

first years
first priority

A FAIR START FOR *every* CHILD IN EUROPE

Snapshot of early childhood development data and policies in nine countries *A cross country analysis*

The current analysis has been developed within the *First Years First Priority* Campaign co-led by Eurochild and the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), in partnership with the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) and Roma Education Fund (REF).

The analysis summarises the situation of young children across several policy areas impacting their development. It is based on data collected¹ from nine European countries and consolidated in nine Country Profiles. It draws attention towards four key findings across policy areas impacting early childhood development (ECD) and priorities for policy-making and investment in early childhood at the European and country level.

¹ See Annex: List of indicators across ECD policy areas.

Spotlight on early childhood in nine European countries: key findings and challenges

1

The scarcity of data on children's early years – especially children under three – across policy areas, indicates insufficient knowledge of, and attention to, early childhood development. This is despite widespread recognition that children's early years are fundamental for their lifelong healthy development and wellbeing and should be a priority for governments and policymakers.

2

Limited or non-existent disaggregated data on the lives of young children under six – especially those under three – who are living in poverty and social exclusion hinders efforts to improve public policy and investment for young children facing multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities. Comprehensive and comparable data is necessary, at the country and European level, to inform policy-making and public spending on early childhood, so that all children can have the best start in life.

3

Across countries there is a need to guarantee universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services – especially for children under three and those who are most in need – alongside greater support for families with young children. This requires increased public investment in ECEC and parenting services and strengthening the capacity and professional development of ECEC staff to respond to children's needs in their very early years.

4

There is a need for an integrated multi-sectoral approach to early childhood, with leadership and coordination that addresses children's and families' needs in a comprehensive way. The European Child Guarantee is an opportunity for governments to address poverty and social exclusion from children's earliest years, with a holistic approach to ECD policies and financing, and a comprehensive system of parenting and family support, especially in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Priorities at European and country level regarding ECD

Based on the analysis of data collected at country level, specific priorities on ECD have been identified in all nine countries involved in the Campaign. The country priorities are featured in individual [Country Profiles on ECD](#).

The analysis of these priorities, across all nine countries, indicated that consistent data collection at national and European level is needed to elevate the rights of very young children, to improve decision-making on policies and finances affecting early childhood, and to track progress. The recommendations below suggest a) several measures to support better data collection and monitoring within and across countries in Europe, b) shared policy priorities at European and country level.

Shared data priorities:

- Track data at EU and country level on child and family poverty and social exclusion for children under the age of six and especially for children under three, as well as for children and families from vulnerable groups.
- Track data at EU and country level on maternal and child health indicators, disaggregated by type of vulnerability.
- Track data at EU and country level on child safety and security for children under the age of six to better inform policies.

Shared policy priorities:

- Take coordinated measures to reduce regional disparities and inequalities in accessing ECD services: health, education and social protection.
- Take policy measures to ensure equal access to pre- and postnatal care for all pregnant women, particularly for those living in precarious conditions and at risk of exclusion (Roma and Travellers, migrants or refugees, single mothers, unemployed, undocumented).
- Use the **Council Recommendation on the European Child Guarantee**, the **Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care** and domestic policies to increase access to ECEC services for children under three, through increased availability and affordability for those experiencing one or more vulnerabilities, and/or at risk of exclusion, and through adequate parental leave policies.
- Approach parenting and family support policies and services for parents with children under six years of age, and especially for those experiencing precarious life conditions, with multi-sectoral policy measures including housing, employment, parental leave, social assistance, health, education and social protection.
- Use the **Council Recommendation on the European Child Guarantee** and other policy instruments to create mechanisms for national and sub-national coordination of ECD policy development and implementation and ensure that they address children's and families' needs holistically, that they reach out to those living in the most precarious conditions and at risk of exclusion, and that they are effective.
- Invest in the professionalisation of staff working in education and care, health, parenting and social protection services for children up to six years of age and their families.
- Ensure coordination of funding streams across ECD policy areas at EU and country level.

Introduction

Researchers and policy makers are increasingly recognising that the early years have lifelong impacts on an individual. Achieving positive outcomes requires a holistic, comprehensive and well-coordinated approach to policy development and implementation across multiple sectors affecting young children and families. Research indicates that high quality services create enabling environments for young children at home and in communities and can contribute greatly to breaking the vicious cycle of inequalities later in life. Vulnerable children and families benefit the most from interventions and support provided in the early years.

The global and European policy context

Early childhood policy development at the global and European level has progressed rapidly over the past decade and has accelerated in recent years. This is confirmed by a number of important declarations and policy documents, including: the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the Nurturing Care Framework (2018), the EU Council Conclusions on Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion (2018), the EU Council Recommendation on High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019), the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021), the EU Council Recommendation on Establishing a European Child Guarantee (2021). Significant changes have happened also at the country level across Europe. However, these advances are inconsistent and while **data-informed progress on policy development and implementation** can be noted in a few areas, such as early childhood education and care and child protection, it is **not necessarily present across all policy areas impacting children's overall development and wellbeing in their early years**. Collecting data which focuses on children under the age of six and their families, across different policy areas, is essential for ensuring significant progress towards ensuring and improving the eco-system surrounding young children and families.

A 360° view on policy areas impacting early childhood development

The *First Years First Priority* Campaign aims to bring visibility to early childhood development and the situation of young children and their families across Europe. Its vision is: *“through public policies and spending, all families, and in particular those living with adversity, get the support they need to provide a healthy, safe and nurturing environment for their youngest children”*. To achieve this, data around existing policies and the result of their implementation is pivotal. The evidence brought by the Campaign to sustain its holistic vision addresses six key policy areas that impact ECD (See Figure 1).

This cross-country analysis builds on data collected across nine countries in Europe, and draws in data from additional sources, in order to provide critical information about how existing policies are serving young children and their families. The aim is to stimulate efforts to improve policies and services, as well as to create better approaches and greater consistency in the kinds of indicators and data that are used to assess and describe how well European society nurtures young lives.



Figure 1: Policy areas impacting ECD

The First Years First Priority Campaign focus

The Campaign broadly addresses the development of children under the age of six. However, due to the strong evidence regarding the critical importance of nurturing environments during the first three years, especially for the most vulnerable, the Campaign focuses primarily on **children under three years of age and on children at the highest risk of discrimination or exclusion**:

- Children living in extreme poverty
- Roma and Traveller children
- Migrant and refugee children (including undocumented children)
- Children with developmental delays or disabilities
- Children at risk of entering, or in, alternative care.

Countries involved

The Campaign operates at the European level through its European partners (Eurochild, the International Step by Step Association, European Public Health Alliance, Roma Education Fund) and at country level through its National Coordinators and national coalitions in **nine countries**:

- Bulgaria - Trust for Social Achievement
- Finland - Central Union for Child Welfare
- France - Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance
- Hungary - Family, Child, Youth Association
- Ireland - Children's Rights Alliance
- Portugal - Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso
- Romania - Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development
- Serbia - Pomoc Deci
- Spain - Plataforma de Infancia

Limitations of the analysis

The cross-country analysis is based on the data collected by the National Coordinators and consolidated in nine Country Profiles developed under the Campaign. There are a few limitations that have been encountered when collecting and analysing the data:

- The data collected is not comparable due to the diversity of sources used across countries, the different age groups that the data covers and its reference to different years². However, through the analysis, some trends emerged across the six categories of indicators.
- The qualitative data was collected through close ended questions and desk research (e.g. listing the policies), therefore there is limited information around bottom-up policies/services which meet the needs of specific vulnerable groups and their effectiveness in meeting those needs.
- When analysing some of the results, the country context was highly relevant. For example, a high percentage of children under three being cared for only by their parents might be closely linked to the availability of parental leave, and not necessarily to a shortage of services.

