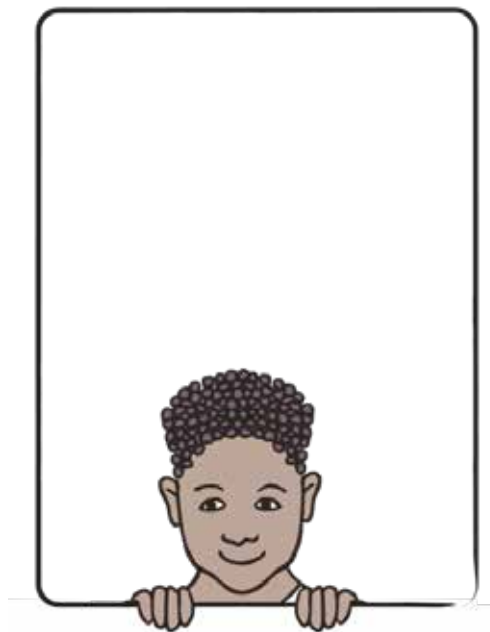
11 Udslagsgivende årsager til iværksatte anbringelser efter landsdel, årsag til anbringelse, alder og køn.



Due to the fall in unaccompanied minors there does not seem to be a shortage of places. However, the local authorities do not register these children separately from other children in the statistics of children placed in alternative care, so it is not possible to tell how many of the different options the children are placed in.

### EU funds

At a national level, there gerenerally is a lack of knowledge of EU funds allocated for the implementation of a legislative and/or policy framework related to families in vulnerable situations and children in care.



# England

## Country Profile on the COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
[Children's Rights Alliance for England \(CRAE\)](#)

29.9%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2018 in the whole of UK

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government needs to ensure that **all children are transitioning back to school successfully and children, in particular young children are kept in school during the future lockdowns as long as the evidence shows it is safe to do so.** Supporting children's mental health, well-being and reducing educational inequality should be at the heart of this.
- The government should put in place a **comprehensive strategy** that embraces a new vision of childhood to support children to recover from the impact of COVID-19 and ensure they join

health and the economy as the three pillars of the government's response. **The voices and rights of children** must be at the heart of the recovery and rebuilding process. This must be accompanied by a commitment to protect children whose rights are more at risk, such as those with disabilities, asylum seekers, abuse victims and those from minority communities.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- There should be urgent **action and investment** across local and national government, including: funding for early help universal services and public health; supporting innovation and integrated working, particularly with charities; dedicated financial support for children; support for

early years' settings and schools so attainment gains are protected; and unprecedented investment in children's mental health.

- The government must conduct a **review of the social security system**, as part of a broader child poverty strategy to ensure it is sufficient to enable all households to have an adequate standard of living.
- The government should take this opportunity to **end homelessness for all children** and families and renew the ban on rough sleeping and evictions which was in place until September 2020 as a result of COVID-19. They should also ensure that all children and families have access to suitable self-contained accommodation, including households with no recourse to public funds.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

The government provided a **free school meals voucher scheme** for all key workers and children in vulnerable situations in school whilst schools were closed, for those at home who meet the benefits-related eligibility criteria and over the summer holidays, for families with no recourse to public funds who are not normally eligible for free school meals. In October 2020, MPs voted against extending free school meals during half term and the school holidays with the Government coming under increased pressure to provide more funding to ensure that children do not go hungry.



During the pandemic, the government introduced a series of new **regulations relaxing duties for children** in a number of vital areas.



- **Social care for children:** regulations which involved 65 losses or dilutions of safeguards for children in care, and children who could come into care were in force until September 2020.<sup>1</sup> Though the majority of those changes have now lapsed, there may be long-term consequences for the children who were in care during this period.
- **Children with special educational needs and disability (SEND):** these downgraded the duties and delayed the timescales for the assessment and preparation of an Education Health Care Plan which enables children with SEND to access specific resources and a school

place whilst schools are not open for all children.<sup>2</sup> These changes have expired but there will likely be a lasting impact on children who lost their entitlement to support for the first time since 2014.

- **Children who have been excluded from school:** These regulations created potentially long delays for children attempting to hold schools to account over unfair school exclusions, which will have inevitably impacted most harshly on pupils with SEND. These changes have been relaxed but not ended, and are set to continue in some form until at least March 2021.

The government is providing **laptops and tablets** for disadvantaged families, children and young people who do not currently have access to them, including care leavers, children and young people aged 0 to 19 or young children's

1 [The Adoption and Children \(Coronavirus\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2020](#) – The safeguards affected include: social worker visits; reviews of children's welfare in care; independent scrutiny of children's homes, prospective adoptive parents and foster carers; and the process for placing children in care away from their home areas, including outside of England.

2 [The Special Educational Needs and Disability \(Coronavirus\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2020](#). See also [Regulation 5, Notice of the Secretary of State for Education \(2020\), Coronavirus Act 2020, Modification of section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014 \(England\), Notice 2020](#).

families with a social worker, and disadvantaged year 10 pupils. Internet access will be provided through 4G wireless routers for care leavers, secondary school pupils with a social worker and disadvantaged year 10 pupils. There are concerns about how effectively this is being rolled out.



### Negative developments <sup>3</sup>

**Schools were shut** from 20 March 2020 until September 2020 for most year groups. Children had to be **home-schooled** by parents or carers who were also working, may not have had access to the internet or computers or the educational knowledge or skills to teach their children. This is likely to have further increased educational inequalities between children who were already disadvantaged, and undo progress which has been made in recent years<sup>4</sup> to close the significant educational attainment gap.<sup>5</sup>

There are huge safeguarding concerns in regards to how the **lockdown impeded the ability of professionals to reach and support the children in the most vulnerable situations**, with children hidden from view and issues going undetected by professionals whilst schools have been closed.<sup>6</sup> Early indications are pointing to an **increase in future demand for safeguarding, mental health and other high-need services**. There are concerns that the current lockdown is placing children at increased risk of **domestic abuse**. Refuge (Domestic Violence Support) reported a 700% rise in calls to its National Domestic Abuse Helpline in a single day. The number of domestic homicides is far higher than the average rate for the time of year. Contacts to the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (NSPCC) Helpline about children experiencing domestic abuse also increased by 10% during the lockdown period.

The COVID-19 pandemic is **exacerbating already high levels of poor mental health** amongst children as they feel more anxious, isolated and uncertain as well as making it more difficult for those with existing mental health needs to access support.<sup>7</sup>

NGOs had to face numerous challenges, among which:

- **Loss of funding** – many children's charities rely on donations from the public, shop income and fundraising from large events which have had to be cancelled.
- Many charities are seeing a **rise in need for support for their services** as mental health and safeguarding needs rise and children in care or care leavers are more isolated and social services are operating under capacity or remotely, meaning charities have to plug the gaps. Many are also reporting a **rise in the need for crisis financial support to access**

**basic necessities** such as food as young people have lost jobs.

- Having to **work remotely** has created challenges for all organisations but particularly those that work through face to face support through young people, one on one or in groups.

### Good practice

Children's Rights Alliance for England has been working with 15 other children's charities to gather intelligence on the impact of COVID-19 and issues facing the children's sector and its services through a survey to children's sector statutory and voluntary professionals.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Please see [here](#) for a summary of the main issues affecting children and the recovery since the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> Education Policy Institute (2020) [Education in England: annual report](#)

<sup>5</sup> Clare Lally and Rowena Birmingham for UK Parliament (2020) [COVID-19 and the disadvantage gap. Rapid response](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Recovery Plan – Safeguarding and Child Protection \(2020\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs](#); Marsh, S., Hill, A. (21 October 2020) 'Figures lay bare toll of pandemic on UK children's mental health' The Guardian

<sup>8</sup> More information can be found [here](#).

# Policies for Investing in Children

## National strategy to tackle child poverty

### There is no strategy or targets to tackle child poverty in England.

There has been no progress on re-introducing binding targets to eradicate child poverty in England or on developing a strategy for achieving them, despite calls by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

The UK government's **cross-departmental unit on child poverty was abolished** in December 2016, shortly after the repeal of the Child Poverty Act 2010. This removed the duty to report on child poverty reduction targets and to produce a Child Poverty Strategy. The Child Poverty Act 2010 was replaced by the Welfare Reform and Work Act and the government has insisted that employment is the best route

out of poverty, despite evidence that the majority of households living in poverty are also working.<sup>9</sup>

There has been a **lack of political will** by the UK government to re-introduce a strategy, while the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have developed their own child poverty reduction strategies.

CRAE has consistently **called for a strategy to tackle child poverty** in England, as part of wider reforms needed in the field. CRAE has also consistently called on the government to urgently develop, fund and implement an action plan to reduce the number of children in poverty and to ensure progress, monitoring and reporting against the indicators that were contained in the Child Poverty Act 2010. Given the growing levels of child poverty in the UK, and the potentially devastating impacts of COVID-19 on families and households on low and precarious

incomes, a strategy to address child poverty is more important than ever.

## Access to adequate financial resources

Before COVID-19, there were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2018-19, around 30% of children.<sup>10</sup> A report by the Institute of Public Policy Research has predicted that the number of children living in relative poverty is now 4.5 million, with an increase of 200,000 compared to 2018/19.<sup>11</sup>

Regressive reforms to the social security system over recent years, coupled with insecure and insufficiently paid work and high housing and childcare costs, has meant that **low-income households have not had sufficient financial resources to ensure an adequate standard of living.**

Emerging data on the impacts of COVID-19 shows that 42% of families with children, and single parents in particular, are facing serious financial difficulties and struggling to make ends meet, compared to 24% of other households.<sup>12</sup> The Trussell Trust has reported that the number of families with children receiving food parcels has almost doubled, when compared to the same period last year.<sup>13</sup>

Many non-UK nationals who have leave to remain in the UK (e.g. those on work or family visas) are subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition, which prohibits them from claiming most social security benefits. Some British children whose parent(s) have NRPF due to their immigration status are also left unable to access many benefits, as they cannot make a claim in their own right. While the exact number of children affected by the NRPF restrictions is not known,

9 [What has driven the rise of in-work poverty?](#) D. Innes, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, February 2020

10 [Households Below Average Income](#), Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2018/19, Tables 4a and 4b. Department for Work and Pensions, 2020.

11 1.1 million more people face poverty at end of 2020 as a result of coronavirus pandemic, finds IPPR, 4 June 2020

12 CPAG calculations using data provided in: Kempson, E. and Poppe, C. (2020) [Coronavirus Financial Impact Tracker: key findings from a national survey](#), Standard Life Foundation

13 Food parcels provided to children during April 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Food banks report busiest month ever, as coalition urgently calls for funding to get money into people's pockets quickly during pandemic

the Children's Society has estimated that it amounts to at least a hundred thousand children and 1 million adults.<sup>14</sup> Children's organisations are calling on the government to suspend NRPF policies in response to the COVID-19 crisis, so that families can access the social security support under the same conditions as everyone else.

## Access to services

Families' and children's **access to statutory support** from children's social care services has been impacted by severe reductions in funding from central government since 2010. Early intervention services, designed to support families before a situation reaches crisis point, have been most severely impacted. Funding for children and young people's services since 2010/11 has fallen by 23% whilst

early intervention services have suffered a 60% cut in the same period.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the **demand for children's services has risen significantly**, with the number of child protection enquiries increasing 139% since 2008-2009 and the total number of looked after children reached a new high of 78,150 in 2018-2019.<sup>16</sup> This inevitably means that some children and families who need support are not able to access it until their situation reaches crisis point.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the **spending power** of children's services will be threatened as business rates, council tax and other revenue streams are diminished by the economic impact of the pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people is likely to be deep and long-lasting, and **local authorities** are currently experiencing **immense additional pressures** on their finances as they carry much of the burden of responding to this unprecedented crisis.<sup>18</sup>

## Recommendations<sup>19</sup>

- A cross-government action plan to implement the recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, including a strategy to eradicate child poverty.
- Significant investment in local authorities so they can fulfil their duties in supporting low-income households, children and young people.
- Significant public investment in local, universal early help services that support children and young people.
- A social security system based on human rights standards and that enables all households to have an adequate standard of living.

14 A Lifeline for All: Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds, The Children's Society, May 2020

15 Under Pressure - Children's and young people's services 2010/11 to 2018/19: a summary, Action for Children, NCB, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Barnardo's, 2020.

16 Children's services funding facts and figures, Local Government Association, 2020; and Department for Education (2019) Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019.

17 Under Pressure - Children's and young people's services 2010/11 to 2018/19: a summary, Action for Children, NCB, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Barnardo's, 2020.

18 Local Government Association (2020) A child-centred recovery.

For more info on resources and services: (a) Supporting families during the covid-19 pandemic, 4 June 2020, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG); (b) Fact checking claims about child poverty, 22nd June 2020, Children's Commissioner for England; (c) The impact of Coronavirus on food: How have things changed since the start of lockdown?

From an online survey of 4352 adults in the UK conducted on 14th-17th May by YouGov Plc, The Food Foundation; (d)

Under Pressure - Children's and young people's services 2010/11 to 2018/19: a summary, Action for Children, NCB, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Barnardo's, May 2020; (e) Pressures on children's and young people's services: a deep dive, May 2020

19 Please see also here for a list of the top recommendations that the children's civil society sector is calling for to ensure children are at the heart of the COVID recovery.

- Labour market reforms to ensure that wages are sufficient to enable working households to meet their essential needs (including housing) and ensure that all children can have an adequate standard of living.
- Reinstate the £2.2 billion per year lost from funding available for children and young people's services over the last decade.
- Set out a sustainable plan to increase investment in children's services beyond 2010 levels in order to respond to rising levels of need – particularly in light of the COVID-19 crisis.
- The government should take this opportunity to end homelessness for all children and families and renew the ban on rough sleeping and evictions which was in place until September 2020 as a result of COVID-19. They should also ensure that all children and families have access to suitable self-contained accommodation, including households with no recourse to public funds.
- Please see here<sup>20</sup> for a list of the top recommendations that the children's civil society sector is calling for to ensure children are at the heart of the COVID recovery.

## Children's participation<sup>21</sup>

Despite some limited progress, children are still too **often shut out of policy debates and this has been the case during the COVID-19 crisis**. There has been no attempt by the UK government to engage with children and young people on the crisis or in the response, even though both have clearly had a profound impact on children's lives and will for generations to come.

A key challenge which remains in England is that **children's views are still not taken seriously by many**, despite pockets of good practice and progress in particular areas, for example, the proliferation of school councils. Children have also highlighted particular problems arising from not being listened to by teachers, social workers and the police, while the availability of good quality, independent advocacy is patchy.

Where children do have a statutory right to participation, for example

children in care, **children are not always aware** that they have this right.

Where there has been progress in relation to strategic decision making, for example the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport commitment to increasing attention to the voice of youth, the **budget allocated to deliver it was limited**.

Particular groups of children also less likely to have their voices heard, for example disabled children or children who are under ten years and there has been no progress in lowering the voting age to 16 in England despite developments in other parts of the UK.

<sup>20</sup> [Delivering a recovery that works for children: Full list of recommendations](#)

<sup>21</sup> CRAE State of Children's Rights in England report regularly assesses how well children are having their participation rights implemented  
The report [See it Say Change](#) it also highlighted children's own views about how well they are listened to  
The 2015 civil society report to the UN committee also covers this issue and is available here  
The most recent Concluding Observations on the UK by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also highlights issues in relation to the implementation of participation rights and is available here

## Recommendations

- At a domestic level we would like to see children's right to express their views, and to have these views given due weight according to age and maturity enshrined in all laws relating to children and apply to all children, including those in the armed forces.
- Children should also be informed of their right to be heard and taken seriously, and training and support should be provided on an ongoing basis to all professionals working with children, including the judiciary. Any consultative methods should be fully assessable and of good practice standard.
- Independent and confidential advocacy should be widely available to ensure children can actively take part in decisions about their lives and future. Where a child is the subject of administrative proceedings, including statutory reviews for children in care, care planning, child protection conferences and reviews, school exclusions, special educational needs assessments and tribunals, and hospital admission processes (including mental health settings), there should be a statutory right to an independent and confidential advocate.





# Estonia

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:

Estonian Union for Child Welfare – Lastekaitse Liit

20.3%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019	38	797
Institutions for children with disabilities		
Institutions for children 0-3		
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019		
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2019	1,527	
Number of children in kinship care	1,394	
Number of adoptions	22	
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019, 2020	0	

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the short term:

- Family counselling services should be reinforced.
- The effect of the measures adopted to react to the COVID crisis must also be evaluated from the point of view of children's rights.
- Greater attention should be paid to important topics such as families with fewer economic possibilities; the increase in domestic violence; the use of narcotic substances; the increase in the psychological problems of parents and their exhaustion.

#### Supporting children and families in the long term:

- Legalise mandatory conciliation services in family law disputes and launch a national service system to ensure the widespread availability of a good quality conciliation procedure.

- Invest in the early discovery of special needs.

- Improve the continuing cooperation of health, social and educational sectors to ensure the availability and quality of necessary support services for all children.

- Develop a comprehensive strategy on young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) as a whole, ensuring a complex approach that includes prevention, intervention and compensation

#### Children in Alternative Care:

- Allocate additional funds to strengthen the child protection system to address the needs of the children in care and families providing foster care, including kinship care.
- Continue to promote family-based foster care by recruitment of new foster families, provision of adequate support to professional foster families and development of quality standards for foster care.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



EU involvement in promoting children's rights at a national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The Estonian government reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in a positive way, especially considering that it supported families as a whole first and foremost. Nonetheless, there was a need to better support children's mental health and to reinforce support services in the education system in order to provide more systematic support for pupils in need and children left out of school.

### Support for parents raising children with special needs:



The government also decided to financially support parents raising children with special needs who had to temporarily stop working.

### Amendments to the Family Benefits Act



The amendments shortened the waiting period for the maintenance allowance from six to three months. The purpose of the maintenance allowance is to guarantee a monthly support payment to a parent who raises a child alone and thereby decrease the poverty risk of single parents and their children. The amendments also prolonged the period of coverage of parental benefit in the event of successive births from two and a half years to three years. As a result, unemployment caused by COVID-19 would not decrease the amount of parental benefit for mothers and fathers who have a child at the end of this year or in the following year.

### Negative developments

**Increased level of stress among parents:** as indicated by a survey commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs in April, 44% of the parents interviewed described the living arrangements arising from the emergency as burdening and stressful. The work of more than half

of the interviewees was affected by kindergarten children having to stay at home or children dealing with distance learning.<sup>1</sup>

**Worsening of families' economic situation:** According to the same survey, 42% of Estonian families witnessed a decrease in their family income. Moreover, in 2020 the unemployment rate is expected to increase by 9.2%.

**Increased inequalities among parents due to income, inhabited region and spoken language:** The possibility of teleworking is greater among parents who speak Estonian (42%) as opposed to parents who speak Russian (20%). Teleworking is less common in north-eastern Estonia (19% parents) and most common in northern Estonia (43% of parents). The possibilities for teleworking are greater among those employed in the public sector (60%) and limited in the private sector (30%).

1 Rohkem kui poolte lapsevanemate töötamist on mõjutanud lasteaialaste kodusolemine või koolilaste distantstõpe.

**Increased inequalities in education:** Although Estonia did generally well with distance education, there were great differences among Estonian schools as regards the provision of additional tutoring, availability of support services and evaluation. Differences among teachers' digital competences also played an important role. Moreover, distance learning does not suit all pupils; many families, especially families with many children, experienced difficulties in acquiring the

necessary computers and other means of communication.

### Good practice

#### Providing computers to children in need

Although Estonia is commonly defined as an e-state, distance learning was a real challenge for the country, given that many families did not have the necessary resources and/or internet connection. A group of enterprising Estonian citizens decided to launch the "A computer

for every pupil"<sup>2</sup> initiative to ensure that all children have the same learning opportunities. Thanks to this programme, more than 1,600 computers have been donated to children in need. In order to ensure the sustainability of the initiative in the future, in April 2020 the coordination of the initiative was handed over to the Estonian Union for Child Welfare.

#### International study on distance learning

The Children's Advisory Panel study was carried out in May 2020 in seven countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway) and allowed 7,017 pupils to share their distance learning experience gathered during the COVID crisis. The initiative took place on the initiative of the Telia Company and thanks to the contribution of various child protection organisations and schools.<sup>3</sup>

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Estonia does not have a separate national strategy to fight child poverty. Yet, the Children and Families Development Plan 2012-2020<sup>4</sup> aims at ensuring that families with children can manage financially

by targeting measures and activities at children and families with children, including families with children with disabilities. It is worrying that the state has no intention to renew the Children and Families Development Plan in its present condition. It is also planned to dissolve the Child Protection Council established by the Child Protection Act of 2016

as an independent government committee.

One of the sub-goals of the Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023<sup>5</sup> is to improve the economic situation of citizens by means of active, adequate and sustainable social protection.

For a state with an ageing and decreasing population and a low birth rate such as Estonia, the national strategy to tackle child poverty would be necessary even without the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies show that single-parent families are still at high risk of poverty and that the emergency situation affected their coping greatly as the new measures meant

<sup>2</sup> Igalte Koolilapsele Arvuti

<sup>3</sup> Children's Experiences with digital learning during COVID-19 period – Findings from the Children's Advisory Panel

<sup>4</sup> Strategy of Children and Families 2012-2020

<sup>5</sup> Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023

it was not possible to count on the other parent's help on an everyday basis.<sup>6</sup>

## EU influence on national developments

The EU exercised a good level of pressure on the Estonian government. On the other hand, the EU should pay greater attention to the transposition of EU directives at the national level.

The 2020 Country Specific Recommendations do not directly address matters related to children or NEETs. It is positive that the document discusses the need to improve the accessibility and resilience of the healthcare system, but no consideration is given to the need to support the social system as a whole. Indeed, several studies show that when the provision of social services decreases or stops, the pressure on the child protection system increases.

## Access to financial resources and services of high quality

**Good level of resources and services:** In recent years, great progress has been made especially as regards the development of services provided to children on a national basis.

**Regional inequalities:** The well-being of children depends, among other things, on how their fundamental social rights are guaranteed. Estonia's regional inequality continues to be a major challenge. The well-being of family with children depends to a large extent on the type of household and the area they live in. Depending on the region, the equivalent net income of households with children in 2018 differed almost two-fold, the relative poverty rate three times. Statistics and various surveys point to inequalities in health and differences in the availability of services. The well-being and

realisation of children's rights still depend on the municipality in which their parents live. Greater multidisciplinary cooperation is needed to support children in need.

**Mental Health Services:** Despite several initiatives to increase the accessibility of mental health services, the primary psychological assistance offered to children and young people is insufficient. For example, such support personnel are not present in all educational institutions. The current Mental Health Act does not enable minors to visit psychiatrists without the parent's consent, excluding children's and young people's independent power of decision. The Chancellor of Justice has requested that an amendment to the act be considered. On the other hand, it is worrying that the proceedings of the draft amendments have been stopped due to the strong opposition of some political parties.

**Education:** The Children's Advisory Panel study involved more than a thousand pupils from 10-18 years

of age.<sup>7</sup> The study showed that more than half of the students found that while distance learning they needed more time for studying. They also mentioned the importance of their parents' help. 40% of pupils highlighted that they did not have as many possibilities to ask for the teacher's help outside classes.

## Children's participation

**The participation of children is still problematically low.** Children in Estonia usually have a say in issues affecting the child, but they participate less in family issues and even less in school life or society. Even very active young people feel that their participation is often rather a formality and mainly for show. According to the Children's Worlds survey, pupils felt that they were not listened to and their views were not taken into account at school (one in four children was critical of the teacher in this regard).<sup>8</sup> The modest involvement of Estonian children in school was also confirmed by the

6 Rohkem kui poolte lapsevanemate töötamist on mõjutanud lasteaialaste kodusolemine või koolilaste distantsõpe.

7 Children's experiences with digital learning during covid-19 period: findings from the children's advisory panel

8 Children's Worlds in Europe and Children's Worlds National Report Estonia

results of a study on children's rights and parenthood.

**Right to vote:** The fact that, from 2015, Estonian citizens and citizens of the European Union who have turned 16 years are eligible to vote in the local government council election is a major improvement.

**Children's participation during COVID:** Youth organisations were indignant that young people were not involved in the decision-making process concerning the crisis on a national level.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in June 2020, youth and children's organisations were not involved in the discussion of the draft amendment act of section 3 of the Mental Health Act (115 SE), although it directly affected children and young people and their power of decision.

## Recommendations

- Set up a periodic monitoring of the operational programme to address the gaps identified by the final conclusions presented by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the state in 2017<sup>10</sup>
- Renew the Children and Families Development Plan 2012-2020
- Relaunch the activities of the Child Protection Council
- Enhance the influence of children and young people in shaping society and the various decision-making processes
- Provide greater support for the involvement of groups in vulnerable situations
- Develop a children's participation strategy to normalise children's involvement in situations in which decisions concerning their lives are made



<sup>9</sup> Eesti Noorteühenduste Liidu juht: millal otsustajad noorte poole pöörduvad?

<sup>10</sup> Concluding observations on the second to fourth periodic reports of Estonia

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

To support families in vulnerable situations during the COVID-19 crisis Estonia introduced temporary financial support to parents of children with special needs. The aim of the financial benefit was to help parents who lost their employment or who remained on unpaid leave. Parents of children with profound, severe or moderate disability, educational special needs and lack of immunity were granted 70% of their average income until 31 May 2020.

Due to the emergency situation caused by COVID-19, disability status and the payment of social benefits were automatically prolonged for six months for persons whose disability status would otherwise end from the beginning of the emergency situation until 31 August 2020.

People who were ill, had a child/ close family member who was ill or

needed care or had been exposed to COVID-19, could apply online for paid sick leave. Sickness benefit was extended to cover the first three days of sick leave, which was not covered by the Health Insurance Fund before.

Local governments created possibilities for 24-hour childcare, mainly for emergency workers, social services providers, transport, food production etc. All schools were closed and pupils had to study online. Local governments had to ensure internet connection for teachers and children.

Thanks to the cooperation of the private sector, volunteers, local governments and schools, children from disadvantaged groups also got access to the internet and computers.

Mainly in cooperation with the Estonian Food Bank, food assistance was organised by local governments for families in need. Many local governments worked in cooperation with local grocery stores and pharmacies to deliver food, other

basic necessities, and medicines. A number of local governments continued to provide school meals for children (mandatory for children from families with coping difficulties etc.).

