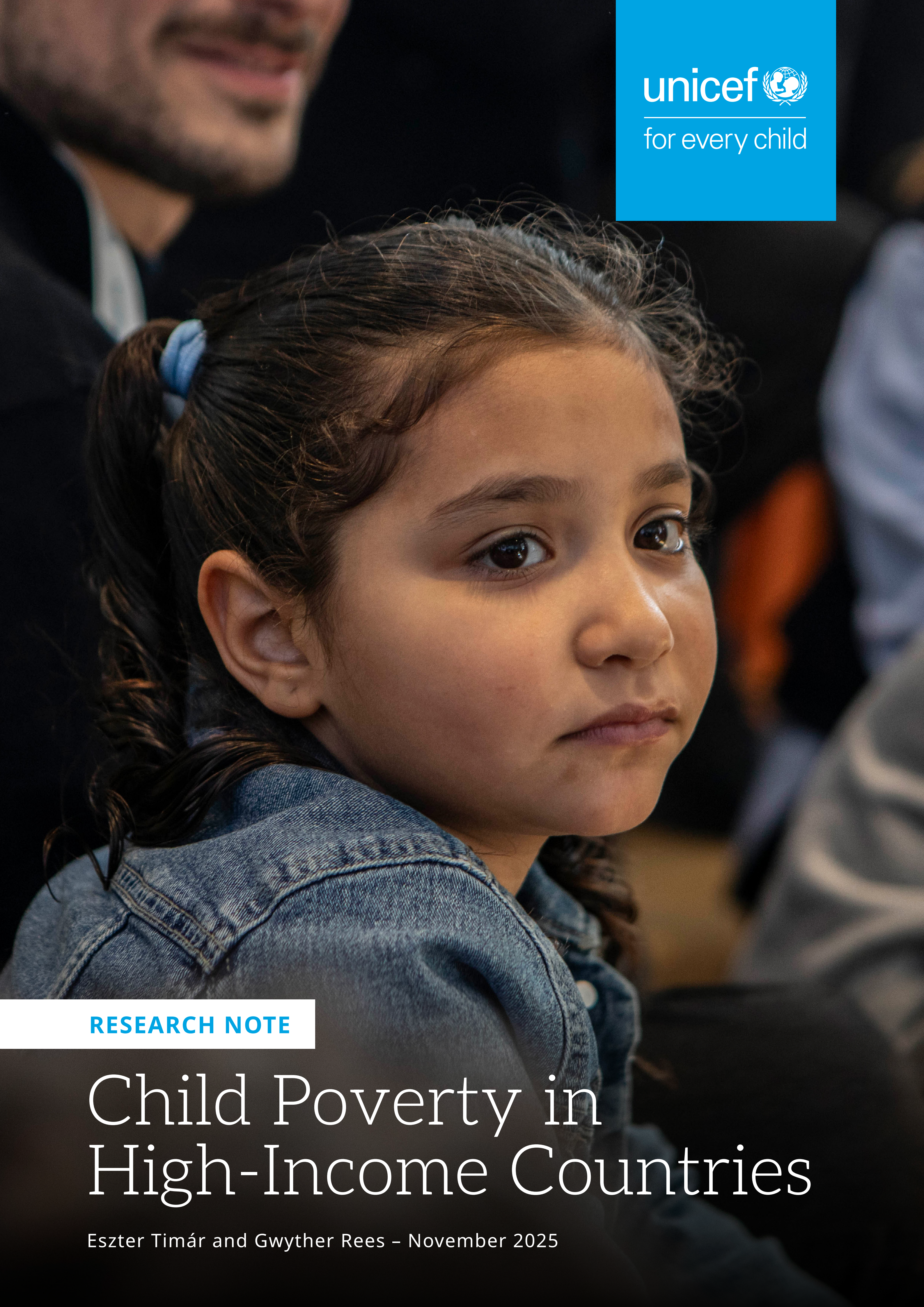


RESEARCH NOTE

Child Poverty in High-Income Countries

Eszter Timár and Gwyther Rees – November 2025

Contents

The State of the World's Children 2025

Ending child poverty: Our shared imperative

This briefing appears alongside the latest edition of UNICEF's flagship *The State of the World's Children* report, which focuses on the continuing damage that poverty inflicts on children and their communities around the world.

The world made progress on reducing child poverty in the twenty-first century, with the number of children living in severe deprivation falling by a third between 2000 and 2023. That progress reflected numerous factors, including strategic and decisive action by governments, civil society and the international community. They made ending child poverty a national priority and prioritized child rights. They embedded children's needs into economic planning, provided cash assistance to families, expanded access to essential public services, and promoted decent work for parents and caregivers.

More recent years have seen a loss of momentum. The COVID-19 pandemic brought progress to a halt, and recovery has been sluggish. In sub-Saharan Africa, major setbacks began even earlier, with some countries making little to no progress in reducing child poverty since 2014. This underlines the reality that progress is often fragile and faces continual challenges. That reality was already in evidence in high-income countries during the global recession in 2008–2010, during which some countries lost more than 10 years of progress in child poverty reduction.

A series of crises – notably climate change, increasing rates of conflict and rising levels of national debt – mean these challenges will only deepen. Progress in reducing child poverty will depend on our ability to better respond to these crises across several areas:

- Climate responses will need to include expanding social safety nets to protect children and families affected by extreme climate events; providing greater support for children displaced by climate change; and strengthening climate-resilient infrastructure and services.
- Rising levels of conflict will need effective strategies that combine flexible humanitarian transfers, education continuity and psychosocial support.
- On the debt crisis, business as usual approaches – such as austerity or borrowing from new sources – risk making things worse. Instead, we need debt restructuring that turns financial obligations into opportunities for investing in children's futures.

Read *The State of the World's Children* 2025 at www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children

Introduction

The UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 18 presented trends in child poverty in high-income countries in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Comparative and multitopic reports, such as those in the Report Card series, have strong advocacy potential but are limited in their depth of analysis. This brief report aims to provide more recent and more detailed information about the nature of child poverty in high-income countries. The first section focuses on monetary (income) poverty, while the second section focuses on non-monetary poverty.