² The aim was to collect the most recent data (e.g. 2020, 2019). In the majority of countries, the most recent year for which data was available was 2019. However, data from 2019 was not available on all indicators. The oldest data included in the analysis is from 2017.

Summary of findings

Limited data on ECD-related indicators regarding children under six years old (even more limited for those under the age of three) and their families, across all nine countries and across all six categories, indicates insufficiently informed early childhood policy development, implementation and monitoring within each policy area and across them.

Overall, across all nine countries **there is insufficient and often no data** related to different indicators, pertaining to all six categories, regarding **children under six and their families** in the general population, and even less data is available for **children under three years of age**. Moreover, **data regarding the specific vulnerable groups in focus** (children at risk of poverty, Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children - including undocumented children, up to three years or six years of age) **is very scarce or non-existent**. In addition, in some countries, such data might not be public/free of charge.

Our initiative to collect data was unsuccessful across all nine countries for the specific indicators listed below:

- child poverty for children aged birth to three years;
- percentage of children with unmet medical needs, disaggregated by age and type of vulnerability;
- percentage of children with minimum acceptable diet, disaggregated by age and type of vulnerability;
- child's safety and security indicators, disaggregated by age and type of vulnerability.

For the same age group, in certain policy areas, the following data is frequently missing:

- percentage of staff with a minimum of a bachelor's degree working in ECEC services for children under three (except Ireland).
- percentage of families with young children (under six years of age) benefitting from parenting support programmes/services.
- percentage of social protection benefits going to families with young children (under six years of age) experiencing severe material deprivation.

Anecdotal data and grey literature provide insight into the situation of vulnerable groups (qualitative or quantitative data) and may bring valid evidence or raise a valid concern regarding the specific population investigated or surveyed. However, such data often cannot be considered as representative for the entire population.

The scarcity or the lack of data regarding children under six years of age (particularly under three years of age) and of disaggregated data on different types of vulnerabilities across all nine countries, indicates that overall, there is little known about a child's first years of life across different policy areas that impact their development, and that those who experience one or more vulnerabilities are not captured in any statistics, thus specific policy measures are not likely to be effective enough in combating inequalities and exclusion, due to their fragmentation.

Because of the scarcity of data and, where it exists, inconsistencies in how data is tracked across different age ranges in different countries, cross-country comparisons are difficult, and it is not possible to link policy changes with trends or progress in order to understand what works and what is not working.

The data collection uncovered great inconsistencies in the available data from across the nine countries for these indicators:

- children living in extreme poverty
- children at risk of poverty and social exclusion
- antenatal care coverage

- access to postnatal health check for newborns
- infants with low birthweight
- children with exclusive breastfeeding
- children under six years of age in alternative care
- children under three years of age out of formal day care services
- children attending formal day care services for children under three years.

At the European level, comparable data focusing on young children across different policy areas impacting their healthy development is essential for providing relevant and responsive policy guidance and mechanisms for support to Member States, modelling a holistic policy view on ECD. Creating data consistency is essential in order to elevate political concern and commitment to create an eco-system of policies and services around young children and families across Europe, and to allocate resources where the evidence indicates high levels of priority.

Policies that fall within the *Early Learning* and *Parental and Family Support* categories that address the most vulnerable young children and their families are distributed unequally across countries and they cover different vulnerable groups unevenly.

Across all nine countries, under two policy areas (*Early Learning* and the *Parental and Family Support*) data about policies aimed at supporting the most vulnerable children and families was collected. While there are many policies in both areas that refer to the general population of young children and their families (ECEC subsidies, universal health provision, child allowance, parental leave, etc.), specific policies targeting children and families experiencing one or more vulnerabilities are not present in all countries, or they more often address two vulnerabilities: poverty and disability. Having policies that refer to universal provisions is a reality in all countries. However, this does not guarantee that the most vulnerable are benefitting from them nor that their needs are effectively met.

Regarding the *Early Learning* policy area, the cross-country analysis leads to the following insights:

- While there are specific policy measures aimed at increasing access to ECEC services for children with disabilities (France, Ireland, Portugal, Finland, Bulgaria, Serbia), they are not always effective due to different barriers, such as insufficient staff or staff's insufficient preparation (Bulgaria, France) or high child-adult ratios that make responsive and individualised support impracticable (Bulgaria).
- All countries have taken measures to facilitate access to ECEC services for children up to six years of age (with continued low enrolment rates for children under three years old – e.g. Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia) from very low to low-income families, primarily through financial subsidies/support awarded to their families or through reduced fees (Bulgaria, Hungary) and even free of charge for families with three or more children, families taking care of children with disabilities or chronic disease, and families with no income (Hungary). For example, in Finland, the fees are determined on the basis of the size and income of the family and the number of hours that a child participates in early childhood education and care. In Ireland, through the 2018 Childcare Support Act, subsidies are provided also for homeless or asylum-seeking families. However, certain vulnerable groups such as Roma and Travellers do not always benefit from such policy measures due to inequalities in access to, or the lack of, services, as well as due to ethnic segregation (Hungary, Bulgaria). Specific data regarding policy measures aimed at increasing access to ECEC services for migrant and refugee children or undocumented children could not be found and must be addressed.
- In ECEC systems that are split, with services for children under three years of age separated from those for children between three and five or six years of age (Bulgaria, France, Portugal, Spain, Romania), the policy measures targeting vulnerable groups are unbalanced, with a greater focus on vulnerable children from the older age group (Bulgaria, Romania, France, Serbia). However, even where older

children from vulnerable groups are prioritised (for example in Bulgaria and Hungary) Roma children have a lower rate of attendance than other children of the same age.

In relation to the *Parental and Family Support* policy area, the cross-country analysis leads to the following insights:

- All countries have family support policies targeting families with children under the age of six with very low to low income. Usually a child allowance (cash transfers) is provided, which varies depending on the level of income, number of children, existing disability, living conditions, employment status, parental status, etc. However, some countries have specific policies for financially supporting parents with children with disabilities (Bulgaria, France, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Romania, Serbia).
- Ireland is the only one of the nine countries where efforts are put into developing a more comprehensive policy at the national level to ensure a coherent system of parental and family support that reaches out to all families and meets their needs (the National Model of Parenting Support Services). In a few other countries there is still a great need for a national strategy/policies and services for supporting families, especially those at high risk of exclusion, such as families living in very precarious conditions, Roma and Traveller families, refugee and migrant families (Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, France).

The cross-sectoral approach to policy development and implementation, as well as to funding and spending at national and/or local level, is a priority for almost all nine countries.

Overall, across the nine countries, there is a lack of national multi-sectoral strategies and of a coordinating body to oversee cross-sectoral ECD policies, with only one exception (Ireland). Coordination bodies or mechanisms at national level are in place but only within specific sectors, e.g. child safety and protection (Portugal, Bulgaria), early intervention, parental support, etc. and/or at the local level (see Finland, Serbia, Spain). Cross-sectoral child-focused budgeting is explored at the national level in only one country (Finland).

Brief analysis of country priorities on ECD across the nine countries

Several policy areas impacting ECD need considerable attention. Specific measures to address inequalities and discrimination starting with early childhood are needed, as well as a better and more holistic approach to ECD policies and financing. Several policy priorities appeared more frequently and are listed below:

1. Improve data around child poverty and child development, especially for children under three years of age.

- Track data across ECD domains for children under the age of three (all nine countries).
- Track data on child poverty and social exclusion, especially for families with children under three years of age, single-parent families or with many children, and families with a low level of education (Spain, Romania, Portugal, Ireland, Hungary, France, Finland, Bulgaria).