Diverse hotlines were made available to provide assistance to people in need. The child helpline 116 111 continued to be in operation during the emergency situation with the possibility for an online chat. Tallinn Children's Hospital crisis hotline 678 7422 advised workers at the front line of the COVID-19 (health workers and police) who were worried about themselves and their children. Additional finances were allocated to the regular financing for victim support and psycho-social crisis assistance.

Institutional care in Estonia is defined as residential care. The statistics and the legal framework do not distinguish between larger institutions and smaller residential settings. In all residential care settings all family units have up to six children, including the foster care

services offered to children with special needs. There have been no changes in the provision of the service during the lockdown. The situation affected mostly children's communication with other relatives as this had to be conducted online or via phone instead of face to face. The main challenges included limited resources for adequate home schooling (competency of social workers, lack of computers, not sufficient internet connection etc.). Staff were overstretched and at higher risk since most social workers are older people. Similarly, for foster families ensuring an online education was a major challenge.

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare has been operating for 31 years and has built its resilience, i.e. the organisation is capable of performing flexibly in difficult times (for example, some training courses were carried out online, parent counselling was carried out over the phone, innovative solutions were used for organising events). They foresee that most civil society organisations in Estonia will face severe problems in

terms of maintaining their activities and budget.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Local government authorities manage child protection on the local level and create the necessary preconditions in the municipality. The Child Protection Act of 2014, which entered into force in 2016, imposes an obligation on local governments to ensure that a child is only separated from his/her family if necessary. The Child Protection Act recognises the family as the natural environment for a child and to achieve this, parents or caregivers are entitled to receive consultation from a social services department.

The National Social Insurance Board, with a specialised Child Protection Unit, assists local governments in resolving child protection cases and supports local governments in deciding suitable measures for children and families. The Social Welfare Act outlines that minimum social services are available in

local municipalities. However, the Estonian Union for Child Welfare explains that the availability and quality of social services vary since these social services are funded by the municipality itself.

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare points out there was a lack of information about children and families in vulnerable situations during the lockdown. Home visits were not allowed. Without proper monitoring and a contact with children via usual channels such as school, hobby classes and medical appointments, the child protection risks (problems in the home, violence, abuse and neglect) may remain hidden, which also suggests a decrease in the registration of child protection cases. In the period January-May 2020, a total of 870 child protection case proceedings were registered by the local governments in Estonia. For comparison, in 2019 it was 1,081, i.e. about 20% more than this year. When the state of emergency ended in mid-May 2020, the registration of case proceedings began to rise.<sup>11</sup>

### Care leavers

Care leavers in Estonia are entitled to a monthly allowance of a minimum of 250 euros if they are enrolled in university/higher education up to 25 years of age. They also receive assistance with housing and individualised support. Otherwise care leavers receive housing support, personnel support services and a financial contribution from the local government. Care leavers have struggled both to keep their jobs and find new jobs. The temporary subsidies offered by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund partially helped.

### Children in migration

There were no migrant, unaccompanied and separated children in Estonia last year. At the end of 2013, SOS Children's Village took responsibility for partnering with the state and providing support and care for up to five children or young people at one time (unaccompanied minors). A contract with the Social Insurance Board has been concluded for this purpose.

### EU funds

Actions for improving the quality of substitution care and diversifying forms of alternative care were supported through the European Social Fund (Measure: 2014-2020.2.2 Welfare measures supporting participation in the labour market). The main aim is to increase the number of family-based alternative care providers and improve the quality of alternative care. Also, support- and aftercare services were further developed.

Measure 2014-2020.2.1 - Development of childcare and care services for children with disabilities to reduce the care burden. This action contributes to the participation of parents/carers in the labour market. The aim is to develop and provide support services for children with severe and profound disabilities - childcare, support person and transport - thereby reducing the parental care burden and barriers to employment. It also encourages and raises awareness of the reconciliation of work and family life.

11 In May 2020, 161 child protection cases were registered, an order of magnitude higher than a month earlier (in April 95 cases), but the number of cases registered is still lower comparing the same months of 2019 (201 cases in May 2019 and 219 cases in April).

# Finland

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:

Central Union for Child Welfare Finland

14.3%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

A total of 18,544 children and young people were placed outside the home during 2018. Of these, 59%, or 10,861 children, were taken into care during the year.

Children in care accounted for 1% of the population aged 0-17, but the proportion varied according to the age of the child.

The share of children aged 16-17 in the population in custody was 2.2% and was clearly higher than in the younger age groups.





## Alternative Recommendations

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government should conduct child impact assessments on each decision concerning children.
- It should limit children's fundamental rights and/or access to services only when absolutely necessary and as little as possible.
- It should support families' financial situation.

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- The government should conduct child impact assessments on each decision concerning children.
- It should not cut social security aimed at children and families.

- It should increase subsidies for local government so as to prevent them from having to cut services for children, young people and families.

### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- It is crucial to understand which structures have faced the hardest consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen those that were not working well. The COVID-19 crisis revealed that the social sector is as important in providing child and family well-being as the health sector.
- The government should have a set of guidelines to help municipalities to deliver on their obligations as service providers. This will help combat inequalities in service provision.
- The funding of the municipalities and NGOs working directly with vulnerable groups should be guaranteed. In addition to securing resources, there is a need to introduce and

strengthen new ways of working and cooperating.

- It is essential that the families most in need should receive support as soon as possible. Stabilising their economic situation is very important to make the future look more predictable and hopeful.
- The government should ensure the well-being of children and young people and strengthen their ability to cope with the crisis. Both urgent short term and long term measures are needed.

## Summary of Ratings

### Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



### Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



### 2020 Country Specific Recommendations:



### Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



### Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was adequate

The government allocated additional funding for education: early childhood education (EUR 14M), comprehensive education (EUR 70M) and general upper secondary education (EUR 17M) on the grounds that COVID-19 has increased the need for support among children; plus vocational upper secondary education and training (EUR 30M) for additional support to prevent drop-outs because of COVID-19 (part of the 4th supplementary budget proposal) ●●●●○

The government allocated additional funding (EUR 112.3M) for social services for children, young people and families, and mental health care

for children and young people



The government allocated additional funding (EUR 60M) for training and services for unemployed young people (part of the 4th supplementary budget proposal)



#### Negative developments

With regard to remote teaching, there are profound inequalities between and even within municipalities and schools.

Roughly 10% of families affected lack a computer or a stable internet connection (18 March– 14 May 2020).

Some children had a lack of contact with responsible adults; the amount of child welfare reports decreased during remote teaching. For example, when the recommendation was to not take children to day care, the best interests of the child were not always given a high enough priority in municipalities. In some

municipalities there were temporary layoffs instead of increased support during the crisis.

Parents faced an increase in unemployment and financial problems (especially if/when combined with a lack of access to necessary child/family welfare services). Roughly 10% of families faced a situation in which the only parent or both parents were made redundant in April.

NGOs were unable to fully respond to children, young people's and families' increased need of services. Some NGOs had to prioritise their work even within vulnerable groups. Moreover, both public and private funding may decrease and increase competition among NGOs.

There was a lack of adequate government guidance during the COVID-19 crisis.

According to a study conducted by the CUCW's "[Kaikille eväät elämään](#)" project, COVID-19 made the existing disparities among

families even more visible: the crisis hit hardest those who were already the most vulnerable. The disruption of everyday structures such as school or day care was especially harmful for children with special needs. According to the study, as many as 55,000 families experience financial scarcity because of the crisis. Moreover, families in a vulnerable situation were also more prone to use pay-day loans and other high risk measures to cover their expenses during the crisis. This will probably lead to more severe problems in the long run.

#### Good practice

- Various NGOs have successfully transferred many of their activities online and/or created new ones.
- Many of the new online services set up during this period will remain active in the coming years.
- NGOs developed new ways of helping, e.g. several members of civil society which had never worked in the food field quickly

organised much needed food aid campaigns and projects.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

- There has generally been a lack of coordinated child policies between ministries, so Finland does not have a strategy to tackle child poverty yet. On the other hand, the Finnish government is working on a National Child Strategy which should be completed by the end of 2020. It will be based on fundamental rights and human rights treaties, and its vision is a genuinely child- and family-friendly Finland that respects the rights of the child.
- Tackling child poverty should be an important goal of this new strategy. Furthermore, an additional plan of action concerning child poverty is probably necessary too.

- The current government's programme has been characterised by several improvements concerning children's rights. However, not all proposals have yet been brought to the Parliament. Furthermore, there is reason to fear the impact of COVID-19 will cause pressure for budget cuts and possibly decrease the government's willingness or ability to carry on with all planned proposals.

### EU influence on national developments

**The involvement of the EU in promoting children's rights was not sufficient.** The EU should lead by example; for instance, by conducting child impact assessments whenever decisions concerning children are made.

**From a children's rights perspective, the Country Specific Recommendations were inadequate.** While there is a reference to improving access to social and health services, children are not mentioned in the recommendation.

### Access to financial resources and services of high quality

**The government's provision of adequate resources and services to families and children was inadequate.** Finland registered a low level of basic social security, regional disparities concerning access to services, and an inadequate availability of some services, such as mental health services and/or treatment for substance abuse.

The Central Union for Child Welfare launched a survey to find out how the services for children and families have been implemented in municipalities during the lock-down. The survey revealed<sup>1</sup> that in many municipalities a policy was outlined to limit health checks and client work in child and maternity health clinics to children under two years of age. This policy carries the risk of not identifying children and families in need at a sufficiently early stage. At worst, the situation leads to the neglect of young children and an increased risk of unrevealed abuse. Families with children with special needs were greatly disadvantaged by the sudden breakdown of everyday structures. Furthermore, according to a recent study of the National Institute for Health and Welfare, there have been up to 40% fewer maternity and child health clinic visits than in 2019.

1 Paikoitetaan siirretty.arki: Koronakriisin vaikutukset lapsiperheiden elämään.

The municipalities carry the main responsibility for service provision in Finland. Most of the municipalities were following the government's recommendations, yet different solutions were implemented when organising basic services such as child and maternity health clinics, school health care and family centre services. Most of the schools have been providing all students with free packed lunches and education was relatively quickly transformed into online mode. Yet, slightly more than one in ten (12%) children who responded to the Save the Children Finland's extensive survey reported that they lacked the tools needed for distance learning. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has drawn up general outlines concerning institutional care, but they were on a general level and did not contribute to the questions related to the provision of out of home care for children.

Overall, the measures were not solid enough to prevent the long-term effects of the coronavirus outbreak. The crisis hit hardest families in a vulnerable situation and highlighted the inequalities in

welfare between families. Although many NGOs have launched fund raising sites to support families in harsh economic situations, the support was not strong enough to carry them throughout the crisis. More than one in four children have experienced mental health problems described as very poor or rather poor due to an emergency caused by the coronavirus. The majority of the children were concerned about their family's economic situation.

### Recommendations

- **The government should conduct child impact assessments whenever decisions concerning or affecting children are made.**
- **It should ensure the quality of and access to universal services, such as early childhood education and child health clinics.**
- **It should ensure adequate funding for child welfare services.**

## Children's participation

**The government performed reasonably well in ensuring children's right to participate.** On the other hand, children, especially children in vulnerable groups, often do not know about their rights and adults' responsibilities. Hence, it is difficult for them to speak up, give feedback or claim their rights. This is partly due to the inadequate training of different professionals.

### Recommendations

- **Our legislation and different plans of action are mostly good, the problems often lie in operational culture and attitudes. Hence, making children's rights training obligatory for different professionals might be a useful step forwards.**

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Restrictive measures taken to slow the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic had a negative impact on the well-being and equality of children and young people. To mitigate the negative effects of the situation, the government has decided to allocate about EUR 320 million to the welfare package of children and young people.<sup>2</sup>

On 25 May 2020, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health appointed a working group linked to the National Child Strategy to survey the rights of the child and well-being of children and families and to strengthen these in the post-crisis measures related to COVID-19. The interim report of the working group presents some preliminary observations. According to the report the coronavirus pandemic has endangered the favourable development, well-being

and health of children and young people in many ways. Furthermore, the corona crisis has created insecurity and anxiety for children; the mental development of children has been put to the test. The situation is difficult, especially for children with pre-existing mental health fragility. However, children's rights and their special position are easily overlooked in emergency conditions and post crisis measures.

The crisis did not have a crucial impact on the upcoming reforms, for example, the new bill on the social and health care reform (which is important for the establishment and operation of the new social and healthcare-provinces) was submitted to the opinion round on 15 June 2020. The work on the improvements of the child protection legislation proceeded as planned. Important development work on the National Child Strategy was also implemented without any longer delays.

The Central Union for Child Welfare is concerned about the increase in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is clearly indicated by current data on the increase in police home alerts (up 30% between 16 March and 7 June 2020) and in alerts related to domestic violence (up 10%). Yet, it is alarming to note that during the same period of time, the amount of cases on child abuse that came to the attention of the police decreased by 45%. There have also been fewer reports of violence against children in child protection, whereas the causes of violence between spouses have risen. The lower numbers of victims seeking shelter from domestic violence may also indicate the hidden distress, even though the number of people in shelters has grown steadily in previous years.

Many alternative care institutions and foster families lacked clear guidelines about how to organise meetings between children in care and their biological families and how

to ensure the safety of everyone. Due to the state of emergency, the dismantling of preventive services in the municipalities was unnecessarily extensive. On the other hand, during the crisis, the digital assistance provided by NGOs increased, for example by expanding opening hours, producing new information content or opening up new services as a response to needs created by the crisis.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

During the pandemic the number of child welfare notifications has dropped. Many difficult situations experienced by children remained undetected, as contact with families in early childhood education, schools and other services had decreased, and assessments of the need for support could no longer be made.

The number of urgent placements and the need for alternative care

<sup>2</sup> Lasten ja nuorten hyvinvointi.koronakriisin jälkihoidossa.

have been growing for a long time in Finland and the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to exacerbate the situation. Also, many of the court hearings have been postponed to the autumn, which raised a lot of concerns amongst the families and the professionals.

The effects of the coronavirus crisis on child protection, as well as the ability of municipalities to respond to the changed situation, are difficult to fully assess due to the current slowness in information systems. The child protection register maintained by the National Institute for Health and Welfare currently produces a comprehensive picture of municipal activities on an annual basis, and it is therefore not possible to use the data in the register to form an up-to-date picture of the situation. Experts from the Finnish Association of Local Authorities have collected information on the actions of municipalities in child protection, but in the future it would be useful to explore the possibilities of producing child protection register data in an accelerated process.

### **Institutional care**

The COVID-19 restrictions on freedom of movement had a strong impact on children living in institutional care. It has been unclear among those working in alternative care how meetings between a child and his/her close network should be limited in such a critical situation. National guidelines concerning this matter have been perceived as deficient.

In addition, finding a temporary place for children who had fallen ill or had been exposed to COVID-19 caused numerous problems. The COVID-19 crisis has also made it difficult for children placed in institutional care to attend school, as co-operation between schools and institutions was inconsistent.

Hence, the negative effects of the crisis had a serious impact on those groups who had already been vulnerable. There is a need for preventive actions and investments in services to minimise the number of children living in institutional care.

The coronavirus epidemic has created new forms and structures of inter-professional cooperation by forcing various actors to work more efficiently across organisational boundaries. The crisis has also forced professionals to look for new solutions that have not yet been fully exploited. These solutions may help prevent the growing number of children living outside home.

### **Disability**

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily lives of children with disabilities and their families have been significant and mostly negative. In many cases, disabled children and young people have not received the rehabilitation they considered necessary or essential. Access to rehabilitation, assessments and examinations have also been seriously delayed during the lockdown.

The lockdown has also increased the feeling of loneliness and is negatively affecting the well-being of children and young people with disabilities

due to the lack of social contact and sports activities.

### **Care leavers**

Care services were organised according to the general guidelines of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health Ministry, but the support measures varied depending on the municipality. The situations of young people in vulnerable situations have become even more difficult during this time, e.g. the threshold for the treatment of mental health problems was not low enough to guarantee young people the therapeutic services they need. The good news is that remote and digital workshop services have so far received good feedback. They managed to decrease young people's marginalisation by offering individual support and opportunities, and increased accessibility to services.

### **Children in migration**

In 2019, 6,155 children applied for asylum, of which the vast majority came with their family while only 63

were unaccompanied/separated asylum-seeking children.<sup>3</sup>

There have been some cases of families affected by the COVID-19 crisis: they lost their jobs but they were allowed to remain in the country. Obviously, some of them are now in the country as undocumented migrants, but there are no official estimates on how many such people there could be among all undocumented migrants now.

After reception, children are most commonly accommodated in institutional settings in specialised and small units which can be compared to child welfare units. The pandemic has not caused any delay in transferring children to the assigned municipalities when they get a residence permit to their application.



<sup>3</sup> Finnish Immigration Service.

# France

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

CNAPE (National Federation of Association for Child Protection – France); Nexem<sup>1</sup> France

22.5%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions (2019)	Number of children (2019)
Number of minors benefiting from at least one child protection measure 2018		<b>306,800</b> <sup>23</sup>
Alternative care		<b>177,000</b>
Institutional care (in total) 2017 <sup>4</sup>	<b>1,963</b>	<b>61,000</b>
Institutions for children with disabilities	<b>325,000 places</b> (figure including adults, precise data for children is not available)	<b>23,010</b>
Institutions for children 0-3	<b>33</b>	<b>790</b>
Number of children in family-based/foster care:		<b>around 50 % = 80,000</b>
Unaccompanied minors		<b>17,760</b> <sup>5</sup> (2019)

### Alternative recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the short term:

- More support for strengthening parenting assistance for young "at-risk" parents in order to prevent the neglect of children. Extend support for vulnerable young adults including care leavers to help them find accommodation, work, and create social ties.

- Support development of additional mechanisms to identify violence and protect children's rights and access to information on their rights. Make sure all children can participate in education, especially in homes where dropping out of school is identified and provide financial assistance to buy school supplies, etc.

#### Supporting children and families in the long term:

- Put in place programmes to allow the most vulnerable children (poor children, children in child protection, children with disabilities, unaccompanied children, etc.) to go on holiday to allow them to experiment, discover, learn about sustainable development, arts, culture, sport, science, digital technologies, and foreign languages. Well-being of children is as important as material support.
- Dedicate a ministry to children and youth: the questions linked to childhood and youth are multidimensional and many actors are concerned.
- Put in place more preventive policies: despite the recent awareness by public authorities, the actions carried out for prevention are still insufficient. Strong political support is necessary to put in place effective prevention policies.

1 NEXEM is a network representing employers from the not-for-profit social services sector in France.

2 Chiffres clés en protection de l'enfance au 31 décembre 2018.

3 In 2017 the placements represented 52% of 344 000 protection measures entrusted to children's social welfare.

4 61.000 enfants, adolescents et jeunes majeurs hébergés fin 2017 dans les établissements de l'aide sociale à l'enfance.

5 Rapport annuel d'activité 2019 du Ministère de la Justice.



## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Child-related issues, especially within the child protection system, have been excluded from the public debate during the health crisis. Many children have had their rights infringed. The Defender of Rights in France received 127 referrals regarding the rights of the child, in connection with the health crisis.

#### Increase in domestic violence

Organisations report an up to 90% increase in calls to 119, the emergency number for children at risk during the lockdown. On average, the 119 line receives 700 calls per day. The government has launched an awareness campaign on intra family violence and introduced an online reporting form that allows for more discreet reporting.

#### Increase in school drop outs

Many children are at risk of dropping out of school. More human and technical resources will be needed

for teachers and families in order to set up individual support for children disengaged from school during lockdown.

#### Decrease in vaccinations

Heavily impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic, vaccinations overall have decreased significantly in France. According to the National Agency for the Safety of Medicines (ANSM) and the National Health Insurance Fund (CNAM), the number of vaccine prescriptions reimbursed in pharmacies fell considerably during the health crisis. They estimate that 44,000 infants aged 3 to 18 months have not received vaccines against diphtheria, tetanus, polio, whooping cough, haemophilus influenza, meningitis B and hepatitis B. In reaction, the French National Authority for Health (HAS) called for resuming vaccinations, particularly in infants and frail people.

#### Impact on mental health

Taking into account the traumatic effects of the crisis on children, particularly on those suffering from persistent pathologies, children's

mental health should be the subject of particular attention.

#### Decentralisation of policies

The COVID crisis has shown the importance to address the compartmentalisation of policies in France. Despite the appointment of Adrien Taquet, Secretary of State responsible for child protection, there is an explosion and a partitioning of childhood and youth policies between ministries, resulting in inequalities of treatment between children. Children with disabilities, for example, have not received the same treatment as children in child protection establishments.

#### Impact on children's rights organisations

Associations working with children in vulnerable situations have many challenges awaiting them. They will have to make up for the delay in implementing the measures, reassess the danger in homes at risk, recreate a bond of trust with families. The social and medico-social associations have been the source of many initiatives to pursue their mission of supporting the most

vulnerable audiences. In order for them to continue their work, it is necessary to restore the ability to experiment for these associations, for example by letting them initiate projects outside of the regulatory procedures which frame social and medico-social action.

### Positive developments

**Exceptional financial assistance for vulnerable families and their children (one-off assistance): it's proportional to the number of children and ranges between EUR 150 (a couple without children) and EUR 5,550 (four children).**



This initiative is good but considered insufficient by CNAPE. Many associations have alerted the government of the increase in the number of families in financial distress and the unprecedented increase in demand for food support (+ 45% between March and May 2020).

**For the duration of the crisis, an obligation to support young adults leaving the child protection system and unaccompanied minors**

**regardless of their supposed age.**



This measure is welcomed as the risk of poverty is extremely high for young people leaving the child protection system, even more for former unaccompanied minors who lack a reliable social or family network.

Many young people living in precarious situations do not have access to social benefits (for example, the Active Solidarity Income or Revenue de Solidarité Active (RSA) is reserved for those over 25 years old). However, this measure is planned to run only until 11 July 2020, and there is thus an urgent need for long-term solutions.

Family support schemes (respite, strengthening of home support) have been put in place and in particular have resulted in the launch of the single call number that allows for very rapid implementation of responses to the needs of families or young people.

**The implementation of home schooling for all children, to prevent dropping out. An online**

**platform has been created by the Ministry of Education.**



The implementation of the home schooling online platform has allowed children and youth to continue their education. But organisations have highlighted numerous problems arising from it: no accompaniment or control over families, no specific training for teachers to use the platform, the lack of technological equipment for many children, especially in institutions. This situation has aggravated the risk of school drop-out. A study launched in March reveals that 20% of the pupils have been disengaged from their schooling since the start of the lockdown.

### Good practice – Helplines

Several telephone platforms have been created by federations of psychologists to support parents and children during lockdown. Toll-free numbers have been set up, families have been able to share their daily difficulties. Volunteers have provided a listening service to reassure and inform, but also to

identify the risks and refer families to other services if necessary.

## Policies For Investing in Children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) remains unknown in France. This observation is shared by many institutions and associations. A survey conducted by the Defender of Rights showed that only half the population is able to cite at least one right of the child. There is progress in the implementation of the UNCRC in certain areas: the prohibition of corporal punishment by law, the plan to tackle violence against children, the child protection law adopted in 2016 focused on the best interests of the child. However, the situation remains extremely worrying in the Overseas Territories.

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

With 9 million people below the poverty line, France's 2018 national strategy for preventing and combating poverty<sup>1</sup> was long-awaited. A large part of this strategy is dedicated to children

and young people, with three main commitments:

- Ensure equal opportunities for all children;
- Guarantee the fundamental rights of children;
- Ensure a training path for all young people.

Almost two years later, significant progress has been made. However, many territories cannot properly deploy the strategy due to the lack of financial and human means. For example, the implementation of some measures such as the wider opening of nurseries for disadvantaged families or the development of the One Euro canteen has been very limited.

### Access to financial resources in the family

Social policies need to be better coordinated to provide for all the needs of the child and their family, particularly in view of the economic

crisis and the worsening situation of poor and precarious families.

### Children's access to services of high quality

For young adults leaving care, the CNAPE has developed three recommendations: 1) the extension of the youth guarantee, 2) access to a financial resource for all young people leaving care, 3) the allocation of basic income to all young people.

## CNAPE Recommendation - A universal allowance for young people

- This universal allowance would be allocated in return for the completion of an integration project until its end. It would be flexible according to the specific needs of each young person and taking into account their project. A change of project occurring before the age of 25 would not result in the end of the payment of the allowance so as to allow any young person to take a new direction. For young adults who wish it, this financial resource should be coupled with specific support as needed.

<sup>1</sup> La stratégie nationale de prévention et d'action contre la pauvreté.

## Views on the Semester process

Children and young people are not sufficiently taken into account in the European semester process. The 2020 Country Specific Recommendations do not mention any issues related to childhood,

which is a regression compared to 2019 where the question of dropping out of school and equal opportunities was addressed.

### Children's participation

Children's participation remains insufficient in France, despite

the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Vulnerable or marginalised children are rarely consulted on matters that concern them. The Defender of Rights underlined that children and young people were not sufficiently taken into account in the formulation of public policies at national and local level.

During the crisis, with the possibility for judges to take decisions without upholding the principle of confrontation during legal proceedings, the right of the child to be heard in all decisions concerning them has been violated.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Work on the implementation of the Child Prevention and Protection Strategy was temporarily suspended during the containment period, but resumed in mid-June 2020<sup>2</sup>. There has been a suspension of home visits by child protection services and educators during the lockdown. However, contacts were maintained with children and parents via regular telephone contacts or videoconferences. It emerged that,

in general, these contacts were more frequent than before.

### Children placed

Many children were sent back home during the lockdown. When it was not possible, measures were set in place to limit tensions and prevent the spread of the virus by grouping children in small groups of two or three. Facilities had to reduce or even stop outside collective activities.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

In France, a number of mechanisms have been put in place to prevent the placement of children in institutions. For example:

**“Non-institutional Educational Action (AEMO)”** which consists of accompanying, at the request of the juvenile judge, minors who have been the subject of a report due to mistreatment, educational,

emotional, moral or psychological problems which compromise their safety and their development.

**“Home schooling”** which is an administrative measure generally following an AEMO. It results in a contract of objectives signed by the representative of the Department and the family, for a renewable duration of three to six months.

These mechanisms were suspended during the lockdown.

