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Child well-being in rich countries: a comparative overview

Introduction

UNICEF produces the *Report Card* series to encourage the monitoring of children's well-being, to permit country comparisons, and to stimulate debate and the development of policies to improve children's lives. Our concept of child well-being is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 2007, we published *Report Card 7*¹ in which the United Kingdom came bottom of the child well-being league table. That finding was a shock and a wake-up call. *Report Card 11* provides an update to that data,

presenting the latest available overview of child well-being in 29 of the world's most advanced economies.

It considers five dimensions of children's lives – material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviours and risks, and housing and environment – as well as children's subjective well-being. In total, 26 internationally comparable indicators have been included in the overview. Most of these data track long-term trends and reflect the results of long-term investments in children's lives.

Report Card 11 consists of three parts:

- 1 **Part one** presents a league table of child well-being in 29 of the world's most advanced economies.²
- 2 **Part two** looks at what children say about their own well-being, including a league table of children's life satisfaction, and another about their relationships with their mothers, fathers and classmates.
- 3 **Part three** examines changes in child well-being in advanced economies over the first decade of the 21st century by focusing on a smaller selection of indicators across 21 countries. These tables track changes in: family affluence; infant mortality rates; educational achievement; further education enrolment rates; overweight children; teenage birth rates; the prevalence of fighting and bullying; and the use of tobacco, alcohol and cannabis.

The indicators used for the initial league table of child well-being in 29 of the world's most advanced economies are:

- **Material well-being**
 - monetary deprivation (relative child poverty rate; relative child poverty gap)
 - material deprivation (deprivation index; low family affluence rate)
- **Health**
 - health at birth (infant mortality rate; low birth weight rate)
 - preventive health (immunisation rate)
 - childhood mortality (ages 1–19)
- **Education**
 - participation rate in early childhood education; further education [15–19 years old]; and numbers of 15–19 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- achievement (average PISA scores in reading, maths and science)
- **Behaviour and risks**
 - health behaviours (overweight; eating fruit; eating breakfast; taking exercise)
 - risk behaviours (teenage pregnancy rate; smoking; alcohol; drugs)
 - exposure to violence (bullying; fighting)
- **Housing and environment**
 - housing (persons per room; multiple housing problems)
 - environmental safety (homicide rate; air pollution)

I. Key findings

		Overall well-being	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4	Dimension 5
		Average rank (all 5 dimensions)	Material well-being	Health and safety	Education	Behaviours and risks	Housing and environment
			(rank)	(rank)	(rank)	(rank)	(rank)
1	Netherlands	2.4	1	5	1	1	4
2	Norway	4.6	3	7	6	4	3
3	Iceland	5	4	1	10	3	7
4	Finland	5.4	2	3	4	12	6
5	Sweden	6.2	5	2	11	5	8
6	Germany	9	11	12	3	6	13
7	Luxembourg	9.2	6	4	22	9	5
8	Switzerland	9.6	9	11	16	11	1
9	Belgium	11.2	13	13	2	14	14
10	Ireland	11.6	17	15	17	7	2
11	Denmark	11.8	12	23	7	2	15
12	Slovenia	12	8	6	5	21	20
13	France	12.8	10	10	15	13	16
14	Czech Republic	15.2	16	8	12	22	18
15	Portugal	15.6	21	14	18	8	17
16	United Kingdom	15.8	14	16	24	15	10
17	Canada	16.6	15	27	14	16	11
18	Austria	17	7	26	23	17	12
19	Spain	17.6	24	9	26	20	9
20	Hungary	18.4	18	20	8	24	22
21	Poland	18.8	22	18	9	19	26
22	Italy	19.2	23	17	25	10	21
23	Estonia	20.8	19	22	13	26	24
23	Slovakia	20.8	25	21	21	18	19
25	Greece	23.4	20	19	28	25	25
26	United States	24.8	26	25	27	23	23
27	Lithuania	25.2	27	24	19	29	27
28	Latvia	26.4	28	28	20	28	28
29	Romania	28.6	29	29	29	27	29

Overall, between 2000 and 2009–10, there has been widespread improvement in most, if not all, indicators of children’s well-being – in particular, family affluence, infant mortality, and smoking among children.

The Netherlands retains its position as the clear leader and is the only country ranked among the top five countries in all dimensions of child well-being. It’s also in the lead when children assess their own well-being. Four Nordic countries (Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) sit just below the Netherlands at the top of the table.

The bottom four places in the table are occupied by three of the poorest countries in the survey (Latvia, Lithuania and Romania) and by one of the richest (the United States). There does not appear to be a strong relationship between per capita GDP and overall child well-being – in other words, country wealth does not always mean happier and healthier children. But investment in children is important. Child poverty is not inevitable but policy-susceptible, and some countries have been doing much better than others at protecting their most vulnerable children.