2. Reduce inequalities among young children and families across all policy areas.

- Take measures to prevent the segregation of children with special needs and Roma and support their inclusion in mainstream services (Hungary).
- Give special attention and support to families near the poverty line (Serbia).

- Introduce specific measures for targeted support for families and children in view of the COVID-19 crisis (Serbia).
 - Ensure that each child up to six years of age has access to health, social and education services (Serbia).
 - Increase the capacity for high quality, flexible ECD-related services, including childcare, healthcare, parenting support and education (Hungary).
 - Accelerate the implementation of existing ECD related policies at national, regional and local levels to meet the needs of children and their families, in particular those in the most vulnerable situations (France).
- 3. Collect data on, and ensure equal access to, maternal and child health services and a specialised health workforce, especially for the most vulnerable children and families.**
- Track data on maternal and child health indicators with a special emphasis on vulnerable families, taking into consideration regional disparities (Romania), and providing information to address the need for a dedicated child health workforce (Ireland).
 - Reduce child and maternal health inequalities, especially for vulnerable groups, by investing in health specialists and health services (Hungary), through early detection and intervention and timely access to high quality health services (periodic health screenings, particularly in educational settings) (Portugal).
 - Ensure that quality perinatal care is being addressed, particularly for those who are undocumented and in migration situations (France).
 - Ensure equal access to prenatal care for all pregnant women and home visiting services for children under three years of age and pregnant women (Bulgaria).
 - Provide free medication for children under three years of age living in poverty, with the prospect of covering all children up to six years of age (Bulgaria).
- 4. Collect data on and ensure children's safety and security.**
- Monitor child safety and security indicators for children under three years of age (Ireland) and especially for vulnerable groups (Romania).
 - Create conditions so that children under six years of age currently in alternative care are placed in family-based arrangements (Portugal).
 - Ensure access to social security for undocumented children (Finland).
 - Improve the system for registering and analysing data on cases of violence against young children to inform measures and actions (Bulgaria).
- 5. Ensure the accessibility and availability of early childhood education (ECEC) services (especially for children under three years of age) and improve staff preparation and qualification.**
- Ensure ECD policies are prioritised and that they are prioritising early learning (France, Ireland).
 - Monitor (Spain) and increase the access rate to ECEC services (Bulgaria), especially for children under three years of age (Hungary, Romania, Portugal) and the availability of ECEC services for the under three years old (Romania).
 - Monitoring the extent to which the professional requirements for ECEC staff are fulfilled (Finland), especially for those working with children under three years of age (Ireland, Portugal).
 - Revisit the initial and continuous training programmes for ECEC staff, especially for those working in services for children under three years of age (Romania).
 - Reconsider group sizes and the adult-child ratio in ECEC services (Finland).
 - Ensure access to ECEC services for undocumented children (Finland).
- 6. Provide comprehensive family support.**
- Develop a systemic comprehensive system of support to all parents from a child's prenatal period to six years of age (Serbia).

- Increase social benefits for families with young children, including adequate financial support for families with severe material deprivation caring for children, with a focus on children up to one year of age (Bulgaria).
- Ensure ECD policies prioritise parental support (France).

7. Implement a comprehensive policy approach to ECD and cross-sectoral coordination.

- Develop a coherent cross-sectoral approach to ECD supported by legal and strategic documents (Serbia).
- Finalise the legal framework for an integrated ECEC system for children from birth to six years of age (Romania).
- Improve coordination between different government structures to ensure coherent and effective ECD policies (Hungary, Romania).
- Establish coordination mechanisms to mainstream the Whole Child Development approach across different levels of the system and sectors (France).
- Develop a strategic framework on ECD, with special attention to coordination mechanisms between the different authorities, to reduce regional disparities (Spain).
- Strengthen the coordination of services at the local level so that all the children and families get the help and support they need (Finland).

8. Invest more and better in early childhood.

- Increase public investment in ECEC working towards a publicly funded model (Ireland).
- Allocate one percent of GDP to quality ECEC (Bulgaria).
- Invest across sectors in the professionalisation of the staff working in services for young children (Bulgaria).
- Include child-specific priorities in the documents of the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans (Serbia).

Cross-country analysis on six policy areas

The brief analysis under each policy area has been developed based on the data collected from the nine countries. Countries used a common set of early childhood-related indicators, which were selected through a collaborative process.

Child poverty

Child poverty refers to those children who grow up impoverished and often lack the food, sanitation, shelter, healthcare and education they need to survive and thrive. Child poverty (under the age of 18) is often correlated with the [household type](#), [employment](#) situation, parents' [educational level](#), parents' [migrant](#) background and [severe material deprivation](#). (Eurostat, 2020). According to the Joint Declaration by the Ministers of the EPSCO Council (2020), around a quarter of all children in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with rates varying between Member States from 14 to 50%. Moreover, a survey released by the Fundamental Rights Agency in 2014³, revealed that 90% of Roma children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion. 50% of Roma children face notable nutritional risks and suffer from malnutrition weakening their physical and mental health, reducing opportunities for healthy growth and development. 30% of Roma children live in households where someone goes to bed hungry⁴.

³ FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014). *Poverty and employment: the situation of Roma in 11 Member States*, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-employment-1_en.pdf

⁴ FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2016). *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination. Survey Roma – Selected findings*

Across the nine countries **we lack adequate data on child poverty for children from birth to three years of age, whereas only a few countries have data for the birth to six years age group.** Available data is not comparable as it represents different age groups and is from different years. Yet, it can give an indication of the status of children up to six years of age. As shown in Figure 2, among the countries with available data, a high percentage of children under six are at risk of poverty and social exclusion or live in extreme poverty (Figure 3) or suffer from severe housing deprivation (Figure 4).

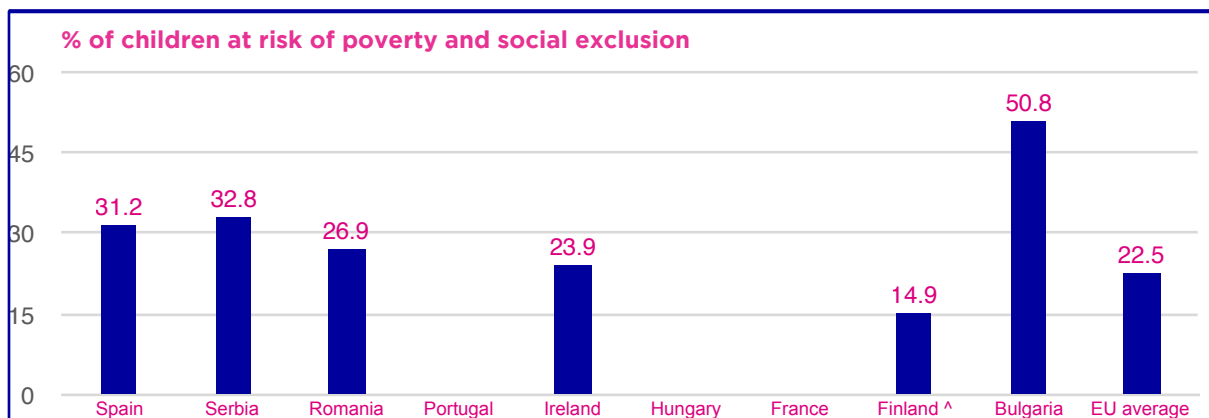


Figure 2: Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion

Note 1: 2018 Data - Ireland; 2019 Data - for the rest of the countries.