2 Protection de l'enfance : la feuille de route du Gouvernement

## Progress on child protection and care reform

### Children living in institutions/residential care

The crisis has had a major impact on children living in institutions: breakdown of schooling and outside contacts, cessation of medico-social care. Some structures alerted the CNAPE that some children were not tolerating lockdown, leading to violence in the structures and to some children running away. Conversely, some young child “introverts” have been adapting particularly well to the lockdown, and are apprehensive about going back to school.

This is rarely highlighted, but some collective institutions have been able to deal with this very well by establishing the conditions for “family” support with organisations in “small units” that greatly mitigate the “collective” effect of institutions.

### Children living in family-based care

The absence of school and other social relations created a risk of educational and social decline. For some children, the crisis has led to disruptions due to the fact that foster families have been infected by COVID-19.

### Care leavers

For the duration of the crisis, there was an obligation to support young adults leaving the child protection system and unaccompanied minors regardless of their supposed age. The risk of poverty is extremely high for young people leaving the child protection system without social and economic support, even more for former unaccompanied minors who lack a reliable social or family network. This measure is planned to run only until 11 July, there is thus an urgent need for long-term solutions.

## Initiative

In Paris, lawyers and associations notified the public prosecutor that more than 200 unaccompanied minors were exposed to a serious and immediate danger to their mental and physical health. Other reports of this type were made throughout the country.



# Germany

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:

Arbeitsgemeinschaft für  
Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (AGJ)

15%

.....  
Children at risk of poverty or social  
exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government should develop a road-map for upcoming waves of the coronavirus and for future crises in close cooperation with civil society. It should also set up support services for children and families in the event of a lockdown.
- It should ensure the participation of children and youth in political processes during times of crisis.

- It should enable NGOs to offer their services to all children and young people and support the professionals with adequate protection measures and greater flexibility in providing services.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- The government should secure financial stability for all NGOs and service providers.
- It should include children and youth in finding solutions and take their views into account.
- It should support more flexibility in providing services.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was sufficient. Indeed, the government provided an allowance of 300€ for every child under 18, and made it easier to get access to an additional allowance for families in difficulty. The government also provided compensation for loss of income due to child care (for a maximum of 20 weeks)

#### Negative developments

Children were heavily affected by the loss of social contact with peers, which sometimes resulted in loneliness among children and young people. For parents it has been increasingly difficult to manage their work and take care of their children at the same time.

Children and young people are not visible in public discourse and

have lost a significant part of the participation rights they had before. Hence, the participation of children and youth in Germany didn't seem to be a priority during a crisis.

Although social organisations were very engaged in finding creative solutions, we registered restricted access to social services to support children and families in need due to lockdown and a rise in cases of domestic violence against children and/or women.

Numerous NGOs are facing an important loss of funding, although there are some measures in place to support such organisations. Furthermore, there is a considerable administrative effort to be made in order to receive supporting resources. Civil society organisations also had to face great uncertainty over how services can be maintained/continued and how professionals can be protected.

#### Good practice

- Video messages and letters from teachers and educators were sent to children in their care.
- Online platforms were set up to allow professionals working in the crisis to share best practices and find creative solutions to adapt their job to the safety measures.
- Numerous support services were offered via online tools or telephone.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

- Germany does not currently have a national strategy to tackle child poverty, although there are debates about a system that covers all services for children under one single framework (Kindergrundsicherung).
- There is a crucial need for a national strategy to tackle child poverty. The AGJ is currently asking for a long-term strategy to tackle the high risk of poverty for children, young people and families.
- A priority would be to strengthen the education and care system, taking in due consideration early childhood education and care. There is an urgent need for a more inclusive and just educational system in combination with social policies that prioritise the reduction of social inequalities.

- In the last few years the government's approach towards children's rights has improved. There is indeed a debate going on about the inclusion of children's rights in the constitution of Germany, which was agreed on in the coalition agreement of the current government. Nonetheless, there seems to be no consensus among the two coalition parties about the wording and the scope of this change, so hopes about the reform of the constitution during this legislative period are actually dwindling.

### EU influence on national developments

The involvement of the EU in promoting children's rights has been adequate. Yet, the EU could play an active role in supporting the current process of including children's rights in the constitution. Showing strong support for this constitutional process as well as financial

incentives via specific programmes would make a difference.

The Country Specific Recommendation states that Germany should invest in digital skills and digital infrastructure. AGJ supports this statement and highlights that Germany needs to invest more into equal living conditions in rural and urban areas. The 'digital divide' needs to be addressed. Furthermore, the digital skills of the young generation as well as the professionals working with children and youth need to be enhanced, which makes further financial support necessary.



# Greece

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

The Smile of the Child, Roots

Research Centre Greece

**30.5%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

**30.2%<sup>1</sup>**

Poverty gap for children under 18 at risk of poverty in 2018

**18.6%<sup>2</sup>**

Severe material deprivation - children under 18 severely lacking coverage of basic material needs in 2018

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2014	86	2,850 3,000 <sup>1</sup> (2019)
Children with disabilities		900
Children 0-3		150
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2018		NA
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		3,330 <sup>2</sup>

1 Child poverty in crisis and in recovery. Smile of the Child. 2019.

2 Ibid

1 Feasibility Study on a Child Guarantee. Target Group Discussion Paper on Children in Alternative Care, 2019. European Commission, DG EMPL.

2 Asylum Information Database – Country Report: Greece.



## Alternative Recommendations

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- To promote direct communication with all children including very young children, since information was shared in a non-child friendly way most of the time. Children's lives were disrupted and they needed to understand the complexity of the issue.
- To ensure child participation in decision shaping and decision making in relation to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Authorities should communicate efficiently with the public about the existence of 24/7 shelters as well as Emergency and Helplines since they are crucial in times of crisis.

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Direct communication with children, more structural guidance to educational response and distance-learning, less dependence on ad-hoc solutions and the professional dedication of individual teachers, and enhancement of public support of well-established and professionally run emergency and helplines. These require structural and sustained political investment.
- Make the education system better equipped technologically, methodologically and personally to tackle crisis situations in the future. Make online education accessible for all children.

### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- Prioritise support for families and children in vulnerable situations including the promotion of and awareness raising about foster care and better incentives for foster care parents.
- Mapping the number of children in child protection and placed in out-of-home care in Greece should be a priority.
- Improve the coordination and cooperation between the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice as the social protection services provided by these three ministries overlap but are poorly aligned.

## Summary of Ratings

### Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



### Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



### 2020 Country Specific Recommendations:



### Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



### Government's protection of children's right to participate:



# Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis

## Negative developments

The social and psychological disorientation resulting from the pandemic was felt by all segments of the population, including children. Children were heavily impacted by news in the media with regard to mortality figures, causes of death, the increased risk for age groups to which their grandparents and some of their other loved ones belong, etc. Direct communication with children is therefore all the more important.

Social support services to families in need were either re-oriented to food-donations or suspended due to various restrictions (travel) and challenges (online counselling, lack of staff). In the event of a new lockdown, nationwide or regional, the Smile of the Child proposes that people who need to travel to social service centres be guaranteed an exemption.

**Measures to ensure the continuation of children's education:**



The disruption of education is an issue recognised by all and at all levels. From the perspective of children, school is not just a learning place but also a determining component of their social context. Digital education from a distance was to some extent a remedy for the academic part of the problem. The digital divide between children with access to computers and the internet and those without has definitely become deeper as a result of the temporary closure of schools and the replacement by distant learning. Schools, civil society organisations, and solidarity groups distributed computers to socially disadvantaged children. However, many families struggled with access to the internet. Private schools and some public schools were quite quick to replace physical classes by digital learning, whereas many public schools were slower in launching online education. The Smile of the Child suggests having an aligned approach as well as school certification procedures in crisis situations.

The closing of schools meant that problems of family violence, abuse or exploitation were not so visible. There was no readily available replacement for this. Moreover, the existence of 24/7 well-established and professionally run Emergency and Helplines was not promoted sufficiently. Nonetheless, the National Helpline for Children SOS 1056 received a lot of calls from children speaking in a whisper. Most of the calls were related to domestic violence.

## Good practice

- Publication of communication / information materials regarding the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures  
●●●●○
- Operation of telephone lines for psychological support of children and parents – caregivers  
●●●●○
- A voluntary blood donation scheme organised by the Smile of

the Child in collaboration with the General Secretariat of Sports.

- Online seminars on crisis management for parents and carers of children by the experts of the Smile of the Child.

## Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children

*At the end of March 2020, in the midst of the pandemic and as our country was in quarantine, when almost no services were working normally, the NGO 'The Smile of the Child' received a phone call from a mother. She said, with great anxiety, that her child would soon have to travel to Germany for his scheduled surgery, which could not be postponed, as was confirmed by the child's neuro-surgeon. As there were no flights, the chances of a positive outcome were slim. We immediately addressed the office of the Prime Minister, who approved our request to proceed with the air transportation procedures. In collaboration with the National Emergency Aid Centre (EKAB) and the Department of Air Transport and the INI Clinic in Hannover (Germany), the transportation of the child from the rehabilitation centre to Athens airport, with an ambulance of our organisation, and an onward transport to Hanover was arranged. Upon arrival, the child suffered a heart attack and was taken for immediate surgery, although it had been scheduled for the next day. The surgery was successful, the child received further treatment and the return to Greece took place in the care of our organisation, in the same way as the outbound journey.*

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

There is no specific national strategy for child poverty. Some measures exist such as food programmes for children.

The Smile of the Child hopes that the National Action Plan for the Rights of the Child, which is being elaborated by the Ministry of Justice, will also provide measures to reduce child poverty. Only a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach stands a chance of having a wide, sustained and lasting impact. Child poverty is structural and requires a more comprehensive strategic approach.

### EU influence on national developments

**The EU has insufficiently influenced the government to implement child-centred legislation.**

To be more efficient in pressuring European governments towards

child-centred legislation implementation the EU needs to further develop effective instruments to act and influence government, directly and indirectly via civil society organisations. A European strategy only has value when it is accompanied by concrete instruments: conditionality in funding child-related policies and projects (in the sector of education and culture).

The Smile of the Child calls on the EU to work with national civil society and thus empower the civil society organisations at local/national level, helping to guarantee continuity and a better impact at lower financial cost. For example, in the migration crisis in Greece the EU followed a policy that excluded well-established but local organisations, in favour of global NGOs.

**The 2020 country specific recommendations were disappointingly focused only on economic recovery and did not mention children.**

The rather general recommendations partly focus

on the need to strengthen the healthcare system. Policies specifically directed at youth and children, whose development and future is the most compromised by the pandemic, are only briefly mentioned in references to social inclusion and youth.

### Access to financial resources and services of high quality

**The efforts made by Greece in ensuring adequate resources and services to families and children are unsatisfactory.**

The Smile of the Child considers that children were hit disproportionately, particularly those in families under the poverty threshold. They still represent a considerable proportion of the children in Greece. Before COVID, the recovery of the economy had been steady but apparently insufficient to decisively reduce poverty and the risk of slipping into poverty for children. With regard to future measures at EU level, the answer lies in the Child Guarantee, and at national level in a commitment to earmark financial means from the national budget

and from the European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) (not exclusively European Social Fund plus (ESF+) to structurally improve services such as education, healthcare, childcare, housing, and nutrition.

### Children's participation

**The efforts made by Greece in ensuring children's right to participate were adequate.**

A structural approach is needed, that is applied across all relevant

areas of public sector competence to communicate with children in a direct way.

New mechanisms by which children are heard by parliament before decisions affecting them are taken should be set up. Children's advisory councils in cooperation with the Children's Ombudsperson should be on board.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Children living in residential settings and unaccompanied minors became invisible during the corona virus crisis in Greece, the Research Roots Centre Greece suggests. There was no information about what should have happened to the children if any child was ill, whether they were tested, or if there was any communication

with their birth family. The main public office responsible for the protection of children in institutions and unaccompanied children did not provide any information, no data or any other explanation. Residential centres were understaffed and voluntary staff were not allowed. Institutions working with children with disabilities were operating under an unclear regime, too. Moreover, many vulnerable families became more vulnerable due to job losses and an absence of any

support during the crisis. A one-time benefit was given to families where at least one member had to stop working due to the lockdown.

Several NGOs had to stop their operations and received no financial contributions, which left some organisations heavily in debt, as they still had to pay for overheads (rent, electricity and other expenses).

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Roots Research Centre insists that not enough is being done to prevent children being separated from their families, despite the government's claims. They registered several family separations during the crisis. The procedure for removing a child

from their family is not adequate either. Roots Research Centre notes that a child can be separated from their family merely on the basis of an accusation or complaint, without the regional or municipal social services being notified and without the adequate investigation process needed if a child is at risk.

## Progress on child protection and care reform

There has been no progress on child protection reforms. Even the foster care system that was recently created by adoption of the law on foster care in 2018 has not been activated therefore Roots Research Centre launched an online petition. The aim was to raise awareness about this problem because even children who were already assessed for foster care remained in residential institutions.

Foster parents' rights and responsibilities do not correspond with every day needs and situations. The child remains under the guardianship of its biological

parent who is entitled to approve the transfer of the child to foster care and all other actions. For example, if the child needs a medical intervention, the foster parent cannot give permission to the doctor to operate, as there is no temporary guardianship-type agreement.

There is no service provision or support for the family at risk and whose child has been taken. Re-unification of children with their birth families happen rarely and preference is given to adoption. Roots Research Centre believes that foster care is the best solution and if the conditions in the family of origin improves a child can be re-united with his/her parents. Similarly, foster care in Greece is underdeveloped, as most people want to adopt rather than foster. Foster care parents receive an allowance, but only if the child is placed in foster care through a public hospital in Athens and not through a hospital of another region of the country. Foster care parents with children with disabilities do not receive support for making the necessary alterations in their home. Foster care mothers are not offered parental leave or days off to care for their foster child.

Roots Research Centre therefore calls for a change in the current law, in particular as regards the guardianship scheme since the current version does not respond adequately to the needs of a child. On the other hand, in Greece there is a very good evaluation process of the foster families, so when the children are placed in foster families, they will receive appropriate care from their foster parents.

The government started preparing a deinstitutionalisation strategy in 2019 that focuses on children with and without disabilities, adults with disabilities, and the elderly to address all recurring challenges to the child protection system and the disabled and elderly population.

## Care leavers

Young people who leave alternative, pre-eminently institutional, care face multiple challenges in Greece. Roots Research Centre believes that supported accommodation is the most urgent issue to be addressed. Supported living apartments will provide accommodation for adolescents with prior criminal backgrounds, care leavers or

adolescents whose adoption has been terminated.

## Children in migration

Regarding the impact of the coronavirus on children in migration, Roots Research Centre explains that some unaccompanied children hosted by NGOs were protected, but the rest who stayed in camps, police facilities and in the streets were not offered any protection. The re-location of unaccompanied minors to re-unite with their families has been also delayed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Following the commitment that 1,500 unaccompanied minors would be able to travel from Athens and the Greek islands to other European countries, only 250 have travelled so far. To date, there is no centralised general secretariat or office to tackle the issues related to unaccompanied children.

# Hungary

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

[Family, Child, Youth](#)

[Association; Hintonlovon](#)

[Foundation Hungary](#)

# 22.4%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019		<b>7,072</b>
Institutions for children with disabilities		<b>2,247</b>
Institutions for children 0-6	<b>75</b> (including 37 general residential homes, 16 specialised homes for young children under 6, and 22 small group homes for specialised homes for young children under 6)	<b>304</b>
Number of children in family-based/ foster care in 2019		<b>13,018</b> <b>2,256</b> (children 0-3)

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Develop the guidelines and provide training for teachers and other professionals on distance and online teaching methodology and safety on the internet also with attention to children in vulnerable situations;
- Make online education accessible to all children with special attention to children in vulnerable situations by providing technical and personnel support;
- Provide guidance and training to professionals and other service providers to cope with the pandemic;
- Increase the resources for family support services and provide technical support for professionals on how to handle the crisis while also protecting themselves and their families;

- Publish child-friendly materials to explain the pandemic to families and children;

- Consult with children on all measures aimed at children.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Provide high quality services: supervision, developing digital literacy for all, access to digital learning for children in vulnerable situations with special attention to children with disabilities, Roma children and children in care;
- Increase the financial and in-kind support for families in need;
- The local community should be supported to be able to secure all services based on universal and targeted care provisions: health care, education, early childhood education and care, and social services.

## Summary of Ratings

**Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:**



**Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:**



**2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:**



**Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:**



**Government's protection of children's right to participate:**



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Negative developments

There was no clear guidance from the authorities. As a result, the Híntalovon Foundation and the Family, Child, Youth Association struggled to provide advice on the parent's visits and other issues while providing pro bono legal services (dealing with family cases such as child custody). The financial recession experienced by both families and service providers has not been translated into concrete measures for poor families.

It was an extra strain for NGOs to maintain their activities such as providing personal assistance or training for professionals to fulfil their commitments. Financial sustainability has become a great challenge for most NGOs.

The Family, Child and Youth Association notes that there is a very low level of digital literacy among school teachers in Hungary. They lack basic information i.e. on the age limits to access different online platforms, usage of the content filtering software, and tools to prevent online bullying. Therefore, it has become a new advocacy objective for the Family, Child and Youth Association that was not planned strategically in their annual advocacy plan for 2020. Disruptions in education and a worsening of educational performance were observed.<sup>1</sup>

There was a need for extra training, technical support and supervision for social workers working with families at risk that remained unmet. To some extent NGOs filled that gap, but access to health and social support has decreased substantially in many places.

Children living away from their family have been facing extreme challenges, such as lack of

professional staff, closure of the residential homes, ban on parental visits and children's visits to their families, no going out, etc., lack of digital devices - problems with digital education. There was also a moratorium on accepting newly referred children.

Children with special needs have not got access to the necessary services. Children with special educational needs have also been deprived of the necessary services.

#### Government measures

The government introduced an Action Plan to protect the Hungarian economy<sup>2</sup> that includes few measures referring to families e.g. a moratorium for family debts or extending the deadlines for financial support. The Family, Child and Youth Association suggests those are limited economic measures and that there is a lack of other aid for families and children in vulnerable situations. Apart from this Action Plan, no other policy was implemented.

<sup>1</sup> Internet usage during the pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> Magyarország, 2020.: Évi Nemzeti Reform Programja.



### Examples of good practice

- The Hungarian Child Rights NGO Coalition put together a list of initiatives and resources<sup>3</sup> developed during the pandemic.
- Hintalovon Foundation conducted a survey on children's experiences on internet, digital education, etc. during the pandemic.
- Some NGOs active in the most deprived regions and localities managed to increase and adjust their activities, for example: the Igazgyöngy (Real Pearl) enhanced its direct support and educational help to families and children<sup>4</sup> and the Vanhelyed Foundation has

expanded its activities to support Roma families and children<sup>5</sup>.

- Eötvös Lóránd University tested and introduced distance learning for students with disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

There is no strategy addressing child poverty but there is a social inclusion programme for Roma people and for people living in deprived regions of the country.<sup>7</sup> According to government statements this programme represents a national anti-poverty strategy.

Association calls for the adoption of policies such as a national child anti-poverty strategy.

Another negative development is a regression in the protection of children's rights in Hungary. As the Family, Child and Youth Association outlines, the current government ignores the respect and promotion of human and child rights, and children's rights are not featured in any policy.

Since child poverty is above the EU average and the level of deep poverty is extremely high and continuously increasing in Hungary, the Family, Child and Youth

### EU influence on national developments

The EU has insufficiently influenced the government to implement child-centred legislation.

To be more efficient the EU should provide better independent monitoring of EU-funded projects to prevent corruption and inefficiency in the implementation of the financial support and make the government accountable not claiming the money back from taxpayers' money.

The 2020 Country Specific Recommendations for Hungary only partially reflect the main challenges, recommending social assistance and quality education for all. The Family, Child and Youth Association note that the recommendations are mainly economic in nature and fail to address the most vulnerable groups including children (disabled, poor, living away from their family, unaccompanied minors, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Programok a Gyermekjogi Civil Koalíció ajánlásával

<sup>4</sup> The Work of Real Pearl Foundation During The Pandemic

<sup>5</sup> VanHelyed Foundation

<sup>6</sup> Good practices on equitable access to distance education

<sup>7</sup> „Jelenlét”: „Felzárkózó települések”, 1404/2019. (VII.5.) Gov. Reg.

## Access to financial resources and services of high quality

Since 2006 the situation has worsened substantially, due to the crisis in 2008 and following the change of government in 2010 and the consequent shifting of political priorities. All this has led to the impoverishment of the poorer and marginalised families. As neither the minimum pension, nor maternity allowance or family allowance has been increased since 2006, it has affected a fast growing number of families. Many of those have lost their properties due to unpaid mortgages. There has been financial austerity with no adequate resources for health care, education and social support. As a consequence, there are fewer services in the precisely the areas where most of the children and families in vulnerable situations live.

Children experience higher deprivation rates compared with the

rest of the population. The severe material deprivation rate among children (15.2%) and families with three or more children (22.0%) was among the highest in the EU, well above the EU averages (6.4% and 6.7%). Deprivation, including housing deprivation, is among the reasons for a relatively high share (1.3%) of children under state care, which indicates a need to strengthen prevention.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, close to half of Hungarian Roma (43.4%) faced severe material deprivation, and around four in ten people suffering from it were Roma<sup>9</sup>.

Limited childcare provision for under 3 years old, is one of the reasons for the gender employment gap and low fertility rate in Hungary. The share of children under the age of three enrolled in childcare increased from 13.8% in 2017 to 16.5% in 2018, but it is still well below the EU average of 35.1% and the Barcelona objective of 33%. The government's nursery development programme plans to increase the number of crèche places to 70,000 by 2022 from the

48,000 in 2018. Moreover, in the past nine years, Hungary has not made progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. The three years paid maternity allowance has created a strong belief that mothers should stay at home in any circumstances.

The adequacy of the social safety net has weakened over the past decade. Social transfers reduce the poverty rate in Hungary by 48.8%, which is one of the highest in the EU. This is mainly driven by family benefits during parental leave. The poverty-reducing impact of other benefits is low. The minimum income allowance has been unchanged since 2012 and now, at 15% of the minimum wage, it is one of the least adequate in the EU.<sup>10</sup> The public works wage also decreased relative to the minimum wage, from 77% in 2013 to 55% in 2019. Social protection for casual and seasonal workers is limited. Labour shortages strongly affect social services too, affecting service

provision and restricting support to families in need.

Educational outcomes are below the EU average and large differences remain. By the age of 15, basic skills are significantly below the EU and regional averages and have decreased over the last decade. The impact of pupils' socio-economic background on their educational outcomes is one of the strongest in the EU. Schools are increasingly characterised by the similar socio-economic background of their pupils, with concentrations of disadvantaged pupils in certain schools. The share of schools with over 50% of Roma students increased from around 9% in 2008 to around 14% in 2018.

Public spending on health is low, and a high reliance on out-of-pocket payments restricts access for poorer households, exacerbating disparities in access to care. Although the authorities started addressing the problem of health workforce shortages, regional disparities

<sup>8</sup> Statement of the ombudsman, 14 December 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Poverty and social exclusion show strong territorial concentration: In the least developed districts, where one in ten Hungarians live, the average income per taxpayer was hardly above the minimum wage. A quarter of the population in South Transdanubia, North Great Plain and North Hungary was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Residential isolation of Roma is one of the highest in the EU. (European Commission)

<sup>10</sup> According to the benchmarking exercise on minimum income in Social Protection Committee. (European Commission)

remain an issue. Strengthening primary care remains a key condition for improving effectiveness and equity of access to care.

Following the above mentioned analyses the Child, Youth and Family association considers the Hungarian

government has made no effort in ensuring adequate resources and services to families and children in need, only the well-off families.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

In residential homes contact between children and their biological family members was suspended. Children were not allowed to leave the institutions either. Participation in online education was weak due limited access to the internet, lack of computers and carers' teaching and technical skills. Other challenges included overstretched staff (high child-staff ratio), lack of separation opportunities and provision of personal protective equipment (PPE). There were no guidelines for the staff nor the children, which

increased tensions and violence substantially, particularly in institutions.

The pandemic has made it even more clear how inadequate residential facilities are for ensuring the well-being of children. Children with diverse needs and without proper professional plans were placed together in the same small group home. A wide age range often led to abuse (older children often harassing the younger ones). Even in normal times there is a lack of properly trained and supervised staff due to a high turnover and low salaries. The quality of care is inadequate in many settings.

### Children's participation

- There has never been any serious consideration of children's participation, despite the ratification of the international treaties. Both within families, in the education, health care

system or social protection, children's participation – or even the participation of parents and professionals – in decision making has always been very low and it has worsened with the current conservative politics and policies.

In foster care there was no guidance on how to proceed in the event of the illness or infection of any family member, likewise there was no plan or services to tackle those situations. There was also a lack of access to proper education for many children in foster families because they did not receive any assistance to participate in online education.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

The Family, Child and Youth Association is of the view that many policies and practices have increased the risk of child-family separation such as compulsory

kindergarten attendance where the absence of the child might lead to taking a child out of the family. 35%<sup>11</sup> of children enter alternative care due to poverty and social exclusion. Local community-based services for families at risk are missing or are very limited. The Family, Child and Youth Association estimates that approximately 150,000 children will enter the child protection system in the upcoming period as a consequence of the pandemic.

### Progress on child protection reforms

There is no deinstitutionalisation reform going on in Hungary, the

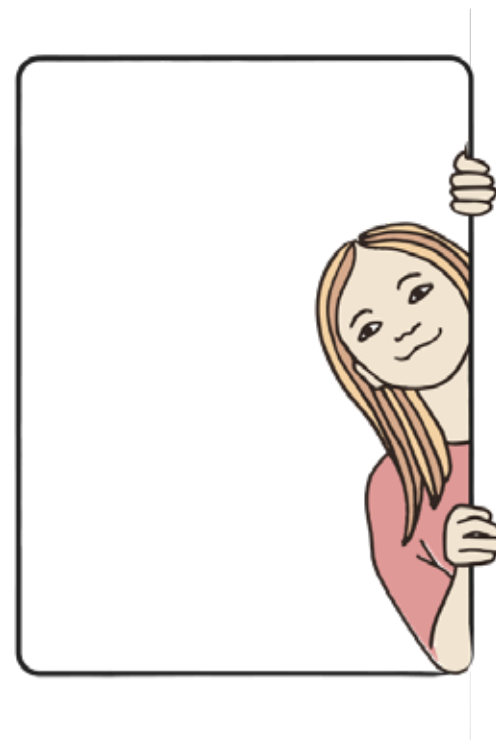
11 Erőforrásokat a megelőzésre és az alapellátásra: az ombudsman a gyermekek családból való, elsődlegesen anyagi okból történő kiemelések gyakorlatáról

Family, Child and Youth Association highlights. Moreover, social workers and professionals, including civil society organisation staff, lack supervision and better organisation since they need to cover many child-protection cases. The system has become more bureaucratic and the individual interests of children are not taken into account.

