

Migration and Inequality: Making policies inclusive for every child

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The policy response of European governments to migration is inadequate as it provides only limited support based on the legal status of children on the move, which does not meet their basic rights and needs.

INTRODUCTION

With political and economic uncertainties on the rise globally, the number of migrants worldwide is also likely to grow. Migration brings new opportunities and benefits, along with significant costs and risks. Children feel these negative aspects particularly strongly, as the social and economic circumstances they encounter are usually beyond their control. The need to facilitate safe migration has been recognized at the international level and incorporated into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its corresponding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, target 10.7 within the goal to reduce inequality within and among countries aims to “Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies”.¹

By framing migration governance under SDG 10, the Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the intrinsic link between migration and inequality. Migration policies vary within and between European countries and have an impact on the levels of social and economic inequality, particularly the inequalities experienced by vulnerable migrant and refugee children.

Inequality is an important determinant in explaining some of the most pressing concerns of migrant and refugee children in Europe today.² Children born in Europe to immigrant parents are likely to be disadvantaged compared to children of native-born parents. Children from immigrant households are consistently at a higher risk of income poverty³, and they tend to be over-represented in the bottom income decile in European Union (EU) countries.⁴ The association between immigrant background and the probability of being in the poorest income decile often even remains after controlling for household work intensity and other key predictors such as education, family size and single parenthood.⁵ A recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveals that immigrants “in employment are twice as likely as their native-born peers to live below the poverty line”.⁶

1 “Sustainable Development Goal 10”. *Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform*. United Nations. Available at <<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg10>>, accessed 13 June 2017.

2 The terms ‘child migrants’, ‘child immigrants’, ‘refugee children’, ‘unaccompanied and separated children’ and ‘children seeking asylum’ are used interchangeably, generally to refer to immigrant children who are under 18 years of age.

3 Chzhen, Yekaterina, ‘Child Poverty and Material Deprivation in the European Union during the Great Recession’, Innocenti Working Paper 2014-06, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, Florence, July 2014.

4 Toczydlowska, Emilia, ‘Children in the Bottom of Income Distribution in Europe: Risks and composition’, Innocenti Working Paper 2016-12, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, Florence, April 2016.

5 Ibid.; Bruckauf, Zlata, Yekaterina Chzhen and Emilia Toczydlowska, ‘Bottom-end Inequality: Are children with an immigrant background at a disadvantage?’, Innocenti Research Brief 2016-07, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, Florence, 2016.

6 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Understanding the Socio-economic Divide in Europe*, Background report, Centre for Opportunity and Equality, OECD, Paris, 26 January 2017. Available at: <www.oecd.org/els/soc/cope-divide-europe-2017-background-report.pdf>, accessed 3 June 2017.

Furthermore, it states: “In the EU, the youth unemployment rate among native-born immigrant offspring is almost 50% higher than among the young with native-born parents. In non-EU OECD countries, the rates of the two groups are similar”.⁷ We further note that native-born immigrant children are not the only children who are much more likely to face various forms of inequalities in Europe – so too are children with different immigration status, such for instance a refugee background.

Our contribution to the discourse on migration and inequality is threefold. Firstly, this brief provides a cross-country comparative overview of **inequality affecting children on the move** in Europe. For each country⁸, we compare the situation of economically disadvantaged children who have a migration background (i.e. those at the bottom of the national income distribution) with that of the average child population, and examine the median income levels of their families.

Secondly, this brief offers **an overview of the policy and practice affecting various categories of migrant and refugee children on the move in Europe**.⁹ The extent to which children with an immigrant background are exposed to inequality, and protected from abuse and deprivation, depends not only on how well migration is managed, but also on how migrant and refugee children are integrated into society (i.e. access to basic services). Their relatively limited (or non-existent) labour market opportunities and lower incomes compared to native-born citizens result in persistent inequalities at both the structural and individual level. Thus, our overview of policy and practice enables us to identify where migration policy and practice could be amended to address inequality within and between European countries.

Finally, the brief also **reflects on the performance of European countries in regard to SDG target 10.7**, within the goal to reduce inequality, to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration”. States have a shared responsibility and a legal obligation to protect displaced children, and they should be guided in doing so by the key principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and by migration-related SDG targets.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Inequality is measured as a relative income gap. The indicator relates the income at the 10th percentile of the child income distribution (that is a representative of the poorest 10 per cent of children), and compares this to the income of the child who enjoys an average standard of living in a society (a median), with the gap between the two being reported as a percentage of the latter. For immigrant children, the inequality is measured in a similar manner, except that the poorest 10 per cent of migrant children are considered. Hence, the relative income gap for immigrant children is calculated as the gap between the disposable household income of a child living in a migrant household at the 10th percentile and that of the child at the 50th percentile (using total child population median), expressed as a percentage of the median position. Child population median is used purposefully for calculations of both relative income gaps in order to illustrate the economic divide between immigrant children and children who experience an average standard of living.