Monetary poverty

Monetary poverty remains one of the most widely used measures of child well-being. While income alone does not determine a child's quality of life, it is a key enabler of adequate living standards. This section presents internationally comparable statistics on the extent, depth and persistence of monetary child poverty in high-income countries. For this report, we present new analysis harmonizing data on children living in monetary poverty based on a poverty threshold of 60 per cent of the average income of the population (*see Box 1*).

The extent of poverty

Figure 1 shows the proportion of children in relative monetary poverty[1] in 2023; and in 2013 and 2018.[2] The figure includes all high-income countries for which comparable data are available.

In the 10-year period between 2013 and 2023:

- A total of 13 countries reduced their child poverty rate by more than 10 per cent proportionally.[3] This includes 7 countries – Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania and Slovenia – that cut it by more than a quarter.
- In three countries – France, Switzerland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – child poverty increased by more than 20 per cent.
- As a result of these primarily positive patterns, the average child poverty rate across countries dropped by around 8 per cent proportionally over a 10-year period.

Box 1: Definition of relative income poverty

Relative income poverty

This report uses various measures of poverty. In the section on monetary poverty, the key indicator is relative income poverty because it offers the most suitable cross-country comparisons (due to its wide availability). This measure considers someone poor if their income falls below a threshold relative to the average income of the population. In this report, the threshold used is an equivalised household income below 60 per cent of the national median.

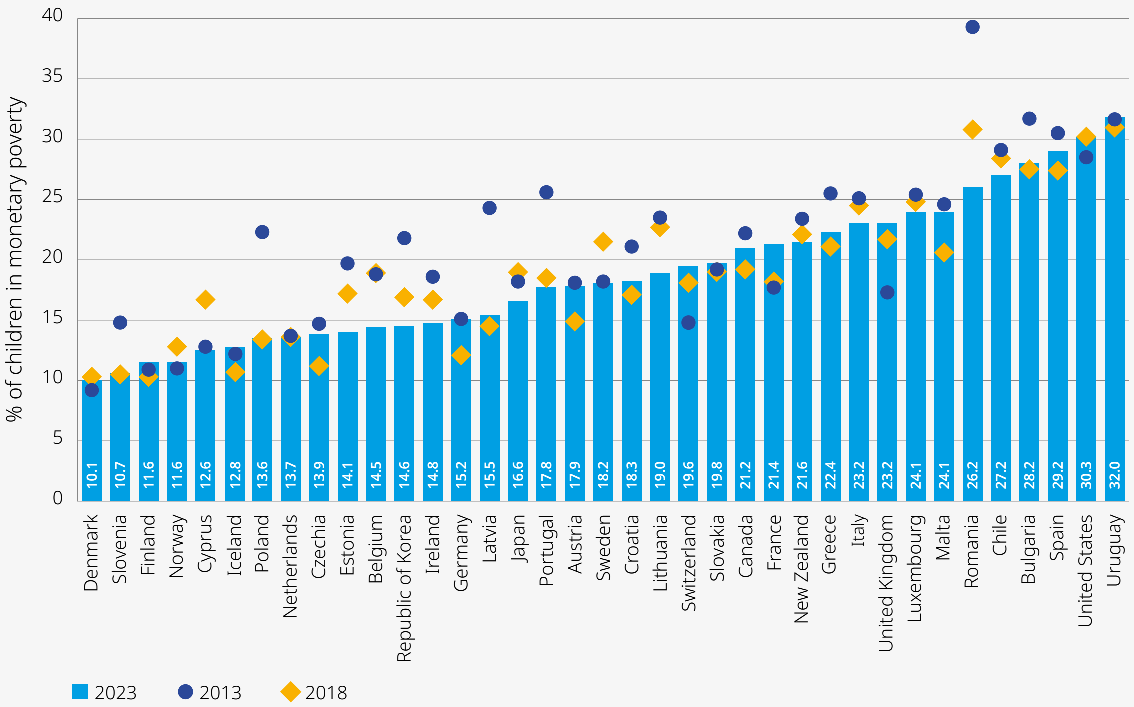
The poverty rate refers to the proportion of people whose income falls below this threshold. The poverty gap refers to how far below this threshold an average poor person's income falls. In this report, we consider the poverty rate and gap among children under 18 years of age.

- However, there is a notable share of countries where child poverty levels have stagnated. In 19 countries, child poverty rates did not change by more than 10 per cent (in either direction) over this 10-year period.

Most of the positive developments listed above occurred in the first five years of the period. Looking in particular at the most recent five-year period, from 2018 to 2023, which spans the COVID-19 pandemic, the picture is less positive:

- Child monetary poverty dropped by more than 10 per cent in nine countries – Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Republic of Korea, Romania and Sweden.
- However, the rate increased by more than 10 per cent in seven countries – Austria, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland and Malta.
- There was no discernible change in the average child poverty rate across countries between 2018 and 2023.
- The most recent estimates show that around 50 million children (23 per cent of the total child population in these countries) were living in child poverty in 2023, showing very little progress since 2013 when the rate was also around 23 per cent.[4]

Figure 1: Rates of child monetary poverty in high-income countries, 2013–2023



Sources: Eurostat (2025) [indicator ilc_li02: relative at-risk-of-poverty rate] for countries participating in the Eurostat statistical framework. Data for the Republic of Korea were provided by Statistics Korea, for Canada by Statistics Canada, and for Japan by Tokyo Metropolitan University. For the United Kingdom, data were calculated from the Households Below Average Income (FYE 2023/24) Study. For the United States and Uruguay, we report our own calculations based on the Luxemburg Income Study. For Chile, we report our own calculations based on CASEN 2022, 2017 and 2014.
Note: '2023' data for Switzerland and Korea refer to 2022, and for Japan to 2021. 2018 data for the United States refer to 2017.