Civil society organisations protecting children and families are often left out of consultations and decisions. For example, a report from a home for children with challenging behaviour in Kalocsa, revealed abuse of children by caregivers, and among children themselves there was prostitution and drug abuse.

### **EU funds**

The transparency and accessibility of EU funds are the main challenge in Hungary.



# Ireland

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

[Children's Rights Alliance Ireland](#); [EPIC Empowering People in Care Ireland](#)

24.1%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2018 (AROPE)

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019	179	409 <sup>1</sup>
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2019		5,957 at the end of Q2 2020 <sup>2</sup>
Foster care (general and relative)		5,450 at the end of Q2 2020 <sup>3</sup>
Residential Placement		406 at the end of Q2 2020 <sup>4</sup>
Kinship care		1,548
Adoptions		131 (End 2018)
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2017		175

1 Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has identified 483 children with a moderate or severe disability living in foster care placements, but the Ombudsman for Children (Ireland) said there was no consensus with the Health Service Executive (HSE) that this was the actual number.

2 Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2020.

3 Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2020.

4 Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2020.

### Alternative Recommendations

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Ensure **children safety at school** and prompt measures to remedy the effects of any future prolonged period away from schools (learning loss, educational and developmental delays, school dropout, deterioration of behaviour and emotional regulation).
- **Children's emotional well-being** is of serious concern. Our members are reporting high levels of stress and anxiety among young people. Supports need to be put in place for children and young people.

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Implement the **Child Guarantee**
- Invest in addressing **food poverty**

**Children in Alternative Care:**

- Children or young people in care, or with care experience, need to be specifically mentioned within the next Programme for Government in Ireland, and related action plans, and cannot be simply included in a general category of 'children in vulnerable situations' or 'marginalised children'.



## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

**The government's support to families and children during the crisis was adequate.** It extended the school meals programme when the schools shut, so that children would not go hungry. There has been a big focus on **reopening early years settings for all children**, in particular those from vulnerable groups and for children of frontline workers. Whilst this proved to be challenging, most of the country's early years settings opened on 29 June 2020. As of mid-August 2020, 85% of services that were normally open over the summer had reopened.<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced at the start of the pandemic and is available to

employees and the self-employed who have lost their job on or after 13 March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it will be in place until April 2021.

Campaigns and Initiatives:

- **Let's Play Ireland**<sup>2</sup> is a government-led initiative aimed at promoting play for all children living in Ireland during the COVID-19 emergency.
- **Supporting Children**<sup>3</sup> is a focused government campaign outlining information about services for children, young people and families.
- **Let's Get Ready**<sup>4</sup> is a government campaign to help parents and children prepare to return to early learning and childcare services or make the move to pre-school and school for the first time.

#### Negative developments

The main key challenges experienced by children and families in Ireland as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak were: child poverty, the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown on children and young people's mental health and learning loss from children and young people as a result of being out of school. Moreover, technology difficulties - such as not having access to computers and internet connections - have been extremely challenging for certain groups, based on their economic situation and their location. This is an ongoing severe disparity which concerns primary, secondary and third level students in question.

The ESRI conducted research<sup>5</sup> on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people. The report highlights that emerging evidence suggests that inequalities experienced by vulnerable groups of

1 Early Childhood Ireland, Dealing with the Pandemic: Member consultation Project

2 Let's Play Ireland

3 Supporting children

4 Let's get ready

5 The Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for Policy in Relation to Children and Young People

children such as Traveller, Roma and children with a disability have grown because of the pandemic. It outlines that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to experience ‘learning loss’ as a result of school closures. The closures also reduced access to social and sports activities which will impact on a child’s overall well-being. It also outlined that the two main drivers of family stress during the pandemic: the necessity to combine remote working with home schooling and childcare.

Another ESRI report<sup>6</sup> highlighted the need to raise income supports to parents to mitigate a rise in child poverty as a result of COVID-19.

The Children’s Rights Alliance held regular members’ meetings on issues arising for children and families on the impact of COVID-19. Some of the areas of concern highlighted were:

- The impact of parents **losing their jobs**.

- The impact of the pandemic and the lockdown on children and young people’s **mental health and well-being**.
- The challenges children have faced with the **schools and early years services closing**. In particular, families living in vulnerable situations and families in poverty have struggled with the lack of technology in the home and the need in some situations for parents to balance working from home with home schooling.
- An increase in **domestic violence** has been reported.
- **Food poverty**, because of the closure of early years’ services and schools who would have provided meals to young children from vulnerable backgrounds.
- Difficulties, particularly during lockdown for families living in overcrowding/living arrangements.
- Direct provision/homelessness.
- Parenting challenges and activities with children.
- In response to the emerging needs resulting from COVID-19, members outlined that they adapted how they work to stay connected to families in vulnerable situations through phone and web when face to face support was not possible. Despite this being a short term beneficial solution, it is acknowledged that the longer this continues the harder will be for children and young people to connect this way, as well as for vulnerable families, as so much is lost without face to face physical interaction.

### Good practice

The Children’s Rights Alliance, with funding from a number of donors, established a food provision scheme to support the nutritional needs of children under the age of six years experiencing poverty and

deprivation during the COVID-19 crisis. A total of €164,000 was issued to 21 organisations across Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Adopting a national strategy to tackle child poverty is necessary for Ireland to tackle child poverty and efficiently implement the future EU Child Guarantee. At the moment, two important elements in this field are:

- **Better Outcome – Brighter Future**<sup>8</sup>: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 contains a target for the reduction of child poverty in Ireland.
- **Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025**<sup>9</sup>: The Roadmap outlines a plan to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less and make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU.

<sup>6</sup> Child Poverty in Ireland and the Pandemic Recession.

<sup>7</sup> Children’s Rights Alliance, Food Provision Scheme.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/63a1ff-report-of-the-national-policy-framework-for-children-young-people-20/>.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.dsfa.ie/en/pdf/Roadmap\\_for\\_Social\\_Inclusion\\_2020\\_2025\\_Summary\\_of\\_Ambition\\_Goals\\_and\\_Commitments.pdf](http://www.dsfa.ie/en/pdf/Roadmap_for_Social_Inclusion_2020_2025_Summary_of_Ambition_Goals_and_Commitments.pdf)

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Tusla (the Child and Family Agency)<sup>10</sup> staff around the country have been working with local partners and organisations to develop creative solutions to help children and families during the public health crisis.<sup>11</sup> However, solutions and supports have tended to be local, individual, and not an overarching support for the families in vulnerable situations and children in care.

Social media has been used a lot to try and share good practice and innovative practice within the sector. However, overall communication has been inconsistent and therefore it has been up to the residential care homes to make decisions, or indeed has come down to the discretion of social workers or their managers.

The majority of children in care are in foster care in Ireland and therefore decisions or supports depended on the needs of the foster family and the members of that family, in conjunction with their social workers.

There is currently no overarching long term strategy, that EPIC is aware of, to support families and children in vulnerable situations in coping with the long term effects of COVID-19. However, short and long term supports were implemented by Tusla because of COVID-19, such as extending existing placements and aftercare supports which have been continued and extended by Tusla and are currently providing some stability. This provided stability to the young people who were due to leave placements, or whose aftercare supports were due to end due to ageing out of the system.

Local schools extended food support programmes, which

ordinarily provided food for children and young people in school, out to the wider community, based on the recognised needs of the families. These supports have included other organisations which provide day to day supports for the vulnerable and homeless. Other programmes to support families in vulnerable situations have adapted or been rolled out<sup>12</sup>. Each area of the country has adapted differently, depending on existing set up or supports.

Overall, in EPIC's view the responses as listed above have been positive and under extremely difficult circumstances, namely a prolonged lock-down, the supports seem to have worked well.

The difficulty in accessing services and the closure of schools has caused major challenges for EPIC. The issue of being out of school has impacted on many levels. The loss of the routine and structure

of going to school is impacting on the units as all the children are now there together. The other issue for staff was trying to motivate the young people to keep up with their schoolwork and it was said repeatedly in the surveys that care staff are not schoolteachers.

From the EPIC survey of residential centres<sup>13</sup>, it was reported that young people were experiencing loss due to a lack of family contact. Access has been curtailed and, in most places, completely stopped so young people are missing their family.

Other main challenges included:

- Lack of face to face contact with children and young people, children and young people not willing to engage over zoom etc. and the difficulty in adequately supporting them because services are not operating as normal.

10 Tusla – The Child and Family Agency was established on 1 January 2014 and is now the dedicated state agency responsible for improving well-being and outcomes for children. It represents the most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland. It is an ambitious move which brings together over 4,000 staff and an operational budget of over €750m. [More info here.](#)

11 [Tusla...update](#)

12 [Tusla...initiatives](#).

13 EPIC, TUSLA – A survey of Children's Residential Care Services in Ireland during the Covid-19 crisis, May 2020.



- Inconsistencies nationally in terms of approaches to dealing with COVID-19 – for example when to allow family access, and in what shape or form.
- Courts and children's reviews been postponed or cancelled, so the usual oversight of the child's care has not taken place.

### Initiative

During May 2020, Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) Inspectors from Children's Services organised a competition for children in care, inviting them to tell us about how they were being creative or showing kindness during COVID-19. Children in residential care, special care units and Oberstown Children Detention Campuses across the country took part – sending us stories, poems, drawings and photos of their initiatives.

## Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Family support services have been run on a limited scale due to the restrictions around COVID-19. As stated previously, areas have operated differently, and it appears that there was no general oversight of these support services.

- Child Protection and Welfare Cases: 4,655 cases awaiting allocation at the end of March 2020.
- Child Protection Notification Scheme: A total of 827 children listed as “active” at the end of March 2020.<sup>14</sup>
- There were 31,134 referrals for welfare concerns and 25,427 referrals of abuse for 2019.<sup>15</sup>

One major concern is that the numbers of children and young people being referred to social

services has dropped. This is due to the schools, youth clubs, sports clubs, etc. being closed. Therefore, if children have been at risk during this time, they may not have had the supports of the Child and Family Agency, and may be unable to contact other supports and resources.

### Progress on child protection and care reform

The government has been reviewing the Child Care Act 1991, and though this is a long process over a number of years some parts of the review have been delayed due to COVID-19 (for example, consulting with young people was due to take place in spring and summer and has been postponed).

Some court cases were initially delayed due to COVID-19 but these, where necessary, are taking place again. Online hearings also took place. However, one would anticipate that there will be delays due to the backlog. The Child Care Law Reporting Project (CCLRP)

has already made observations relating to some of the issues that have arisen, as a result of COVID-19.

Thankfully in Ireland the numbers of young people in residential care is low, 406.<sup>16</sup> However, all research shows that young people have better outcomes when living in a family home environment. Due to a shortage of foster carers in Ireland at present, unfortunately more young people are ending up in residential care.

### Care leavers

Aftercare supports were extended for those who were ageing out in March 2020 and, in some instances, in August 2020 as well. Depending on the situation it is expected that this will be reviewed and extended again. Young people who are in residential placements are staying there past their 18th birthdays. While this is positive in that they have a home, it does not help with them moving on to possible school/college places in the autumn. There is huge uncertainty around

<sup>14</sup> Monthly Performance and Activity Report, March 2020.

<sup>15</sup> The data is only recorded between welfare and abuse. There is no breakdown in the different types of abuse.

<sup>16</sup> Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2020.

education, leading to stress around where a young person will be living when they are moved on. No clear timescale is given, in all cases.

### Children in migration

In 2019, 24 unaccompanied minors were granted international protection in Ireland. As of April 2020 there were 42 applications for international protection by unaccompanied minors pending.<sup>17</sup> The ESRI report<sup>18</sup> identified that there were 175 unaccompanied minors referred to the care of Tusla in 2017. In early June 2020 eight unaccompanied minors were welcomed to Ireland.<sup>19</sup> These young people had been identified to come to Ireland during a scoping exercise in September 2019, but their arrival was apparently delayed due to COVID-19.

There are huge delays relating to COVID-19 regarding all refugee programmatic work - the family reunification processes are all very delayed, and the Immigrant Council of Ireland have stated that they have sought information in this regard but that their communication has not been responded to.<sup>20</sup> For example, an interim care order for an unaccompanied child victim of trafficking was granted by Dublin District Court in the first ever virtual hearing of a District Court case.<sup>21</sup>

Unaccompanied minors who arrive in Ireland are generally placed in foster families, residential homes, or supported lodgings. In Ireland (and recognising the tiny numbers) they would be comparably well supported by Tusla (the Child and Family Agency).



*“Due to the lockdown, a young person who had just recently moved into residential care was unable to meet with his family for the first eight weeks in care. As this was also his first time in care, he found this very difficult. Thankfully, due to good social work, he was able to visit his home on a twice weekly basis thereafter.”*

17 See Parliamentary Question (PQ) by Minister Flanagan, though in the same PQ the Minister obfuscates slightly and it is unclear if the 24 children have in fact all arrived. For more information please see Department of Justice and Equality.

18 Approaches to unaccompanied minors following status determination in Ireland.

19 [Here](#) for more information

20 In communication with the Immigrant Council of Ireland 25.06.2020. See also [Immigrant Council of Ireland](#).

21 [Here](#) for more information

# Italy

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:

Fondazione l'Albero della Vita

30.6%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2018

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

Small group homes (SGHs)	Number of children in SGH 2017 <sup>1</sup>
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12,892

### Family-based care (2017<sup>2</sup>)

Number of children in family-based/foster care:	14,219
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Number of children in kinship care:	48%
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Number of adoptions:	
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1 Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali "Quaderni della Ricerca Sociale 46 - bambini, e ragazzi in affidamento familiare e nei servizi residenziali per minorenni" - Esiti della rilevazione coordinate dei dati in possesso delle Regioni e Province autonome. Figures updated at 31 December 2017

2 Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali "Quaderni della Ricerca Sociale 46 - bambini, e ragazzi in affidamento familiare e nei servizi residenziali per minorenni" - Esiti della rilevazione coordinate dei dati in possesso delle Regioni e Province autonome. Figures updated at 31 December 2017

## Alternative Recommendations

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The Italian government should ensure equal opportunities at school for all children, especially by providing computers, desks and internet connection for all children in poverty and funds for NGOs to support families in filling the computer technology knowledge and skills gaps.
- The Italian government should activate immediate measures to monitor families in vulnerable situations to prevent violence against children and provide adequate psychosocial support.

- The Italian government should ensure food is provided to all children in poverty, at school and at family/community level if school attendance is not guaranteed.

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- The Italian government should tackle child poverty in the framework of the more general measures against poverty. In particular, it should change the amount of funds directed to families with children and ensure the quality of staff in social services to implement the social inclusion pacts.
- The Italian government should include within the future Family Act measures to ensure the development of quality services for early childhood education and care, especially in the southern regions.
- The European Union should urge the Italian government to create a national plan to tackle child poverty within the national measures to combat poverty.



## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Negative developments

- Significant decrease in fundraising activities by individuals
- Increased difficulty in ensuring the safety of services' beneficiaries and staff
- Increased difficulty in providing support to children and families in poverty
- Very severe food poverty registered during the lockdown and the following period
- Exclusion of poor children from school when the learning process became digital
- Violence and tension in poor households where several family members live together

- Inefficient re-organisation of the school system:



- Inadequate allocation of extraordinary funds for tackling child educative poverty:



#### Good practice

- From the end of March to mid-September 2020, L'Albero della Vita delivered extra support to poor families by providing tablets and internet connection to 1,000 children and weekly shopping vouchers to 800 families in six cities.
- Several organisations provided food support to poor families delivering it at home, in distribution centres and with the support of National Civil Protection.
- Several organisations moved their psychosocial support activities online, providing educational, psychological and medical assistance in a very difficult situation.

#### Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children



*The Zen2 district of Palermo witnessed an increasing number of robberies at local supermarkets by people wishing to protect their families: many children were seriously at risk of starving. Many parents had serious problems feeding their children for weeks. One mother developed the habit of lowering the blinds at 5.00 pm to simulate the arrival of the night in advance to avoid making her children hungry when she was not able to serve dinner. One family ate hard fried bread for over a week.*

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

The measures to combat poverty are recent in Italy: they were first implemented in 2017 and have only indirectly dealt with children by providing a financial benefit for poor families. Unfortunately, there is no sign yet of the political will to put a different emphasis on child poverty on the political agenda. There are different reasons for this, such as the lack of understanding of the severity and the impact of child poverty. Moreover, the most recent measures were mainly focused on the voting population.

On a more positive note, in drawing up the new National Childhood Plan, the National Observatory for childhood and adolescence is giving great prominence to this issue and developing coherent proposals to be implemented in the 2021 budget law.

A national strategy to tackle child poverty would be relevant to focus on this crucial issue rather than generally on poverty, given that the current approach is not improving the condition of children in poverty.

### EU influence on national developments

- **Insufficient involvement of the EU in promoting children's rights:** The EU should have urged the Italian government to create a national plan to tackle child poverty within the national measures to combat poverty.
- **The Country Specific Recommendations were disappointing:** Poverty and children are basically not mentioned. There are just a very few mentions of the socio-economic difficulties faced by the society.

### Access to financial resources and services of high quality

The government has been very slow in putting into practice the new citizens' income, the so-called *Reddito di Cittadinanza*. This concerns in particular the social assistance that should be provided to poor families with children in a vulnerable situation. These families face a vast array of problems which goes much further than pure financial poverty.

It is crucial to support family members' mental health in order to ensure they keep or find a job and help stop the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Small group homes (SGHs) – main challenges

- Being able to redefine a daily routine that had suddenly completely changed and try to re-create a new context with the new routine;
- Being able to make sense of what was happening and let it be enough for the life of the community;
- Continue to work, while the world has stopped, and create a protective environment capable of containing uncertainty.

### Family-based care

The restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic decided by the government, have prevented direct contact with children and families and caused the suspension of all activities aimed at the training and selection of foster families,

the promotion of foster care in the territories, as well as the beginning of new foster projects for minors.

It has been possible to monitor foster care in progress. In particular, foster families were supported through calls and video-calls in their struggles through this tough time and their efforts to make the best of it.

The main challenges for foster carers were:

- Living so close to one another 24 hours a day, especially for new foster families, that had just started their relationship and barely knew each other;
- Manage school activities at home especially when children are young;
- Smart-working with children constantly at home;
- Maintaining family contacts, which were guaranteed by means of video calls, both between birth

families and children and between siblings, with the promise of being able to re-embrace soon, but many children suffered from not being able to see their families;

- The social isolation faced by children who were deprived of all their daily relationships;
- Working with limited professional support, which was provided by means of telephone calls and video-calls, as professionals could not make direct visits.

# Latvia

Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
[Latvian Child Welfare Network](#)

18.9%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019



## Alternative Recommendations

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19:

- The government should reinforce family counselling services as well as timely financial /material support for families avoiding unnecessary bureaucratic procedures that delay needed support.
- The effect of the measures adopted in response to the COVID-19 crisis must be evaluated from the point of view of children's rights.
- The government should pay more attention to families with fewer economic resources; the increase in domestic violence; the increase in the psychological problems of parents and their exhaustion.
- In dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, the government should involve professionals from a broader range of sectors, not just epidemiologists and healthcare professionals.
- More educational and informative material should be provided - not only to families, but also to professionals working in different sectors, such as social and educational fields.
- Support measures for professionals should also be provided, as they may burn out over a longer period of time.
- The government should develop simple and practical methodologies to deal with crisis situations and enhance coordination among different sectors and within sectors.
- The government should ensure free psychological consultations for children, young people and parents.
- The government should strengthen the health care system and emergency health care services.
- The government should provide all children with a computer and internet access as well as ensure a learning support from teachers during online education.
- The government should help employees to keep their job during and after the crisis. Provide re-skilling trainings and financial support for people who lost their jobs. This should include self-employed, employees and other vulnerable groups with no or poor social protection.
- Free COVID-19 tests should be provided to all vulnerable members of the society.

## Summary of Ratings

### Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



### Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



### Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:





# Child Poverty

## Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

### Negative developments

#### Lack of a common strategy

At a national level, there was a lack of a common strategy in the field of the social protection of children and families. The Ministry of Welfare published a number of guidelines on the subject. Unfortunately, they were too voluminous, abstract and difficult to understand. There was a lack of common information for professionals working in the social field. Furthermore, there was lack of a unified support scheme for municipalities on what kind of services should be provided to support families with children. Each municipality dealt with this in its own way; some provided lunch for families with children, some food packages, food vouchers, etc.

#### Education system

The system was unprepared to guarantee distance learning:

teachers were unprepared and uncoordinated. On the other hand, parents were overloaded. Moreover, there was a lack of equipment for distance learning in many families with children. Particularly problematic situations affected children who were in boarding schools, crisis centres and out-of-home care before the COVID-19 outbreak.

#### NGOs had to deal with serious difficulties

NGO employees were extremely vulnerable, for example many of them were exposed to the virus or lost their jobs; many services were temporarily interrupted. In many instances, it was difficult to provide assistance to clients, especially in cases concerning domestic violence or other sensitive issues. Many projects were fairly reduced or cancelled; there was a huge decline in donations due to companies and individuals concerned about their financial situation.

#### Social area

There was an increase in violent episodes within families, involving children. This was linked to the emotional pressure experienced by parents and aggravated by the poor living conditions and social, financial or health problems. Many family members returned from abroad, which created additional strain on the daily family routine. Concerning social work, a number of cases were reported in which professionals avoided face-to-face contact with clients.

#### Healthcare

Health services for children were not available even in the most serious situations as a consequence the illness get worse and the number of patients has increased.

#### Negative impact

The COVID-19 outbreak has caused a variety of difficulties in the areas of well-being, health and education, which will have significant negative consequences for children and their families in the future. In recent months, conflicts and violence in

families with children increased. The same can be said about economic problems, given that in many one or both parents lost their job or experienced a significant decrease in their income. At present, the country has not yet compiled and analysed data on the impact of the crisis on the well-being of the population. On the other hand, it is expected that children with acute or chronic illnesses who did not receive the help they needed during the crisis may have witnessed a significant deterioration in their health status. There were also significant challenges in the field of education, especially in ensuring a quality learning process. This is clearly shown by the deterioration in students' performances and poor results in their final exams.

### Good practice

#### Education

The government provided distance learning tools (such as computers and the TV channel [Tavaklase](#)), free lunches for children from low-income, poor and large families, in

and methodological support for teachers. Furthermore, webinars for professionals (education professionals, educators, interest educators, etc.) were organised by the Agency for International Youth Programmes to teach how to help children and young people learn remotely and build a healthy daily life in times of crisis.

### Health

In the majority of cases, the government provided free COVID tests for those who had symptoms of the disease or were involved in the medical sector or police.

### Well-being

Amendments were made to the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, which provides for additional support during a crisis, such as the Crisis Benefit (not more than EUR 40 per person for no more than three months). There is also a supplement of EUR 50 for each child if the family receives 1) crisis benefit (max age of 18 years) or 2) downtime benefit (24 years). The state maintained the payment of parental benefit during the lockdown when a child reaches the age of one or one and a half year (up to EUR

700). Guidelines were developed for working with children and families and for dealing with incidents of violence.

### Webinars

NGOs organised many webinars on children's and family welfare. For example, the Union of Local Governments of Latvia organised a conference on the impact of the crisis on domestic violence, which was attended by specialists in various fields, including social workers, orphans' courts, and NGOs.

### Positive initiatives

These 'Stay home' and 'Let's help to stay at home' initiatives provided self-isolated people with basic necessities, such as food and medicine. Various regional initiatives provided supplies and psychological support to families and children. For example, the Dobele Youth Initiative and Health Centre organised virtual remote activities for young people.

### Helplines

Free psychological helplines were provided by NGOs such as Dardedze, Marta and Skalbes to help parents and children.

## Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children


### Domestic instabilities




*A mother raising a nine-year-old daughter and a 16-year-old son alone was helped by members of a civil society organisation.*

*Her son has moderate intellectual disability so, before the pandemic, he was attending a special boarding school during the week and returned to his home only during the weekend. During lockdown he had to stay at home, so for the first time both children had to live together in the same place for a long period of time. There were a lot of conflicts and misunderstandings. The sister refused to communicate with her family, she stopped studying and became depressed. She became aggressive towards her brother and started talking about suicide. The mother, struggling to maintain a balance between the two children, experienced a severe emotional crisis and became physically abusive towards her daughter, who she thought was abusing her brother, provoking and annoying her. She finally decided to ask for help from a member of the Latvian Child Welfare Network.*


## Online safety

 In a house with four pre-school and younger school-age children living in an extended family, parents allowed unrestricted use of screen devices to provide activities for the children. As a result, the children found pornographic material and engaged in inappropriate sexual activities with each other. The mother sought help. Another school-age girl (third grade) met a person on the internet, who soon asked for a naked photo of the girl, which she sent. This person started to blackmail the girl asking for erotic videos and threatening to send the previous photo to her friends. Her grandmother sought help.

## Education

 Numerous parents called NGO helplines asking for help for their children who dropped out of school and witnessed a sharp decrease in their success rate.

## Healthcare

 An adolescent was assigned to a foster family which required a COVID-19 test for the kid, in order not to endanger the health of the other kids. The state did not pay for the test, so the family had to do it at its own expense paying around 80 euros.

# Malta

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

### Contributors:

[Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society \(MFWS\)](#); [Foundation for Social Welfare Services \(FSWS\)](#)

**23.6%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019 <sup>1</sup>		
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019		
0-3 years	3	36
0-17 years	11	184
Children with disabilities	6 <sup>2</sup>	n/a <sup>3</sup>
Number of children in family-based/ foster care in 2020		285
Kinship care		59
Adoptions		215
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		31 <sup>4</sup>

- 1 In Malta there is no institutional care.
- 2 Two group homes plus four group homes for disability
- 3 The actual number of children cannot be identified according to the residence because there are children with disability who are in mainstream residential homes.
- 4 Asylum in Europe... Statistics, Malta

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Ensure children's safety online, set up harsher penalties in this domain and organise information campaigns for both children and guardians.
- Provide empowering sessions focusing on self-esteem, peer pressure and bullying.
- Put early years on the political agenda, especially when it comes to education.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Provide clearer guidelines to educators when it comes to teaching remotely.
- Advocate for an EU Policy on online safety.