The analysis uses the disposable household income of all households with children aged 0 to 18 years as well as for immigrant households with children; disposable household income is expressed in euro, equivalized using the modified OECD scale, and assessed at the individual level of the child. The household is considered to have migrant status when at least one of its members was born outside the current country of residency. This includes inter-EU migrants as well as those born outside the EU. We use cross-country comparable data from 2014 taken from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) instrument.¹⁰

RESULTS

Inequality affecting immigrant children in the EU

The analysis of income levels illustrates that children with an immigrant background are at an economic disadvantage compared to other children. The average income available to minors within immigrant households is lower in all of the European countries examined, with the exception of Latvia, Malta and Portugal (see *Table 1*).

7 Ibid.

8 Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia are excluded from the analysis, as the proportion of children with an immigrant background is less than 5 per cent of the sample size in each of these countries.

9 The overview of the policy and practice environment that affects migrant and refugee children across Europe is based on: United Nations Children's Fund, *Children on the Move. Ongoing study of legal entitlements for migrant children*, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2016. The information about the severe lack of legal entitlements for migrant and refugee children is developed from data provided in: Byrne, Kevin, 'Law, Policy and Practice affecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe', Draft publication, on file with author. The overview covers the legal entitlements of various categories of children on the move: asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, undocumented migrants, refugees and those subject to return proceedings.

10 “European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC)”. Eurostat. European Commission. Available at <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions/overview>>, accessed 13 June 2017.

Table 1. Median income of child population and children with an immigrant background

Median income levels in euro, 2014		
Country	All families with children (€)	Migrant families with children (€)
Austria	20,199.94	16,727.45
Belgium	21,240.87	14,804.37
Croatia	4,810.48	3,737.18
Cyprus	14,178.33	12,691.43
Czech Republic	7,290.27	6,426.68
Denmark	28,153.48	23,841.02
Estonia	8,042.58	6,098.33
Finland	23,036.06	20,061.00
France	19,420.00	14,960.00
Germany	18,980.67	16,871.15
Greece	7,141.67	4,808.93
Iceland	20,782.27	20,298.22
Ireland	18,528.78	17,011.85
Italy	14,248.80	11,506.19
Latvia	5,062.52	5,418.01
Lithuania	4,532.44	4,124.23
Luxembourg	29,151.90	26,335.24
Malta	11,755.02	11,963.86
Netherlands	20,035.60	18,727.62
Norway	41,622.25	38,378.39
Portugal	7,766.26	7,804.44
Slovenia	11,809.52	9,205.56
Spain	11,713.52	7,204.91
Sweden	25,882.88	21,427.30
Switzerland	33,861.93	32,434.01
United Kingdom	17,850.00	16,050.00

Note: Incomes are expressed in euros and income deciles are estimated on positive income values only (0 and negative incomes were excluded). Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia are excluded from the analysis, as the proportion of children with an immigrant background is less than 5 per cent of the sample size in each of these countries.
Source: EU-SILC, 2014.

In most European countries, migrant children from poor backgrounds lag further behind economically than other children