The depth of poverty

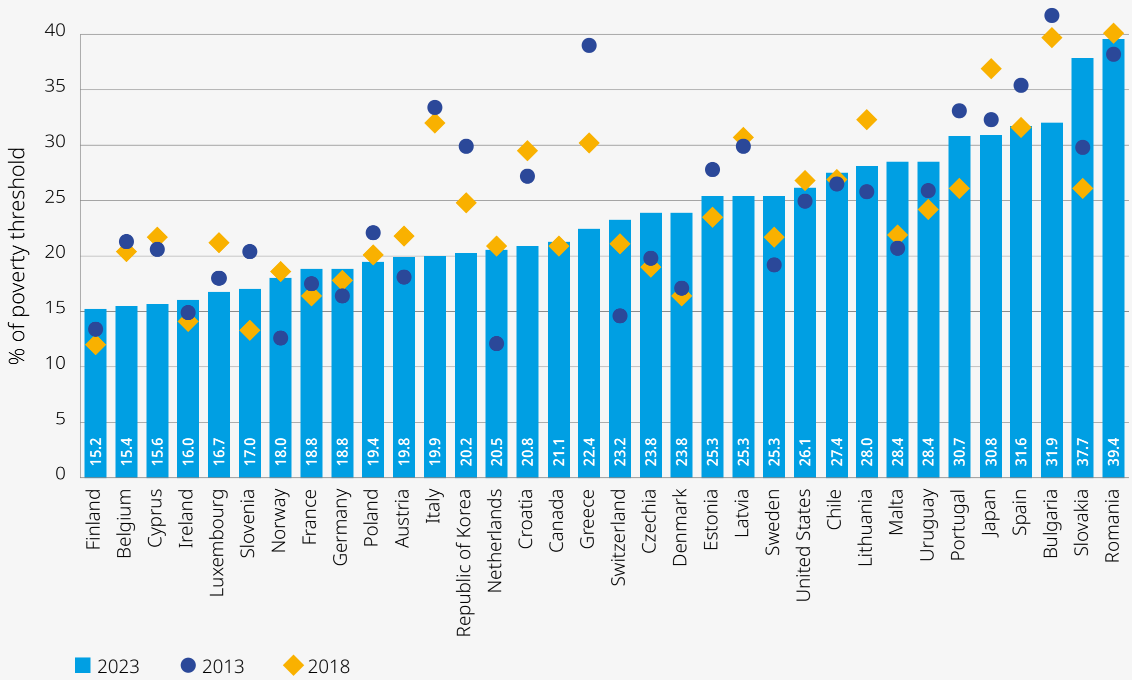
The monetary poverty rate, presented in Figure 1, shows the percentage of children who are considered to be poor. This measure masks important variations in the depth of poverty – that is, how far below the poverty line the incomes of the poor are. To capture this, the poverty gap serves as a useful complementary measure. In this report, the poverty gap is defined as the average shortfall of people living in poverty from the poverty line (expressed as a percentage of the poverty line). It thus distinguishes between countries where the poor are just below the poverty line and countries where the poor are deeply deprived. The poverty rate and the poverty gap are both required for analytical depth that considers both the incidence and the intensity of poverty.

The poverty gap among children in high-income countries is presented in Figure 2. In 2023, there were large cross-country differences in the depth of child poverty. In Romania, the average poor child lived more than 39 per cent below the poverty line, by far the highest value among all countries. Other countries with comparatively large poverty gaps included Slovakia (38 per cent) and Bulgaria (32 per cent). At the other end of the scale, the child poverty gap was smallest in Finland (15 per cent), Belgium (15 per cent), Cyprus (16 per cent) and Luxembourg (17 per cent). These differences highlight that the experiences of poor children may be dramatically different across countries – even across those with similar poverty rates.

Between 2013 and 2023, progress in reducing the depth of child poverty was mixed:

- Seven countries reduced the child poverty gap by more than five percentage points: Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and the Republic of Korea. The gap narrowed in these countries, suggesting that poor children became 'less poor' over this decade. Greece and Italy achieved the largest reductions.
- In contrast, seven countries experienced an increase in the child poverty gap of more than five percentage points. These were Denmark, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden, and Switzerland.
- On average, there was no consistent change in the depth of poverty across countries.

Figure 2: The child monetary poverty gap in high-income countries, 2013–2023



Sources: Eurostat (2025) [indicator ilc_li11: median relative at-risk-of-poverty gap]. Data for the Republic of Korea were provided by Statistics Korea, for Canada by Statistics Canada, and for Japan by Tokyo Metropolitan University. For Chile, we report our own calculations based on CASEN 2022. No data were available for the countries not listed in this chart.

