

Innocenti Report Card 13

Fairness for Children:

A league table of inequality in child well-being in rich countries

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Fair Start to Life for All Children

Few would dispute that *all* children deserve a good start to life. Or that experiences of poverty, poor health or low educational attainment in childhood can profoundly affect life chances in adulthood.

A true measure of a nation's fairness may therefore be how well it attends to the well-being of its most disadvantaged children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and their own sense of well-being.

Report Card 13 presents an overview of inequalities in child well-being in 41 countries from the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The focus throughout is *the gap* between the well-being of children at the bottom and those in the middle of the distribution (the 'average'). These gaps capture how far children at the bottom are allowed to fall behind the average child in each nation.

The *Report Card's* league tables rank countries based on these gaps in four key domains of child well-being: income, education, health and life satisfaction. A combined summary league table also provides an overall picture across all four domains.

Reducing the Gaps Benefits All Children

No country provides all children with the same start in life but the fact that child well-being gaps are smaller in some countries than others shows that large inequalities in child well-being are not inevitable.

The evidence presented in the *Report Card* suggests that reducing child well-being gaps typically benefits *all* children. Countries with smaller child well-being gaps tend to also have:

- ❖ fewer children living in poverty
- ❖ fewer children below proficiency levels in reading, maths and science
- ❖ fewer children reporting ill-health on a daily basis
- ❖ fewer children reporting very low levels of life satisfaction.

Some Good News

Important examples of recent progress in reducing child well-being gaps can be found.

- ❖ In the majority of rich countries gaps in physical activity and unhealthy eating have narrowed.
- ❖ Belgium, Czech Republic and Germany had some of the largest gaps in reading achievement scores but all have narrowed the gap while also lifting overall proficiency levels. Some of the countries with the biggest levels of educational disadvantage – such as Chile, Mexico and Romania – are making substantial progress in reducing gaps and in improving overall proficiency levels.
- ❖ Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania previously had the lowest average life satisfaction scores but all have made progress in reducing gaps and increasing average ratings.

- ❖ The economic crisis negatively affected children's incomes in many countries, but some – the Czech Republic, Finland, Republic of Korea and Switzerland – have managed to deliver a positive scenario of rising average incomes and a narrowing income gap between 2008 and 2013.

Overall Trends are Discouraging

Progress in reducing child well-being gaps has been modest overall. In many countries the most disadvantaged children have been allowed to fall further behind their peers since the 2000s. Discouraging trends include:

- ❖ Income gaps have increased in the majority of rich countries since the economic crisis. Trends are particularly stark in the large southern European countries where the poorest children have seen their incomes fall even further behind a falling average. In Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain the poorest children are significantly worse off in both relative and real terms.
- ❖ Very few countries made clear progress in both reducing the gap and reducing the prevalence of low performance in reading. In countries like Finland and Sweden, previously seen as exemplars of high standards and equity in education, both inequality and levels of low performance increased.
- ❖ No country made clear progress in reducing the gap in self-reported health complaints. Indeed, the gap has increased in 25 countries, with large increases in Ireland, Malta, Poland and Slovenia.
- ❖ The life satisfaction gap has increased in more countries than it has decreased. Comparatively large increases occurred in Belgium, the Czech Republic and Spain.

Inequalities Can Reinforce Inequalities

Inequalities often overlap and reinforce each other in practice. While the *Report Card's* league tables examine key domains of child well-being separately, the evidence shows there are clear interactions between different inequalities. For example:

- ❖ Children from the least affluent households are more likely to have poorer outcomes in life satisfaction and education and are less likely to exercise regularly or eat healthily.
- ❖ Countries where the gaps between the incomes of the poorest children and those at the middle are smaller, tend to have higher levels of overall child well-being.
- ❖ Gender gaps in adolescent health are widespread and persistent. In all countries examined, girls are significantly more likely to fall behind in health. In ten countries, the gender gap has actually increased. Girls also report lower levels of life satisfaction than boys, especially at age 15.
- ❖ Low levels of life satisfaction are associated with multiple risk behaviours in many countries including bullying and being bullied. Migrant children in Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United States report lower life satisfaction than non-migrant children.
- ❖ There is also evidence to suggest that high levels of income inequality across the whole of society are harmful for child well-being. Across the countries examined in the *Report Card* those with more equal income distributions also tend to be those that do better in minimising adverse child well-being outcomes.

The Depth of Disadvantage

The limited progress in closing child well-being gaps is of concern on fairness grounds, but urgent action is also required because the magnitude of disadvantage in some countries is so large:

- ❖ In 19 countries examined the poorest children have less than half the income of the average child in their country. In Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, as well as in Israel, Japan and Mexico, the difference between incomes of the poorest and average children exceeds 60%. This means that the poorest have less than 40% of the income of the average.
- ❖ Across OECD countries the most disadvantaged children are the equivalent of 3 years of schooling behind the average child for reading. In Bulgaria, Chile, Mexico and Romania approximately 25 per cent of 15-year-olds lack skills and competencies in solving basic reading, maths and science tasks, a worryingly high figure.
- ❖ In 25 countries more than one in five children report one or more health symptoms on a daily basis. More than half of children in Turkey do so.
- ❖ Across rich countries the self-rated life satisfaction of the average child is 8 out of 10, but in the vast majority of countries more than 1 in 20 children rate their life satisfaction at the very low level of 4 or lower out of 10: in Poland 10 per cent, and in Turkey more than 15 per cent of children rate their life satisfaction at this level.

Promoting Fairness for Children

The *Report Card* suggests the following principles and recommendations for policy makers to consider in strengthening child well-being:

- ❖ Protect the incomes of the poorest children. It is clear that social transfers play a vital role in protecting the poorest children. In some countries with very large child income gaps – such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Portugal – social transfers to households with the poorest children are minimal.
- ❖ A renewed commitment to reducing the educational gap at the very bottom. Such a focus need not come at the expense of overall achievement, as demonstrated by Denmark, Estonia, and Poland which reduced gaps and also raised achievement levels for all.
- ❖ Promote and support healthy lifestyles for all children. Important progress in reducing some health gaps shows that public health campaigns can deliver significant gains. However, progress has been too slow in some areas. The wide and persistent gender gap in health outcomes is a serious cause for concern.
- ❖ Take subjective well-being seriously. Children’s own voices should be heard more clearly by policy makers. Life satisfaction data demonstrate that wider social inequalities clearly affect children’s subjective well-being. In every country examined, for every point in time surveyed this century, children from the least affluent households are more likely than other children to be fall behind in life satisfaction.

The evidence presented in this *Report Card* underestimates the true depth of disadvantage some children face. This is because current data sources, while more extensive than they have ever been, struggle to capture the experiences of children with the lowest levels of well-being. The *Report Card* also recommends therefore that policy makers sustain and improve efforts to monitor and measure child well-being.

But the overall message of the *Report Card* is that, in order to improve the well-being of *all* children, it is vital that greater progress is made in reducing child well-being gaps. A fair society is impossible

if some children are denied a strong start in life. Addressing inequalities in child well-being should therefore be a central aspect of all policies relevant to children and child well-being.