Note 2: For Finland data is for the age group 0-17, for Ireland data is for age 0-18.

Note 3: For the EU average data is for age group 0-18

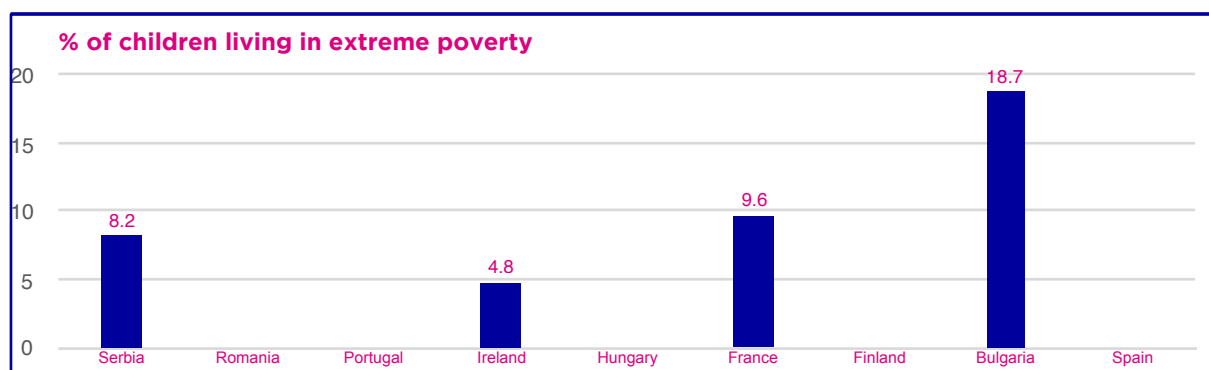


Figure 3: Children living in extreme poverty

Note 1: Serbia - 2019 Data; Ireland - 2018 Data for under five years old; France - 2019 Data for under six years old; Bulgaria - 2020 Data for under six years old.

Note 2: Missing data for Romania, Portugal, Hungary, Finland, Spain.

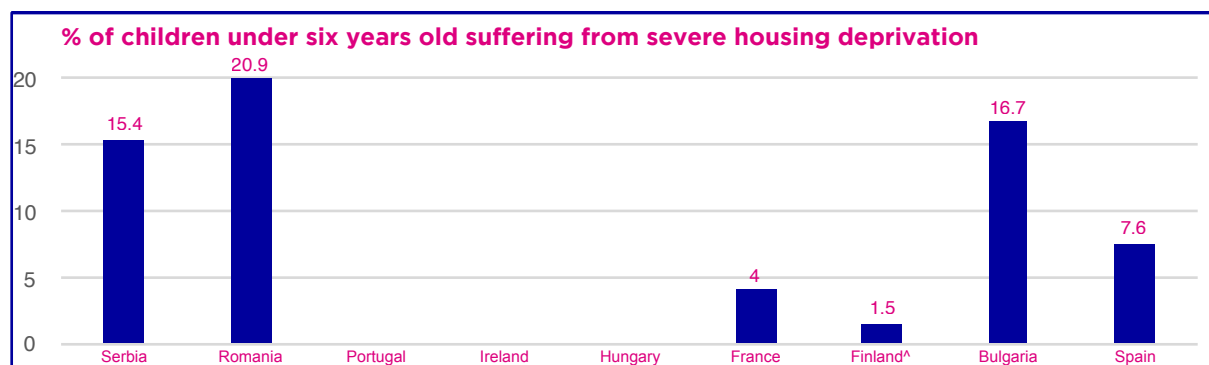


Figure 4: Children suffering from severe housing deprivation

Note 1: Bulgaria - 2020 Data; for the rest of the countries - 2019 Data

Note 2: Missing data for Portugal, Ireland, Hungary.

Across countries it is evident that poverty rates are highly correlated with household type and parents' educational level. For example, as shown in Figure 5, single person households and households with three or more children are by far at higher risk of poverty. In addition, although there is no consistency among countries for defining the educational level of parents, analysis highlights that children whose parents have less than primary education or only primary education are at higher risk of poverty.

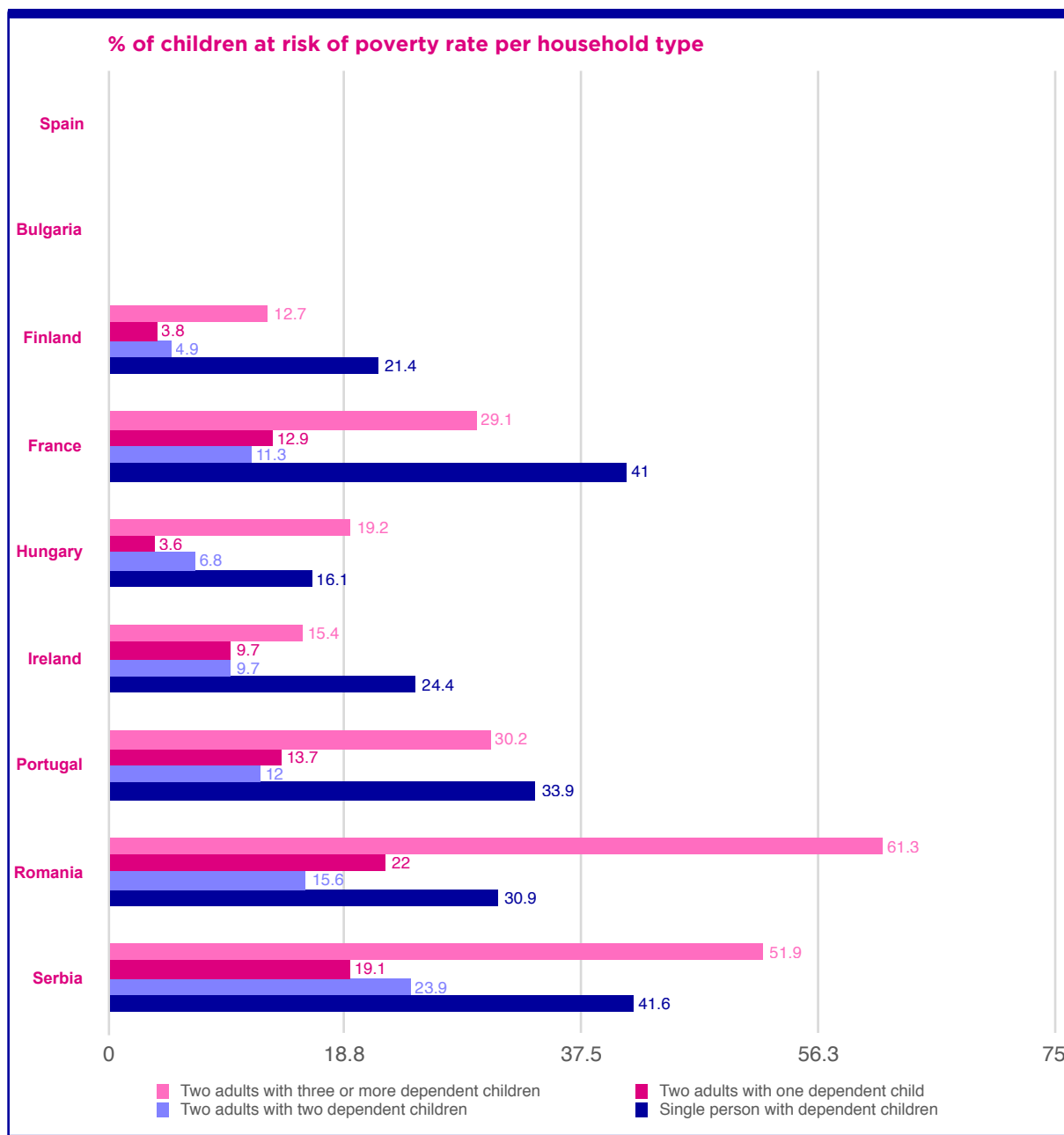


Figure 5: Risk of poverty rate per household type

Note 1: Ireland and Hungary - 2018 Data; for the rest of the countries - 2019 Data

Note 2: Missing data for Bulgaria and Spain

Overall, across countries there is a **need to track disaggregated data** on child and family poverty and social exclusion, **especially for children under three**, as well as for **children and families from vulnerable groups, particularly Roma children and migrant and refugee**

children, as well as single person households, families with more than three children and families with low educational attainment.