- Tackle Child Poverty.

#### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- Support services for the parents and biological family of children who live in the care system should be easily accessible and available as soon as the children enter the system. Access to these services will allow the biological families to work on their issues and explore the possibility to re-unite with their children.
- Continue to develop more outcome measures to ensure that changes are taking place to help improve children's lives.
- Continue to improve on the idea of co-production, thereby involving children and parents in the development and evaluation of projects and initiatives.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was adequate.

It provided a grant of €350 per employee to businesses who have or had employees on quarantine, whether this is mandatory or self-imposed due to possible contact with individuals directly at risk of infection.

Employees of enterprises that suffered from a complete suspension of operations were entitled to a grant of two days' salary per week based on a monthly salary of €800.

Where, after 8 March 2020, at least one of the parents (in the private sector) was required to stay at home to take care of their school-aged children, such parents received a direct payment of €166.15 per week

if working on a full-time basis and €103.85 per week if working on a part-time basis.

#### Good practice

- The setting up of the Food Aid project by the Malta Trust Foundation (local NGO): During lockdown - from March to June - it fed over 6,000 individuals of which 2000 children. A number of other NGOs, such as Caritas Malta, supported children and families by supplying cooked meals as well.
- The setting up of the Food Aid project by the Malta Trust Foundation (local NGO), which is currently feeding over 9,000 individuals including over 2,500 families.
- NGOs in Malta are united to fight poverty as one front.
- Professionals went on voluntary lockdown to protect their service users, such as those living in out-of-home care settings and in homes for the elderly.

### Key challenges experienced by families and children <sup>1</sup>

- Home schooling was found to be very complicated. Every educator had to find their own system to teach online.
- Children felt isolated as they missed contact with their peer group and adults such as educators and family members including grandparents.
- The lack of routine and structure was deemed to be difficult for most children.

### Key challenges for civil society organisations

- The sudden need to adapt to working remotely.
- Some NGOs were side-lined due to financial elements.
- The necessity to deal with a period of deep uncertainties and challenges.

1 The points below were elaborated by children. Having said this, a recent EU report rated Malta as having the best E-Education programme during COVID-19.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Child poverty is mentioned in the National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion.<sup>2</sup> Having a national strategy for child poverty is important as it puts the issue on the national political agenda.

The fact that as a country we have accepted to participate in the CPAT project (Child Participation Assessment Tool of the Council of Europe) confirms that Malta is ready to identify the gaps and work to close or eliminate the gaps identified.

One of the problems to address concerns children's access to services. For example, the vast majority of children do not have information about the services available to them.

### EU influence on national developments

- **Insufficient involvement of the EU in promoting children's rights.** The EU has not been helpful on many different levels. The fact that in 2020 we still don't have an EU Commissioner for children is unacceptable. National governments have to move from words to concrete action, by allocating enough resources in their recovery plans to invest in children.
- **The Country Specific Recommendations were disappointing.** Children are only mentioned in relation to the EUR 800 grant being given to parents who are employed and neither is able to telework. Recommendations focus only on the economy and helping businesses recover from the impact of this pandemic. No useful reference to our work as the document is mainly based on the economic impact of COVID-19.

- One of the main challenges facing families is a situation where both parents are working long hours and children are being cared for at after school sessions or by other relatives. The Maltese NGOs would like to have a Minister for children focusing solely on the best interests of the child.

### Children's participation

The voice of the child is still greatly underestimated in Malta. Children are rarely given the space to participate even on issues concerning them. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society is fully committed to give children the space to participate through its various projects and its Children's and Young Persons' Council.

### Efforts of the government to ensure child participation

- Meaningful and informed child participation is a right defined by the United Nations Convention on

the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which Malta ratified in 1990. Yet, this has not been transposed to national legislation.

- The government must believe in children and young people and value their contribution. We must nurture a listening culture. We need to reach out to children and young people from socially excluded groups.
- The government should ensure the creation of a variety of mechanisms to ensure that children and young people, who use different styles of communication, are included.
- The government should set up reference or advisory groups made up of a small group of children/young people to act as advisors.

2 National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion, Malta, 2014-2024.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### General overview of FSWS measures

Services were operated in distinct shifts to ensure continuity and safety at the same time. Practices were changed and adapted to meet the needs of service users', services and employees at large. Moreover, essential services were ensured, such as residential services for children, drug rehabilitation, DETOX (Substance Misuse Outpatients Unit), domestic violence services (together with risk assessments), child protection services and out of hours' emergency services continued operating as if under normal circumstances.

FSWS continued providing crisis intervention services, phone intakes and other emergency services. Office visits were replaced by telephone interventions for service users. Teleworking was provided

to employees with a daily physical presence of 25% at offices. Where applicable, quarantine leave – without loss of income – was given to the employees concerned. As a result, there was no major disruption in the provision of support and services to young people ageing out of care.

#### Agenzija APPOGG and Alternative Care Directorate

- A new helpline 1772 for those feeling lonely was introduced;
- Supervised access visits were temporarily shifted to online access;
- Different groups of people were reached through food distribution;
- Online pre-assessment training was organised for fostering and adoption services;
- Foster care placements for children who needed out of home care placement continued to take place;

- Weekly webinars for foster carers were introduced.

#### Child Residential Homes

- Online training and support sessions were delivered for social support workers;
- Staff were provided with protective gear;
- Parents, under staff supervision, spoke with their children using technology;
- Contact with children living in out of home care placements continued within the Looked After Children Service;
- Two online support groups for children living in out of home care placements were organised;
- Social workers within the Domestic Violence Service continued with normal home visits.

#### Child Protection Services

- In general, operations continued with minor changes;
- Visits were still carried out in high risk areas;
- Plenty of precautions akin to the above-mentioned general precautions were undertaken.

From a child protection point of view, these are the three main challenges that were experienced by the agency:

- People's legitimate resistance to contact;
- Fears by professionals that are limiting visits (e.g. to schools);
- The reduced availability of medical professionals whose time is taken up by the crisis.

From the Children's Directorate's point of view, these are the three main challenges that were experienced:

- Even though the social workers used social media, telephone calls, exchange of letters and cards and other means, the social workers could not carry out visits to the premises/placements where the children in care were residing.
- Foster carers and residential care staff had to be trained and equipped with resources to support children to remain inside and do not leave the premises where they live.
- Supervised and unsupervised access of minors living in care with their family members were stopped to ensure that the minors were safe and to limit their interaction with persons outside their placements.

### Story of a girl in foster care



*One of the challenges faced by minors residing in care was the lack of contact that they had with their biological family members. The case of an 8-year-old girl who lives in a foster placement, shows how deeply some of the children missed leaving their foster home to have access with their parents, with whom they cannot reside. This girl, who used to meet her mother twice a week, could not understand that it was in her best interests not to leave the house/ have access with persons outside her household. Schools were closed and parents were urged to leave children inside the foster home, thus access with family members was stopped. This girl called her mother and had regular skype calls with her, however the effect of face to face contact could not be replaced. As soon as the restrictions started to loosen and it was safe for children to leave the house, access resumed and the girl and her mother could meet again. Since the schools closed, foster carers had to make the necessary arrangements to stay at home with the children. In a very short period of time they had to change their routine and make the necessary arrangements. Foster families were supported by regular phone calls. They were also offered free online counselling sessions. Webinars covering a number of topics relevant to COVID-19 and the challenges that it brought about, were also being carried out on a weekly basis.*

### A story of a foster family



*A foster family faced a challenging time during the COVID-19 lockdown. Due to the pandemic one of the foster parents lost her job, while the other was asked to stop reporting to work for a few weeks until the company where he works reopened. The couple have a child of their own and they foster two other children. The foster parents were offered online support by their social worker, while they also had free online counselling sessions. Their social worker liaised with other FSWS professionals to financially help these foster carers during this challenging time, by providing them with baby food and diapers.*



## Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

There is a high value in keeping families together. It is a preference, although it will never be an absolute value. If a family is abusive, removal will continue to be an option. However, Child Protection Services (CPS) make a special effort to access the family resources in order to avoid placements in residential care. There is always an attempt to mitigate and resolve the issues in the families and monitor for a period of time. If not, CPS actually negotiate with the families in question to explore the removal of the child into other placements within the extended family.

The children's directorate continued to work with families in vulnerable situations even during the pandemic. Where possible, interventions took place on the phone. However, social workers also maintained contact with families via face-to-face interventions carried out through safe distancing.

## Progress on child protection and care reform

Individualised care with personalised care planning is a right for minors living in care. Minors deserve stability and permanency in their out of home care placements. Foster care and community based care should be given precedence over institutional care. Therefore, in Malta there is no institutional care.

The pandemic had a clear impact on the ability to move ahead with certain reform projects. FSWS suggests that the crisis actually freed up the space for the departments to dedicate time for the reforms, so, the impact was positive. However, because of the limited ability to meet, some things were slow.

The Children's Directorate continued with its interventions with minors residing in out of home care. Since the minors were placed safely in their residences, social workers kept regular contact with them via social media. With regards to youths who needed support, the social workers still met with these youths, ensuring

that the necessary precautions were taken. All meetings took place following the health-protection rules.

## EU funds

The Ministry (Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity) has been implementing the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) in cooperation with FSWS through the provision of food packages and other social welfare services for families in vulnerable situations to ensure their integration/reintegration into society.

FEAD Eligibility Criteria in Malta:

- Households in receipt of non-contributory means-tested benefits and having two or more children below the age of 16;
- Households having two or more children below the age of 16 with an income not exceeding 80% of National Minimum Wage;
- Households having two or more children below the age of 16 with

an income not exceeding the National Minimum Wage;

- Non-single households eligible for non-contributory means tested age pension.

These criteria take into account the financial situation of each household. It is noted that children, along with the elderly, are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion and therefore have a higher risk of material deprivation. There is a notable difference between the at-risk-of-poverty rate of households with and without dependent children. Additionally, households with two or more dependent children are deemed at a greater risk of poverty when compared to households with one dependent child.

During the COVID-19 pandemic provision is being made to deliver aid to people's homes rather than the usual system of collection from one of 17 distribution centres. Furthermore, a follow-up call has been programmed to ensure that the target cohort is duly supported and referred to any other social welfare services where needed.

# Netherlands

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
Dutch NGO Coalition  
on Children's Rights

15.5%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019<sup>1</sup>

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019	n/a	2,550 closed residential care <sup>1</sup> 17,920 residential care <sup>2</sup>
Institutions for children with disabilities	n/a	n/a
Institutions for children 0-3	n/a	n/a
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019	n/a	5,550 <sup>3</sup>
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2019	n/a	23,272 <sup>4</sup>
Number of adoptions		145 <sup>5</sup>

- 1 JH 1223 Gesloten plaatsing (JeugdZorgPlus en gesloten.GGZ).
- 2 JH 1224 Ander verblijf bij JH aanbieder.
- 3 JH 1222 Gezinsgericht
- 4 Factsheet PLEEGZORG 2019.
- 5 Statistisch overzicht Interlandelijke adoptie over de Jaren 2015 tot en met 2019.

### Alternative recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Provide clear, child-friendly information to children and young people, about the virus, about the measures and about the impact on their lives.
- Ensure that children and young people can participate in discussions in all areas which impact them including poverty measures, education, and mental well-being.
- Provide emergency financial support and material provision for families experiencing increased financial difficulty during the crisis.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Develop and invest in specific protection measures for children and young people against the economic consequences of this crisis such as: extra budget for social protection systems, such

as social assistance, shelter for homeless families, the capacity of food banks with increasing demand, etc.

- Involve children and young people in developing the measures and provide information that is understandable to them.
- Invest in data collection on groups of children in vulnerable situations so that it is quickly clear which children need extra help.
- Research and evaluate the way in which youth care and youth mental health care dealt with the corona crisis and measures. Make sure that children and young people play a role in this.
- Ensure that children and young people are involved in youth care and youth mental health care and can participate in the changes concerning the coronavirus.
- Ensure that waiting lists in youth care and youth mental health care are resolved as quickly as possible and use extra capacity for this.

1 According to the Netherlands Youth Institute: In 2018, 8.1 percent of all minor children (0-18 years) live in low income families and 3.3 percent of all minor children live in long lasting low income families (4 years or longer). This is 11.4 percent in total. More info available [here](#).

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Many families are dealing with reduced incomes, whether from job losses or pay cuts, and are under significant financial pressure. Mitigation measures put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as the closure of services, significantly affected children, particularly children in vulnerable situations. Children dealing with domestic abuse were forced to stay at home in a heightened stress environment, causing violence to increase. Data has shown a surge in calls to helplines since the outbreak<sup>6</sup>. Due to school closures and the switch to online education, children living in highly vulnerable situations fell off the radar, putting their safety and education at risk.

With the imposition of the COVID-19 measures, there were also concerns that tensions created by staying at home together for a long time, stress about possible job losses or contamination could potentially increase cases of child abuse<sup>7</sup>. However, Safe at Home and the police have not seen a major increase since the start of the COVID-19 crisis in the number of reports of domestic violence and child abuse<sup>8</sup>. According to Safe at Home, this is explained by the fact that conscious of the potential effect of lockdown, people were more vigilant and reported situations more easily. The Sexual Violence Centre is deeply concerned about an expected increase in victims of sexual abuse in the domestic circle.

Multiple parties have published reports regarding the impact of the crisis on children in vulnerable situations, for example:

- UNICEF the Netherlands<sup>9</sup>
- Save the Children Netherlands<sup>10</sup>

6 [De Kindertelefoon, Wat Kinderen bezighoudt in Coronatijd Hand-out periode 16 maart t/m 12 april 2020, 24 april 2020.](#)

7 [Coronacrisis En Kinderen En Jongeren In Nederland](#)

8 [Landelijk beeld: Corona quarantaine leidt voorsnog niet tot meer adviesvragen en meldingen bij Veilig Thuis.](#)

9 [Coronacrisis En Kinderen En Jongeren In Nederland](#)

10 [Mbo-jongeren voelen zich tijdens coronacrisis vergeten](#)

### About loneliness

*“The 1.5 metre measure drives me crazy. I haven't really touched anyone in three months (except for my parents and brother). I now officially fall into the lonely boys category.”*

17 years (M)

### About the lack of clarity

*“The thing that worries me the most is that there is simply no clarity. We never received any real information from our school. And if anything was said then it was actually something we already knew.”* -

21 years (F)

### About the financial situation

*“My mother was stuck abroad, so I had to cover all costs myself.”*

- 19 years (F)

### Government's responses

The Dutch government has implemented financial emergency measures to minimise the economic impact on employers and the self-employed but this approach lacks a specific focus on the consequences for children. For example, there has been no calculation of how many of the nearly 1.9 million households with children have been financially affected by the crisis.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, poverty will increase if no extra efforts are being made and the situation for children in vulnerable situations will regress.

Economic regulations have been put in place for companies to request income for their employees in order for families to provide for their children (among others)<sup>11</sup>. Money was made available to distribute laptops and secure wifi connection, but many children in vulnerable situations were not reached<sup>12</sup>. Implementation of emergency relief funds, but young people were left out<sup>13</sup>.

### Good practice

Augeo Foundation, Stichting Kinderpostzegels and Stichting Het Vergeten Kind have joined forces and set up a special crisis fund to help children in vulnerable situations during this difficult period. This extra effort has been made by a lot of NGOs (like distributing laptops by Stichting Leergeld etc.) Several organisations such as Child Ombudsman and Save the Children have talked to children and also shed light of the importance of their position within the crisis<sup>14</sup>.

11 Algemene informatie over NOW3 (vanaf oktober 2020).

12 Zorgen om toename van huiselijk geweld door coronastress. 'Kijk niet weg, ga in gesprek'.

13 Scholen verliezen contact met duizenden kwetsbare leerlingen.

14 Kinderombudsvrouw Margrite Kalverboer maakt zich zorgen om kwetsbare kinderen in coronacrisis. Mbo-jongeren voelen zich tijdens coronacrisis vergeten.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

To combat child poverty, in 2019 the Dutch government has formulated "four child poverty ambitions"<sup>15</sup>.

Where the central government is primarily responsible for ensuring sufficient income, municipalities are responsible for implementing poverty policy and facilitating participation of citizens in society.

#### With regard to ambition 1

**"Participation"** of the above mentioned four child poverty ambitions: municipalities are insufficiently committed to an integrated child-oriented poverty policy that improves the lives of children in all areas and, for example, also tackles the stress in families as a result of poverty<sup>16</sup>. Due to the lack

of uniform national policy standards, there are large differences between municipalities. For example, not all municipalities make use of children's participation in shaping policies<sup>17</sup>. Children from vulnerable groups in particular are not sufficiently involved<sup>18</sup>. In addition, it appears that private child aid organisations often have to provide additional help to the municipal offer.

**Regarding ambition 2 "reduce the number of children living in poverty"**: last April the government formulated a target for halving the number of children growing up in poverty: from 9.2% in 2015 to 4.6% in 2030<sup>19</sup>. The government's commitment to this goal: to promote work and more hours of work for parents, appears insufficient as research shows that increasing the earning capacity for working parents is not always feasible<sup>20</sup>. Even

before the corona crisis, it turned out that more than 40% of children in poverty have working parents. This percentage is expected to increase with the current pandemic and expected economic recession. In addition, this strategy does take into account the right of the child to an adequate standard of living. It can be concluded that the Dutch government does not fulfil its responsibility in providing an adequate standard of living (Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - UNCRC), which is already limited by the government of the Dutch reservation to Article 26 of the UNCRC.

Recent research by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) shows that if the current government policy is continued, poverty will increase by 25% in the coming years, irrespective of the effects of

the COVID-19 crisis<sup>21</sup>. Research by Armoedefonds shows that 90.1% of the anti-poverty organisations expect an increase in demand for assistance in the coming months, and not all organisations have the financial capacity to assist. It is clear, therefore, that the current poverty policy is going to fall far short of reaching the rising number of children in poverty - especially children in long-term poverty.

**Many initiatives have been set up by organisations or individuals to help people in poverty such as online donations, a crisis fund for children in vulnerable situations, and an appeal from the National Poverty Coalition. This fund was available until the 26 June 2020. At the time of writing, almost 35.000 requests had been made.**

15 Kamerstukken I, 2018-2019, 35.000.XV, nr. D.

16 Alle kinderen kansrijk. Het verbeteren van de ontwikkelingskansen van kinderen in armoede.

17 Kansen voor kinderen: een postcodetombola?

18 The Right of Children to Participate in Public Decision-Making Processes

19 Brief aan de Eerste Kamer: Nadere uitwerking ambities kinderarmoede

20 Sam& (2020). 'Altijd op een richeltje lopen'. Verslag onderzoek werkende ouders onder de armoedegrens. Rotterdam.

21 CPB en SCP. (2020). Kansrijk armoedebeleid, Den Haag.

## Views on the Semester process

The EU has not been able to push the government to think beyond the conviction that "work is the best way out of poverty".

It should not always be emphasised that the Netherlands is doing so well compared to other European countries. The Netherlands is a champion in reducing poverty among the elderly through social schemes - better than France, Luxembourg and Germany, according to a recent study by the Dutch planning agencies. But when it comes to alleviating poverty among children, the Netherlands is doing worse than all those countries. It is striking that a country like UK scores much better.<sup>22</sup>

## Access to financial resources in the family

The Dutch benefits system is intended to guarantee sufficient income. The benefits system plays a crucial role in the security of the life of many households and families, but it is opaque, complex, and inaccessible. Families run the risk of reimbursement in the event of a (minimal) rise in income and / or do not dare to use the schemes<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, social assistance and subsistence level are too low, the Dutch reservation on Article 26 UNCRC preclude children from claiming social security themselves. Therefore, a renewal of the entire benefits system should be made a priority of the cabinet.

## Children's participation

Albeit the increasing attention on this topic, Children's right to participate is not structurally embedded in the Netherlands and its government way of working. According to the Ombudsman for Children, children's participation is insufficient, especially for children from vulnerable groups<sup>24</sup>. There are several barriers, including insufficient financial resources at national and local level.

To ensure children's rights to participate, Member States should follow specific guidelines to structurally embed children's participation at a local and national level. Member States should also promote the implementation of the Child Participation Assessment tool developed by the Council of Europe.

<sup>22</sup> The Dutch planning agencies base this conclusion on international comparative research into poverty policy in 49 countries (carried out since 1967), conducted by the Department of Empirical Analysis of Social and Tax Regulations at Leiden University.

<sup>23</sup> IBO (2020), Toeslagen deelonderzoek 2. Eenvoud of maatwerk: Alternatieven voor het bestaande toeslagenstelsel.

<sup>24</sup> The Right of Children to Participate in Public Decision-Making Processes.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Contact with parents and family members

Children and young people who are placed in a care institution have the right to maintain contact with their parents and other family members. During the lockdown, visiting hours were prohibited or limited. The effects of limited contact with family on children in vulnerable situations are immense. This also applies to youth mental health care and care for children with an intellectual disability, JeugdzorgPlus, and judicial youth institutions, according to the Netherlands Youth Institute.<sup>25</sup> A large number of children do not develop well in an environment that does not replicate family-based living conditions.



*The Parool (a national newspaper) published a blog on 27 June 2020 about a young girl, 17 years old, diagnosed with autism. Her behavioural problems were so severe that she was placed in a care institution: "One day she called, "Daddy, you have to get me or I'll cut my wrists." He raced to the institution. Four care workers sat in a room to talk about Jade. Nobody was with the girl. Until he went to her room himself. It looked like she was frozen. Her father recognised the image. It was only after a few seconds that he saw the belt around her neck. Care workers later reported hearing that furniture was being moved. They were not alarmed. Jade is not included in the National Institute for Health and the Environment (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu – RIVM) figures for coronavirus victims. But Jade is also a victim of corona."<sup>26</sup>*

### Child protection service

Following the coronavirus outbreak, measures have been put in place to avoid the closure of child protection services. However, at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, face-to-face contacts were often converted into video meetings. Without interacting directly with family members, social workers risk missing signals and have difficulties reaching some young people. There is also the 'Kindertelefoon', the Dutch Child Helpline, but for some children, online assistance can be a barrier because children feel less familiar with this or because they are not able to speak freely at home<sup>27</sup>. In addition, there is an increase in the need for drastic interventions, for example, if parents refuse any form of contact. Home visits still take place for exceptional cases, but the distance that has to be kept makes it feel more detached. The Council of Child Protection indicates that their research is

<sup>25</sup> [Tips voor professionals in de residentiële jeugdhulp](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Jade wordt niet meegeteld in RIVM-cijfers. Ze werd 17](#)

<sup>27</sup> [De Kindertelefoon, Wat Kinderen bezighoudt in Coronatijd Hand](#)

mainly done via (video) calling unless that is not possible<sup>28</sup>. Recent report<sup>29</sup> covers the living situation and quality of life of parents within the youth care system. According to the report impact of COVID-19 can lead to a greater demand for youth care as the problems within multi-use households worsen and the number of multi-use households may also increase. Some problems can arise in the short term, other problems in the longer term. There is recommendation to municipalities that multi-use families need special attention to minimize the impact of the crisis on family life.

### Special care and support for children with disabilities

Special care and support for children with disabilities have been discontinued.<sup>30</sup> In addition, access to care is more difficult and treatments are being delayed. There are also concerns that waiting lists in youth care and youth mental healthcare

are increasing.<sup>31</sup> The treatment and guidance of children within youth care, youth mental health care, and children with a disability was due to start again on 1 June 2020.

### Foster families and children

The Dutch Foster Families Association (NVP) has raised the alarm about the rising tensions in many foster families that are suffering from the COVID-19 crisis. Tensions are mounting, among other things, because children cannot see their family members due to home quarantine and supportive care has been temporarily suspended. Those tensions could ultimately damage the relationship between the child and the foster parents.

Foster care is further under pressure due to the increase in the number of urgent out-of-home placements and the growing need for acute foster care. A survey among foster care organisations shows that they

are now approaching existing foster parents to ask whether they would be prepared to take in extra children temporarily. "The NVP is concerned that the fewer foster homes there are, the greater the chances of a less good match and premature termination of the placement".<sup>32</sup>

### Care leavers

In view of the research carried out by JSO (expertise centre for youth, society and development), young people leaving care are insufficiently prepared for an independent life<sup>33</sup>. The number of homeless youth has also increased enormously to 12,700 in the 18 to 30 age group<sup>34</sup>. Research has shown that this also concerns young people who can no longer count on child protection schemes after reaching 18. The extension of (the right to) foster care/family home up to 21-years-old is a positive development as it offers the option of guiding young people

in vulnerable situations towards independence.

### Family-based care

There has been a great shortage of foster care families for years. In 2018, out of 542 foster parents surveyed, 52% quitted because of undesirable circumstances such as problems with the care system<sup>35</sup>. A Foster Care Action Plan has been started by the national government, which focuses, among other things, on continuity and promoting the expertise of foster parents. This is still ongoing. In 2019 there were 145 international adoptions. The total number of national adoptions is unknown.

### Children in migration

#### Unaccompanied minors

In 2019, 1,045 unaccompanied minors came to the Netherlands.

28 RvdK werkt door tijdens periode met coronavirus

29 Leefsituatie van ouders met kinderen in de jeugdzorg

30 Gehandicapte kinderen in de knel door corona. 'Wij worden behoorlijk vergeten'

31 Cliënten en ggz op zoek naar nieuw evenwicht

32 Pleegouders slaan alarm over thuissituatie

33 Leren van herhaald beroep in de JeugdzorgPlus

34 Raad Volksgezondheid en Samenleving

35 Waarom stoppen pleegouders? Onderzoek naar omstandigheden, begeleiding en hoe pleegouders behouden kunnen worden



In 2019 there was a total of 3,072 guardianships and 255 supervision orders (ondertoezichtstelling).<sup>36</sup>

During COVID-19, newcomers had no access to the regular Central Organ for Asylum-seekers (COA) reception. However, an emergency shelter was set up at the military base in Zoutkamp (municipality of Hogeland), where asylum seekers could receive shelter and basic facilities. In line with the Reception Directive, the Zoutkamp had to provide sufficient sanitary facilities, a properly functioning Wifi, opportunities for physical exercise and access for volunteers and care workers (including the Dutch Council for Refugees 'VluchtelingenWerk'). Defence for Children<sup>37</sup> was concerned about whether the facilities at the Zoutkamp were suitable for unaccompanied minors because of the minimum facilities, the large dormitories and the measures restricting their freedom.

