The State of Children in the European Union 2024
Addressing the needs and rights of the EU's youngest generation

A Summary with a focus on child and adolescent mental health

UNICEF published a new report and four policy briefs uncovering the prevalence of challenges faced by children living in countries across the European Union (EU), including rising poverty, deteriorating mental health, online sexual abuse, and exposure to pollution. While the EU is one of the most prosperous regions in the world, the rights of far too many children within its borders are under threat or even denied.

The report summarizes analyses by UNICEF on child well-being and progress for children in the European Union (EU) during the period of the current EU legislature, 2019-2024, and identifies key issues for the next political cycle.

Key facts from the report:

Child poverty
- Almost **1 in 4 children are at risk of poverty** and social exclusion = 20 million children in the EU
- Although from 2015-19 the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU fell from 22.2 million to 19.1 million, since 2019, **the number has increased by almost one million to 20.7 million in 2022**.

Mental health
- It is estimated that over **11 million children and young people** aged 19 and younger (13%) in the EU **suffer from a mental health condition**.
- The rates increase with age from around 2% of children under the age of 5 to around 19% of young people aged 15 to 19.
- **Suicide is the second most common cause of death among young people** aged 15 to 19 in the EU, accounting for approximately one in six deaths.

Environment
- **Children are more vulnerable to environmental harms** which can impact both their cognitive and body development.
- It is estimated that still **almost one in 20 children in the EU are exposed to high levels of pesticide pollution**, amounting to over 380,000 children.

Digital technologies
- In 2021 **around 1/3 of children aged 10 years old could not tell if a website was trustworthy.**
- In 2018, **around 1 in 20 children** (5%) aged 15 living in the most disadvantaged households **lacked access to the internet at home**, compared to less than 1% in the most advantaged households.

Major challenges over the past 5 years:

• **COVID-19 pandemic** which had a tremendous impact on children's mental health and education

• The **effects of climate change** affect children's (mental) health, livelihoods, disrupts their access to basic services.

• **Digital transformation** brings both benefits for child development and learning and risks and challenges regarding their protection from **harmful content, behaviour, and wrong or misleading information**.

• Falling birth rates, ageing populations and changes in family structures contribute to a new **demographic transition**. In many of the EU's rural areas, **adequate and timely access to health services for children and sustained access to educati**on are facing increased demands.

• **Migration** has been a major subject of political debate and issue for policymakers to address, including **how to provide services for and successfully integrate migrant and asylum-seeking families and children**.

• Since 2021 **inflation** has once again become a challenge for European economies, while at the same time eating into the **household budgets of families**.

• Since 2022, the **war in Ukraine** poses security threats and affects a large number of children from Ukraine, in countries across Europe.

The crises have been affecting children:

- Evidence of **worsening trends regarding children's mental health** in many countries.
- **Physical health challenges**: Immunization rates fell during COVID-19; increasing numbers of overweight/obese children
- The pandemic affected children's learning and heightened **educational inequalities**.
- **Child poverty** denies opportunities for millions of children and increase their risk of **social exclusion.**

Key Policy Areas: Mental Health Services

- Increase funding to **improve accessibility and quality of mental health services**
- Importance of **early intervention**: not only to improve the lives of young people in the present but also because the majority of adult mental health problems manifest before the age of 18.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many of issues raised would benefit from a consolidation of ongoing efforts and investment. It is equally clear, however, that **an acceleration of efforts and increased levels of financial investments will be needed**. In many cases, actions will be designed and led by the governments of EU member States within their own contexts. But it is clear that **many areas will benefit from EU-level support, through knowledge sharing, policy formulation, new legislation, as well as financial incentives.**

1) **Safeguard and strengthen recent progress made on children's rights**
- Fully implement the European Child Guarantee: This is essential to reaching the EU 2030 target of reducing the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion from 20 to 15 million.
- Launch a comprehensive, multi-sectoral mental health strategy based on socio-ecological, inclusive and human rights approaches with specific, actionable objectives, timeline, budget, and indicators.

- Update and enforce legislation to protect children from recognized and emerging risks of violence in the digital environment, while at the same time addressing the digital divide and equitable access to digital learning and promoting digital skills and literacy.
- Priority must be given to reaching the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children – whose rights are most under threat or denied – including refugee and migrant children, those with disabilities, groups facing discrimination, and children affected by conflict.

2) Increase investment in children in the EU

- Measures to promote children's rights must be included in current and future EU funding opportunities and instruments supporting the triple transition (digital, green and social) and aiming at strengthening resilience and recovery.
- The EU should support and incentivize actions by member States through the sharing of best practices and strong monitoring.
- Prioritize increasing the fiscal space for more investment in children through raising the current EU budget, and its financing, through a mix of increased contributions from member States and the exploration of innovative financing instruments and new European-level taxes.

3) Strengthen governance for children

- The impact on child rights and future generations should be systematically considered in all future EU policy making and legislation. This includes establishing impact assessment mechanisms to assess the consequences of policy actions and decisions on children, as well as exploring best options for an EU governance that represents children, upholds their interests and holds EU institutions to account.
- Strengthened child rights governance in EU institutions would include options for a permanent body to protect and promote children's rights or horizontal oversight at Vice-President level at the European Parliament; as well as enforced European Commission structures under the political leadership of a Vice-President; as well as an informal Council of the EU configuration interested in upholding children's rights and meaningful and inclusive participation of children.

4) Improve the evidence base with a new EU data collection strategy that includes children

- Address gaps in evidence on child well-being in the EU.
- Establish centralized, integrated, and comprehensive data collection systems that cover all areas of the CRC and its Optional Protocols.
- Include child-related Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators in the EU SDG monitoring framework.
- Establish a Eurostat task force on statistics on children to improve the availability, integration and disaggregation of statistics on children.
- Employing foresight methods with children and youth to help map potential futures, especially in the digital space, that inform anticipatory policies fit for our age.