

## KEY FINDINGS

### **"Report Card 9 - The Children Left Behind"**

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Report Card 9 *The Children Left Behind* presents a first overview of inequalities in child well-being for 24 of the world's richest countries. It focuses on the relative gap between children in the bottom of the distribution with those occupying the median of different child well-being indicators. Three dimensions of well-being are examined: material well-being, education, and health. In each case, the question asked is 'how far behind are children being allowed to fall?'

- A small group of countries – Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland – are leading the way in promoting bottom-end equality in child well-being. Greece, Italy and the United States are on the other hand allowing children to fall furthest from the median, with large gaps between the performance of children in the middle of the distribution and children at the bottom end.
- The rankings are the result of different performances in three dimensions of inequality in child well-being: material, educational and health – based on available and comparable data. No country is in the top band for all three measures. All countries have room for improvement in individual indicators or dimensions.
- The report shows a number of examples where countries who rank best in performance in each indicator of child well-being also rank best in reducing inequality. As such, it is argued that greater equity can be achieved without sacrificing efficiency and economic performance. Equity and efficiency in a society can be complementary and mutually reinforcing.
- The analysis conducted in *Report Card 9* is a new approach in measuring countries' performances based on available data. It does not, however, investigate the determinants and causes of inequality among children, and specific investigation would be required to understand the differences among the countries. However, some of the existing research on rich countries suggests that:
  - ✓ Reducing socio-economic inequalities and mitigating their impact on children's health and development can facilitate improved health.
  - ✓ A concentration of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in particular schools is often associated with higher inequality in school achievements at country level.
  - ✓ Socio-economic status is an indispensable framework for policy analysis of bottom-end inequality among children. Policies designed to address specific inequalities in health or education are likely to have limited impact if they confine themselves to the health and education sectors. Actions to prevent children from falling behind in different dimensions of well-being must eventually come face to face with the question of the socio-economic gradient.
  - ✓ Across the OECD on average, government interventions (via taxes and transfers) are reducing child poverty rates by around two-fifths. Calculations in the report show that more than 1 million children are being lifted above the national poverty line in France, Germany and the United Kingdom, while government interventions in Italy are making much less of an impact.

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### 1. Material well-being

*Methodology: Data for three indicators was analysed, namely: income, housing living space and possession of key education resources.*

- Switzerland has the least inequality in material well-being, closely followed by Iceland and the Netherlands. The highest relative gaps are reported in Hungary, the United States and Slovakia.
- Some countries have higher levels of inequality in some indicators than in others. For example, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Greece and Slovakia are penalized in the ranking due to higher than average inequality in access to basic educational resources.
- Spain, Canada, Portugal and Greece also rank lower in terms of overall material inequality due to higher levels than average of household income inequality.

#### Indicators:

##### **Disposable household income for children aged 0-17**

*Methodology: The bottom-end inequality in disposable household income is measured by the percentage gap between the child at the median position and the child at the 10th percentile (i.e. the child who has less income than 90 per cent of all children in the country). No data are available for the United States on this indicator.*

An analysis of the average for the OECD countries included in the main comparison shows that the child at the 10th percentile has an income that is 47% lower than the income of the child at the median. The lowest levels of inequality are registered in Norway, Denmark and Austria, with gaps at or lower than 40%; the widest gaps are found in Canada, Spain, Portugal and Greece.

##### **Educational resources for 15-year-old students**

*Methodology: The indicator analysed is an index that summarizes the possession of key educational resources for children available in the household. For statistical reasons, the bottom-end inequality is measured by comparing the median with the average of all children below the median, instead of the child at the 10th percentile. Clearly, the results are expected to be much larger if the focus is on the most disadvantaged children, rather than all children below the median.*

The average gap in educational resources between the median and students below the median is 15%. Four countries have a gap lower than 10%, specifically: Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The highest gaps are registered in Hungary, the United Kingdom, Greece and Slovakia, with gaps ranging from 21-26%.

##### **Housing living space for children aged 0-17**

*Methodology: The indicator used to assess bottom-end inequality in housing is the number of rooms per person in households with children (not counting corridors, kitchens and*

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*bathrooms). Inequality is measured by the percentage difference between the child at the median and the average of all children below the median*

On average for the OECD countries, the gap between the median and the less advantaged half is 21%. The countries with the lower levels of bottom-end inequality for educational resources are Iceland, Germany and Switzerland, with gaps of 9%; the widest gaps are found in Poland, the United States, Italy and Hungary, with gaps between 29-33%.

