

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:

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

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2020 Country Specific Recommendations:

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

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

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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 revealed¹ 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.²

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

² Lasten ja nuorten hyvinvointi, koronaviruksen 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.³

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.

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



³ Finnish Immigration Service.