With regard to the reception of unaccompanied minors, a distinction is made between reception by the COA and reception by Nidos.

Nidos is responsible for the care and supervision of unaccompanied minors until the age of 14 with or without a residence permit. COA is responsible for unaccompanied minors aged 15 and older without a residence permit and provides care for this group at the Process Reception Location (POL). The POL is located on the site of a regular asylum seekers centre (AZC). Another important difference between COA and Nidos is the scale: At COA, small scale means 16-20 youngsters per unit. At Nidos, small scale is 4- 10 children per home. Reception model 2019: 23% with COA and 61% with Nidos.

<sup>36</sup> CBS

<sup>37</sup> Vraag aan Staatssecretaris: Prioriteit voor kinderen bij overplaatsing uit Zoutkamp en goed afstandsonderwijs op azc's

# Poland

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
Polish Foster Care  
Coalition (PFCC)

16%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2021

- **Poland should take action to:** prepare systemic procedures taking into account the experience of carers including foster parents to adequately respond to crises such as the coronavirus epidemic. There is a need for a multidisciplinary team of experts, including those from non-governmental organisations who will have an advisory role in the overall process.
- **Poland urgently needs a strategy on deinstitutionalisation:** it is necessary to prompt the government and local authorities to develop family support services and professional family-based foster care system for children placed in alternative care.



## Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

YEAR 2019<sup>1</sup>

Number of family assistants	<b>3,934</b>	Number of families supported	<b>44,324</b>
Number of supporting families	<b>104</b>	Number of families supported	<b>118</b>
		Number of families provided with specialist guidance	<b>95,980</b>
	Number of institutions (2019)	Number of children (2019)	
Total institutional care		<b>21,362</b>	
Institutional care – care & education centres	<b>1,166</b>	<b>16,325</b>	
Number of children 0-3		<b>685</b>	
Number of children 4-6		<b>853</b>	
Number of children with disabilities		<b>1,748</b>	
Stationary facilities (for adults and children with developmental disabilities)		<b>1,860</b>	
Institutions for children with disabilities	<b>36</b>	<b>2,091<sup>2</sup></b> <b>1,086<sup>3</sup></b>	
Total number of children in family-based/foster care		<b>50,929</b>	
Number of children in kinship care		<b>29,853</b>	
Adopted children		<b>950</b>	
Unaccompanied children		<b>105<sup>4</sup> asylum seeking</b> <b>24 non-asylum seeking</b>	

1 Maly rocznik statystyczny polski 2020, Statistical office, Warsaw 2020.

2 In institutions acting under the Act of family support and alternative care.

3 Number of children with disabilities in in stationary social welfare facilities (those institutions operate under the Social Assistance Act of 2004)

4 <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/poland/statistics>.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

To respond to the COVID-19 epidemic temporary changes were introduced to the Act on Family Support and the Alternative Care System that included the weakening of a regulation that the maximum number of children placed in an institutional care facility is 14 as well as an obligation to transform all institutions to accommodate a maximum of 14 children by 1 January 2021. Moreover, restrictions on placing children under the age of 10 in institutional care facilities have been also suspended.

Neither the government nor local authorities introduced mechanisms to monitor foster families to assist with their emerging challenges and needs. The greatest need was assistance to access online education. Although there was financial support (PLN 130 million from the European Social Fund - ESF) for children placed in alternative care to reduce the impact of COVID-19 by purchasing computers and the necessary software for the 2019-2020 school

year, extra personnel support to help with education was not included. In some families there was a clear regression in the educational outcomes of children because they were not able to cope with all tasks without external support.

The Polish Foster Care Coalition (PFCC) acknowledges the governmental measure enabling parents to stay at home to look after their children under eight years of age while retaining the right to remuneration, as well as a one-time PLN 1,700 allowance for social services staff hired as “family assistants”<sup>5</sup>. Children from disadvantaged families were particularly hit by the period of social isolation. They could not take advantage of free meals at school and day-care centres and they did not have sufficient IT equipment or access to a good internet connection. To tackle this, the government allocated funds for purchasing IT equipment for schools using ESF funds.

The main challenges created by the pandemic in care institutions included the absence of procedures and standards for implementing quarantine in the care institution, overstretched staff, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and tests, and in general a lack of guidelines for contacts with biological families. As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, temporary changes were introduced to the Act on Family Support and Alternative Care System<sup>6</sup>.

An additional challenge was trying to provide online schooling where IT devices such as laptops or computers were missing and there was no access to a quality internet connection. Schools attempting online schooling for the first time faced many challenges, one of them being too much homework.

The PFCC has observed there was a lack of protocols and procedures on COVID-19 for children placed in family-based care, for example how to proceed when foster parents are hospitalised and the rest of

the foster family is in quarantine, including the procedures to replace ill foster parents. Lockdown and social isolation restrictions caused mental health problems for many children, without any accessible support or assistance. A lack of guidelines for contact with biological families of children and access to COVID-19 creditable test posed another challenges for staff and children in care.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

The Act of 2011 on Family Support and the Alternative Care System also stipulates support for families at risk. Supportive measures include:

- a family assistant, who assists in improving the family life situation, resolving psychological and social issues and problems with bringing up children and searching for a job;
- a family supporter, whose task is to help families experiencing

difficulties in carrying out their functions;

- a day-support centre that provides different services from general to specialised – socio-therapeutic and therapeutic assistance;
- since 2012 there are also street work classes that carry out motivating and socio-therapeutic activities and provide specialists’ guidance.

The amendment to the Family and Guardianship Code of 2016 stipulates<sup>7</sup> that placing a child in foster care because of poverty is not allowed. Placement in alternative care is possible only after using all available tools to support the family - mainly via family assistant support.

According to the ministry’s survey from 2012 the main reasons why children enter alternative care were: parental addiction (39.62%); parents ill-equipped to care for and educate their children (25.17%); one of the child’s parents dies (8.52%); both

<sup>5</sup> Dodatki dla asystentów rodziny.

<sup>6</sup> Article 15 of the Act of April 16, 2020 on specific support instruments due to SARS-CoV-2 virus.

<sup>7</sup> Kodeks rodzinny i opiekuńczy.

parents die (4.46%); and domestic violence (3.63%).

### Progress on child protection and care reform

In February the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy started preparing the national deinstitutionalisation (DI) strategy to 2040. The working group dedicated to families and children was established, in which PFFC representatives participate. Its work progress has been very slow. Moreover, there are ministries that plan to elaborate a mid-term ministerial programme (i.e. by 2027), instead of having a national cross-sectoral deinstitutionalisation strategy. This approach could jeopardise the promising process aimed at the development of a DI strategy. Similarly, the development of family-based foster care has not progressed, indeed the opposite has happened as the number of foster care families has been decreasing<sup>8</sup>.

### Care leavers

The Supreme Audit Office conducted an audit in 2015 and elaborated a report on the quality of support provided for alternative care leavers<sup>9</sup>. The report indicates that, despite the standards of support stipulated in law, the process of preparing care leavers is in practice ineffective. For example, the Act states that care leavers should be given assistance in, among others tasks, “ensuring adequate housing conditions”. The real situation looks somewhat different. Only a few care leavers (16%) who do not go on to higher education return to their biological families. Others are offered flats that are usually located in buildings of a very low standard, in the neighbourhood of families similar to their families of origin (facing multiple problems). Unfortunately, most care leavers with disabilities remain in institutional care in stationary social welfare facilities (called Domy Pomocy Społecznej) despite the fact that Poland ratified the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2012<sup>10</sup>.

### Children in migration

According to the law, unaccompanied minors seeking asylum are to be placed in institutional care facilities or in a professional foster family (zawodowa rodzina zastępcza). As an exception, children accompanied by a close member of a family who is not officially their legal guardian, may be placed under their care. In practice asylum seeking children are rarely placed in a professional foster family. The asylum proceedings have slowed down during the pandemic, and access to asylum procedure has been significantly restricted (very few new applications). Specifically, the latter may have influenced the situation of children who were not able to ask for asylum, e.g. at the Polish-Belarusian border, but no data as to the extent of the phenomenon is available.

### EU funds

Thanks to the financial support of the European Social Fund, online education has been made accessible to children from disadvantaged communities and children in care. PLN 130 million from the ESF was announced in July 2020 for the purchase of computers and the necessary software to provide support for children placed in alternative care to reduce the impact of COVID-19 and to secure audio-visual equipment and personal protective equipment and disinfectants.

The Ministry of Education announced that from 1 April 2020 local governments could apply for money to purchase equipment for online schooling for students and teachers. PLN 180 million was allocated from the Operational Programme Digital Poland.<sup>11</sup>

8 In 2018, the number of family foster care entities decreased by 1.7% compared to 2017. Data from: Information of the Council of Ministers on the implementation in 2018 of the Act of Family Support and Alternative Care System, Informacja Rady Ministrów o realizacji w roku 2018 ustawy z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 r. o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej.

9 Pomoc w usamodzielnianiu się pełnoletnich wychowanków pieczy zastępczej

10 Moreover, the Act of 4 November 2016 on the support of pregnant women and families "For life", obliges local governments or non-governmental organisations support providing supervised housing.

11 Qd. 1 kwietnia samorzady mogą wystąpić o pieniądze na komputery dla uczniów i nauczycieli.

## Testimonies of foster parents

### Testimony 1 - a foster mother with 12 years of experience in running a professional foster family

*When I think about the time of social isolation caused by COVID-19, I first think about the challenges of online education. In my foster family we have eight children, four of whom attend special schools (due to special educational needs). The children are at different stages of education. One child benefits from early supportive therapy for child development. Teachers approached online education in different ways. Some teachers sent materials needed for education via e-mail, others used different electronic tools. It was very difficult for the children to switch to a remote working mode. During online education, I became my children's teacher. I started work at 8.00 a.m. translating maths, geography and other subjects. Most of my children need help. One challenge, for example, was English, which I do not know, so I had to look for online tutoring. I also take care of a gifted child who is studying at a ballet school. This type of education requires constant exercise, with the child working on her body every day, but suddenly the exercises are missing, it is a huge waste. If you multiply the number of children times the number of their teachers, add imperfect devices (laptop and computers) and the poor quality of the internet connection, I have no idea how we managed. Sometimes I felt as if I was looking after a class of 50 children. Everyday life was very difficult. We had to keep the household, teach children at home, and moreover, we saw the consequences of children not being able to benefit from the therapy they had already started. The big question mark would be if one of us fell ill, we initially talked about our adult children replacing us. But a solution offered by social services is still missing.*

### Testimony 2 - a foster mother, 17 years of experience in running a professional foster family.

*I am in touch with two young care leavers. One young woman managed financially, even though the hair salon where she worked has been closed. Unfortunately, she missed a semester in extramural high school because online classes were too difficult for her. She did not know how to deal with the different demands of teachers. Teachers used different tools for remote work, which was an additional difficulty. Various forms of contact and methods of material evaluation are presented. First of all, this young person did not have access to a computer or laptop. She was using a smartphone. However, a smartphone is not the same as a laptop or computer with a good internet connection. Unfortunately, she hadn't told anyone she was having hardware issues, and when that came out it was too late to catch up, even though she had made an attempt. The other care leaver is a young adult man who lives in a semi-independent apartment but has had financial problems due to a lack of work. Before the pandemic, he worked in a gym. The gym was closed and he had more time, so he successfully completed the semester in extramural high school. He had hardware issues too, but he let me know quickly and we were able to help.*

# Portugal

Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso; Sérgio Araújo (Independent researcher and professor at the School of Education of the Polytechnic of Porto)

22.3%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

## Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

Total number of institutions (2019)	Number of children (2019)
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Institutional care (in total)	According to the CASA report 2018: <b>8,557 (4,319 boys   4,238 Girls)</b>
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Institutions for children with disabilities	
Institutions for children 0-3	According to the CASA report 2018:

**408 boys + 382 girls = 790 total**



## Alternative Recommendations

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government should provide affordable and timely access to mental health services for all, with special attention to infant mental health.
- The government should provide adequate financial support to families in vulnerable situations.
- The government should provide internet access and computers to those families who still do not have it in order to ensure that every child will be able to attend home schooling.
- The government should listen to children's views and suggestions.
- The government should tackle the impact of this crisis on accessing housing.

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- The government should take action to reduce inequalities in access to healthcare, by improving the timely access to high quality health services for all, with special attention to children. One way to achieve this is to subsidise private and third sector healthcare providers that complement the national health service (Serviço Nacional de Saúde - SNS) to satisfy unmet healthcare needs.
- Portuguese families need adequate financial support, as the current social transfers are known to be not very effective in tackling poverty and social exclusion.
- The government should put children at the heart of all its policies.
- The government should work on housing opportunities for vulnerable families.
- The government should promote health guidelines that do not

exclude groups of children in the most vulnerable situation.

- The government should prioritise the participation of young people in the shaping of the use of new EU funding period and the Portuguese post-COVID policies and funds.

### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- In the event of a pandemic the government should issue specific guidelines for children and young people in institutional care to differentiate them from the elderly population.
- The government should launch the programmes to promote and develop family-based care as the best solution for children without parental care by accelerating implementation of the legal procedures that will put in place the new law concerning foster families.
- The government should put an end to the institutionalisation of babies between 0-3 years old.

## Summary of Ratings

### Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



### Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



### 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:





# Child Poverty

## Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

### Negative developments

There are no proposed or implemented measures related to the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous families have had to face a severe reduction in their income.

During the schools lockdown there were several negative developments: children were deprived of social contacts with their peers; parents had to balance working from home with managing online school activities for their children; many children had no means to follow online activities, as they did not have access to computers and/or the internet; parents can face serious difficulties in helping their children with school activities as they might not have a

sufficient educational background.<sup>1</sup> And this might happen again if the schools will not be able to keep open.

Access to healthcare became more difficult as the SNS and the private health sector stopped all non-urgent appointments (including follow up appointments, screenings and ongoing therapies) and surgeries. The country also witnessed an increase in mental health problems, like depression and anxiety.

According to UNICEF Portugal,<sup>2</sup> the main issues concerning children are: inequalities accessing home schooling due to the lack of available means (computer or internet) and of parenting support; increased food insecurity due to the families' loss of income and to the difficulties in assuring access to school meals for every child in a vulnerable situation; more difficult access to basic goods and services; children with special needs without adequate

health and educational support; insufficient physical activity and playing opportunities; higher risk of abuse at home and online, as well as higher exposure to domestic violence; inadequate follow-up of children in vulnerable situations or at risk, as the child protection system is designed to work in an in-person model, and gaps in the identification of new cases of vulnerability.

### Government measures

The Portuguese government promoted support for families after the schools closed, establishing that workers who need to leave work for urgent assistance to children under 12 or with special needs, resulting from the closure of a school, early childhood support or disability, are entitled to exceptional support for the family. To access this support, the worker must submit a statement to his/her employer, who is responsible for applying for support from Social Security.<sup>3</sup>

The government also adopted the programme Programa de Estabilização Económica e Social (PEES - Economic and Social Stabilisation Programme)<sup>4</sup> which launched two new measures to support families: a stabilisation supplement and an extraordinary family allowance. These social support payments aim to compensate those who lost part of their salary in the last few months due to the pandemic.

Complemento de Estabilização (Stabilisation supplement): is a financial support for workers who were laid off between April and June 2020. This support is a one-off measure which aims to compensate the loss of wages in relation to a month of layoff. Regrettably, only workers who earned less than €1,270 per month are entitled to this stabilisation supplement. Payments vary between €100 and €351.

<sup>1</sup> According to the OECD, in 2018, 50.2% of the Portuguese population aged 25-64 years old had less than upper secondary education

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF Portugal: Coronavirus

<sup>3</sup> Encerramento das escolas... apoio às famílias

<sup>4</sup> Programa de Estabilização Económica e Social

Abono de Família Extraordinário – the extraordinary family allowance was approved by the government to support Portuguese families as a complementary benefit to the family allowance, which will start to be paid in September by Social Security. It covers families with children and young people up to the age of 16, who fall into the first, second or third income bracket. This exceptional support should cover 974,000 Portuguese children and young people.<sup>5</sup>

The main criticism of these measures concerns the fact that the financial supplements are inadequate, the administrative procedures to follow when applying for it are burdensome, and the time delay before receiving the subsidy is quite long.

With the return to school, children and young people who come into contact with colleagues infected with COVID-19 may have to be in preventive isolation; and in such cases, parents can justifiably miss work without being penalised through their income.

### Examples of good practice

- In March 2020, *Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso* set up a free mental health helpline and managed to maintain remote child psychology, psychiatry and speech therapies, among others, for our users/clients.
- Due to COVID-19, many health services were put on hold, so *Fundação Maria Ulrich* released a series of videos to help families to maintain the psychomotricity stimulation of children from six to 36 months old.
- *Food Bank Portugal* had to support families that have not been in a vulnerable situation before - like arts professionals, freelancers, etc. - as the pandemic left them without any kind of work and, consequently, without an income. Similarly, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) together with local campaigns in Portuguese supermarkets and local churches provided food and basic supplies for the most deprived.
- Many civil society organisations maintained their support to families through digital means.

### Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children



*Portugal witnessed a worrying increase in infant mental health problems. Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso shared the cases of three children, aged 6, 9 and 11, from different families and social backgrounds. Before the lockdown, all of them did well in school and were well-behaved. With the beginning of the lockdown, they started to have sleep problems, nightmares, and became increasingly aggressive. As time went by, they started to have aggressive behaviours towards their siblings and parents. All of them refused to learn from home when online or TV schooling started. The child aged 11 became addicted to YouTube and started to watch violent videos more and more often. Family members and teachers stated that they “did not know that child anymore”. The nine-year-old developed regressive behaviour: she/he could not sleep alone anymore and started sleeping with his/her youngest sister; when contradicted, she/he answers with animal-like behaviours; she/he does not want to wash her/himself or get dressed; she/he became addicted to videogames. The child aged six wanted to sleep with her/his parents. She/he became progressively more violent towards her/his mother and showed less and less regret for these behaviours.*

<sup>5</sup> Covid-19: conheça as novas medidas de apoio às famílias.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Portugal does not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty. However, the Portuguese Government just created a Committee to present a proposal for a National Strategy against Poverty until the end of this year<sup>6</sup>, which can be a crucial opportunity to put child poverty on the national political agenda.

Breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty takes time. In Portugal public policies are interlinked with electoral cycles, so policy makers are more concerned with what they can achieve in the four years they have in government than in setting up long term strategies. Child poverty is a multi-dimensional and complex social problem, so tackling it requires inter-sectoral collaborative approaches. Due to the Portuguese “working in silos” culture, however, this is very hard to put in place.

A national strategy to tackle child poverty is urgently needed, as 22% of Portuguese children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and civil society organisations are worried that this rate will rise with the impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, the country still has an in-work poverty rate of almost 10%.

Despite all the evidence and recommendations about the deinstitutionalisation of children, almost nothing has been done in our country. There are around 7,000 children in alternative care in Portugal and only 3% of them are in family-centred arrangements.

Children don't seem to be a priority in Portugal. There is very little child-centred legislation. Policies that affect children, like for instance early childhood education and care (ECEC), are mainly put in place to allow parents to go to work, and not because they can have positive effects on child development.

### EU influence on national developments

The EU has insufficiently influenced the government to implement child-centred legislation. To be more efficient in pressuring European governments towards child-centred legislation implementation the EU needs to:

- Acknowledge that health – understood as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity - is the base of our well-being.
- Acknowledge that the first three years of life are crucial in our personal development. Indeed, 80% of the human brain develops during these first years. This implies that there is a unique opportunity to intervene early in the life of a person to promote the development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

- Acknowledge that Early Childhood Education and Care cannot be seen merely as a means to allow parents to work, but as a multinational concept that includes a professional response to the specific needs of the children under their responsibility; parenting support and financial support to families.
- Acknowledge that the establishment of personal safe bonds is crucial in child development. This is one of the reasons why children should not be in centre-based alternative care arrangements.
- Acknowledge that investing in the first years of life is the best way to build a healthier and sustainable society as childhood investments have great return potential for both individuals and society.

The 2020 Country Specific Recommendation (CSR) was disappointingly focused only on economic recovery and did not

mention children. It was outrageous to read that the need to have better support for families, increase ECEC coverage and promote better policies of work-personal life balance was based on the need to increase the fertility rate, and not on supporting child development and well-being.

Social policy issues - like education or health - seem to be understood uniquely as tools for economic growth rather than means to societies' sustainability (health and education are the two main factors to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and social exclusion!).

There are no specific references to children, child health or child poverty, even if children are one of the most vulnerable groups of the Portuguese population. Although most of the children in out-of-home alternative care are institutionalised - only around 3% were in family-based care – and this can have severe consequences on child health and well-being, the CSR does not mention the importance of promoting the transition from institutional to family-based care.

In 2016, the Portuguese CSR highlighted the need to ensure the long-term sustainability of the health system, referring to the need to improve the measures aimed at promoting disease prevention and primary healthcare provision in the early stages. While the situation has not changed since 2016, the latest version of the CSR does not mention this utmost necessity.

### **Access to financial resources and services of high quality**

One of the main concerns is the access of children to quality health care. The country has one of the highest households' out-of-pocket payments for healthcare of the entire European Union – around 28%.

It is true that the national health system is open to everyone who needs healthcare and that in Portugal there is a system of exemptions concerning the national health system for every child (from birth to 18 years old). However, the sum of these two factors is not tantamount to a real access to quality and timely health care for every child. And this is due to the organisation of the national health

system: for a hospital consultation with a specialist, children wait months, or even years.

Additionally, children with special needs don't always have access to the early intervention they need, as the as the National Early Intervention on Childhood System (Sistema Nacional de Intervenção Precoce na Infância) has no means to answer to all the children in need of it.

This lack of access to health has serious consequences both in school and in health throughout the lives of Portuguese citizens. Portugal urgently needs to understand that investing in high quality and timely healthcare leads to a higher well-being, educational success, and better social inclusion. In the long run, this would entail having healthier citizens, with better quality of life; higher employability; higher work capacity; higher productivity; lower labour absenteeism; and so on.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The government did not support institutions that take care of children; it just increased the number of monitoring calls to guarantee that sanitary conditions were fulfilled.

According to the rules of the Directorate General of Health, issued at the end of July, a child who has just been removed from his/her family and placed in alternative care must enter the institution alone and cannot be accompanied by a reference figure, not even by the case manager / team (the host meeting must be done by phone or email). The child must do the COVID-19 test and even with a negative result, it is compulsory to isolate a child for 14 days. This rule was suspended with the start of the school year. A complaint was made by civil society to the Ombudsman (Provedoria de Justiça) that this

rule was unconstitutional and undermines the rights of the child.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

The gatekeeping mechanisms for the support of vulnerable families are the same for all kinds of families. According to civil society organisations working in institutional care, there is no extra financial support for their organisations, just more pressure from the Ministry of Social Affairs to follow the health guidelines.

### Progress on child protection reforms

Important changes to the foster families' regime came into force in January 2020. The government measures ensured more rights and support for the foster families, which are now equivalent to those for other families in terms of labour law and social benefits.

The State now provides between €522.91 and €691.55 per child, when the previous minimum amount was around €330. The precise amount of the support is assessed according to the age of the children and also considering conditions of vulnerability such as disability.

Unfortunately, the implementation of this new regime is delayed by the practical difficulties arising from the pandemic and a national debate on institutional care.

### EU funds

In 2017 more than €11 million were invested within the scope of Portugal Inovação Social Program (Portugal Social Innovation programme) in 38 innovative projects aimed at combating social problems, such as unemployment, social exclusion or food waste. With regard to children, ECO media reports that these projects included the monitoring of children's health, a new methodology to tackle autism, the promotion

of digital skills to combat school drop-out and promote youth employability.<sup>7</sup> However positive, these projects are in place only in some Portuguese regions and are not reaching all the national territory. For example, albeit recording the highest number of children in alternative care of the country,<sup>8</sup> the Lisbon Region is not included in the Inovação Social Program. The proposed Child Guarantee could help to change this paradigm by focusing on the childhood segment despite the region of provenance.

<sup>7</sup> Fundos comunitários também ajudam a cumprir sonhos de crianças doentes.

<sup>8</sup> Casa Report 2018.

# Romania

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
**Hope and Homes for  
Children (HHC) Romania**

**35.8%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019	170	5,206
Institutions for children with disabilities	74	2,401
Institutions for children 0-3	N/A	N/A
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019	696	6,892
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2019		34,562
Number of children in kinship care		16,519
Number of adoptions		1,251
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		N/A

### Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2021

- **Support further deinstitutionalisation (DI) of children in care:** All institutions for children should be eligible for closure and DI should be supported through a wide range of services and actions, such as prevention, reintegration of children in their families, developing family-based care, developing integrated networks of community-based care services, and support for young care-leavers.
- **Provide access to non-segregated and inclusive education, including digital learning, for all children:** Support children to attend non-segregated and inclusive schools and achieve better educational outcomes, as a prerequisite for better professional careers and successful integration in their communities. This can be done through specific support measures such as books, transportation, and other school supplies' provision.
- **Increase access to social housing.** This should include increasing the number of available social housing, but also simplifying the procedures for people in vulnerable situations. It is particularly important to pay attention to care leavers.
- **Develop accessible infrastructure and transport:** For children with disabilities and their families, it is essential to ensure the accessibility of buildings, accessible transport, and community-based services.
- **Increase access to primary health services and prevention at community level for groups in vulnerable situations.** Health and access to health services is especially important for groups in vulnerable situations from disadvantaged communities. There should be a clear separation between health-related infrastructure investments and investment related to social services for groups in extremely vulnerable situations and those at risk of social exclusion in particular. Otherwise, the investments in health-related infrastructure could absorb most of the funds available.