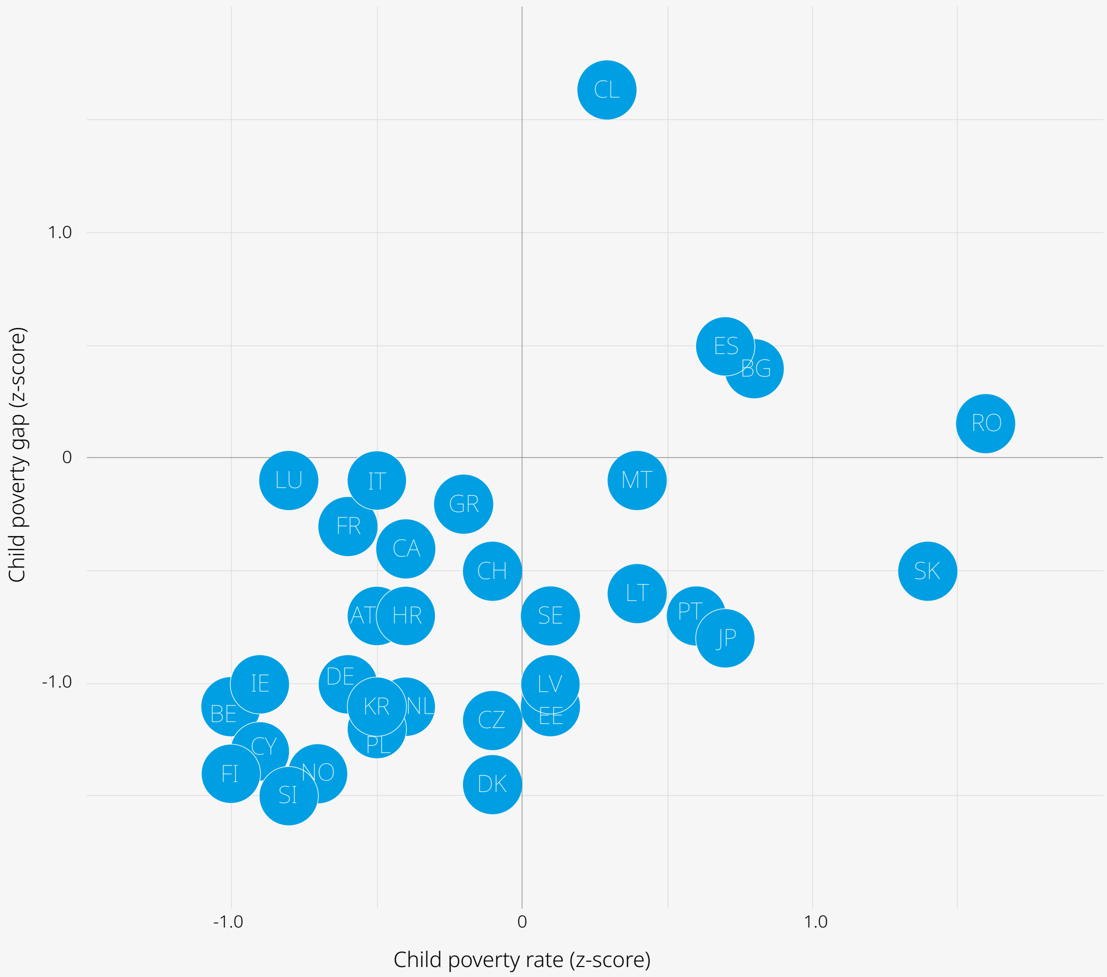
Note: '2023' data for Switzerland and Korea refer to 2022, and for Japan to 2021.

Figure 3 shows how countries compare in terms of the incidence and depth of poverty, with each dot representing a country. The horizontal axis presents the poverty gap, while the vertical axis shows the poverty rate. Both indicators are standardized z-scores, which means that they are expressed relative to the average across all countries.

Plotting the poverty rate and gap on a single figure highlights significant cross-country variation:

- Countries in the bottom-left quadrant perform better than average in both dimensions, meaning that fewer children live in poverty and those who are poor are less severely deprived. Finland and Slovenia stand out – they lie farthest from the origin in this quadrant.
- Countries in the top-right quadrant (especially Bulgaria, Romania and Spain) perform the worst – here, child poverty is both widespread and deep. This means that relatively few children live in poverty, but they are left far behind.
- What it means to be poor may be dramatically different across contexts. Slovakia and Switzerland, for example, have nearly identical poverty rates but differ dramatically in their poverty gaps. This suggests that while a similar share of children is classified as poor in both countries, those in Slovakia experience far deeper deprivation than those in Switzerland.

Figure 3: Standardized child poverty rate and gap, 2023



Source: Eurostat (2025) [indicators ilc_li02 and ilc_li11] for EU Member States; data provided by individual national statistical offices.

Note: 'Poverty gap' refers to the child poverty gap expressed as a percentage of the poverty threshold, as per the European Union statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) definition.

Complementary approaches to monetary poverty

Anchored poverty

We present changes in children's living standards using a fixed poverty line based on the 2018 income threshold (adjusted only for inflation). This allows us to assess whether families with children are better or worse off in real terms over time, regardless of how the broader income distribution changes.[5] This approach is an especially insightful metric during periods of economic volatility, when relative poverty rates may fall simply because the median income falls.

In Table 1, we present changes in living standards and in relative income poverty between 2018 and 2023. The shading of cells indicates the direction and magnitude of changes. Darker colours indicate changes greater than +/- 10 per cent. Lighter colours indicate changes between 5 and 10 per cent. Red shows increasing poverty (i.e., a worsening situation), while green shows decreasing

Table 1: Changes in anchored and relative income poverty, 2018–2023

Country	**Living standards** (% change)	**Relative income poverty** (% change)
Germany	41.3	25.62
France	26.4	17.58
Czechia	20.5	24.11
Finland	13.6	12.62
Slovakia	10	4.21
Denmark	5.8	–1.94
Switzerland	5.7	8.29
Austria	3.4	20.13
Netherlands	–5.9	0.74
Italy	–8.6	–5.31
Spain	–12.8	6.57
Norway	–16.1	–9.38
Latvia	–18.6	6.9
Sweden	–19.1	–15.35
Estonia	–19.8	–18.02
Malta	–19.9	16.99
Portugal	–25.4	–3.78
Belgium	–30.7	–23.28
Greece	–31.3	6.16
Luxembourg	–33.9	–2.82
Lithuania	–34.4	–16.3
Slovenia	–38.1	1.9
Ireland	–39.5	–11.38
Croatia	–46.2	7.02
Bulgaria	–48.7	2.55
Cyprus	–49.1	–24.55
Poland	–52.2	1.49
Romania	–65.6	–14.94

Source: Eurostat (2025).

poverty (i.e., an improvement). Grey cells indicate stagnation or changes smaller than five per cent.