Maternal and child health

Under this category, maternal health refers to women's health during pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period, while child health refers to the health status of children in the antenatal, birth and postnatal period up to two years old.

Data is only available on different maternal and child health related indicators in five countries. As shown in Figure 6, in most of the countries with available data, the percentage of antenatal care coverage is relatively high (including Finland with an estimated 99,7% antenatal coverage, though no exact data was provided). In addition, the percentage of access to postnatal health checks for newborns is also relatively high (Figure 7).

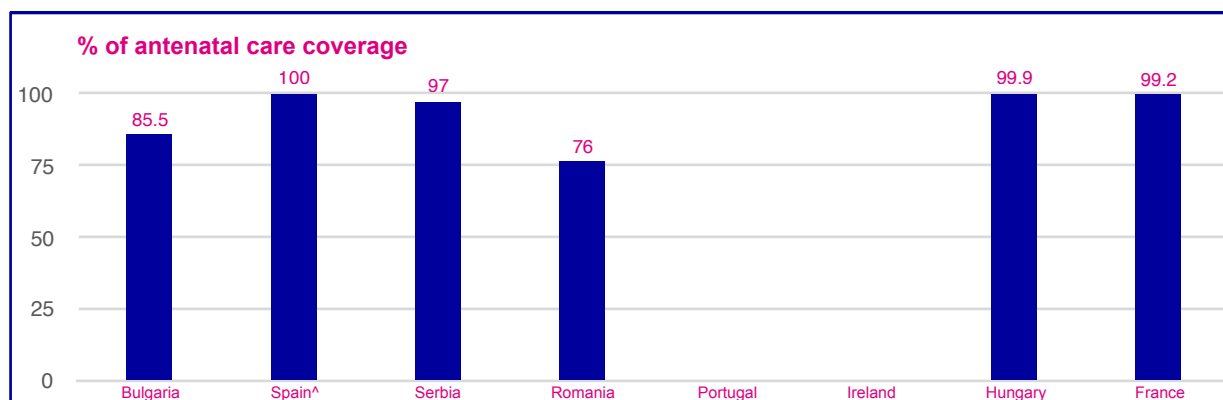


Figure 6: Antenatal care coverage

Note 1: 2019 Data - Bulgaria and Serbia; 2020 Data - Spain; 2018 Data - Romania; 2017 Data - France; 2017 Data - Hungary

Note 2: Missing data for Portugal and Ireland

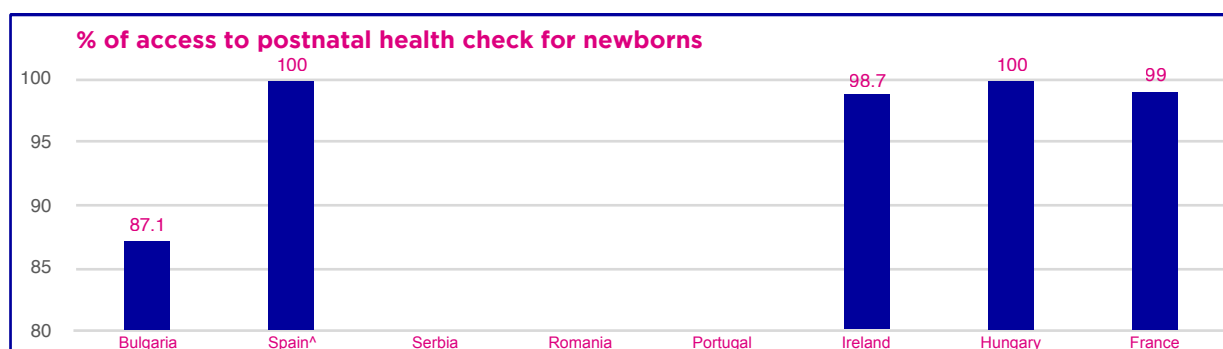


Figure 7: Access to postnatal health check for newborns

Note 1: 2019 Data - Ireland and Finland; 2020 Data - Bulgaria and Spain; 2017 Data - France

Note 2: Missing data for Serbia, Romania and Portugal

Yet, in most of the countries we **lack data on the percentage of children with unmet medical needs**. In addition, the cross-country analysis highlighted that there are large regional disparities in terms of access to medical services. In addition, in many cases, such as in Portugal, although there is a free legal entitlement to free healthcare, the low quality of services, including long waiting lists, increase inequalities in healthcare access. A similar situation is noticed in Bulgaria, where the inequitable distribution of general practitioners (GPs) and pharmacies across the country, especially in smaller settlements and rural areas,

hinders access to health services for vulnerable populations, particularly poor families, Roma communities and parents/carers of children with disabilities⁵.

Finally, as shown in Figure 8, the percentage of infants with low birthweight varies considerably across countries.

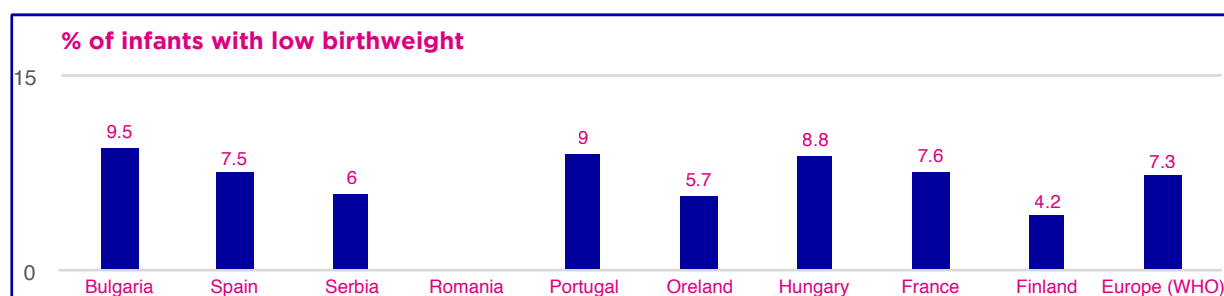


Figure 8: Infants with low birthweight

Note 1: 2019 Data - Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Serbia, Spain; 2018 Data - Portugal; 2017 Data - Ireland, France; Missing data for Romania

Note 2: 2015 Data - Average in WHO's European Region

Turning to child nutrition, although in most of the countries we **lack data on the percentage of children with a minimum acceptable diet**, available data indicates that the **percentage of children with exclusive breastfeeding is relatively low** in most of the countries where data is available (Figure 9).