The United Kingdom is placed 16th out of 29 countries in the new UNICEF league table of child well-being in the world’s rich countries, and 86 per cent of UK children report a high level of life satisfaction. This represents a move up the table since the first UNICEF overview in 2007, when the UK was placed bottom out of 21 countries.

But that improvement is not consistent across all areas.

UK RANKINGS IN 2009–10

Material well-being

UK placed 14th out of 29 countries

Although the UK has one of the lowest rates of child deprivation in the developed world at 5.5%, the gap between the poverty line and those living below the line is 23%.

Health

UK placed 16th out of 29 countries

Infant mortality has long been used as a major indicator of child health. The UK’s rate of 4.4 per 1000 live births is approximately double the rate of Sweden or Finland.

Education

UK placed 24th out of 29 countries

The UK does well in relation to early childhood education and comparatively well in educational achievement. But, by having the lowest further education participation rate in the developed world at 74 per cent, and almost 10 per cent of young people not in education, employment or training, the UK is dragged down the education league table.

Behaviour and risks

UK placed 15th out of 29 countries

The UK is one of only four developed countries to see a decline in the percentage of overweight children, and is one of the countries with the biggest fall in consumption of alcohol, smoking and cannabis. However, we still have a problem with high rates of alcohol abuse and rank 27/29 countries for teenage pregnancy rates.

Housing and environment

UK placed 10th out of 29 countries

UK children are in the top third when looking at overcrowding and levels of outdoor air pollution, but fall to the middle of the table when reporting problems with housing standards.

II. Key messages and recommendations

The Report Card series clearly demonstrates that the legislative and policy decisions of governments have a significant impact on all children throughout their childhoods – particularly those living in poverty and disadvantage.

The UK has moved up the league table, but there is still a way to go to be near where we should be. More worryingly, the economic downturn is having a profound impact on the countries included in this research, many of which have seen rising unemployment and falls in public expenditure that inevitably will affect the lives of their children.

Individual children pay the costs when we fail to safeguard their well-being but, over time, we all bear the costs. Making policy choices that lead to children suffering avoidable setbacks in the most formative stages of development is a breach of the most basic tenet of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – that every child has a right to develop to their full potential.

It is crucial to continue to closely monitor the state of children in the industrialized world, so as to prevent the heaviest burden of economic recession from falling on those least able to sustain it, and to avoid a slide from the achievements of the past decade.

Recommendations for Government action in the UK

- 1 Devise and support policies and programmes to close the gaps in child well-being**, so that all children are given the opportunity to reach their full potential. UNICEF believes that more equal societies are better for children and everyone else. Inequality has the greatest impact on poor children and those living in the most deprived areas of society.
- 2 Identify what resources are being invested in children.** Child budgeting refers to the identification, allocation and monitoring of resources spent on children and children's services. Being able to assess resource allocation is a necessary prerequisite to making better informed decisions about expenditure.
- 3 Undertake regular analysis of the effects of decision making** on children at central and local government level. The impact on children should be one of the first considerations of government before agreement on actions to reduce the deficit.
- 4 Prioritise children's rights and ensure children's policy is more visible in and across government.** Give one government department oversight of policies affecting children from 0 to 18. Child well-being is multi-dimensional in nature and requires a coordinated response. Investment needs to be maintained from the early years through to young adulthood.
- 5 Maintain the commitment to eradicate child poverty in the UK by 2020.** A political focus on the poorest children in this time of exceptional financial pressure on families is at the heart of successfully protecting the most vulnerable in our society.
- 6 Ask children how they feel about their lives.** Under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to be asked and a right to be heard. Adults have a responsibility to listen and respond to the things children say. As far as possible, adults must include children in the process of determining and promoting their own well-being.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is the world's leading organisation working for children. We work with children, families, local communities, organisations and governments in more than 190 countries to help every child realise their full potential. In everything we do, the most disadvantaged children and the countries in greatest need have priority.

UNICEF UK raises funds for UNICEF's emergency and development work around the world and advocates for lasting change for children worldwide. This includes, for example, working to change government policies and practices that restrict child rights in the UK and internationally.



About UNICEF Report Cards

The UNICEF *Report Card* series is designed to monitor and compare the performance of economically advanced countries in securing the rights of children. Each *Report Card* focuses on a different theme, and taken as a series they build up a picture of child well-being across the EU and other rich nations, including the UK.

References

- UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries*, Report Card 7, (UNICEF, 2007).
- These are: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States.