

POLICY BRIEF 1:

Child poverty

The State of Children in the European Union 2024

The issue

- Growing up in poverty damages childhoods and children's future prospects as adults.
- Child poverty is not only about the amount of money that families have but also whether children's basic needs (e.g., food, shelter) are met and whether they have access to essential services (e.g., health, education).
- When children and their families face such situations, they also risk becoming socially excluded. As well as the impact on individuals affected, this ultimately erodes the fabric of societies.
- Children have a right to adequate social security, nutrition, health, and education services.¹
- The European Union (EU) aims, by 2030, to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 5 million.²

The EU 2030 target means reducing the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion from around 20 million to 15 million over the next six years.

The picture in the EU

There are currently around 20 million children (almost one in four) in the 27 countries of the EU who are defined as 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion' (AROPE), which is a key indicator for the EU 2030 targets.³

This means that they live in households in one or more of the following conditions:

1. **Severe material and social deprivation.** Households who have an enforced lack of at least 7 out of 13 basic conditions (e.g., able to keep the home adequately warm, being able to replace worn-out clothes).
2. **At risk of poverty (low income).** Households with income (taking into account household size) below 60 per cent of the national median income.
3. **Low-work intensity.** Households where adults work less than 20 per cent of their total working potential (excluding some adults such as those of pension age).



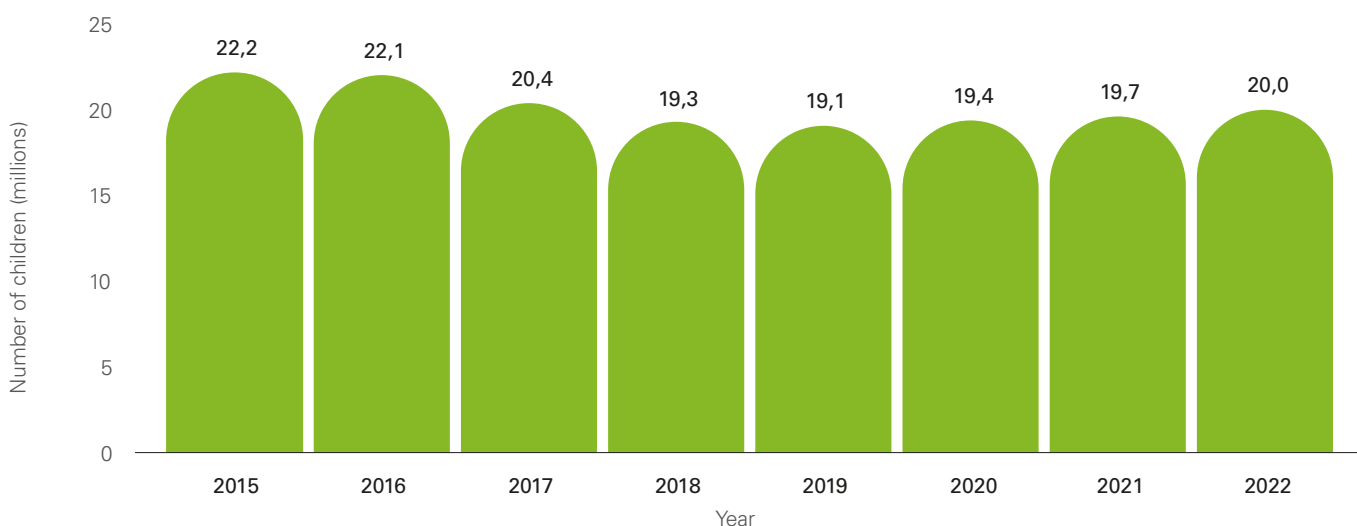
Trends

The number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, as measured through AROPE, fell from 22.2 million to 19.1 million – a drop of more than 3 million – in four years from 2015 to 2019. This included:

- A large decrease in children living in severe deprivation, from 11.8 per cent in 2015 to 7.5 per cent in 2019.
- A decrease in children living in low income (at risk of poverty), from 21.4 per cent in 2015 to 18.5 per cent in 2019.
- A reduction in low-work intensity from 8.4 per cent in 2015 to 6.4 per cent in 2019.

Since 2019, the number has increased by around 1.6 million to around 20 million in 2022. All three of the aforementioned conditions have also increased. This may be due to the combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent food and energy inflation. However, there have also been changes in data collection methods in some countries in this period. Overall, the trend is fairly stable over the past three years.