## Summary of Ratings

**Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:**



**Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:**



**2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:**



**Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:**



**Government's protection of children's right to participate:**



## Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The first restrictive measure imposed by the government in Romania was to close down schools in March 2020. They remained closed until June 2020, with only a few exceptions<sup>1</sup>. This unprecedented situation and the launching of online education has posed several challenges such as making online education accessible to all children, especially those at risk or in poverty and preparing for the implementation of a mix of online and face-to-face education starting from September.

The Ministry of Education decided to provide all children in need with basic technological equipment and access to the internet. However, neither the Ministry nor the School Inspectorates (at county levels) have proper information on which children need this support. Regarding the second measure, the legislative process has introduced a mix of online and face-to-face education. The support of the government was thus rather limited.

It is estimated that out of approximately 3 million children attending school, 32% do not have access to any kind of online education. This means that over 1 million children could have a gap of half a year of education, due to the fact that they did not attend online classes between March-June 2020.<sup>2</sup>

A phone line was launched for the children and adults who needed information on COVID-19 (by the government) and another one was launched by a charity in Baia Mare and the Ministry of Labour (as part of an EU-funded project). There is no data, for now, on how successful these initiatives were.

Regarding the children in care, a quarantine was placed on all state-managed services in terms of visits and the staff needed to spend two weeks in isolation before being in touch with the children at work.<sup>3</sup> The quarantine and ban on visiting has not been lifted yet, only the measures for the staff were lifted.

There were three main challenges for children living in institutions:

- The confinement, which was even more difficult in the institutional environment. The fact that the children were not allowed to leave the institutions, not even for their daily routine outside (going to school, going out and meeting friends, going for walks etc.) had a negative impact on them and their reaction was often frustration which translated in higher predisposition for aggressive or self-harming behaviour.
- The ban on visits meant the absence of face-to-face contact between children and their biological parents, relatives or friends and had a detrimental effect on the children and their mental health.
- As schools closed, the children in institutions were supposed to start online education. Most did not have access to

<sup>1</sup> These exceptions included children in the 8th and 12th forms, for two weeks, starting from 2 June 2020, in order to help them prepare for their final exams.

<sup>2</sup> IRES: 32% dintre elevii nu au acces la echipament electronic. Doar jumătate dintre copiii au avut contact cu profesorii la toate materiile.

<sup>3</sup> Noi măsuri de protecție socială, aprobate de Guvern.

computers/laptops or tablets in order to pursue online education. The situation was even worse for children who need special education with one-to-one tutorials. Overall, the continuation of education was not ensured, which was also due to overstretched and/or incompetent staff.

Lack of PPE and other hygiene materials was a general problem. Only a limited number of institutions managed to secure these materials which according to Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) Romania posed a real threat to the health of the children and the staff.

Small Group Homes (SGH) were subjected to the same restrictions as the larger institutions in terms of visits, staff quarantine and lockdown. Similarly, they suffered the same lack of cleaning and hygiene materials, however, as there are only 10-12 children in these homes, the staff/children ratio is better and the children's needs were better met by the staff including attending an online education.

The challenges for children in foster families were mainly linked to their mental-health. The children and their foster carers struggled with the prolonged confinement and from not being able to see their friends or to go out. There was potentially an additional problem if one member of the foster family became infected, there were no protocols to address and resolve it. However, as far as HHC Romania is aware, no such cases have so far occurred.

National civil society organisations have recorded a reduction in funding sources, due to the fact that many businesses and donors experienced a decline in their operations. At the same time NGOs were requested to provide more services or in a different way that required more finances.

## Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Almost 35.8% of Romania's children are at risk of social exclusion and poverty and with 1 million work contracts terminated or on hold during the pandemic<sup>4</sup>. HHC Romania assumes that the number of children entering alternative care will grow in the upcoming months. As observed before there are two main triggers for the institutionalisation of children: poverty and a lack of alternative services (as well as prevention networks).<sup>5</sup>

There have been certain measures taken, but no special gatekeeping mechanisms were set up. The local authorities maintained their gatekeeping role, but unfortunately, as the needs became greater and more diverse, the support was not adequate. Food and hygiene packages, while a good initiative, were not sufficient and there is no official data regarding whether

this support has reached their beneficiaries and how efficient it was.

## Progress on child protection and care reform

The crisis delayed the reforms in the area of child protection as the Ministry of Labour focused more on the relief measures for the COVID-19 crisis and not so much on the DI process. A new law 272 - regulating child protection in Romania was adopted in June 2020. HHC notes that while this does not specifically help to accelerate the deinstitutionalisation process, it has provisions regarding children in care, and in particular young care-leavers who have reached the age when they must move from care into independent living.

### Care leavers

HHC Romania observed that the situation of care leavers became very difficult during the pandemic and there were no special services to

<sup>4</sup> Situația contractelor individuale de muncă suspendate/încetate, la data de 28 mai 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Studiu de fundamentare pentru Strategia națională privind incluziunea socială și reducerea sărăciei, 2015-2020.



support them. First, those who were about to leave state care remained in care due to the pandemic and confinement. For some it was an undesired prolongation of dependence. Others who could leave struggled to find accommodation as due to the stigma nobody wanted to rent places to young care leavers.

Moreover, many care leavers lost their jobs, finding themselves with no financial resources and even when the state secured the unemployment allowance, until the money came, they were left with no financial resources at all.

### Children in migration

There were 2,140 asylum requests received in 2018 in Romania, but it does not indicate how many of them were for children. The main reception places for unaccompanied and separated migrant children are the services of the child protection system in Romania. The alternative services (SGHs) are used, depending

on availability, but institutional settings are mostly the norm.

### EU funds

During the pandemic, the government diverted EU funds – with the approval of the European Commission – to support persons in vulnerable situations (not only children, but also adults) in order to provide them with hygiene supplies, disinfectants and other materials. More than 1.2 million people were targeted for this type of support and the total amount spent was RON 141.2 million. Another batch of supplies in the form of food packages was provided in April 2020 which amounted to a total of RON 1 billion.<sup>6</sup>

A significant amount of EU funds has been allocated for families in vulnerable situations and children in care in the 2014-2020 period. The specific prioritisation of de-institutionalisation (DI) in the Partnership Agreement<sup>7</sup> constituted a great commitment from both

Romania and the European Commission to the implementation of DI reform. It led to a specific allocation from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) for de-institutionalisation in the corresponding operational programmes, namely the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) and the Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP).

For instance, from 2016-2018, the project “The elaboration of the plan to de-institutionalise children from institutions and to ensure their transition to community care” (SIPOCA 2) was implemented. It was followed up by the call for ROP OS 8.3 – social services, children in vulnerable situations. Moreover, a number of ESF calls were launched in 2018 to address the development of social and socio-professional services at community level for children and young people and reduce the number of children and young people placed in institutions by consolidating the foster network.

There was also an ESF call for proposals to consolidate the foster network. This was particularly important because the foster care networks are facing a number of challenges: the current foster carers are handing in their certifications for several reasons, including the fact that they have better jobs or have reached retirement age. Most recently, in November 2019, an ESF call under the HCOP was launched: “My First Room” – innovative tools for the social and professional reintegration of young care-leavers.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic HHC Romania suggests a greater flexibility in funds allocation is needed, especially the re-directing of funds in case of need. In this way, vulnerable families and children will benefit more from these projects, allowing them to overcome risk and crisis situations. Furthermore, future investments, both through the national budget and EU funds (REACT-EU, and the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework - MFF) should be used to<sup>8</sup> fulfil

<sup>6</sup> 1,18 milioane de români primesc pachete de igienă distribuite de Ministerul Fondurilor Europene.

<sup>7</sup> Partnership Agreement Romania 2014RQ16M8PA0Q1.1.2, page 52

<sup>8</sup> See also the European Expert Group on the transition from institutional to community-based care with Hope and Homes for Children (2019) - Checklist to ensure EU-funded measures contribute to independent living by developing and ensuring access to family-based and community-based services.

the alternative country specific recommendations proposed by HHC Romania.

## Testimonies

*“The pandemic triggered emotions such as stress and uncertainty for me and my colleagues of all ages. Schools were closed and we needed to stay away from friends. The educators were calm and supported us and so did the people from HHC and they provided us with advice and made time for us so we could talk.”*

John, aged 12

*“We were encouraged to say if we did not feel well and if we were worried about the virus. This is why, whenever we felt that something was not right, we always went to the staff or to the people from HHC and talked to them. And they always had an answer for us and a good word.”*

Michaela, aged 10

*“This so-called social distancing brought us closer, I learnt how to appreciate my colleagues and how to listen to them. I became more patient with others and with myself. The team spirit amongst the staff, the kindness of the social workers and psychologists at HHC – this all restored my faith that things will be OK in the end.”*

Marius, aged 16

*“We were assigned different tasks and we were told, again and again, the basic hygiene rules. They are very important anytime, but especially now. In our daily programme we had special time slots for being reminded of hygiene rules and their importance and we were encouraged to come forward and talk to staff members any time we felt something was wrong.”*

Adrian, aged 9

*One of the young adults who had left the institution and was made redundant when the pandemic appeared became so desperate that he asked to be re-institutionalised, as he had basically no money at all. Sharing an apartment with a friend, none of them could pay the rent and, while the owner agreed to a reduction of the rent, he still stated that rent needed to be paid, putting the young adults at risk of being evicted.*

*We intervened by providing food stamps for the period of the pandemic, which provided basic living resources until the unemployment allowance was provided by the state. Also, we covered the remaining rent costs, to avoid eviction, because he would have been in a very difficult situation had he been evicted. As he put it in June: “I was desperate because there was nothing that I could do, I could not control the situation. I really wanted to work and earn money, but there was nowhere to work and, therefore, no way to earn money. I felt so helpless and lost...I believe it was the first time I felt this way for a long time. I mean, in the institution I managed to build some sort of protection system for myself and things were rather predictable. I knew it was going to be difficult once I left, but I figured that if I work hard, thing will be OK. Well...I could not work, that is the problem. And everything was downhill from there on.”*

Marius, aged 22

# Serbia

## Country Profile on the COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

[Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia \(MODS\)](#);  
[Mental Disability Rights Initiative-Serbia \(MDRI\)](#)

35.9%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2018

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Total number of children in alternative care	21	5,997 <sup>1</sup>
Institutional care (in total) in 2018	21	647 <sup>2</sup>
Institutions for children with disabilities in 2019	6	478 <sup>3</sup> (number of residents of institutions for children with disabilities - 1455)
Institutions for children 0 - 3	1	40
Children with disabilities in SGH in 2019	5	35 (in total 61 residents: children and adults)
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2017		5,350 <sup>4</sup>
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		823 <sup>5</sup>
Small Group Homes (SGHs)	5	35 (61 children and adults in these 5 SGHs)

1 ДЕЦА У СИСТЕМУ СОЦИЈАЛНЕ ЗАШТИТЕ 2019.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Asylum Information Database - Country Report: Serbia.

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Ensure internet access for every child.
- Ensure that every child can use adequate technological devices, such as telephones, tablets or laptops, to learn.
- Provide free face masks for every child attending school and provide free sanitary products for families in need.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Provide social cash benefits for families in need.
- Ensure that all children live in good housing conditions.
- Invest more in education and welfare benefits.

#### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- Serbia should speed up deinstitutionalisation as part of prevention and response to any future epidemic.
- Serbia should pay special attention to the rights of children in residential care when imposing restrictions affecting residential institutions where children live.



## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Negative developments <sup>6</sup>

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was insufficient.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) had to face a period of uncertainty over how to organise activities with children and families. For example, they still do not know how many children do not have access to the internet, have a computer or a smartphone. Moreover, funds are mainly directed to COVID-19 emergency activities, causing cuts and delays in the financing of social activities.

Restrictive measures introduced during the state of emergency significantly affected children: kindergartens and schools have stopped working; their mobility has been heavily restricted; their ability to see their peers is limited

and not recommended; teaching is conducted online through various applications and over the RTS (Radio Television Serbia) public broadcast service.

Children continually experience fear of being infected with the coronavirus. Most children have learned about the coronavirus on TV or online, with only a fifth of them learning about it from their parents. However, in most cases their parents are the main sources of information on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children report that they mostly miss social activities (companionship, socialising, friends, going out) and the freedom of movement.

The prolonged restrictive measures, the state of emergency, and the continued fear of COVID-19 are exacerbated by the high level of uncertainty on many important issues. For example, how long the state of emergency and the COVID-19 outbreak will last, how it will progress, how they will be graded, how they will enrol in high

school, and so on. They primarily worry about the health of loved ones, family members and other people, including worrying that one of them may die.

Children appear to recognise the potential stigmatisation of people with COVID-19; they are afraid of transmitting the virus to loved ones, because then they will be "guilty" if one of them becomes ill.

#### Good practice

- The members of the Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia (MODS) helped families and children to understand how to cope with the lockdown and COVID-19 crisis by creating some background documents and sharing them online.
- MODS members are offering free webinars for parents and children.
- MODS members are urging the government to support the most vulnerable children and families in this critical period.

<sup>6</sup> More info at [Being a child during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Serbia does not have a national strategy to tackle child poverty.

Addressing child poverty is not perceived by the political establishment as a priority. As a consequence, funds are redirected towards other issues.

Even considering the years before the COVID outbreak, the protection of children's rights in Serbia has worsened: there seems to be no social protection development strategy, no strategy for the rights of the child, no strategy to tackle poverty, no law on the rights of the child, no intention to remove the time limit for receiving financial social assistance.

The National Organisation for Rare Diseases of Serbia, the Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia and the Association of Patients of Serbia and Association Hrabriša are

the signatories of an initiative for assessing the constitutionality of Article 12, paragraph 7 of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children.

The controversial provision of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children places the parents of children younger than five with special and serious psychophysical disabilities in the difficult position of having to choose between being absent from work in order to take care of the child (and the corresponding salary compensation due to that absence) and the right to an allowance for help and care from another person.

Without any justification, this legal provision causes the interdependence and exclusivity of those two rights that exist separately and independently from each other. In relation to this Law, the issue of the current solution regarding the exercise of the right to leave from work to care for the child – maternity leave, has also been escalated. On 8 December 2018 the Constitutional

Court issued Decision No IUZ-226/2017 to open a procedure to determine the unconstitutionality of the provision of Article 12, paragraph 7 of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children. We urge the government to completely abolish the controversial provision in order to stop the application of this measure that directly affects parents who fight for a dignified and good quality life for their children on a daily basis.

### EU influence on national developments

- The EU involvement in promoting child rights at a national level was insufficient.
- The EU should support independent civil society organisations' advocacy and research work.
- While presenting Progress Reports about Serbia, the EU should put more emphasis on the

need to address children's rights issues.

### Education

- Most children (83.3%) stated that they had no problems with online teaching.
- Almost half of the children have their own personal computer (48.3%), 37% share the computer with the household, and 14.7% of the children do not have access to a computer at all.
- Children are notably satisfied with the communication with their teachers, but somewhat less satisfied with the extent to which parents / guardians can explain to them parts of lessons they do not understand.
- Children who are less satisfied with communication with teachers have significantly greater problems with learning.

- Regarding distance learning, children reported having a problem with the internet (internet access, poor connection); with not having anyone to ask for clarifications about their lessons; with the quick succession of slides on TV so they cannot always read everything; with teachers who use different applications so they run out of memory space on their smartphones.
- The present-day education system in Serbia does not diminish the consequences of socio-economic inequalities and does not enable social mobility. The chances of a young person whose parents' education is only elementary to enrol in a high school or college and have the opportunity for a better-paid job and a decent salary are fairly limited.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

In Serbia, residential institutions have been confining children and adults with disabilities since the outbreak of COVID-19, sometimes not even allowing them to go out in their institutions' yards for fresh air or to receive visitors. At the same time, external, independent monitoring of institutions is not allowed, leaving children without proper preventive mechanisms against abuse, violence, inhuman and degrading treatments and punishments. This

is the case especially for institutions that are locked down and short of staff.

Civil society actors have experienced significant challenges as a direct result of the crisis. Participation in decision-making on national and local levels significantly shrunk and all measures have therefore been taken without the involvement of civil society. All measures are decided by a small circle of people, without the involvement of NGOs. There has further been a lack of reliable and disaggregated data about the health situation of children in alternative care related to COVID-19. Finally,

### Children's participation

Marginalised and vulnerable children are not listened to in Serbia. MODS members are trying to change this state of play through projects with the United Nations and the programme 'Dialogue for the Future', but much remains to be done.

MODS members are also implementing various projects to

help children from marginalised groups to be heard. Politicians should organise public hearings with children to listen to their opinions and ideas and set up meaningful consultation processes with children to involve them in the political process.

there has been an overwhelming amount of information and challenges blurring the visibility of actions from civil society.

No plans for mitigating the long-term effects of COVID-19 have yet been released and it is suspected that none have been created.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Several studies have been published in recent years showing that the most prevalent reasons for putting children in institutions are of a social and economic nature, and especially that there is a lack of adequate community-based care and support. However, there are no estimates regarding the number of children at risk of separation from their parents. Additionally, the provision

of services to support vulnerable families was reduced during the lockdown, and some of the services halted. Only after the intervention of dozens of NGOs did the government re-establish and enable provision of some services.

The Ministry for Social Affairs has claimed that new placements of children in alternative care were stopped and that social care homes were instructed to place already institutionalised people in families where this was possible. However, there are no records that this was done in any institution for adults or children.

## Progress on child protection and care reform

Child protection reforms do not seem to have been slower as a consequence of the crisis. In May 2020, right after the state of emergency was abolished, a Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence was adopted together with an action plan. It designated

EU funds (IPA III) of approximately €667,000 (activity 2.2.3. AP) for the improvement and development of specialist treatments for minors who committed crimes. This strategy contains some deinstitutionalisation related provisions. No processes seem to have been stalled because of the crisis. It is uncertain whether there are any EU funds allocated specifically to children in the context of COVID-19.

In Serbia, small group homes' (SGHs) have the same possibility to have a detrimental effect on children's wellbeing of bigger scale institutions. The children lack personalised care and attention, and stimulation, and are segregated from the community. The children who were taken out of large institutions a decade ago and were placed in SGHs are still there and some of them show significant regression in their health and wellbeing. Problems with the provision of healthcare and meaningful activities have been recorded, and the overall atmosphere and style of living is very similar to that in bigger scale institutions with somewhat better physical conditions.

# Slovakia

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
[Coalition for Children Slovakia](#)

22%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2018

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Avoid chaotic/contradictory announcements and introduction of the measures during the pandemic.
- Include children in the most vulnerable situations, especially those in segregated areas, in the social packages and eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy for the distribution of social allowances from the state.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Provide quality education for all children in any kind of circumstances by preparing

special measures for children in vulnerable situations (living in poverty, in institutional care, migrant children...).

- Ensure meaningful child participation in decision-making processes by shifting the understanding of a child as a passive recipient to that of an active co-creator.

#### Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- To further support families and children in vulnerable situations by targeted financial allowances as well as further development and deployment of family counselling centres to socially disadvantaged areas.





## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was inadequate.

The Slovak government did not address the needs of families and children adequately during the pandemic. In particular, no special allowance to support families in vulnerable situations was introduced. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family extended the provision of parental allowance to parents who lost their entitlement to it in March 2020 and did not have a job to return to, and had no other income. It was paid until the end of the emergency in April 2020.<sup>1</sup>

An amendment to the Act on Social Insurance, which regulates, inter alia, the conditions for entitlement to nursing care during child sickness

in connection with the spread of coronavirus was adopted in March 2020. It secured a nursing care allowance previously provided during child-sickness for children 0-18 years<sup>2</sup> during the lockdown.

#### Negative developments

- In many cases children in segregated villages did not attend any kind of education from March to June 2020.

#### Good practice

- New and effective ways of working (webinars, online meetings...)
- Big wave of solidarity among people.
- New fundraising tools emerged including new ways of crowdfunding.
- New partnerships that led to new initiatives were established.

### Key challenges experienced by families and children

- Insecurity about the future and not knowing how long the situation was going to last. Uncertainty of the re-unification of families whose members/parents stayed locked in different countries.
- Attempts to harmonise home-office and home schooling. Lack of computers and personnel capacities.
- Not being able to generate sufficient income for the families.

### Key challenges for civil society organisations

- To continue implementation of the project activities e.g. based on cooperation with schools or by organising conferences.
- Insecurity for the future, inability to plan anything: need for organisations to re-structure their

<sup>1</sup> Slovakian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family.

<sup>2</sup> OČR a PN v súvislosti s koronavírusom... čo platí od marca 2020?

activities and their approach and working methods.

- Major impact on cash flow due to interruption of services. Income has scaled down since donors

were facing similar financial difficulties. The donors were generous with prolonging the

projects' duration and submitting the final reports.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

The national strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion<sup>3</sup> was adopted in 2015 and updated in 2017. Coalition of Children Slovakia (CCS) considers that it fails to address the needs of the poorest families and children in segregated areas. Another weak point is that there is no action plan to implement the planned measures.

CCS has observed a tendency by the Slovak government to regress in the implementation of policies for the benefit of children. A good example is the Ombudsperson for Children, which is a missed opportunity and a waste of funding. Slovakia has had a new government since March 2020

that includes the parties promoting “traditional family values” (with a conservative catholic background). Children’s rights are overlooked and the reproductive rights of woman are now under pressure, due to the new conservative leadership of the Ministry of Social Affairs, and Ministry of Health Care. Their actions (a new law is in parliament) consist of appointing conservative heads of ministerial departments in charge of these policies, introducing measures that will restrict the access of women to abortion and reorienting grant schemes for pro-life and family policies designated originally for gender balance. New measures are also expected in children’s rights issues.

### The involvement of the EU in promoting children’s rights was adequate:

The Coalition for Children Slovakia suggests not providing funds to the areas which were not able to use the allocated funds and evaluating the impact of supported projects. The rule of law and human rights should be the guiding principles in all calls.

### Children’s right to participate

The main challenge is not understanding the meaning of participation and absence of an official leader or a supervisor for ensuring child participation. A child is understood as a passive recipient instead of an active co-creator that should be involved in all decision-

making processes that affect them. A member of the CCS, the Open Society Foundation Slovakia, published a position paper mapping the situation on child participation in Slovakia<sup>4</sup>. They also published a *National Strategy for support of the participation of children and young people in Slovakia*.<sup>5</sup> Recommendations focus on two main areas - school and municipality environments:

#### in school environment:

- Incorporate the child participation into the education & training of future teaching and professional staff
- Elaborate the programme of teacher’s professional development that will include the issue of participation of children and young people

<sup>3</sup> Národná rámcová stratégia podpory sociálneho začlenenia a boja proti chudobe.

<sup>4</sup> Pozitívny dokument Participácia detí a mladých ľudí na Slovensku.

<sup>5</sup> Návrh stratégie podpory a rozvoja participácie detí a mladých ľudí v Slovenskej republike.

- Develop the methodology for ensuring school participation

#### in the municipality:

- Introduce the participation of children and young people in municipality

- Appoint the coordinator for the participation of children and young people at local-government level

- Develop the methodology to ensure the participation of children and young people

#### Efforts of the government to ensure child participation:

For progress to be made, a new ombudsperson for children should be appointed, with a mandate to protect and ensure the enforcement of children's rights. The functioning

of the Committee for Children and Young People should be made more efficient and transparent, following the suspension of all activities after the previous coordinator left.

## Children in Alternative Care (CIAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

During lockdown all residential facilities canceled visits. Contact between a child and their biological family was ensured via social media and phone. Adoption processes were also stopped.

- NGOs have been trying to monitor children and families in vulnerable situations with the assistance of some municipalities, and some such as the Banská Bystrica<sup>5</sup> municipality were very helpful. Given the absence of ambulant or community services, it is estimated that the number of

children entering child protection will raise by 30% approximately. Families at risk were hit hard by the crisis with no or very limited support including the absence of support provided via family centres. Even in situations where a woman with children needed to leave their home it was difficult to find a place since all help and crisis centres were closed.

- There were no special measures during the crisis to address the needs of young people ageing out of care. They could stay in residential care during the pandemic. Mental health problems and depression from uncertainty increased among young people,

and yet no adequate support was provided.

### Child protection

The Slovak Republic introduced new types of services for families in vulnerable situations by creating the Centre for Children and Family in 2019 which the CCS sees as a positive change in child protection. This centre provides new community services from experts such as psychologists and social workers. The centres were created in existing facilities. The quality of the services provided may vary but in general it is a step forward.

There is also a new Concept ensuring the implementation

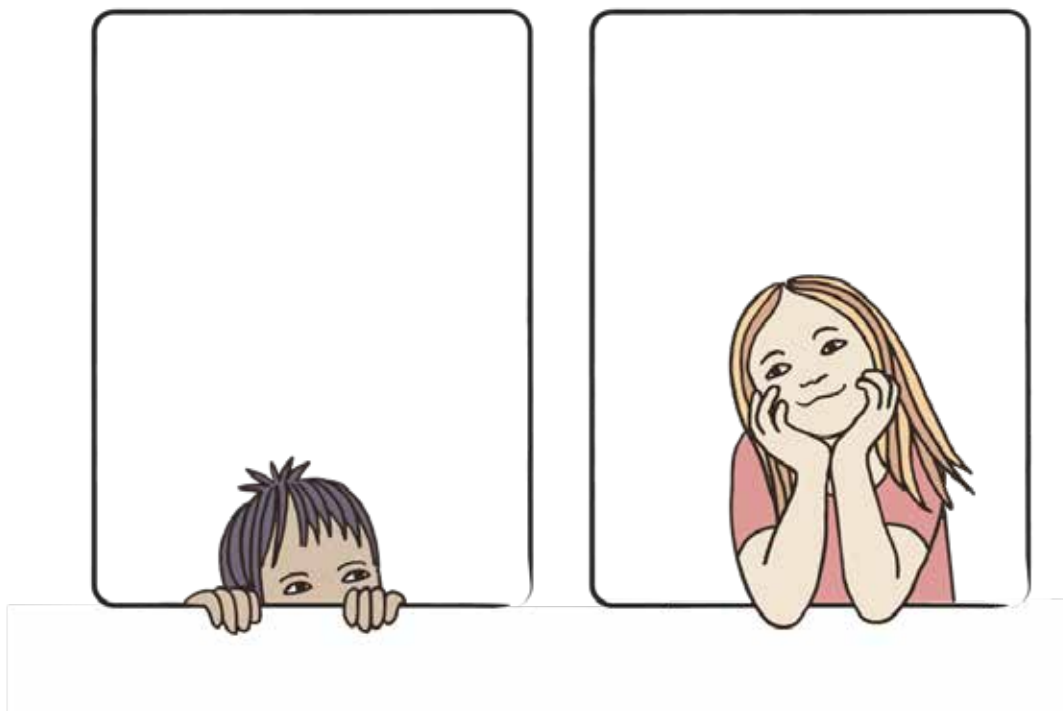
of measures in social protection facilities and social guardianship for the years 2019 – 2023. The Transformation and Deinstitutionalisation Plan aims at continuing the process of deinstitutionalisation of replacement care, in order to reduce the number of children placed in alternative care.