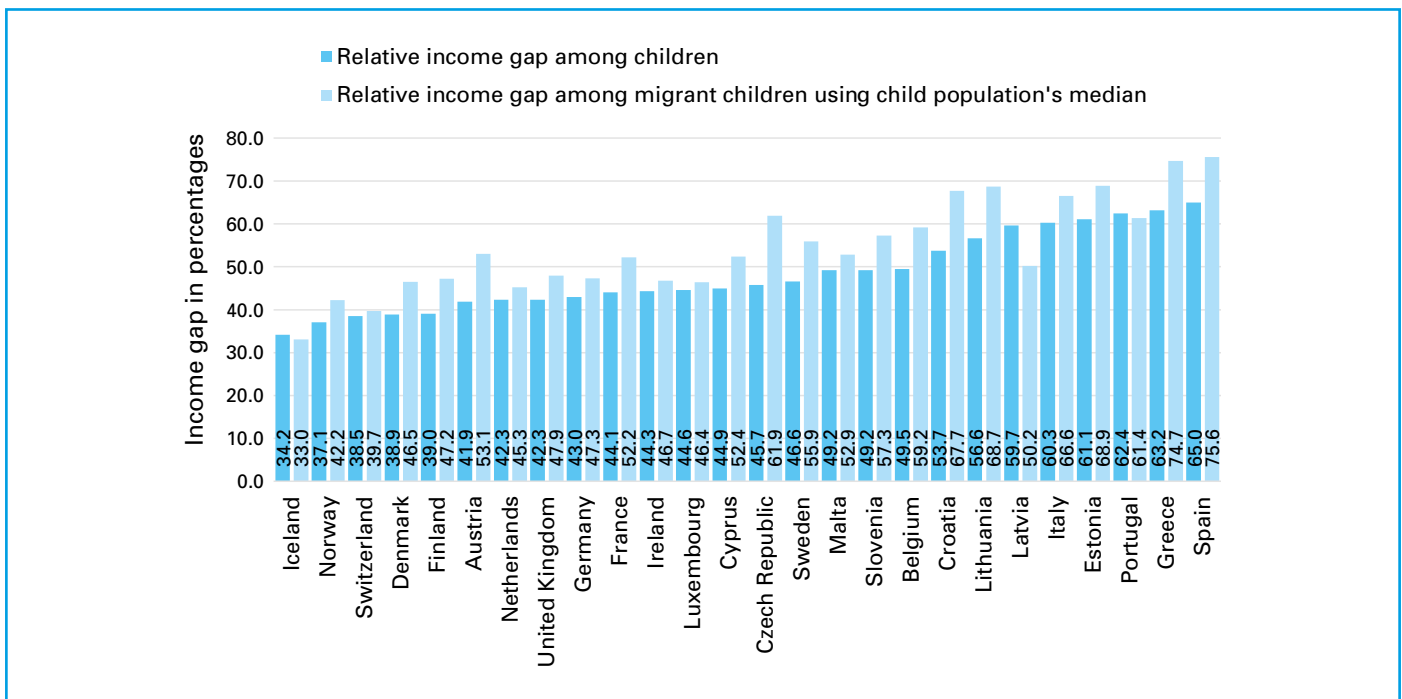
The relative income gap between children varies to a large extent across European countries. In Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, the income available to the child from a poor background is on average 30 to 40 per cent less than the income available to the child who enjoys an average standard of living (see *Figure 1*). In Spain, Portugal and Greece, the economic divide is even more stark, with the income available to a child from a disadvantaged background about 70 per cent less than that of a typical child.

Although there is clearly income inequality among children across Europe, the disparity is worse still when children’s immigrant background (or not) is taken into consideration. In all of the European countries except Iceland, Latvia and Portugal, the economic divide between disadvantaged children with an immigrant background and an average child is even more severe than it is for other disadvantaged children. The difference is especially noticeable in countries such as Croatia, the Czech Republic and Lithuania. A stark income gap between disadvantaged children with an immigrant background and other disadvantaged children is also prevalent in Greece.

We must acknowledge that this analysis has a number of limitations. There are no disaggregated data that enable us to identify the exposure of different categories of migrant children to inequality. EU-SILC is a household survey that asks only for the birthplace of adults; our definition of ‘children with an immigrant background’ is simply those children who live in a household with at least one foreign-born adult. The survey does not collect detailed information about immigration status, which is often a rough measure that may not provide detailed information on important variations in the types of immigration, the country of origin and destination, and the length of stay in the host country. One caveat of our analysis, therefore, is that it draws on existing quantitative data on children who live in a household with immigrants.

In the absence of substantive qualitative research into intra-household dynamics, these data can explain the level of inequality between children with an immigration background and the average child population, but they do not articulate a comprehensive picture of inequality. Household surveys also tend to omit from data collection processes those less stable immigrant populations such as undocumented migrants. Moreover, the timing of these surveys (i.e. up to 2014) excludes the most recent arrivals.

Figure 1. Relative income gap among all children, and between migrant children and the average child population, 2014



Note: Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia are excluded from the analysis, as the proportion of children with an immigrant background is less than 5 per cent of the sample size in each of these countries.
Source: EU-SILC, 2014.

