

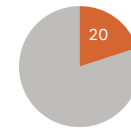
## “Country recommendation

It is essential for a federal country like Belgium, with different levels of power, to improve the coordination of policies related to children.

## Country Profile 2023



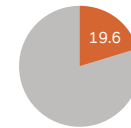
# Belgium



### Child Population:

**2,327,977**

20% of total population



### Child Poverty:

**456,283**

19.6% (2022)

▼ -0.9% compared to 2021

## RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[A little Lining Comes](#)

[ONE](#)

[Flemish Child Rights Coalition](#)

## Children's Rights in Belgium

In the 'French-speaking community of Belgium', the Minister for Childhood is responsible for Children's rights and an [action plan for the period of 2020 to 2024](#) for children's rights has been developed.

In Flanders, the Ministry for Youth, Media, Brussels and Poverty Alleviation and the Co-ordinating Ministry for Children's Rights, are responsible for the rights of children in the region. The Ministry for Education, Sports, Animal Well-being, and the Flemish Border Region, is also partly responsible for the well-being of children. Currently, the Minister is working on an 'integrated youth decree' that combines and updates five decrees relating to Flemish youth work and youth and child rights policy. The role of the Flemish Child Rights Coalition will also be included and updated in this integrated decree. A [Youth and Child Rights Policy Plan](#) for 2020 to 2024 has been developed.

Members in Belgium identified several key areas related to children's rights.

### Child participation

**At federal level**, children's opinions are collected through [a participatory project](#) aimed at producing a version of the recommendations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adapted to young people.

**In the French-speaking community of Belgium**, a number of bodies take children's points of view into account at different levels:

**At local level**, children are consulted through the [municipality's children's councils](#).

**At the level of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation**, there are initiatives taken by:

- [The General Delegate for Children's Rights](#);
- [The Childhood Observatory](#) (OEJAJ);
- The [Youth Forum](#) with the

objective of meeting young people and bringing their struggles, fears, hopes and demands to all levels of society.

In the Walloon Region, children's voices are also heard through an [intergenerational dialogue](#).

In Flanders, the Flemish Commission for Children's Rights is mandated to take complaints from parents, professionals and children relating to child rights. However, [most complaints that are received come from adults](#).

In Flanders, secondary schools are required (by decree) to organise a means of participation for their students (for example by a student's council). However, not complying with this does not bear any consequences for the school involved. Primary schools are required to organise a students' council if 10% of the students aged 11 to 13 years asks for it.

### Anti-child rights movements

According to Eurochild members, the uprise of the radical right is a worrying development for civil society and the advancement of human rights in general in Flanders and Belgium, including children's rights, and particularly for children and young people of colour.

### Child safety and well-being online

According to the [Digisprong Knowledge Centre](#), 32% of children and 24% of youth report being cyberbullied in 2022.

The increasing dissemination of images of child sexual abuse is complicated by the transnational nature of the problem in Belgium. Filing a police complaint is often a high barrier for victims and not all online platforms are equipped with reporting mechanisms. According to the [Child Focus Annual Report 2022](#), the real extent of the problem in Belgium is still unknown: many victims

remain unidentified and there is no centralised reporting system nationally.

Several initiatives have been implemented:

- The recent EU [Directive 2018/1808 on audiovisual media services](#) (AVMSD) was transposed to Belgian regulatory framework in 2021 by adapting the [decree on audiovisual media services and video-sharing services](#) (4 February 2021). This decree includes measures to combat harmful content, such as hate speech and discrimination, as well as other measures to protect children.
- In 2022, the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation adopted a [media education plan](#) entitled *62 Actions to Develop Critical Thinking and Interactivity with the Media*.
- A new structural policy on school environment to counter harassment and cyberbullying

has been implemented.

- [BetterNet](#) is the Belgian Safer Internet Centre, appointed under the *EU Better Internet for Kids+ Strategy*. The project aims to improve the online behaviour of Belgian citizens, paying particular attention to young users, other vulnerable groups, families and those involved in education. This programme also set up a helpline for children and teenagers, as well as parents.
- The Direction for Equal Opportunities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation relaunched a [campaign to prevent sexual violence in relationships between young people](#).

### Child protection systems

Belgium's child protection (*Jeugdhulp* in Dutch and *l'Aide à la jeunesse* in French) sector is in difficulty. As a result of successive crises, there are many children at risk. There is a shortage of staff and accommodation places,

leading to institutional violence. Children who are not ill are having to live in hospital as this is the only measure of protection available.

### Children in migration and refugees

There is an ongoing asylum seeker reception crisis in Belgium. It remains possible [to detain](#) families with children because of their migration status, and the number of non-accompanied minors going missing in Belgium [increases yearly](#). There are currently [1,249 non-accompanied minors](#) waiting for a guardian to be appointed to them.

Minor asylum seekers do not always receive a place in a reception centre and are forced to live on the street. Fedasil (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) has been convicted by Belgian courts for over 7,000 times since the beginning of 2022 for failing to provide asylum seekers a place in

a reception centre. Additionally, several interim measures were imposed on Belgium by the European Court of Human Rights due to its failure to provide reception to asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup>

### Climate change and environmental impacts

In 2022, Belgium signed the [Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action](#).

Nevertheless and despite its relative wealth, Belgium [scores poorly](#) in comparison to other OECD countries on its level of exposure to pollution, lead and pesticides. The country's air quality is also quite low and access to green spaces is limited and unequally divided. 8 out of 10 children in Belgium report being worried about the climate.