Three distinct patterns emerge from the data shown in Table 1:

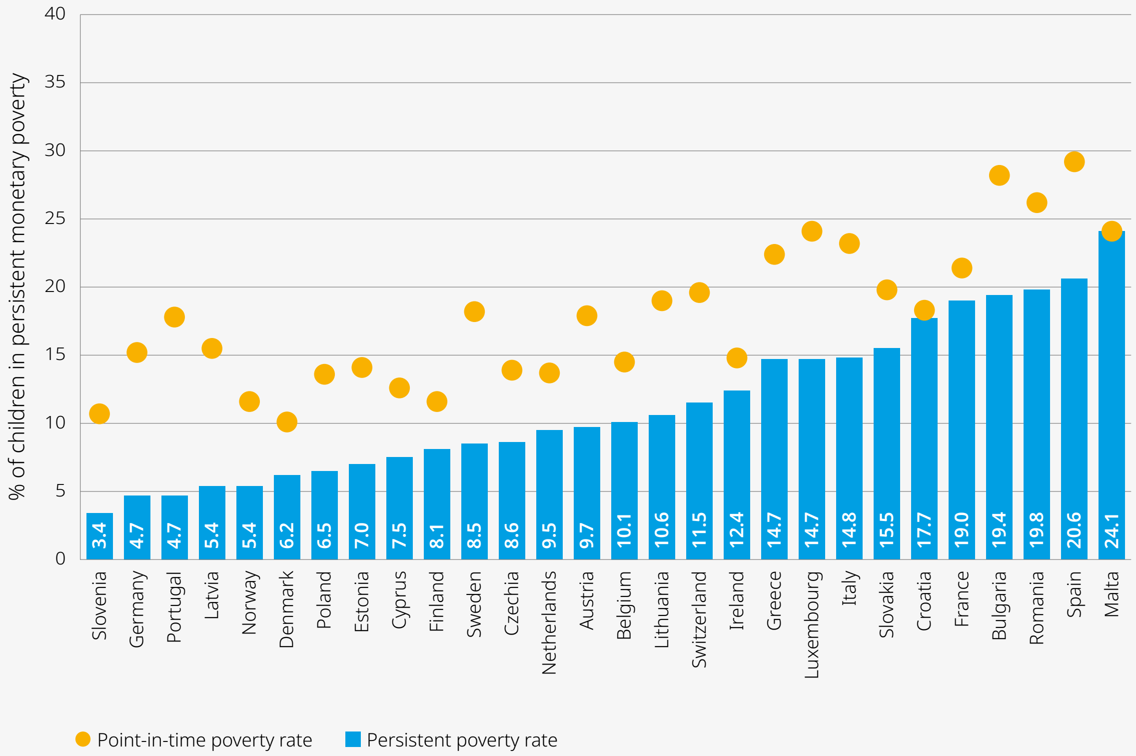
- Both columns in red: worsening in both anchored and relative poverty. Czechia, Finland, France and Germany fall into this category. This means that children are worse off in absolute terms (compared with the 2018 poverty threshold) and more disadvantaged compared with the population. This dual deterioration signals falling economic living standards and growing income inequality.
- Both columns in green: improvements in both anchored and relative poverty. This most positive pattern is seen in Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Lithuania, Romania and Sweden. In these countries, child poverty reduction has clearly been due to monetary gains, since families' living standards have improved in absolute terms as well as compared with the population average.
- First column green, second column red: improvement in anchored poverty but worsening in relative poverty. In Malta, the incomes of families with children are higher than in 2018. However, because median incomes rose faster, a greater share is counted as poor despite income gains. This means that children's situation has improved in real terms, but they are falling farther behind others.

In summary, comparative poverty statistics show that while child poverty has fallen in several high-income countries, progress is far from universal. The promising improvements seen between 2013 and 2018 have stalled in the last five years.

Poverty persistence

Annual poverty rates, such as those presented above, provide a snapshot of child poverty at a given moment; they do not capture how long children remain in poverty. But there is an important temporal dimension: the timing and duration of the experience of poverty matter.[6] The literature distinguishes between short spells of poverty, often called transient or episodic poverty, and persistent poverty. Transient poverty is often a short-lived drop in household income due to idiosyncratic shocks such as illness or job loss. Even short spells of poverty can have negative effects on children's development, especially if they occur during the sensitive early years.[7,8] But the harm associated with persistent poverty – which spans multiple years – is even more profound and long-lasting.[9,10]

Figure 4: Persistent child poverty rates, 2023



Note: Persistent poverty data for Luxembourg refer to 2021, and for Denmark and Switzerland to 2022. For other countries, both indicators refer to 2023.

Figure 4 presents this indicator based on longitudinal data from Eurostat. According to Eurostat's definition, persistent poverty is the share of children who live in a household with an income below the relative income poverty threshold in the current year and at least two of the three previous years.

The following picture emerges:

- Persistent poverty affects nearly 10 million children across the European Union.[11]
- Persistent poverty rates vary widely across European countries. In a few countries (e.g., Croatia, France, Ireland and Malta), the rates of persistent child poverty are very close to the annual child poverty rate. For a considerable share of children in these countries, poverty is not a short-term drop in family income but a prolonged experience.
- In contrast, most countries report lower persistent poverty rates than point-in-time poverty rates among children. This suggests that households with children can quickly recover from income shocks, presumably due to well-functioning labour markets and social protection systems

Non-monetary poverty

Income-based measures of poverty do not fully capture poor children's experiences and living conditions. Non-monetary measures assess whether children have access to the goods, services and activities that fulfil their rights and promote their well-being. Monetary and non-monetary measures complement one another and show both the available resources and the experienced living conditions for children.