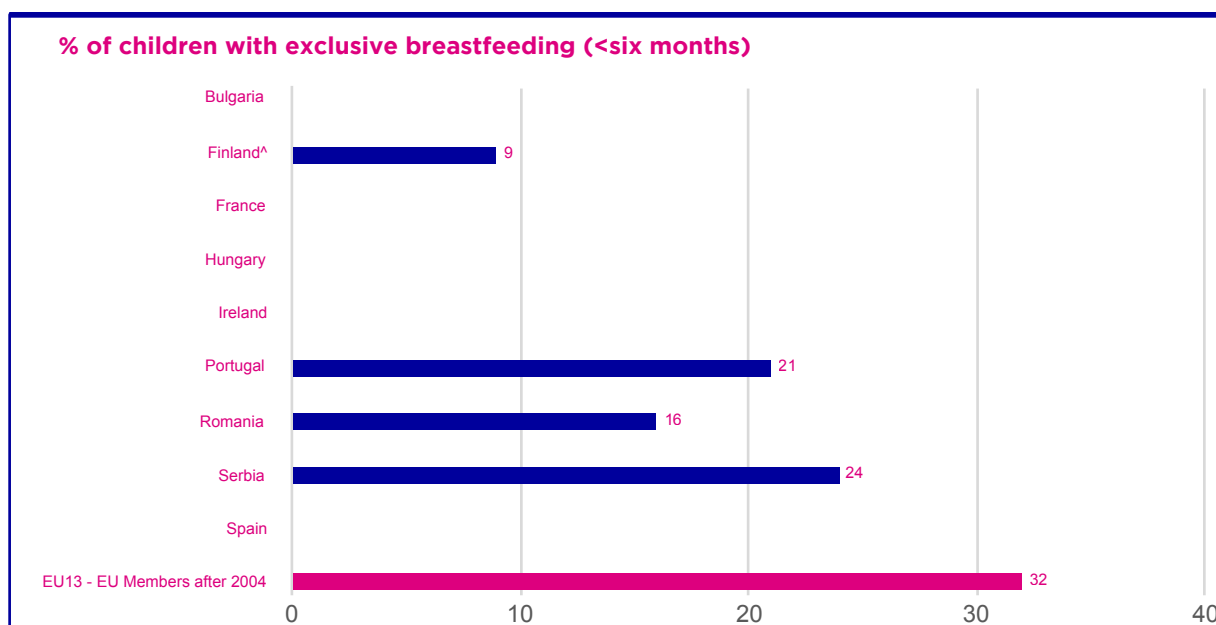


Figure 9: Children with exclusive breastfeeding

Note 1: 2019 Data - Finland, Hungary, Serbia,; 2018 Data - Romania; 2017 Data - Portugal

Note 2. Finland Data is for children at the age of six months

Note 3: EU13 refers to Member States who joined EU after 2004. 2016 Data (WHO), not on exclusive breastfeeding.

Note 4: Missing data from Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Ireland and Spain.

In general, across countries there is a need to ensure **equal access to prenatal care for all pregnant women**, especially for those most in need and to **track more data on maternal and child health indicators**, especially among vulnerable groups. In addition, special

⁵ Roma Early Childhood Inclusion+. Special Report on Roma Inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care. Republic of Bulgaria (2020). Open Society Foundations, UNICEF, Roma Education Fund. https://reyn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RECI_Republic-of-Bulgaria-Report_ENG.pdf

attention should be given to reducing regional disparities and inequalities through ensuring timely access to high quality health services, especially for those most in need.

Child safety and security

Child safety and security refers to children's exposure to the risk of being abused, maltreated and experiencing violence, abandonment and neglect, and to policies that are aimed at protecting them from harm and adversity.

In most of the countries there is a **lack of data on child safety and security indicators and the existing limited data is not comparable** across countries. For example, we have only estimations about the percentage of children under six years of age that have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in Romania, Portugal and Finland. On the other hand, we lack data on the percentage of undocumented children under six years which indicates that there is a high risk of them not benefitting from social protection measures.

Regarding the percentage of children under six covered by social protection through cash transfers, in Romania and Hungary all children are covered, whereas in Serbia only 16,3% of children are covered by social protection. In terms of birth registration, in five countries we have 100% birth registration, whereas we have no data available for Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. In Serbia, the percentage of birth registration is 98,5. Birth registrations are essential for ensuring that children benefit from social protection measures. Finally, although data are not comparable, Figure 10 gives an indication of the percentage of children under six years of age among all children currently in alternative care.

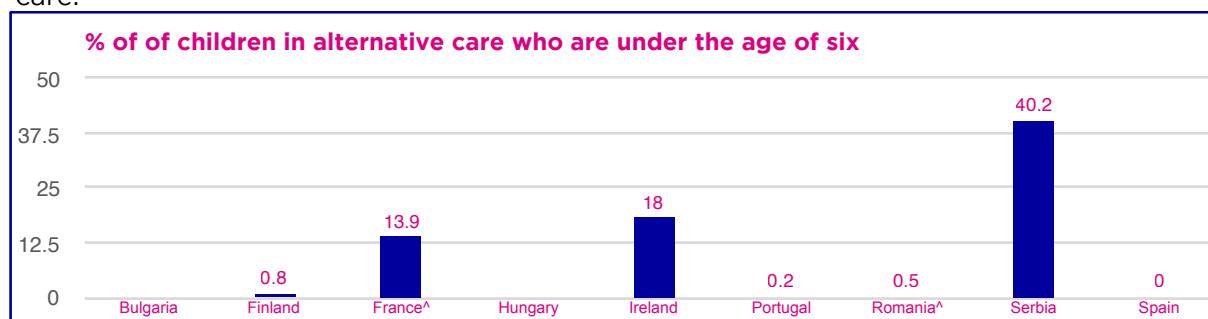


Figure 10: Children in alternative care who are under the age of six

Note 1. Finland refers to children aged birth to five years

Note 2. Data for France are from 2018. For the rest of the countries data are from 2019.

Note 3. In Bulgaria is the share of children under six years placed in alternative care which is 0,4.

Note 4: Missing data for Bulgaria and Hungary.

In general, **tracking data on child safety and security** is an urgent need across countries in terms of both children's general population and for specific vulnerable groups, such as Roma children, migrant and refugee children, children with disabilities and children in alternative care. In addition, other priorities related to child safety and security include the need to create conditions so that children under six currently in alternative care are placed in family-based arrangements (Portugal) and to improve the system for registering and analysing data on cases of violence against children (Bulgaria).

Early learning

The Early Learning category refers to data regarding children's access to environments that ensure stimulation and learning in both home learning environments and in out-of-home

settings such as early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, playgroups, childminding services, etc.

According to the recent EU Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, the limited availability and high costs of early childhood education and care can form a barrier for children from low-income families. Their attendance rates are considerably lower, resulting in worse educational outcomes and higher school drop-out rates, in particular for children with a migrant background or Roma children. Segregation and discrimination in accessing mainstream education by children with disabilities or special educational needs remains a challenge. Also, according to the 2019 [Eurydice report](#), although most European countries have committed themselves to guaranteeing an ECEC place for all children, either by establishing a legal entitlement to participate in ECEC, or by making participation compulsory, in countries with split ECEC systems, the legal entitlement often starts at around age three, when children move from the 'childcare-type' ECEC setting into the education system.