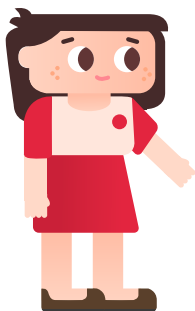
### Children's mental health

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of young people's mental health.

<sup>1</sup> Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, [Opvangcrisis: Een Trieste Verjaardag](#), 2023; AGII, [Wettelijk kader en rechtspraak over gebrek aan opvang van asielzoekers met oneigenlijke code no show](#), 2023.

Policymakers have taken measures in this regard, such as increasing the affordability of psychological help. However, waiting lists for mental health services remain very long, particularly for children.

Belgium is in the process of reforming its mental health care delivery system with the aim of simultaneously strengthening community care and improving integration of care. The new policy model attempts to strike a balance between hospitals and community services, and it is based on networks of services.



## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Belgium

Belgium has a total child population of 2,327,977. Of which 19.6% live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2021.

There are significant differences between the Belgian communities:

- Brussels: 23.3% of children grow up in poverty.
- Wallonia: 16.2% of children grow up in poverty.
- Flanders: 7.3% of children grow up in poverty.

According to the Children's Rights Coalition, the groups of children most in need in Belgium are children with a migration background, children with

disabilities, children in alternative care, and children experiencing housing deprivation.

The main services needed to support children most in need in Belgium are [affordable and quality housing](#) and inclusive education, since children growing up in poverty and children with a migration background are [over-represented in special education](#).

Moreover, Belgium needs to provide accessible childcare facilities for children living in vulnerable families and preventive medical care for children. The country should also develop a policy for the inclusion of refugee children.

A few recent interventions have been able to help children and their families in Belgium:

- [ZoJong!](#), an organisation for and by young informal caregivers that won a sustainability award, provides support to young caregivers through awareness campaigns, workshops in

secondary education, packages for preschool education, activities for young informal caregivers and training/lectures for professionals and teachers.

- The government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation validated a draft new price list in nurseries, [reviewing the scale of parental contributions](#).

## The European Child Guarantee

### Belgium's National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee's implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The [National Action Plan \(NAP\) of Belgium](#) was published on 3 May 2022.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the federal government and the federated entities have chosen not to target

<sup>2</sup> The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

particularly vulnerable groups of children with specific measures. Measures generally address all children experiencing poverty.

ONE explains that for French-speaking community of Belgium, the NAP mentions that various categories of children have been identified as vulnerable: children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children in care, migrant children, children from single-parent families and children whose mothers are in prison. The issue of children's mental health has also received attention.

According to the Child Rights Coalition, many of the initiatives listed in the NAP are project-based or dependent on the goodwill of individual local actors (such as schools). More structural measures are needed to ensure all children have full access to all services. ONE adds that the NAP includes measures or actions planned at various levels of the federal state. Therefore, the implementation of

these measures is responsibility of the administrations/sectors concerned. Better coordination of child policy in a federal state seems necessary.

In general, there is a lack of disaggregated national data relating to children and their rights. The complex institutional setup of Belgium contributes to this issue.

POD Maatschappelijke Integratie, the Flemish federal administration for Social Integration co-ordinates the implementation of the Child Guarantee, and has held several meetings with a variety of other civil society organisations, including our member the Child Rights Coalition.

ONE is in touch with the person of contact for the French-speaking community of Belgium and will participate in the meeting that will be organised by the federal coordinator for the implementation of the Child Guarantee.

The Belgian NAP is an overview of measures already included in the Child Guarantee and its adoption did not lead to new procedures being introduced. Moreover, the Belgian NAP does not analyse whether the measures that were already in place meet the standards of the Child Guarantee. In general, as Child Rights Coalition have argued in their [position paper](#) in April 2023, the NAP lacks ambition and additional structural measures are needed to meet the goals of the Child Guarantee.



## European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

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

This year's [European Semester Country Report for Belgium](#) did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground because, while the report highlights a slight reduction in poverty in the country, the situation of children is not specifically mentioned.

The recommendations for Belgium highlight the excellent level early childhood education and care (ECEC) coverage compared with other European countries. Nevertheless, social inequalities remain, with more privileged families making greater use of ECEC than more disadvantaged ones.

While the high cost of education and its social inequality are

highlighted. Early childhood is given very little attention in the report.

Overall, Eurochild members were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

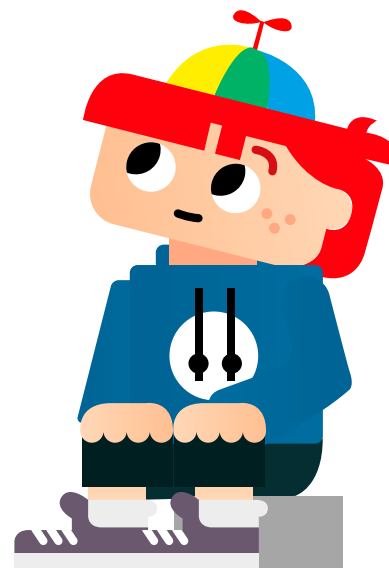
### Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report do not take children sufficiently into account.

ONE highlights that only one single recommendation is focused on children, linking the importance of quality childcare service (ECEC) to support the employment of mothers.

In the [Country Specific Recommendations](#) for Belgium, the European Commission failed to highlight the need to support children in poverty. ONE points that, while the report highlights the appropriate measures taken by Belgium in response to the

Covid-19 crisis and points to a slight reduction in poverty in Belgium, it does not specifically mention the situation of children.



Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.



**Eurochild**

Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

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