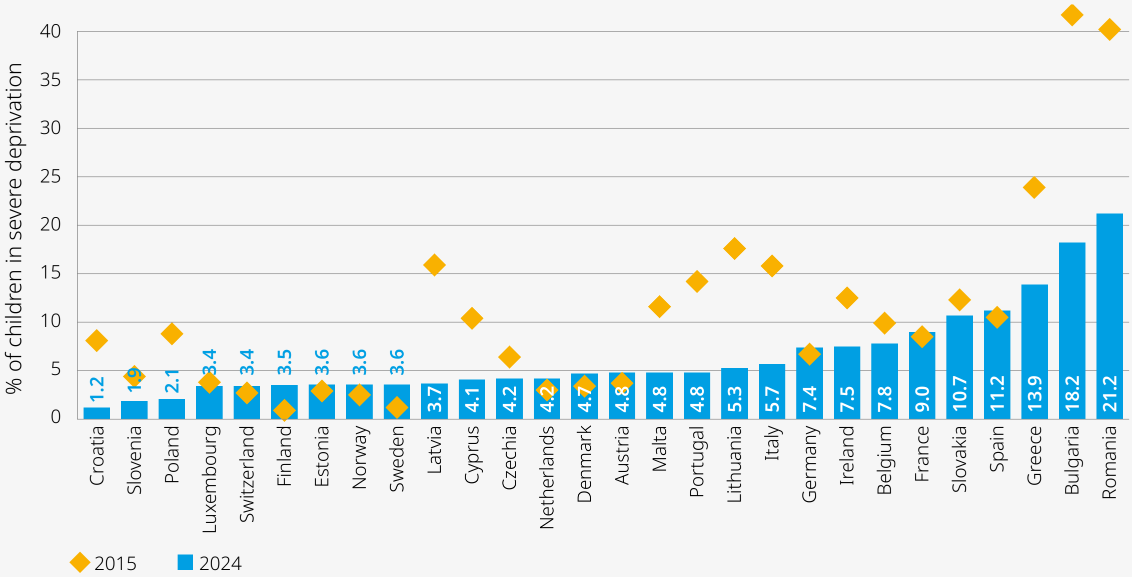
Severe material deprivation

Making cross-country comparisons using non-monetary poverty measures is challenging because of the variation in what constitutes 'adequate' living standards. It is even more challenging in high-income settings due to the lack of harmonized standards and efforts to measure non-monetary poverty. One exception is the 'severe material and social deprivation' indicator in the European Union statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) framework. It captures the share of children living in households that lack at least 7 out of 13 items[12] considered essential for an adequate standard of living in European countries. Examples include the ability to keep a home warm, afford a meal with protein every other day, replace worn-out clothes or participate in leisure activities.

Figure 5 shows the current picture and the progress made in the severe material deprivation rate between 2015 and 2024:

- The most successful countries in terms of protecting children from deprivation are not necessarily the wealthiest ones. Croatia, Slovenia and Poland register the lowest deprivation rates, while western and northern European nations are in the middle of the distribution.
- The latest statistics show large differences between countries. In Romania, the share of children in severe material deprivation is 10 times higher than that in Croatia.

Figure 5: Children living in severe material and social deprivation, 2015 and 2024



Source: EU-SILC (2025).

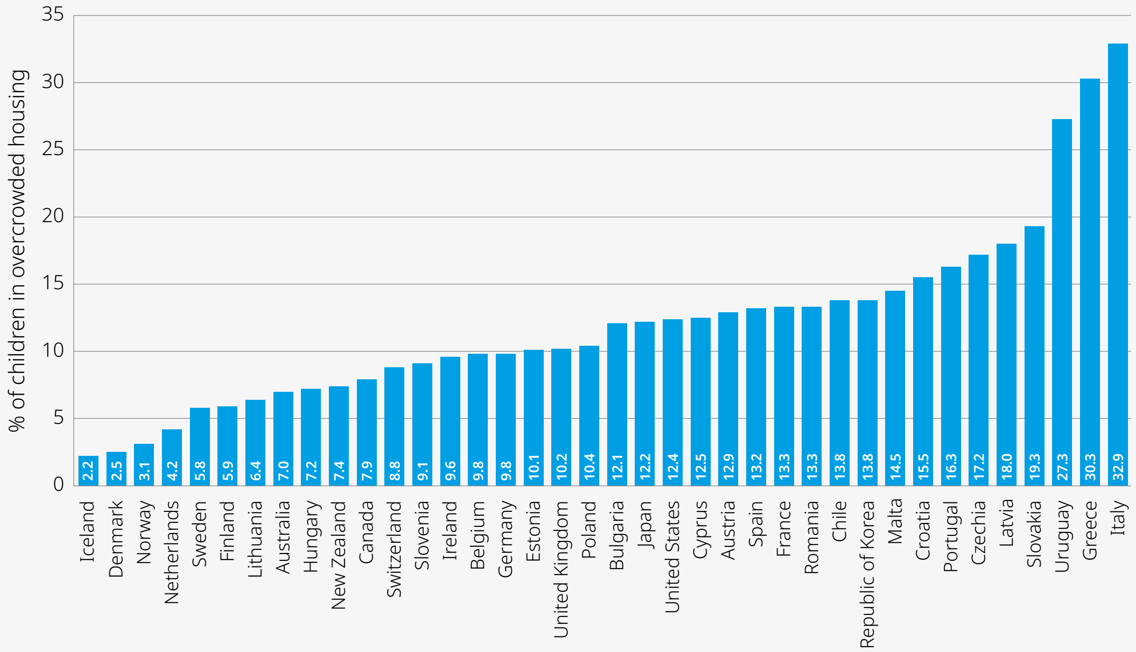
- In terms of change over time, in several countries, including those with the highest severe material deprivation rates in 2015, there has been stark improvement. More precisely, there was discernible decrease in material deprivation in 17 countries. In 10 countries, the reduction was over 50 per cent proportionally (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia).
- Yet, in a handful of countries, the severe material deprivation rate has risen. Proportionally, the most dramatic increases have been recorded in countries where deprivation rates were initially lowest. In Finland, the rate has almost tripled, while in Sweden it has doubled.
- Despite overall progress, in 2024 there were still 6.3 million children living in severe material deprivation in the European Union.[13]

Other indicators of deprivation

While the EU-SILC severe material deprivation indicator is a useful measure within Europe, its coverage excludes many high-income countries. To broaden the scope, it is useful to draw on other internationally comparable indicators of non-monetary child poverty. This section shows three such measures that are available for other high-income countries: overcrowding in homes, food insecurity and lack of internet access at home.

Children who live in overcrowded housing do not have sufficient space to study, rest and enjoy privacy. Overcrowding has been linked to worsened educational outcomes.[14] The OECD publishes data on the share of 15-year-old adolescents who do not have a room of their own. While not a direct measure of housing overcrowding, this indicator can approximate whether there is sufficient space and privacy at home for teenagers. The variation between countries is large, ranging from 1 in 20 adolescents in Iceland to about 1 in 3 adolescents in Italy (*see Figure 6*).