The Coalition for Children of Slovakia believes the deinstitutionalisation of children in alternative care has brought several positive changes to the care system. However, it is still work in progress and there are several gaps. Remaining challenges are the further transformation of residential facilities, the development of family-based foster care and the adoption of

clear standards for all providers of alternative care for children. Family support via various programmes as well as counselling centres needs to be further developed and deployed across the country. Several separations of children from their families could have been prevented if there had been adequate financial and non-financial assistance, given the findings of the Ministry of Labour that one of the main reasons why children enter the child protection system is their poor socio-economic situation<sup>6</sup>.

### Children in migration

In Slovakia there were 85 unaccompanied migrant children in 2019 who were placed in a specialised children's home in Medzilaborce<sup>7</sup>. Out of 69 unaccompanied minors who entered Slovakia in 2019, 38 were provided accommodation and support in the same home.



<sup>6</sup> Sociálne veci a rodina.

<sup>7</sup> Štatistický prehľad legálnej a nelegálnej migrácie v Slovenskej republike.

# Slovenia

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:  
Slovenian NGO Network ZIPOM

11.7%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Alternative recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Maintaining the health of the population (including mental health), especially of children and families.
- Financial and other support for underprivileged families and families with children with special needs.
- Finding different and new ways of schooling children during an outbreak – giving more support to teachers and parents on how to school children at home.

#### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Efficient tackling of unemployment and poverty.

- Strengthening the health care system (including providing specialists for child health care: paediatricians, child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists).

- Integrating a Child Guarantee mechanism into the national policy planning.

- Higher welfare benefits for children (child allowance – otroški dodatek), reducing inequality in employment and income.

- Free kindergartens for all children, and free school textbooks for all children in primary school.

- Independent healthcare insurance for all children, and increase in the number of child healthcare specialists.

- More affordable loans for families.



## Summary of Ratings

**Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:**



**Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:**



**2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:**



**Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:**



**Government's protection of children's right to participate:**



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19<sup>1</sup> crisis

#### Digital gap

The coronavirus lockdown highlighted and reinforced the education gap. Some rural areas in Slovenia do not have access to stable connections. Many students did not have the equipment at home to log in to class, or their parents might be essential workers, unable to watch them during the day to ensure they sign in for school or help them study.

#### Food poverty

The school closure put children living in low-income families at risk (to be hungry), they relied on free school meals.

#### Increase in intra-family violence

The distress of children in violent families has increased. Children subjected to domestic abuse

were forced to stay at home in an environment of heightened stress that caused the violence to increase. The national helpline TOM telephone (helpline for children and young people, which is one of the SAFY's programmes), recorded more calls concerning family relations, psychological issues, depression, destructive behaviours, and loneliness.

#### Unemployment

Many people lost their jobs, the unemployment rate in Slovenia rose by 20% from 75,026 at the beginning of the epidemic in mid-March to 90,415 at the end of May (resource Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia).

#### Impact on the work of civil society organisations

Civil society organisations are impacted by the uncertainty concerning COVID-19, making the continuation of their work and activities with children more

difficult due to all the precautionary measures (e.g. children's holidays during the summer, free childcare during the vacations, issues with ensuring children's participation). They are facing a significant increase in humanitarian needs and are operating under short delays. In parallel, government support for the NGO sector started to decrease and there are signs that it will continue to decrease even more (funding cuts).

### Positive developments

- Subsidising of part-time work (to maintain jobs in face of the consequences of the epidemic and the temporary inability to provide work) – active employment policy measures.
- Vouchers for strengthening Slovenian tourism (all residents – adult citizens - with permanent residence in Slovenia received a voucher for the amount of €200

1 Obvestilo.za.javnost.marec.2020.  
Obvestilo.za.javnost.april.2020.  
Obvestilo.za.javnost.maj.2020.  
Neuradni.dnevni.podatki.brezposelnost

and also children and young people for the amount of €50). They can be used to pay bed and breakfast in accommodation establishments in Slovenia.



- Deferral of credit payments for 12 months for a wide range of beneficiaries (persons, citizens of Slovenia) – it only delays the

payment of credit and interest still had to be paid, also the costs of the deferral fees were left to the beneficiaries, so in effect it only prolonged the loan repayment time and made it more costly (because the banks charged a deferral fee).



- The possibility of introducing combined school learning – in-person and remote learning.



**During the pandemic, civil society organisations have been successful in:**

- Providing technical equipment for remote learning (mostly computers for school pupils).

- Providing food (charitable food packages in cooperation with food online shop [Preprosto.je](https://preprosto.je)).

- Engaging more volunteers in providing childcare for children whose parents had to go to work and also helping the elderly do the grocery shopping and keeping them company.

## Policies for Investing in Children

In Slovenia, children's rights received very little attention from the government during COVID-19, as there is a widespread view that children are well off in the country, and the issue is not seen as a priority. Before the crisis, children's rights had a period of progress, when many changes happened, although we are still waiting for the Programme for Children and the state report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The delay is also due to governments shifts. Now, especially since the shift in government from the left to the right-wing political parties at the

start of the COVID crisis, civil society is concerned about the place of children's rights on the political agenda.

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Slovenia does not have a specific national strategy for tackling child poverty. Chapter 3 (decent life for all) of the Development Strategy of Slovenia 2030<sup>2</sup>, is devoted to protecting families and children and creating a supportive decision-

making environment for a child. *Slovenia has committed itself (according to the Agenda 2030) to reduce poverty by half.*

In Slovenia, 41,000 children lived in poverty (which is 10.5 % of all children) in 2019. A strategy to tackle child poverty at the national level is essential to bring this figure down. Moreover, Slovenia should put some efforts to get acquainted with Child Guarantee and take it into account as much as possible, especially in policy making.

The main obstacles for the development of a national strategy to tackle child poverty are:

- There is not enough attention to children's rights.
- Children are often an overlooked social group (especially when talking about children's participation).
- Child poverty cannot be separated from family poverty. In the strategy, poverty should be covered comprehensively.

<sup>2</sup> [Strategija razvoja Slovenije 2030](#)

## Access to financial resources in the family

In Slovenia, social transfers are effective in reducing poverty. Many families rely on welfare benefits to sustain their families. It is important to address unemployment and in-work poverty.

Children in Slovenia have access to kindergartens, healthcare, and education. Kindergartens are free only for the second and next child and children's access to healthcare is dependent on their parents' economic status. There is a lack of specialists for children's health care: paediatricians, child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists.

The majority of Roma children still do not attend school, do not have access to adequate housing or even water.

## Views on the Semester process

The 2020 Country-Specific Recommendation does not mention

the NGO sector and only mentions children with regard to education and remote learning (see Art. 29).

## Children's participation

Children's participation is not part of any strategic or legislative document in Slovenia, so it is quite hard to include children at the policy level.

The Children's Parliaments programme enables children to participate in school, on a local level, and on the national level. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, face to face communication was suspended. The Children's Parliaments' activities moved online, using [OPIN.ME](#), a platform for e-participation.

### To ensure children's right to participate, SAFY and ZIPCOM are calling for:

- Adoption of a national programme for children (2020-2025) – it is in the preparatory phase.
- Preparation and adoption of a national strategy on child participation.

- More general awareness of children's rights and consequently also on the right to participate.



# Spain

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

Plataforma de Organizaciones de Infancia and FICE Spain

30.3%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Number of Institutions <sup>1</sup> (2019)	Number of children (2019)
Institutional care (in total)	<b>1,104 (residential centres)<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>21,283</b>
Institutions for children with disabilities		<b>1,373</b>
Institutions for children 0-3		<b>619</b>

### Family-based care

	2018
Number of children in family-based/foster care:	<b>6,981</b>
Number of children in kinship care:	<b>12,564</b>
Number of adoptions:	<b>639<sup>3</sup></b>

1 In the national statistics on child protection the data provided is grouped under two headings, residential care or foster care. There is no specific data on small group homes (it is included as part of residential care).

2 As of 31 December 2018, there were 1,104 residential facilities: 812 managed by collaborating entities and 206 publicly owned.

3 The number of children adopted in 2018 was 639, representing a decrease of 6% from the previous year. 49% were under three years old. There were 1,215 new adoption offers, a decrease of 7% from the previous year, 924 certificates of suitability were issued, 94% of which were positive.

## Alternative Recommendations

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government should adopt legislative measures to support summer and after-school practices for children such as learning and educational activities and educational leisure.

- Family support measures should be implemented by the government in order to ensure that vulnerable families, children in protection centres and all those working with children have access to COVID-19 health protection equipment (masks, hydro alcoholic gel, gloves, etc.).

### Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- The Spanish government should implement child social benefits to financially support vulnerable families experiencing poverty.

- The Spanish government should implement measures to promote a balance between family life and work besides working from home.

- The EU should approve the European Child Guarantee. In the post-COVID-19 crisis period this measure would help to reduce the negative consequences of this crisis.

### Children in Alternative Care:

- Support families to prevent unnecessary separation;
- Prioritise family-based care;
- Provide greater financial and human resources to guarantee the protection of children in alternative care;
- Ensure appropriate protection for care leavers;
- Ensure appropriate protection for unaccompanied migrant children.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

#### Government support

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was adequate.

#### Negative developments

##### Children and families experienced a number of important challenges

In Spain the lockdown measures concerning children have been extremely restrictive. For example, during the first weeks of the lockdown, children were not allowed to leave their house for any reason. There was a lack of a children's rights perspective in public policies and similarly a lack measures to address the needs of vulnerable groups (such as Roma and migrant children) in the Spanish national protection system.

##### NGOs faced important hurdles

Hurdles included the uncertainty over the public funding from the

Spanish authorities to NGOs in the mid and long term; the difficulty in providing services to children without internet connections or without electronic devices; the work overload in the face of unforeseen urgent and emergency issues.

##### Lack of data on violence and of mechanisms to denounce it

Civil society organisations are concerned about the lack of data during the COVID lockdown and the decrease on the reported cases of violence. Indeed, there is grave concern that a lot of cases are not being identified and, in particular, about the lack of mechanisms designed to enable children to denounce such cases. According to figures from the General Police Directorate, from 16 March 2019 and 16 May 2019, 239 cases of sexual violence against children were reported. From 16 March 2020 and 16 May 2020, only 84 cases were reported, so 64.85% less. This reinforces the idea that nowadays children are unable to ask for help because they do not have the mechanisms to do so.

##### School meal grants

During the lockdown, the number of children who received school meal grants halved.

##### Digitalisation

44% of the families with a monthly income under EUR 900 do not have a computer at home, and 32% do not have an internet connection.

##### Good practice

##### Government measures

The government implemented a number of positive measures, including a minimum living income, temporary lay-offs, social protection measures and food scholarships.

##### Internet connection

Civil society organisations such as the Red Cross, UNICEF and Save the Children provided internet connections and electronic devices to vulnerable and socially isolated families.

##### Awareness

A coordinated advocacy action by Spanish children's rights organisations managed to increase

awareness at the political level of the impact of the outbreak on children's wellbeing. As a result, children's rights issues were finally included in the political debate.

### Press conference

Children were invited to take part in a press conference organised by the government. They thus had the possibility to ask questions directly to the government representatives.

### Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children

A member organisation shared an example of the obstacles faced by children in vulnerable families during the COVID-19 lockdown

and the negative consequences on their education. In particular, the organisation has been helping Roma children without an internet connection or electronic devices at home to receive their online homework and to get in contact with the school.

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Spain has a national strategy against poverty with a specific chapter to tackle child poverty. There is also a Spanish High Commissioner Against Child Poverty in the Ministry of the Presidency.

The strategy sets up clear objectives for reducing child poverty. However, there is no specific budget allocated for this strategy; due to the political instability, the National General Budget has been automatically extended since 2016.

Having a national strategy to tackle child poverty is important because it is an advocacy tool that helps civil society organisations to ask for more

policies and a greater commitment to tackle child poverty. However, from an operational point of view, the strategy is less useful given the lack of a specific allocated budget.

In recent years the government has improved its protection of children's rights. It has introduced a new law on the protection of children from violence, a new education law, and a new minimum income guarantee. However much more is needed in the next months in order to react to the severely negative impact of COVID-19 on children's well-being.

### EU influence on national developments

- **Reasonable involvement of the EU in promoting children's rights:**

The EU had a reasonable influence on national developments. On the other hand, the EU should adopt stricter measures to guarantee that the recommendations addressed to Spain in the framework of the European Semester are actually implemented. Moreover, the EU should exercise more pressure on the government to guarantee a more efficient promotion of children's rights.

- Positive response to the Country-Specific Recommendations: The document includes specific recommendations regarding cash transfers to vulnerable families and specific proposals to promote early childhood education.

Access to financial resources and services of high quality

- The Spanish government performed positively in ensuring adequate resources and services to families and children.
- Social services offices have been closed during the lockdown. This clearly had a negative impact on vulnerable families with children. Some problems have been identified regarding the access to temporary lay-offs.
- With regard to the Minimum Income Guarantee, vulnerable families did not receive cash transfers until June.

## Children's participation

- The Spanish government performed reasonably well in ensuring children's right to participate.
- Due to the lack of technical devices and an internet connection in many families, some problems have been identified in the field of children's participation, especially in vulnerable families.

## Recommendations

- **The Spanish Government should implement a direct cash transfer to support childcare.**
- **Other priorities should also be addressed, such as school support programmes, conciliation between family life and work, digital education programmes, summer programmes for children, and programmes to addressed to vulnerable families such as the VECA programme.**
- **The implementation of the National Child Participation Council should be a priority. Given that this action has been included in the coalition Government Agreement, the next steps by the government are expected in the coming months.**

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

All the efforts made by the government have been focused on containing the spread of the virus. As a consequence, many other activities have been put on hold. In an emergency health context, the **main challenge** is to protect the rights of children in institutions and ensure quality care and protection for children and adolescents in alternative care.

The government implemented a number of policies to support vulnerable families and children in care: the Royal Decree-Law of 12 March adopting urgent measures to respond to the economic impact of COVID-19, Royal Decree-Law 11/2020, of 31 March, adopting additional urgent measures in the social and economic field to deal with COVID-19; Royal Decree-Law 8/2020, of 17 March, on urgent extraordinary measures to deal with the economic and social impact

of COVID-19; Royal Decree-Law 12/2020, of 31 March, on urgent measures to protect and assist victims of gender-based violence.

The main challenges faced by NGOs were: how to guarantee the rights of all children and youngsters in care while dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak, how to guarantee safety in the face of a lack of sufficient protective gear; how to guarantee the quality of support services, how to find innovative solutions in a very short time.

Institutional care cannot guarantee that the rights of the children are respected, neither does it provide the best quality care possible since multiple studies show that family based care is the best option. Yet, it was extremely difficult to send children whose parents have been hospitalised because of the coronavirus. Nonetheless many calls were made by umbrella organisations such as the State Association of Foster Families (ASEAF), and in many cases minors have been sent to residential

centres. The coronavirus has in many cases slowed down and delayed the process of finding foster families for these children.

During quarantine, social organisations have been doing their best to support families with online tools to see how the confinement and adaptations were going. In this regard children and their families were not only facing the potential threats of the coronavirus but also the challenges related to having to deal with online education and living in a limited space for a prolonged time.

## Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

In 2018 there was an increase of 5.2% in the total number of children and adolescents in care, from 47,493 in 2017 to 49,985 in 2018. The total number of residential placements as at 31 December increased sharply (from 17,527 in

2017 to 21,283 in 2018). On the other hand, foster care has slowed down from 19,004 in 2017 to 19,545 in 2018. In absolute terms, residential care has surpassed family care with 21,283 children and youngsters versus 19,545 in foster care.

For the first time, in residential care, the total number of foreign children, 55%, has surpassed that of Spaniards, 45%.

Key gatekeeping measures for the support of vulnerable families are listed hereafter.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, these initiatives – however positive - have been clearly insufficient in reaching all the persons who needed it.

- **Minimum Living Income** (*Ingreso mínimo vital*): is a non-contributory social security benefit that guarantees a minimum income to vulnerable individuals. It provided an additional 25 million euros to address the basic right to food of children from vulnerable families who have been affected by the

closure of schools and school canteens.

- In view of the lockdown during the state of alarm caused by COVID-19, services for women victims of gender violence have been declared essential.
- Evictions were suspended for a maximum period of six months from 2 April 2020.
- Prolongation of lease contracts.
- Rent debt moratorium.
- Rent subsidies.

## Main reasons for children entering alternative care<sup>2</sup>

- The main means for children entering alternative care in Spain are "ex lege guardianships": when the exercise of the functions of care and custody of the minor are assumed by the public entity.
- By court order: custody in centres or establishments run by the

public entity, in application of a judge's order.

- Voluntary custody at the request of parents or guardians: either because there is an express request from those who have authority over the minor before the public body, or through the municipal social services, public prosecutor's office, etc.
- Provisional care: provisional care with the aim of providing immediate attention to a minor in an emergency situation.

## Care leavers

Administrative procedures have been suspended for many months. This means that young people are still waiting for decisions on residence permits, work permits and enrolment in studies that remain pending for an indefinite period.

Care leavers who were studying have lost opportunities to participate in educational activities.

<sup>1</sup> Medidas urgentes en el ámbito social y económico para hacer frente al COVID-19; Preguntas frecuentes sobre las medidas sociales contra el coronavirus.

<sup>2</sup> Boletín de datos estadísticos de medidas de protección a la infancia.

The necessity to study from home negatively affected young care leavers who are now facing difficulties in going on to further their studies.

Law 13/2020 of 7 April recognised the right of young migrants between 18 and 21 years old to work in the fields until 30 June. The measure has since been extended until 30 September. Furthermore, on 26 May, the Council of Ministers approved the granting of a two-year residence and work permit (extendable for another two years) to all young migrants between the ages of 18 and 21 who take up this extraordinary measure of temporary agricultural work. In the meantime, services that were already supporting these young care leavers have continued to do so as much as possible.

## Children in migration

The number of migrant minors registered in Spain's Registry of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors

(MENA) as of July 2019 was 12,323.<sup>3</sup>

In the last few years many Spanish autonomous communities have been experiencing a high rate of migrant arrivals. These regions have been taken aback by the arrival of unaccompanied foreign minors (MENAS), which often has resulted in a sudden and unexpected increase in demand for residential places. This has caused overcrowding in reception centres and a distortion of evaluation and referral processes. This has also led to the exclusive presence of foreign minors in some centres, which postpones their necessary integration with other minors of Spanish nationality.

During the quarantine the administrative procedures have been paralysed and or/slowed down. Unaccompanied minors who were studying have lost their opportunity to participate in educational activities. COVID-19 has placed them once again in an "eternal waiting room".

The outbreak has also caused the suspension of the visits of relatives and friends. To alleviate this lack of contact with their loved ones, care providers have tackled the situation by video-conferencing or video-calling. This has partially helped children to maintain the bond with their loved ones and helped them to better cope with isolation.

According to the Spanish law on the protection of minors, family foster care should take precedence over residential care. However, residential care settings are currently the most prominent. The pandemic has put a halt to placement in family based settings due to restrictions on mobility and social distancing requirements. There are autonomous communities that have taken steps to find a solution. Catalonia, for example, has launched a pilot project to offer family placement to migrant minors. This type of care is also being promoted in the Community of Valencia.

## EU funds

**EU funds** allocated for the implementation of legislative and/or policy framework related to vulnerable families and children in care are the following:

- The Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII);
- The Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus (CRII+);
- Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) as part of the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus CRII+ package.

They are all new funds. There is not enough information on how the Spanish government will be using these funds in practice.

3 Número de menores migrantes inscritos en el Registro de Menores Extranjeros no Acompañados (MENA) de España a julio de 2019, por comunidad autónoma.

# Statistics explained

Data on child poverty provided in this publication was retrieved from Eurostat.

The most recent data on children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), was taken from 2019 data when available, and where not (as is the case with Ireland and Italy) 2018 data was used.

The European Commission defines the AROPE indicator as the share of the population in at least one of the following three conditions:

- at risk of poverty, meaning below the poverty threshold
- in a situation of severe material deprivation
- living in a household with a very low work intensity.



## Glossary – Children in Alternative Care

<b>Alternative care</b>	A formal or informal (children without parental care should be narrower as “not in overnight care” might be during summer camps, informal family arrangements, boarding school etc.) arrangement whereby a child is looked after at least overnight outside the parental home, either by decision of a judicial or administrative authority or duly accredited body, or at the initiative of the child, his/her parent(s) or primary caregivers, or spontaneously by a care provider in the absence of parents (Better Care Network Toolkit) <sup>1</sup>
<b>Child protection</b>	Preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Child protection system</b>	The combination of laws, policies, structures, mechanisms and services required to prevent and respond to child maltreatment, exploitation and other violations of the child’s fundamental rights. <sup>3</sup>
<b>Children without parental care</b>	‘All children not in the overnight care’ (Guidelines, para 29.a) of both or one of their parents as a result of ‘the parents general inability or unwillingness to provide adequate care’ (Guidelines, para 30.c).
<b>Community-based services</b>	Services directly accessible at the community level, such as: family strengthening services, parenting courses and sessions, promotion of positive parent-child relationships, conflict resolution skills, opportunities for employment and income generation and, where required, social assistance, etc.; supportive social services, such as day care, mediation and conciliation services, substance abuse treatment, financial assistance, and services for parents and children with disabilities <sup>4</sup>
<b>Deinstitutionalisation of children</b>	Policy-driven process of reforming a country’s alternative care system, which primarily aims at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreasing reliance on institutional and residential care with a complementary increase in family and community-based care and services;</li> <li>• Preventing separation of children from their parents by providing adequate support to children, families and communities;</li> <li>• Preparing the process of leaving care, ensuring social inclusion for care leavers and a smooth transition towards independent living.</li> <li>• De-institutionalisation def. from the EU Guidelines<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Formal family-based care</b>	All care provided in the domestic environment of a family which has been ordered by a competent administrative body or judicial authority (derived from Guidelines, paras 29.b.ii and 29.c.ii). Foster care and formal kinship care are two types of formal family-based care. <sup>6</sup>

1 <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Child%20Protection%20Systems%20-%20Mapping%20and%20Assessment%20Toolkit.pdf>

2 [https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard\\_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php](https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php)

3 [https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard\\_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php](https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php)

4 Opening Doors for Europe’s Children 2014, Deinstitutionalisation and Quality Alternative Care for Children in Europe; Lessons Learned and the Way Forward.

5 <https://deinstitutionalisationdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/guidelines-final-english.pdf>

6 [https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard\\_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php](https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php)



<b>Foster care</b>	'Situations where children are placed by a competent authority for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family other than the children's own family that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care' (Guidelines, para 29.c.ii).
<b>Institutional care</b>	Care taking place in (often large) residential settings that are not built around the needs of the child nor close to a family or small-group situation, and display the characteristics typical of institutional culture (depersonalisation, rigidity of routine, block treatment, social distance, dependence, lack of accountability, etc.). <sup>7</sup> This will generate a lot of discussion, should be further elaborated
<b>Kinship care</b>	Family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature (Guidelines, para 29.c.ii).
<b>Leaving care</b>	The fact of a child being discharged from the formal alternative care system in order to re-join his/her family, be placed in kinship care or with an adoptive family, or because he/she has reached the official upper age limit for being in such care. <sup>8</sup> The Guidelines state that aftercare should be prepared as early as possible in the placement and, in any case, well before the young person leaves the care setting (para 134). Moving Forward indicates the policy orientation required to achieve this: providing opportunities for children to develop the necessary life skills and to have access to all relevant information when they are preparing to leave care. This can include preparing young people for independence through youth homes, located in nearby communities. <sup>9</sup>
<b>Prevention</b>	Intervention (Support and services provided – instead of intervention!) in the family or community that enables children to stay in their families as an outcome, if this is in their best interests. Support can be provided in several areas such as living conditions, family and social relationships, education, physical and mental health, household economy, etc. <sup>10</sup>
<b>Family Reintegration</b>	"The process of a separated child making what is anticipated to be a permanent transition back to his or her family and community (usually of origin), in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging and purpose in all spheres of life." <sup>11</sup>
<b>Residential care</b>	Care provided in any non-family-based group setting, such as places of safety for emergency care, transit centres in emergency situations, and all other short- and long-term residential care facilities, including group homes;(Guidelines, para 29.c.iv). This has to be clearly described how is it different from institutional care – often these two are used as synonyms. -Children's homes is also used as the same category
<b>Small group home</b>	A type of residential care in which a small group of children live in a house in the community, and are cared for in an environment that is as family-like as possible. <sup>12</sup> There are a lot of debates , see above, if it is an institution or a community based provision and also the numbers are important 4-15, which is still a group home and which is an institution, residential home <sup>13</sup> .
<b>Unaccompanied children</b>	Children 'who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so' <sup>14</sup>

7 Opening Doors for Europe's Children 2014, Deinstitutionalisation and Quality Alternative Care for Children in Europe; Lessons Learned and the Way Forward and <https://deinstitutionalisation.com/terminology/>.

8 [https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard\\_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php](https://trackingprogressinitiative.org/dashboard_bcn/troubleshooting/glossary.php)

9 [https://www.kennisplein.be/Documents/Young\\_people\\_transitioning\\_out\\_of\\_care.pdf](https://www.kennisplein.be/Documents/Young_people_transitioning_out_of_care.pdf)

10 Opening Doors for Europe's Children 2014, Deinstitutionalisation and Quality Alternative Care for Children in Europe; Lessons Learned and the Way Forward. (to be updated in 2017)

11 Guidelines on Children's Reintegration

12 Opening Doors for Europe's Children 2014, Deinstitutionalisation and Quality Alternative Care for Children in Europe; Lessons Learned and the Way Forward.

13 UNICEF 2020, *White Paper*; The role of small-scale residential care for children in the transition from institutional to community-based care and in the continuum of care in the Europe and Central Asia Region

14 UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child, p. 8.



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