

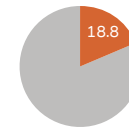
“ Country recommendation

Finland should take immediate action to address the alarming issue of children and young people's mental health and invest in prevention. It is essential to develop services and guarantee access to mental health support for all.

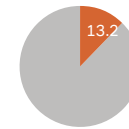
Country Profile 2022



Finland



Child Population:
1.04 million
(18.8% of total population)



Child Poverty Rate:
13.2% (2021) ▼*

* [lower compared to pre-covid rates in 2019](#)

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Central Union for Child Welfare](#)

European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

The *European Semester Country Report for Finland* did not clearly outline the main vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policy-makers.

The areas covered were not representative of the reality on the ground, since there is **no overall analysis of the national situation of the children** and there is no clear focus on the most vulnerable children in Finland.

Children are briefly mentioned when it comes to poverty, youth unemployment and those ‘Not in Employment, Education or Training’ (NEET). However, the **report failed to include a child rights perspective in the sections covering social and health care reform, social policy reform, as well as work-based migration.**

For example, despite social and healthcare reform being mentioned several times, the focus is entirely on health services. Social services, like home services and substitute care, are not covered in the report. Unfortunately, this is what the public discussion concerning the reform has also looked like: the focus has often been on health services, mainly adults’ health services.

Children and families with a migrant background are not mentioned at all. While the report mentions the need for work-based immigration, Central Union for Child Welfare wants to highlight that when discussing work-based immigration, the children of the persons to be recruited and their rights must also be taken into account.

Children are mentioned several times in matters concerning early education and learning. However, Central Union for Child Welfare has **concerns about the resources and availability of student welfare services.**

For example, according to the Student Welfare Act, students must be given the opportunity to talk with a school psychologist or a school social worker within a week of contact and, in urgent cases, on the same or the next day. Additionally, the school nurse must be available daily. **Given that these services are not always implemented as required by law,** a stronger focus should be placed on strengthening such services in all municipalities.

The report does not include any reference to children’s right to be heard and to children’s rights in the digital environment. Moreover, it doesn’t really cover mental health and wellbeing, which is particularly worrying, as this issue needs to be urgently tackled holistically at all levels of government. This matter concerns especially young people: access to services needs to be guaranteed to those in need and at the same time, young people must be offered support to take care of their mental wellbeing and build their resilience.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report do not address sufficiently the needs on the ground and neglect the child-rights perspective.

Recommendation 1 focuses on policy proposals for social security reform, with the aim of increasing the efficiency of the system of social benefits, improving incentives to work, and also supporting long-term sustainability of public finances.

While this recommendation is welcome, the impact of these reforms on children and their rights must be assessed during their preparation. More specifically, the reduction of poverty in families with children must be an evaluation criteria in the reform process. It is **essential that the social security reform contributes to preventing child poverty and the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.**

As the [Country Specific Recommendations for Finland](#) were **not written with children's rights in mind**, nor were they based on an adequate analysis of the situation of children in the country, Central Union for Child Welfare believe **they should not be used to identify funding priorities for children and their families or caregivers**.

Poverty and Social Exclusion – experiences of children, families, and communities

Child poverty in Finland

Finland has a total [child population of 1.04 million, 13.2% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021](#).

Single parents, the unemployed, families with health issues, and large families have traditionally been the most vulnerable groups in Finland, when it comes to poverty and material deprivation. The inflation and energy crises have not hit with full strength yet. Still, it is estimated that **already**

16,000 new families have fallen below the poverty line since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

We can predict that more families will face severe difficulties in the coming months and years, with rising energy and food prices and with increased interest rates on mortgages. All families are dependent on transport and energy to some extent, but it will be those with lower incomes who will struggle most.

Despite good employment rates and the lack of severe problems to families caused by the Covid-19 after the initial shock, the current crisis is likely to **exacerbate the risk of falling into poverty for new population groups, including some families with two earners**. Central Union for Child Welfare calls on the government of Finland to react immediately to the current crisis.

In fact, while some initiatives to help households with electricity bills have already been put forward, **additional temporary and targeted measures will likely be necessary as well**. The

Finnish government has now put forward an initiative to pay out an extra child allowance as a one-off payment in December 2022. As child allowance is universal and not taxed in Finland, this measure reaches all children under 17 years of age and an additional payment to support single parents has been included as well.

European Child Guarantee

Finland National Action Plan

The [Council Recommendation on a European Child Guarantee](#) asked Member States to submit a National Action Plan (NAP) that would outline how the Child Guarantee would be implemented at the national level.

In January 2022, [Eurochild published recommendations](#) for all Members States to consider when drafting their NAPs.

[Finland's National Action Plan](#) was published on 21 April 2022. **The government will implement the European Child Guarantee**

as part of the existing National Child Strategy, the over-arching cross-sectoral framework document for coordinating child and family policies and Finland's implementation of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#). Its action plan includes 30 measures and a focus on addressing discrimination and inequality and protecting the rights of children in a vulnerable situation.

Central Union for Child Welfare is particularly happy about this choice, given that the **overall coordination of child and family policies in Finland has been a challenge** for years because matters concerning children and families have been allocated to different ministries.

The organisation sees the National Child Strategy as a good framework for child and family policies and for monitoring and evaluating the targets of the Child Guarantee.

Children and young people have been involved in the preparation of the National Child Strategy

and its action plan, through workshops, online events, and surveys. Various groups of children participated in different ways (including children with disabilities, LGBTI children, etc.).

When children and young people participated, they were informed about how and which processes their opinions would affect. In some cases, results were later compiled and shared with children and young people (e.g. in the form of videos). However, **it is unclear how children and young people will be involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the NAP.**

Central Union for Child Welfare was **actively involved throughout the drafting of the NAP**, along with several other civil society organisations and relevant stakeholders. NGOs will be also included in the planned national cooperation network for monitoring and evaluating the NAP.

Central Union for Child Welfare does not see any major gaps in the National Child Strategy as such. However, they acknowledged that **its success will depend on future governments' commitment to implement the strategy** as an overarching and comprehensive framework for advancing the realisation of children's rights.

EU Funding

Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There are a variety of EU funds available in Finland for actions that invest in children. At national level, information about funds can be found on www.eurahoitusneuvonta.fi.

The European Social Fund Plus funding can be used for social innovation, for example for supporting the well-being of

children who receive child welfare services. **For the first time a specific ESF+ programme will focus on child protection issues.** This programme aims to decrease the demand for alternative care.

One of the main principles of ESF+ regulation is social dialogue and civil society engagement. However, Central Union for Child Welfare was not able to provide a good practice example of civil society involvement in the monitoring/implementation/evaluation of EU funds in Finland.

Projects funded by the EU in Finland

Our member, Central Union for Child Welfare has not been involved in EU funded projects. They applied for funding in 2020 but ultimately they weren't successful. In 2022, they applied for ESF+ funding as a part of a coalition and are waiting for the result.

Priorities for EU funding in Finland

On 28 January 2021, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament reached an agreement that compels Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average (23.4% - AROPE 2017 – 2019) to allocate 5% of ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty.¹ The other Member States, including Finland, should allocate an 'appropriate' amount of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty.

Central Union for Child Welfare calls on the government of Finland to prioritise investment in hobbies and leisure activities, which are out of reach for many children due to an increase in prices. **EU funding has potential for creating and supporting new ways for children to participate in leisure activities outside the home.**

¹ [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus \(ESF+\) and repealing Regulation \(EU\) No 1296/2013](#)