

# Child poverty and social exclusion

Taken from  
*Children's Realities in Europe:  
Progress & Gaps*  
Eurochild 2024 flagship report  
on children in need across Europe.



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Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

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# Child poverty and social exclusion

*On 20 November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled "Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps", which compiles information from 57 Eurochild members in 31 countries across Europe. This sub-report covers insights into child poverty and social exclusion across Europe. After laying out the information coming from the ground on the state of child poverty and social exclusion in Europe, Eurochild offers its recommendations to the European governments to be implemented with the support and guidance of the European Institutions.*

## Introduction

Ensuring social inclusion and tackling child poverty by providing accessible services to all children without discrimination is a pressing issue in Europe. These efforts directly support several rights enshrined in the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**. By supporting vulnerable children and families, states uphold the right to benefit from **social security** (Article 26). Promoting free early childhood education and care, as well as free education, supports **the right to education** (Article 28) and the **aim of education** (Article 29), as well as the **right to play and recreation** (Article 31) through school-based activities. Additionally, providing healthy meals and access to healthcare is essential to reinforce the right to the **highest attainable standard of health** (Article 24). A focus on housing supports the right to an **adequate standard of living** (Article 27).

By targeting vulnerable groups, such as **children with disabilities** (Article 23), those in **alternative care** (Article 20), **migrant or refugee children** (Article 22), and **children belonging to minorities** (Article 30), it is possible to ensure **equal access to rights for all**, in line with the UNCRC **principle of non-discrimination** (Article 2). The enjoyment of these rights is essential for breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and social exclusion, making a lasting impact on children's lives.

Breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and social exclusion is a long-standing priority for Eurochild. Poverty represents a denial of choice and opportunity, acting as a barrier to realising children's full potential. Child poverty needs to be tackled through a rights-based approach, which recognises the child as an individual rights holder while understanding that their development is dependent on the family, school, and community environments in which they are growing up.

## Rates of poverty and social exclusion

According to [Eurostat data](#) for 2023, nearly one in four children (24.8%) in the EU were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, a staggering 20 million children across the 27 Member States. At the national level, the highest rates are observed in **Romania** (39%), **Spain** (34.5%), and **Bulgaria** (33.9%). Child poverty also affects high-income countries, with 26.6% of children in **France** and 26.1% in **Luxembourg** at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In the

EU enlargement countries, the situation is equally concerning, with 27.1% of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in **Serbia** in 2022 and 30.2% of children living in poverty in **Moldova** in 2022. According to UNICEF, child poverty in 2022 reached 65.2% in **Ukraine**. All over Europe, vulnerable groups, including children with migrant backgrounds, refugees and asylum-seekers, children living in single-parent families, from large or disadvantaged families, children with disabilities, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, are overrepresented among those living in poverty.

## Findings from Eurochild Members

### 1. Inclusive education, including early childhood education and care

**Albania, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, and Wales** all require targeted investments in education and early childhood education and care. For example, **Ireland** must sustain investment in its *Equal Start* funding model. At the same time, **Kosovo** needs to focus on early childhood programmes and measures to prevent school drop-out, especially among Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian minorities. In **Italy**, preventing early school leaving, particularly among students with migrant backgrounds, is a challenge. **Romania** should invest in infrastructure and teacher training in disadvantaged areas.

A focus on creating inclusive education systems is needed. **Estonia** should allocate resources to ensure safe and supportive environments for children with special needs. **Poland** and **Bulgaria** must invest in inclusive education systems that support children with disabilities and those from marginalised communities, reducing social exclusion. **Latvia** needs to invest in inclusive education free from segregation, bullying, and discrimination. **Bulgaria** must end segregation in schools and address educational inequality.

**Hungary** faces increasing school segregation, particularly for Roma children. There is an urgent need to address this by providing equal access to quality education and combating geographic inequality. **Romania** must prioritise teacher training and infrastructure development, especially in disadvantaged areas. **Portugal** must ensure that early learning caters to children's developmental needs with appropriately trained professionals. **Croatia** needs to increase investment in education to help break the cycle of poverty. **Cyprus** should provide educational services outside school hours and cater to each child's specific needs. **Slovakia** should focus on supporting preschool care services.