The cross-country analysis indicated that **only one country (Finland) out of the nine guarantees a place in ECEC for children under three years of age**. The percentage of children under three years of age cared for only by their parents varies enormously among countries as shown in Figure 11, whereas in most of the countries only a minority of children attend out-of-home services (formal childcare) for under threes, as shown in Figure 12. Here it is important to stress that the **non-participation rate may be closely linked to the parental leave policies** available in the country. For example, in Finland during the first year of life, most Finnish children are cared for by their parents due to parental leave. The same in Hungary, where parental leave is paid for three years, and grandparents are also

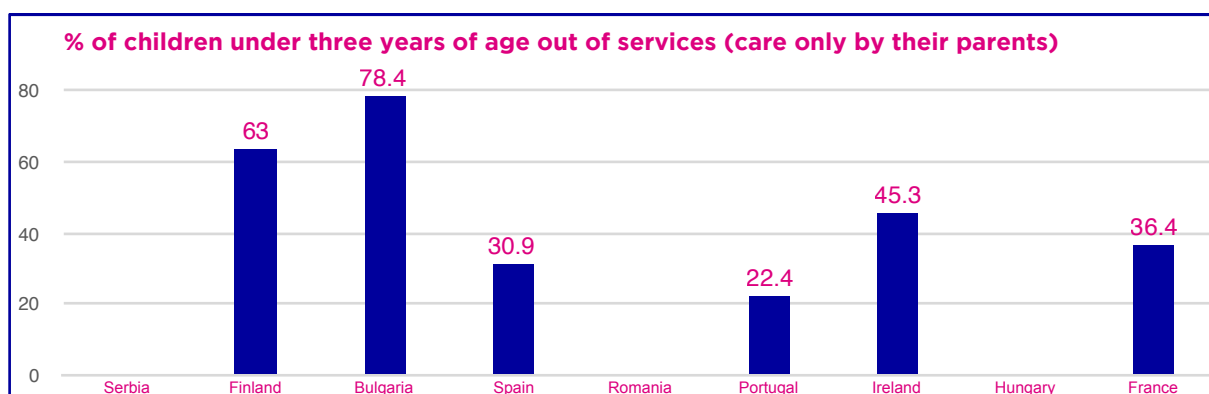


Figure 11: Children under three years old out of services

Note 1. Spain - 2018 Data. For the rest of the countries data are from 2019

Note 2. Data from Finland represent the birth to two age group.

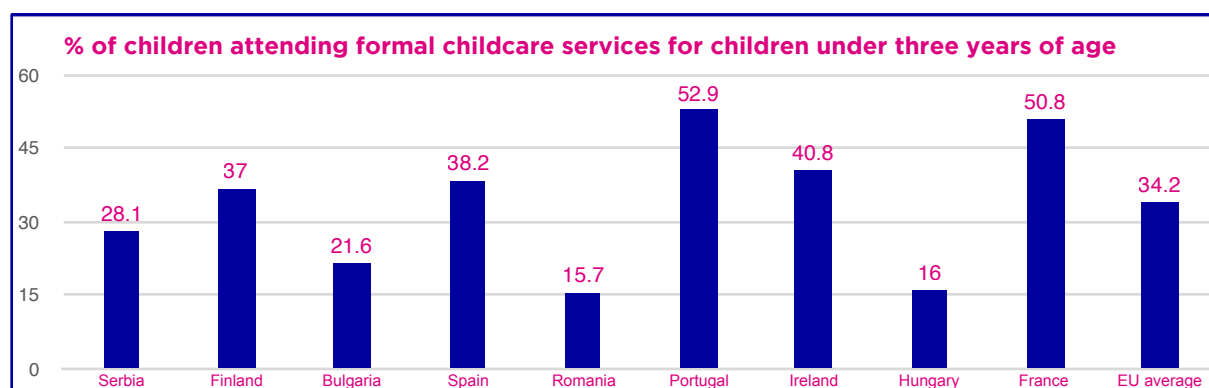


Figure 12: Children attending formal childcare services for children under three years

Note. Data for Spain are from 2017, for Hungary from 2020 and for the rest of the countries and EU average from 2019

eligible for parental leave from the child's second year of life. In other countries, however, the **non-participation rate is linked to the availability of services, the extent to which they are free or subsidised and the extent to which they serve parents' needs**. For example, in Spain, in 2016, the majority of children under three were attending non-free of charge out-of-home services. Data from countries such as Romania indicate that participation rates are significantly lower among children in vulnerable situations, such as children in rural areas and Roma children.

In addition to the above, the analysis highlighted that across all countries there are **different types of policies to facilitate ECEC access for children from vulnerable families**. Such policies refer primarily to ensuring increased ECEC access and attendance for children with developmental problems and/or disabilities, children at risk of extreme poverty, children belonging to ethnic minority groups (Roma, Travellers, refugees, etc.), and children living in remote areas and ethnic minority groups (Roma, Travellers, refugees, etc.).

Among the approaches employed by countries to address specific needs of children who experience one or more vulnerabilities, the following are to be noted:

- Ensuring priority in accessing services (Portugal – for children with disabilities; Spain – for children under six from historically marginalised groups)
- Early intervention (Portugal, Serbia, Finland)
- Teaching assistants for special education or other specialised staff, such as staff supporting the participation of Roma or other minority groups (Serbia, France)
- Second language learning (Finland)
- Public transportation (Bulgaria)
- Reduced fees or financial support for families (Bulgaria, Romania)
- Financial incentives for services who work with children experiencing different vulnerabilities (Bulgaria, France)
- Mandatory preschool programme for nine months prior to enrolment in elementary school (Romania, Serbia).

According to the data collected, in most of the countries, while targeted policies exist their implementation is not effective enough in terms of reaching out to the most vulnerable primarily due to the lack of infrastructure and the services' lack of readiness to work with the most vulnerable children (e.g. the staff's insufficient preparation and capacity, inadequate facilities, rigid daily programme, etc.). In addition, the great disparities between rural/peri-urban and urban areas in accessing services persist in most of the countries and especially in relation to ECEC services for children under three years of age.

Another key aspect regarding the Early Learning category refers to ECEC staff's qualifications. According to the Eurydice Report⁶, only one third of European ECEC systems require core practitioners working with younger children (usually under the age of three) to have a bachelor's degree or higher level of qualification.

In 13 countries, the minimum qualification level is a bachelor's degree (including: Bulgaria, France, Finland). In Portugal, a master's degree is required. In contrast, the proportion of ECEC systems requiring core practitioners to have a bachelor's degree or higher level of qualification in ECEC (or in education) is much higher for those working with children over three years of age. Three quarters of the education systems have such a requirement. In 29

⁶ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019. Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2019 Edition. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

of these, a bachelor's degree is required. In four others, a master's degree is the minimum requirement (including France and Portugal).

However, according to the data collection to which national coordinators from the nine countries contributed, in five out of the nine there is a **lack of data regarding the percentage of staff with at minimum a bachelor's degree working with children under three**. In Romania, there is no such requirement, whereas in Spain due to the decentralised policy there is an uneven distribution of the percentage of staff with at least a bachelor's degree across regions.

In general, across countries there is a need to strengthen and monitor the implementation of ECEC policies, especially for children under three years of age and for the most vulnerable, ensuring that they have access to high quality ECEC services. In addition, there is an urgent need to track data on staff qualifications and their capacity to respond to the specific needs of children from vulnerable groups, as well as data on the availability of, and access to, different types of formal childcare services for children under three: ECEC, home day care, play groups, etc. To address these needs, increasing public investment in ECEC is imperative.