Figure 1. The number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, EU, 2015-2022



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

In addition to the main AROPE measure and its components, the EU produces a child material deprivation measure, based on information gathered at the household level.⁴ This is based on children in households lacking 3 or more out of 17 items (such as having fresh fruit and vegetables daily). On average, more than one in eight children under 16 (13 per cent) were deprived on this measure in 2021.

Disparities

There are major disparities in terms of children's risk of living in poverty in the EU. For instance, there are much higher risks of poverty among:

- **Children in single-parent families**
The risk of poverty or social exclusion in single-parent families with children (43.5 per cent) is around twice as high as that for other families with children (20.2 per cent).⁵
- **Children with disabilities**
Children in the EU with limitations in activities due to health problems are more likely to live in low-income households.⁶
- **Children with a parent who was born outside the country**
Children who have a parent born outside the country are 2.4 times more likely to be at risk of poverty (37.2 per cent) than other children (15.6 per cent).⁷



- **Roma children**

A recent survey in selected EU countries found that, in 2020, more than one in two (54 per cent) Roma and Traveller children lived in severe material deprivation compared to the EU average of around 7 per cent.⁸

There are also substantial geographic disparities within countries, often including higher risks of poverty in contexts such as remote areas and urban peripheries.

Policies need to take these disparities into account and aim to reduce them.

What can the EU do to tackle child poverty?

Fighting child poverty is primarily within the legal competence of member States, however, the EU has a hugely important role to play by incentivizing actions at national level. The EU's prioritization of the issue through measures such as the European Child Guarantee is very welcome – but this progress must be built on to reach the EU 2030 target of reducing the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion from around 20 million to 15 million.

1. **The European Child Guarantee must be fully implemented and have the financial resources to be accelerated and scaled up.** The adoption of the European Child Guarantee was a historic milestone and clearly demonstrates the commitment of EU member States to act on child poverty and social exclusion through the provision of services and agreeing that all children in need should have access to free early childhood education and care, free education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day), free healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing.
2. **The European Commission must step up its support for member States on the European Child Guarantee, ensuring national action plans are comprehensive, costed and resourced, and with strong measurement in place.** The standard of these plans varies a great deal across countries. It's vital member States include measurable objectives and targets, with a focus on reaching children in greatest need. The European Commission can support this work and empower European Child Guarantee national coordinators by strengthening the implementing, monitoring and evaluation framework and building collaboration among countries through investing in research, policy and practice exchanges.

The EU's prioritization of tackling child poverty through measures such as the European Child Guarantee is very welcome – but this progress must be built on.



© UNICEF/UNI114852/Holt

3. **Beyond the European Child Guarantee**, because child poverty is a complex and multidimensional issue there is no single solution. It's therefore critical that **member States take action – and that the EU supports and incentivizes these efforts through the sharing of best practices, regular monitoring and funding opportunities**. This includes:
 - ◆ **Labour market policies to improve access to opportunities for good quality paid work, along with adequate minimum wage levels.**
 - ◆ **Income support to provide universal and targeted cash benefits, including child benefits, which are an essential support for families on low incomes.**
 - ◆ **Adequate housing in socially-diverse neighbourhoods, promoting integration and reducing risks of exclusion.**
4. **Measures to tackle child poverty and social exclusion must be included in current and future EU funding opportunities and instruments supporting the triple transition (digital, green and social) and aiming at strengthening resilience and recovery**. This can help ensure that transitions under such funds are just and do not leave the most vulnerable children behind.

Endnotes

1. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
2. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/>, accessed 20 January 2024.
3. The 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion' (AROPE) measure is the main indicator to monitor the EU 2030 target on poverty and social exclusion. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_\(AROPE\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_(AROPE)).
4. Eurostat: Data browser, 'Child specific material deprivation rate by age (children aged less than 16 years)', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_chmd01/default/table, accessed 20 January 2024.
5. Eurostat: Data browser, Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by income quantile and household composition, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_peps03n_custom_9693534/default/table, accessed 20 January 2024.
6. Eurostat: Data browser, 'Children with limitation in activities due to health problems, by income group, household composition and age', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_hch13_custom_9072816/default/table?page=time:2021, accessed 20 January 2024.
7. Eurostat: Data browser, 'At-risk-of poverty rate for children by citizenship of their parents (population aged 0 to 17 years)', https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_LI33/default/table, accessed 20 January 2024.
8. FRA (European Agency of Fundamental Rights), Roma in 10 European Countries - Main Results. Roma Survey 2021, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf.



ISBN: 978-92-806-5442-4

Cover photo credits: © UNICEF/UNI426528/Ukhov

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