**Malta** needs a national policy on early childhood education, while **Northern Ireland** should increase investment in early years programmes and inclusive childcare, focusing on reducing families' costs. Similarly, **Spain** and **Wales** should ensure universal access to early childhood education.

The most vulnerable children in **Albania** need support to access leisure activities, ensuring they have opportunities for social engagement and development. Similarly, **Moldova** needs to invest in after-school programmes, parent clubs, and youth clubs to foster children's

personal and social development and strengthen community ties. **Kosovo** should invest in developing public transport infrastructure to enable children and families to access schools, services, and employment more easily.

## 2. Healthcare, including mental health

**Albania** should invest in healthcare services and psychological care for its most vulnerable children. **Belgium** must strengthen the affordability and accessibility of quality healthcare, including mental health services. **Greece** must ensure free psycho-social assistance and counselling. To address health disparities, **Poland** requires improved access to physical and mental healthcare, especially for children. **Romania** should guarantee all children access to comprehensive healthcare, including preventive care and mental health services. **Serbia** must also improve access to healthcare, particularly mental health services, and strengthen social protection programmes for vulnerable children and families. **Slovakia** should support the healthcare system, with a focus on prevention.

**Hungary** faces a shortage of general practitioners and paediatricians, with over 100,000 children lacking access to local paediatric care. **Latvia** must improve healthcare access, particularly in rural areas, to ensure children receive the necessary care. **Portugal** should focus on timely access to high-quality services and address the high out-of-pocket expenses and long waiting times for children's specialised care. Subsidising private and third-sector healthcare providers could help meet healthcare needs.

**Malta** should develop a national healthcare policy to ensure access to quality healthcare for all children, including addressing mental health needs and providing comprehensive services nationwide. **Ukraine** needs to focus on supporting mental health recovery for children, especially those affected by conflict and trauma.

## 3. Social protection and financial support

Across Europe, countries must urgently invest more in social services, financial support, and policies to reduce child poverty and ensure equal opportunities for all children.

**Albania** should invest more in social services and establish a national child support programme, initially targeting children up to 10 years old. In **Belgium**, the Flemish *Groeipakket* (child benefits) must be reformed and expanded to lift children out of poverty or prevent them from growing up in poverty. **Bulgaria** should focus on supporting parents' access to the labour market and providing a combination of cash and in-kind benefits to ensure better family welfare.

**Croatia** should invest more in social services and financial benefits for families with children. **Cyprus** must consider public spending for children as an investment in the future and develop an effective social welfare programme that provides real support to those in need. Additionally, **Cyprus** should adopt a more progressive tax system and income redistribution policies to help reduce income inequalities.

**Denmark** should raise the lowest transfer incomes, increase special allowances for children at risk of poverty, adopt a national action plan to combat child poverty and maintain its low

unemployment rate. In **England**, significant investments are required in welfare reform, including scrapping the two-child limit and benefit cap, expanding free school meals for families receiving *Universal Credit*, and increasing funding for early intervention and therapeutic services for children.

**Finland** should maintain a strong, universal approach to child and family policy, ensuring that services and benefits are readily accessible to all families. In **Germany**, it is necessary to increase federal funding for child benefit support and provide unconditional child benefits (*Kindergrundsicherung*). Additionally, **Germany** should invest in a needs-based, poverty-sensitive social infrastructure for children, young people, and families.

**Greece** should strengthen its social welfare system by providing low-income families with sufficient social assistance benefits. In **Ireland**, there is a need to increase investment in income support for low-income families, particularly those with older children. **Italy** should address its demographic challenges by promoting work-life balance and equal opportunities and expanding accessible, high-quality care services.

**Kosovo** needs to implement a stronger child benefit scheme as a key mechanism for poverty reduction and invest in employment and skills development for vulnerable groups. **Malta** should ensure adequate and equal pay for parents and provide more opportunities for quality family time. **Moldova** should provide financial support for children and families in need while promoting economic development and employment opportunities in rural areas.