Figure 6: Share of 15-year-old adolescents who do not have a room of their own, 2022

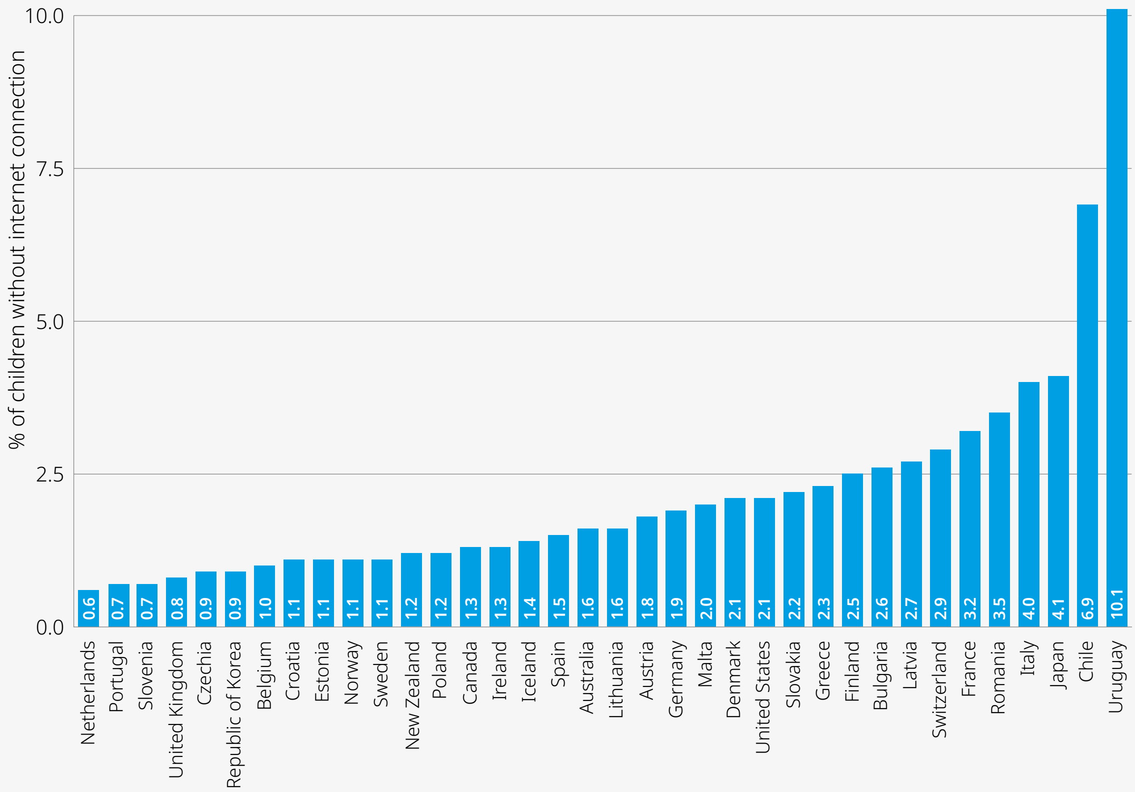


Source: OECD PISA 2022 Database Table ST250Q01JA. 15-year-old students were asked "Which of the following are in your home? … A room of your own." and presented with the response options "Yes" and "No". Data refer to the percentage responding "No".

Notes: there are a large number of missing values in the data for Germany (10.7%) and the United Kingdom (17.8%). For Australia, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see PISA 2022 Results [Volume I] Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4).

Internet access has not traditionally been considered in multidimensional indices of poverty. However, digitalization has increased since the millennium – and this transition was accelerated by the pandemic lockdowns of 2020/21. Today, internet connectivity is integral to children's education, access to information and social lives. We therefore argue that digital exclusion should be part of non-monetary poverty measurement. The OECD collects information on the share of 15-year-olds without internet connection at home (*see Figure 7*). In the Netherlands, which also has the highest internet penetration rate in the world,[15] only about 1 in 200 children does not have internet access at home. In fact, in 7 out of the 38 countries with available data at least 99 per cent of children can connect at home. Uruguay (10.1 per cent) and Chile (6.9 per cent) report the highest shares of adolescents who do not have access to the internet at home.

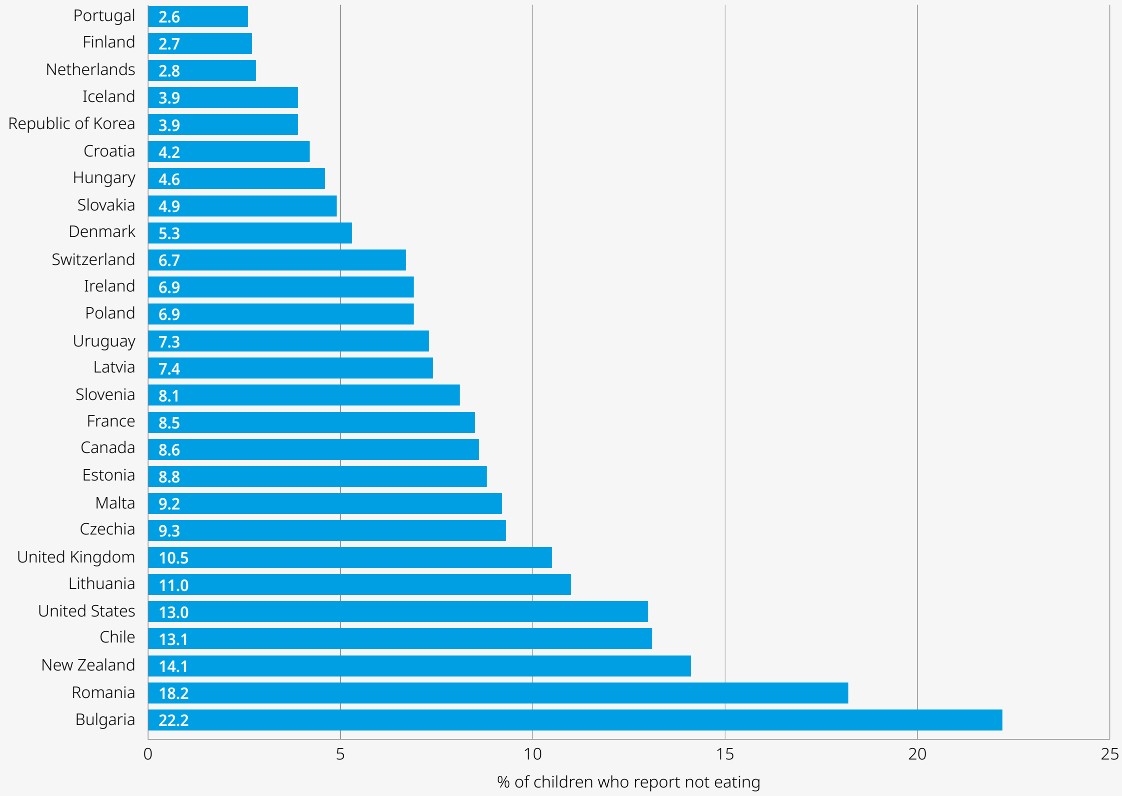
Figure 7: Share of 15-year-olds with no internet connection at home, 2022



