

Belgium

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

Contributors:

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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	4,500²
	German speaking community ¹	28-36
Institutions for children with disabilities/boarding schools	Wallonia (2020)	6,000 (available places)
	Flanders (2017)	1,275 (youth in care full time)
		225³ (during a week)
		949
Number of children in family-based/foster care	German community (2019)	75
	Flanders (2019)	7,756⁴
	Wallonia	n/a
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		1,220⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 help⁸. A Facebook group called "répit 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 report⁹ 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

⁶ Kinderen en jongeren worden nog altijd geëleefd door strenge coronaregels.

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

⁸ Des familles d'accueil pour les enfants dans le besoin.

⁹ Kinderen en jongeren worden nog altijd geëleefd 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 activities¹⁰. 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 2020¹¹. 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 population¹².

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.¹³ On the other hand, the report¹⁴ 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 purpose¹⁵.

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 Fedasil¹⁶ 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.

For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org and Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org.

¹⁰ L'aide à la jeunesse en temps de confinement: "...ils avaient un grand sentiment d'injustice".

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

¹² Parlement de la communauté française, Session 2020–2021, 12 May 2020.

¹³ Le Bateau Ivre – Maison d'accueil

¹⁴ Steeds meer kinderen kunnen terecht in een pleeggezin

¹⁵ Heeft de nieuwe financiering van de gehandicaptenzorg het leven van mensen met een beperking verbeterd?

¹⁶ <https://www.fedasil.be/en>