In the **Netherlands**, child-related benefits need to be increased to ensure all children have an adequate standard of living, including in the Dutch Caribbean islands. **Northern Ireland** should strengthen social security, tackle low pay, and fully implement recommendations from the *Independent Advisory Panel's Report on Welfare Mitigations* to ensure families can afford essentials.

**Poland** should provide more effective social support, including financial assistance and counselling for vulnerable children. **Portugal** needs to ensure adequate financial support for families, especially given the high inflation levels and rising living costs that disproportionately affect poorer households. **Romania** should enhance child allowances and benefits while improving access to quality education, healthcare, and nutrition programmes for disadvantaged children.

**Scotland** should increase the weekly *Scottish Child Payment* to counteract the cost-of-living crisis and increase investment in early intervention programmes. **Serbia** must adopt a *Social Protection Strategy* to reduce child poverty and develop community-based services for families with children. Additionally, **Slovakia** needs to provide greater support for single-parent households, families on the brink of poverty, and families with children with disabilities. This includes improving access to the Minimum Vital Income and ensuring it reaches those in need.

**Slovenia** should focus on providing more government support for vulnerable families, especially single-parent and immigrant families, and modernising its social security system. In **Spain**, it is necessary to increase support for parents through universal financial support,

particularly refundable deductions in personal income tax. **Spain** should also improve access to the *Minimum Vital Income*, which provides cash benefits to those at risk of severe poverty, and ensure that it reaches the most vulnerable children and families who currently cannot access it, including children with irregular migration status and families who are in the process of applying for asylum. **Türkiye** should take urgent measures to address child poverty, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas, by tackling issues such as neglect, abuse, child labour, and early marriage.

**Ukraine** should focus on public investment in children's welfare. **Wales** needs to strengthen its social safety net by abolishing restrictive policies like the two-child limit and benefit cap and ensure that benefits are increased in line with inflation to help families in need.

In **Denmark**, there was a significant decrease in child poverty from 2017 to 2022; however, a political decision to remove a special child allowance has led to an increase in poverty levels. Furthermore, cuts to social security in 2024 are expected to contribute to the rise in child poverty, as more families will need social assistance. Similarly, in **Finland**, although the social security system is based on universality and provides a range of benefits and services for families with children, including child allowance and early childhood education, the recent cuts to social security are likely to result in more families requiring social assistance. **The Netherlands** should reverse funding cuts to municipalities that provide crucial support to households living in poverty to ensure continued assistance for these vulnerable families. It is also important, in certain cases, to make sure that children can receive social security directly and lift reservation to Article 26 of the UNCRC.

#### 4. Housing

Across Europe, several countries face pressing housing challenges, and urgent investments are needed to ensure that every child grows up in a safe and healthy environment. In **Belgium**, addressing the waiting lists for social housing is critical. The government should focus on rapidly expanding social housing construction instead of imposing increasingly restrictive conditions on candidates. Similarly, **Bulgaria** needs to invest in social housing and develop a *National Housing Strategy* to improve the availability and quality of housing, ensuring that families have access to affordable homes. **Croatia** also faces a similar need for increased investment in social housing and developing a comprehensive strategy to tackle housing inequality.

In **Cyprus**, improving the availability of adequate housing that guarantees a decent standard of living for all families is essential. The **UK government** faces an alarming housing crisis, with two million children in **England** living in overcrowded, unaffordable, or unsuitable homes. Significant action is needed to address the housing shortage and improve conditions for these vulnerable children. **Greece** should make similar investments in social housing and rent support to ensure every family can access secure and affordable housing.

In **Hungary**, the absence of a legal framework to assist families facing eviction, along with the lack of temporary accommodation, has left many families vulnerable. The government must address this gap by strengthening housing protections, as the increasing reliance on churches and charitable organisations to provide housing support is insufficient. **Ireland** is

also grappling with a rise in homelessness, with 4,401 children currently living in emergency accommodation. Traveller families, in particular, face substantial barriers in accessing their right to housing, with nearly 40% experiencing homelessness. Immediate investments are needed to reverse this trend and ensure access to stable housing for all children.