Parenting and family support

Although in all countries there are a variety of benefits available to parents with young children (child allowance/benefits), across countries we **lack data on the percentage of families with young children benefitting from parenting support programmes/services**, as well as **data on the percentage of social protection benefits going to families with young children experiencing severe material deprivation**. Even when available, such data is not representative. For example, in Finland it is estimated that only 11,6% of social allowance benefits are going to the families experiencing the most severe material deprivation. In Romania on the other hand, in 2019, 184.563 families benefitted from social allowance for families.

The cross-country analysis indicates that **parenting support services reaching out to vulnerable groups** are available in all nine countries, but in almost all cases they are provided as financial support (allowances) for families experiencing severe material deprivation, or families with disabled children. Very limited or no other types of support services are provided to vulnerable families.

In eight of the nine countries, with the exception of Hungary (see Figure 13), there are different policies in place regulating work and family life, including but not limited to, different types of paid and unpaid maternity, paternity and parental leave, flexible working arrangements and teleworking (especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic).

Yet, despite the existence of these measures, across countries **the need for a comprehensive system of parenting and family support** is evident, especially in the light of the challenges created by the COVID-19

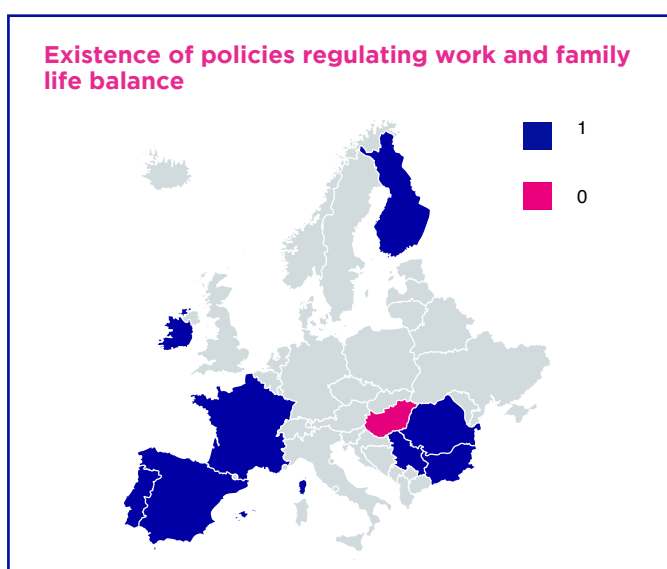


Figure 13: Existence of policies regulating work and family balance

pandemic for all families, but especially for those with young children up to the age of three as well as for those belonging to vulnerable groups.

Cross-sectoral coordination

Across the nine countries there are wide differences in terms of a holistic and integrated policy and governance approach to early childhood development. As shown in Figure 14, **in the majority of countries with available data, there is no explicitly stated national multi-sectoral ECD strategy or other policy document, or a coordinating body to oversee ECD policies, funding and spending across sectors, at national or municipal level.**

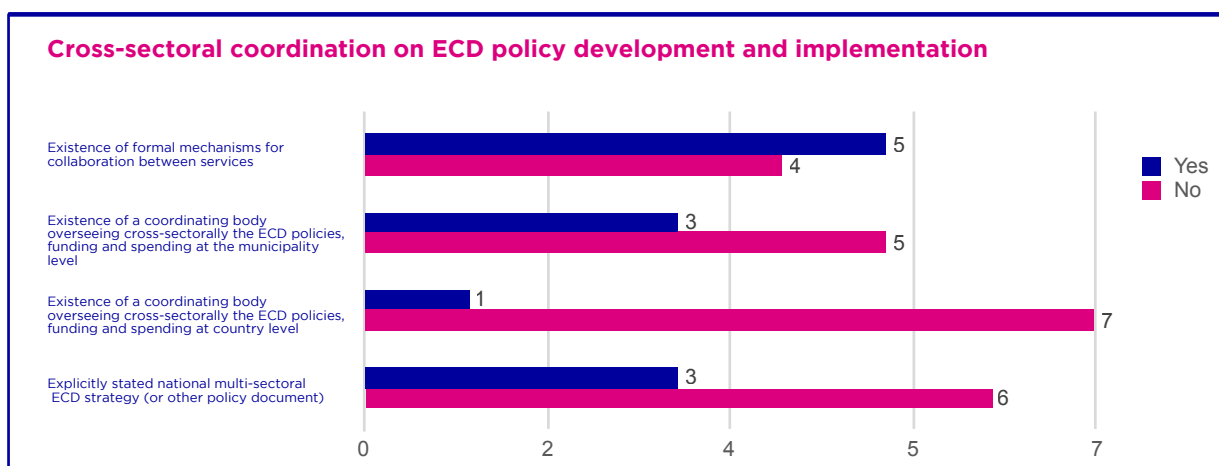


Figure 14: Existence of cross-sectoral policies and mechanism for coordination

Specifically, only Ireland, France and Finland have in place a strategy or other policy document, and only in Ireland there is a coordinating body at the national level. At the municipality level, coordinating bodies exist in Ireland, Romania and Spain. On the other hand, in five countries (Portugal, Ireland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Serbia) there are formal mechanisms for collaboration between services. However, those mechanisms take different forms across countries. For example, in Hungary and Bulgaria formal mechanisms are available only for the child protection sector. Overall, across all countries there is clear need for a more coordinated approach to ECD policies development and implementation that addresses children's and families' needs holistically.

Annex: List of indicators across ECD policy areas

1. Child Poverty

Indicator
1.1. Children under six living in extreme poverty (%)
1.2. Children under six at risk of poverty and social exclusion (%)
1.3. Children under six suffering from severe housing deprivation (%)
1.4 At risk of poverty rate by household type (%)
1.5 At risk of poverty rate for children under six by educational attainment level of their parents

2. Maternal and child health and nutrition

Indicator
2.1. Antenatal care coverage (%)
2.2. Access to postnatal health check for newborns (%)
2.3. Access to postnatal health check for mothers (%)
2.4. Unmet medical needs of children (%)
2.5. Low birthweight (%)
2.6. Exclusive breastfeeding (<six months) (%)
2.7 Minimum acceptable diet (%)

3. Child's safety and security

Indicator
3.1. Children under six covered by social protection (%)
3.2. Children under six in alternative care (%)
3.3. Children under six that have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the past year (%)
3.4. Birth registration (%)
3.5. Undocumented children under six years of age (%)

4. Early learning (including ECEC)

Indicator
4.1. Children under three out of services (cared for only by their parents)
4.2. Place guarantee in ECEC for under three years
4.3. Attendance rate of out-of-home care services for children under three years
4.4. Retention rates of children under three after the closure of ECEC due to COVID-19?
4.5. Percentage of staff with a minimum of a bachelor's level qualification for the entire ECE phase (0-6) (%)
4.6. Existence of policies to facilitate ECEC access of children from vulnerable families (YES/NO, what type)
4.7. ECEC services capacity to ensure the inclusion of children under six from historically marginalised groups

5. Parenting and family support

Indicator
5.1. Benefits available to parents with young children (child allowance/benefits)
5.2. Families with young children benefitting from parenting support programmes/services (%)
5.3. Social protection benefits coverage going to the poorest/going to families with young children (%)
5.4. Existence of parenting support services reaching out to vulnerable groups
5.5. Policies regulating work and family life balance

6. Cross-sectoral coordination for ECD

Indicator
6.1. Explicitly stated national multi-sectoral ECD strategy (or other policy document)
6.2. Existence of a coordinating body overseeing cross-sectorally the ECD policies, funding and spending at country level and/or municipality level)
6.3. Existence of formal mechanisms for collaboration between early childhood services

The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA Members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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National Coordinators: Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).