Discriminatory policy and inequality

The extent to which children with an immigrant background are exposed to inequality, and sheltered from risks associated with the migration process, are related to the protection guaranteed them by the immigration policies of European countries. Discriminatory policy and practices at both the regional and national level will undoubtedly contribute to the prevalence of inequality among children on the move. National responses to the recent inflow of children seeking sanctuary in Europe were swift, with governments making use of whatever resources were immediately available. Despite many examples of good practice in individual countries, the UNICEF *Children on the Move* study illustrates the presence of chronic deficiencies in all EU Member States' migration, asylum and child rights structures, systems and services, which impede their ability to provide support to children in need.¹¹ Access to services varies and shifts according to children's asylum status and/or place in the migration process.

There are chronic deficiencies in services for migrant children in need in all of the European countries considered

UNICEF research also demonstrates that despite basic education being a fundamental right guaranteed to all children – according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international law – the quality, type and amount of education varies according to the legal status of the child, rather than according to her/his actual educational needs.¹² Asylum-seeking children are not legally entitled to access the host state's education system on the same terms as nationals.¹³

Education authorities can legally postpone asylum-seeking children's access to school for up to three months. Alternative schooling provided in the reception centres does not usually cover the full curriculum and teaching standards are questionable. Neither children's educational needs nor the timing of exams are taken into account by the return process. Several EU Member States explicitly exclude from the education system children who are undocumented immigrants, restricting the realization of their basic right to education (see *Table 2*).

Similarly, children in the migration pathway should have access to appropriate health care, yet children's entitlements to general health care services are quite restricted in practice. Across Europe, migrants and refugees are guaranteed access to emergency health care. The services included under emergency health care vary across European countries, however, and access to general child health services is prioritized by legal status.¹⁴ Children and adolescents whose residence status is irregular are excluded from the full range of antenatal, post-natal and paediatric care services. Seven EU member countries make no specific provision for maternity care for migrants (see *Table 2*).

Access to social protection is also restricted for migrant children, as all EU Member States require a valid residence permit to be presented before social security payments can be made. This policy automatically disadvantages undocumented and irregular migrants. Practical obstacles, combined with limited support measures, mean that these children are frequently deprived, leaving them at risk of poverty.

Table 2. Lack of legal entitlements of children on the move

Undocumented migrant children excluded from school	No specific maternity care provision for migrants	Undocumented migrant children entitled to emergency health care only
Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovakia

Source: United Nations Children's Fund, *Children on the Move. Ongoing study of legal entitlements for migrant children*, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2016. Developed from data provided in: Byrne, Kevin, 'Law, Policy and Practice affecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe', Draft publication, on file with author.

11 United Nations Children's Fund, *Children on the Move. Ongoing study of legal entitlements for migrant children*, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2016.

12 United Nations Children's Fund, *A child is a child: Protecting children on the move from violence, abuse and exploitation*, UNICEF, New York, May 2017, available at <www.unicef.org/publications/index_95956.html>, accessed 3 August 2018; United Nations Children's Fund, *Uprooted: The growing crisis for refugee and migrant children*, UNICEF, New York, September 2016, available at <www.unicef.org/publications/index_92710.html>, accessed 3 June 2017.

13 Byrne, 'Law, Policy and Practice affecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe'.

14 Ibid.

CONCLUSION

To ensure the Agenda for Sustainable Development reaches every child, there is a need to simultaneously address inequality (i.e. meet SDG 10 to reduce inequality) and apply the migration lens (i.e. facilitate safe migration in accordance with SDG target 10.7). As part of this, there is a shared responsibility to address the needs of the most disadvantaged children, who in many cases happen to be migrants and refugees. Tackling socio-economic inequalities experienced by migrant and refugee children has the potential to improve the position of *all children* as well as to reduce *'bottom-end inequality'*, as this group is over-represented in the lowest income decile.

Migrant and refugee children are often affected by income inequality to a greater extent than other children. Migration decisions affect the entire course of a child's life, which might be more positive on the whole depending on the child's access to education, labour market and health care and her or his overall well-being. All in all, we believe that a global- and national-level shared responsibility to address the needs of the most disadvantaged children – many of whom are migrants and refugees – is key to resolving the deep inequalities in European societies.

Policy responses in Europe are often not enough to resolve inequalities, as they focus on limiting support measures (e.g. linking access to education to legal status), resulting in further inequality, and on limited provisions for basic rights and needs. It is necessary to break the link between entitlements and the legal status of children on the move, and instead provide services based on their rights and needs. We reiterate that facilitating orderly migration and ensuring the protection of children are not mutually exclusive demands.¹⁵

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