Many families in Latvia live in inadequate housing, and there is a pressing need to increase the availability of affordable rented housing, particularly through local authorities. **Malta** should ensure that all children have access to safe neighbourhoods where they can live securely and thrive. Similarly, **Portugal** must support families facing housing deprivation, providing financial and social support to prevent homelessness.

Finally, in **Romania**, improving affordable housing in impoverished areas is essential for ensuring children grow up in safe and healthy environments. **Spain** should increase funding for social housing to support families facing housing crises and ensure that children are not deprived of the stability a home provides.

These investments are critical to breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring that every child has access to a secure, stable home where they can build a better future.

## 5. Nutrition

Ensuring access to adequate nutrition for children is a priority across Europe. In **Albania**, the government must focus on providing at least one hot meal daily to every child in kindergarten and school, ensuring that no child goes hungry while learning. Similarly, **Greece** should implement a system that offers school meals to students from low-income households, supporting their health and well-being. In **Malta**, the government must ensure safe and healthy nutrition for all children, helping to prevent food insecurity and promote good dietary habits.

The **Netherlands** has made progress with its new coalition government's decision to continue providing free school breakfasts in schools with at least 30% of students from low-income families, which is a step toward ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have a nutritious start to their day. **Scotland** must increase investment in free school meals and cancel existing school meal debt, removing barriers to healthy nutrition for students. In **Spain**, the government should guarantee access to free school meals for all children living in poverty and invest in improving school canteens and kitchens, ensuring that both primary and secondary school students have access to nutritious meals.

Finally, **Wales** should ensure that all children receive free school meals, starting with the youngest, and extend this provision during school holidays, ensuring children have access to nutritious food year-round.

## 6. Investments in the child protection systems

In many countries across Europe, there is an urgent need to strengthen child protection systems and invest in support services for families, especially those at risk. **Bulgaria** should prioritise improving the quality of its child protection system, ensuring it meets the needs of vulnerable children. **Estonia** needs to invest in psycho-social support for families, creating a



stable system for family-based care, particularly for children with complex needs. In addition, **Estonia** should recruit more child protection workers, enhance their qualifications, and implement cross-sector cooperation between health, social, and education services for more targeted interventions. **Greece** must also invest in social services and dedicated personnel to prevent child abuse and neglect, offering both financial and psychosocial support to vulnerable families. Similarly, **Türkiye** needs to focus on enhancing the social workforce by working with at-risk children and providing specialised training on case management. **Serbia** needs to implement early intervention and community-based services to prevent family separation and institutionalisation while also supporting children in alternative care with programs that promote independence and socio-economic integration.

Another key area of focus is improving care for children in institutional settings or those transitioning from care. **Hungary** should increase investments in children's care. **Poland** must prioritise deinstitutionalisation and strengthen family-based care, including family-style residential care facilities. Special attention should be given to youth transitioning from care into adulthood. **Moldova** should also provide better support for children and young people leaving the care system at the age of 16 or 18 and strengthen services for families to prevent violence and separation.

Preventive measures and enhanced family support are critical in reducing child abuse and neglect. **Kosovo** must invest in preventing early marriage and early parenting among girls while strengthening its child protection systems and ensuring the effective implementation of laws related to child protection and family services. **Northern Ireland** should expand family support services, such as the *Sure Start* program for disadvantaged communities, and invest in non-stigmatising support delivered by the Community and Voluntary Sector. **Romania** needs to support parents through parenting classes and employment assistance, helping families achieve financial stability and create nurturing environments for their children. Additionally, **Romania** must establish a national mechanism to identify cases of violence against children and provide clear reporting processes, along with training for professionals and public awareness campaigns.

## 7. Need for integrated services

**Croatia** must focus on developing an integrated system of early childhood services and support to ensure cohesive and comprehensive assistance. Similarly, **Bulgaria** should provide integrated social services under the Child Guarantee framework to better support families at risk. In **Slovakia**, child protection involves multiple institutions, including the police, schools, and municipalities, but the approach remains fragmented and needs better coordination. **Türkiye** should clarify and define the roles of staff working in the child protection system to improve its efficiency and effectiveness.