## 2. Educational well-being

*Methodology: For the assessment of bottom-end inequality in educational well-being, data for three indicators on school achievement for students aged 15 were analysed, namely: reading, mathematics and science literacy achievement (measured in the OECD Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006).*

- Inequality in children's educational outcomes (in reading, maths and science literacy) is lowest in Finland, followed by Ireland and Canada. Inequality in educational well-being is highest in Belgium, with France and Austria also showing second and third highest levels of inequality.
- Investing in low-achieving students and maximizing the potential of those in the higher ranges is not in conflict. The two countries with the lowest bottom-end inequality in reading literacy, Finland and the Republic of Korea, are also the two countries with the highest median levels of educational achievement. A child born in either of these two countries therefore has both a lower chance of falling a long way behind his or her peers and a higher chance of scoring above the average literacy mark for the OECD as a whole.

### Indicators:

*Methodology: The bottom-end inequality for the three indicators of educational achievement is measured by the percentage gap between the PISA score for the child at the median and the score of the child at the 10th percentile (i.e. the child who has lower scores than 90% of all children in the country).*

### **Reading literacy achievement for children aged 15**

On average, in the OECD countries included in the comparison, the child at the 10th percentile has a score in reading literacy which is 28% lower than the achievement of the child at the median. The lowest level of inequality in reading literacy is registered in Finland, with a gap of around 20%; the highest levels of inequality are found in Italy and Belgium, with gaps of 32-33%.

### **Mathematics literacy achievement for children aged 15**

On average, in the OECD countries included in the comparison, the child at the 10th percentile has a score in mathematic literacy that is 24% lower than the achievement of the child at the median. The lowest level of inequality is registered in Finland, with a gap of around 19%, followed by Ireland and Denmark; the widest gaps are found in Austria and Belgium, with gaps of 27-28%.

### **Science literacy achievement for children aged 15**

On average, in the OECD countries included in the comparison, the child at the 10th

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percentile has a score in science literacy which is 26% lower than the achievement of the child at the median. The lowest level of inequality is registered in Finland, with a gap of 20%, followed by Hungary, Poland and Canada. The widest gap, around 28%, is found in the United States. Belgium and France also have high levels of inequality in science literacy, with gaps of around 28%.

### 3. Health well-being

*Methodology: To assess the bottom-end inequality in health well-being, data for three indicators were analysed, namely: scores for healthy eating, vigorous physical activity and self-reported health complaints. Data refer to students aged 11, 13 and 15 and result from an elaboration of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey (2005-2006).*

- The Netherlands heads the table by a distance, with the lowest inequality in all three indicators. The United States, Italy and Hungary show the highest levels of bottom-end inequality in children's health.
- In general, countries with the lowest levels of health inequality are also the countries with the highest median levels of health. This is the case, for example, in the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal in terms of self-reported health complaints.

#### Indicators:

##### **Self-reported health complaints**

*Methodology: The indicator used for the analysis of self-reported health complaints is constructed on the basis of information on the frequency of select health complaints among adolescents. The score for the scalar indicator on health complaints is analysed to measure the gap between the child at the median and the average of children below the median.*

Overall, in the OECD countries included in the comparison, the average of children below the median is 24% lower than the score of the child at the median. The lowest levels of inequality are registered in the Netherlands, Austria and Portugal, with gaps at around 20%; the widest gaps are found in Hungary, Luxembourg, Greece and the United States, with gaps of 27-28%.

##### **Healthy eating**

*Methodology: The indicator used for the analysis is constructed on the basis of information on frequency of consumption of fruit and vegetables among adolescents. The score for the scalar indicator on healthy eating is analysed to measure the gap between the child at the median and the average of children below the median.*

In the OECD countries included in the comparison, the average of children below the median is 43% lower than the score of the child at the median. The lowest levels of inequality are registered in the Netherlands and Belgium, with gaps of around 35%; the widest gaps are found in Finland and Hungary, with gaps of 49-50%.

##### **Vigorous physical activity**

*Methodology: The indicator used for the analysis is constructed on the basis of information on frequency of vigorous physical activity for adolescents outside school hours. The score for the scalar indicator on vigorous physical activity was analysed to measure the gap between the child at the median and the average of children below the median.*

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In the OECD countries included in the comparison, the gap between the average of children below the median and the median is 32%. The lowest levels of inequality are registered in the Netherlands and Switzerland, with gaps of around 24%; the widest gaps are found in Italy, Spain and France, with gaps of 42-44%.

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