Source: OECD PISA 2022 Database Table ST250Q01JA. 15-year-old students were asked "Which of the following are in your home? ... Internet access (e.g., Wi-fi) (excluding through smartphones)", and presented with the response options "Yes" and "No". Data refer to the percentage responding "No".

Food is one of our most essential needs. One might think that in wealthy nations, food insecurity is a thing of the past. Yet, as data from 13 high-income countries show, the reality is troubling (*see Figure 8*). In Bulgaria, more than one in five (22 per cent) adolescents reported skipping a meal because there was no money to buy food. Even in the best-performing countries, such as Finland, the Netherlands and Portugal, a considerable share of adolescents reported not eating because of financial difficulties.

Figure 8: Share of 15-year-old adolescents who report not eating because of financial difficulties, 2022



Source: OECD PISA 2022 Database Table ST258Q01JA. 15-year-old students were asked "In the past 30 days, how often did you not eat because there was not enough money to buy food?". Data refer to the percentage responding "About once a week" or more often.

Conclusions

This brief report presents the most recent internationally comparable statistics on child poverty in high-income countries. These statistics show a mixed picture. On the one hand, several countries have made progress in improving the living standards of children since the mid-2010s. On the other hand, progress has slowed down (or even reversed) in the past five years. The social and economic turbulence brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark.

Beyond the usual measure of child poverty rates, this brief has presented evidence on the depth and duration of poverty. The child poverty gap has shown that rich countries vary in how far poor children are left behind. They also differ in how quickly poor families can recover: while persistent poverty is uncommon in some, it is the norm in others. Evidence on the intergenerational transmission of poverty also illustrates that there are countries where poor children carry their disadvantages well into adulthood. In others, the association is far weaker – a sign that effective policies can break the cycle of poverty.

The non-monetary indicators presented in this brief add important dimensions to the picture. Poverty is not limited to income shortfalls, and children's living conditions vary widely even among high-income countries.

There is still much to do to fulfil children's right to an adequate standard of living.

Endnotes

1 Eurostat refers to this indicator as the ‘relative at-risk-of-poverty rate’.

2 The years referred to here are the years in which income was received. Usually the survey data are gathered the following year.

3 Calculated as the change between 2013 and 2023, expressed as a percentage of the 2013 figure. We adhere to a cut-off of 10 per cent and use proportional change for consistency with Report Card 18, the last comparative UNICEF report on poverty in high-income countries.

4 Based on statistics on the number of children under the age of 18 in 2023 obtained from Eurostat (2025) and the UNICEF Data Warehouse, and applying the corresponding poverty rates reported in Figure 1.

5 Eurostat calls this indicator the ‘anchored poverty rate’.

6 Duncan, G. J., Yeung, W. J., Brooks-Gunn, J. and Smith, J. R. (1998). How much does childhood poverty affect the life chances of children?, American Sociological Review, vol. 63(3), 406–423.

7 Kimberlin, S. and Berrick, J. D. (2015). ‘Poor for how long? Chronic versus transient child poverty in the United States’ in Theoretical and Empirical Insights into Child and Family Poverty: Cross National Perspectives, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 141–158.

8 Najman, J. M., Hayatbakhsh, M. R., Heron, M. A., Bor, W., O’Callaghan, M. J. and Williams, G. M. (2009). The impact of episodic and chronic poverty on child cognitive development, The Journal of Pediatrics, 154(2), 284–289.

9 Carneiro, P. and Heckman, J. J. (2002). The evidence on credit constraints in post-secondary schooling, The Economic Journal, 112(482), 705–734.

10 Dickerson, A. and Popli, G. K. (2016). Persistent poverty and children’s cognitive development: Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A: Statistics in Society, 179(2), 535–558.

11 Calculated based on the number of children under the age of 18 in the EU-27 (80 million) and the EU-27 persistent child poverty rate (10.3 per cent). All statistics obtained from Eurostat (2025).

12 The 13 items are the ability to replace worn-out clothes; to have two pairs of properly fitting shoes; to spend a small amount of money each week on oneself; to participate in regular leisure activities; to get together with friends/family for a drink or meal at least once a month; to have internet connection; to replace worn-out furniture; to face unexpected expenses; to afford one week’s annual holiday away from home; to avoid arrears; to afford a meal with protein every second day; to keep the home adequately warm; and to access to a car for personal use. A household is considered to be in severe material deprivation if it lacks at least 7 out of these 13 items due to an inability to afford them.

13 Based on estimates provided by Eurostat (2025); accessible at https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_MDSD11.

14 Goux, D. and Maurin, E. (2005). The effect of overcrowded housing on children’s performance at school, Journal of Public Economics, 89(5), 797–819.

15 World Bank Group, ‘Individuals using the Internet (% of population)’, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS, accessed 17 October 2025.

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