## Recommendations

1. **European states should prioritise targeted investments in education, particularly in early childhood education and care, to ensure equal opportunities for all children.** Key actions should include increasing access, improving quality, and addressing barriers faced by marginalised groups. This includes tackling educational segregation, providing tailored services for vulnerable children, and investing in teacher training and infrastructure in disadvantaged areas. **Inclusive and supportive environments should be created** to reduce social exclusion, break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, and promote equitable development for all children.
2. **European states must prioritise improving access to healthcare services for children, including mental health support and care for vulnerable populations.** This includes ensuring affordable and accessible healthcare, addressing health disparities, and providing comprehensive services. **Urgent action is needed to strengthen mental health care systems, reduce inequalities, and enhance preventative measures.** Efforts should focus on increasing the availability of healthcare professionals, especially in underserved areas, and ensuring timely access to high-quality care, including mental health services, for all children, regardless of background or location.
3. **European states must increase investment in social services, financial support, and policies aimed at reducing child poverty.** This includes expanding child benefits, ensuring access to adequate financial assistance for families, and enhancing social protection systems. **Countries should implement targeted programmes that provide direct support to vulnerable families,** including those with children from low-income backgrounds, and develop strategies to tackle poverty. Strengthening universal child and family policies, increasing child allowances, and improving employment opportunities for parents is crucial to ensuring all children have equal opportunities to thrive.
4. **European states must prioritise urgent investments in housing to ensure that all children grow up in secure, stable environments.** These include expanding social housing, addressing waiting lists, and developing national housing strategies to improve affordability and quality. **Governments should provide adequate legal protections for families facing eviction and invest in rent support schemes to prevent homelessness,** particularly for vulnerable groups.
5. **European states must ensure that children have access to adequate nutrition, ensuring that no child goes hungry and that all children have the opportunity to develop healthy eating habits.** This includes providing hot meals in schools and kindergartens, particularly for low-income households. Additionally, provisions should be extended to cover school holidays, addressing food insecurity year-round. These steps are essential for supporting the health and well-being of children across Europe.
6. **European states should strengthen child protection systems by investing in family-based care, enhancing cross-sector cooperation, and increasing the training of child protection professionals.** Efforts should focus on early intervention, preventing family

separation, and supporting transitions from care. Additionally, addressing abuse, and ensuring robust preventive measures to reduce child neglect and violence are essential. **Collaboration across sectors is crucial for providing comprehensive, effective support to vulnerable children and families.**

## Summary

**Investing in education, healthcare, social protection, housing, healthy meals, and child protection is crucial to the enjoyment of a wide variety of children's rights.**

**Education policies** should focus on accessibility, quality, and inclusion, particularly for disadvantaged groups, to prevent school dropouts and ensure equal opportunities. **Strengthening healthcare systems**, including **mental health support**, is crucial for children's overall well-being, especially for vulnerable populations. **Social protection measures**, such as financial aid and tailored services, help reduce child poverty and support families in need. **Expanding affordable housing and preventing homelessness** are key to child development. Ensuring **adequate nutrition** through free school meals is an effective way to combat food insecurity. Last but not least, **strengthening child protection services and enhancing family support** can prevent violence, neglect, and family separation while providing high-quality, family-based care to children.

While the primary motivation for upholding children's rights is a moral obligation grounded in human rights, tackling child poverty and ensuring social inclusion is also an investment in Europe's long-term economic and social stability. Protecting and empowering children leads to intergenerational benefits, stronger social cohesion, and more resilient democracies.

To achieve this, EU institutions and national governments must take decisive action to prioritise children's rights and well-being in policies and budgets. EU members and enlargement countries must ensure no child is left behind by addressing inequalities, strengthening child protection systems, and guaranteeing access to quality education, healthcare, and social support. The EU should support Member States in tackling child poverty and breaking the cycle of social exclusion, including through the negotiations of the new *Multiannual Financial Framework*. **A failure to act not only undermines the rights of millions of children but also jeopardises Europe's future prosperity and democratic integrity.**

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