



## Starting unequal: How's life for disadvantaged children?

July 2022

Children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds frequently fare worse across all well-being areas compared to their more advantaged peers. “Starting unequal: How's life for disadvantaged children?” (Clarke and Thévenon, 2022<sup>[1]</sup>) charts the well-being of disadvantaged children, both across OECD countries and relative to their more advantaged peers, and shows how growing up at the bottom end of the socio economic ladder leads impacts almost all areas of children's lives. It highlights that:

- Children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience poor material outcomes, poor health, and do worse in their education. They also report poorer social and emotional outcomes, including lower self-belief, lower life satisfaction, and are more likely to report multiple health complaints.
- These early well-being inequalities are rooted in the poorer environments that socially and economically disadvantaged children face at home, in school, and in the community – challenges that make social inequalities in child well-being outcomes particularly difficult to address.
- Because different areas of child well-being and different aspects of children's lives are frequently interconnected, children need consistent support across all domains if they are to see real changes to their life experiences and outcomes. Tackling the effects of childhood disadvantaged requires government administrations and key stakeholders to share a common understanding and work together towards common goals.
- Child well-being indicators are key to developing a common information base that can be used to identify challenges and set policy priorities. The [OECD Child Well-being Dashboard](#) and [Data Portal](#) show the potential at the international level of using child well-being indicators to shed light on many important disparities in child well-being between and within countries.

However, data limitations constrain the potential for using child well-being indicators to steer policies. There are still many important data gaps to fill when it comes to capturing child well-being, particularly for children in very vulnerable situations and for several aspects of children's material and social and emotional well-being. Improving the availability of data on these important aspects shaping children's opportunities remains a key challenge at both national and international levels.

Child well-being inequalities matter for children and for wider society. The early inequalities experienced by disadvantaged children matter first for the children themselves. Children growing up in disadvantaged households not only enjoy poorer well-being now, but also face a lifetime of more limited opportunities, typically for reasons far outside their control. They also matter for the social and economic prosperity of society as a whole. Many of the well-being outcomes linked to childhood disadvantage – worse health, poorer knowledge and skills accumulation – strongly affect their chances of later becoming productive members of society and the labour force, and play a key role in the perpetuation of poverty and social exclusion. A disadvantaged childhood can mean a lifetime of disadvantage.

The paper “Starting unequal: How’s life for disadvantaged children?” builds on data from the OECD Child Well-being Dashboard (Box 1) to chart the well-being of children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, illustrating how growing up at the bottom end of the socio economic ladder leads impacts almost all areas of children’s lives.

### Disadvantaged children fare worse in almost all well-being areas

The indicators presented in *Starting Unequal* show that, across well-being areas, children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds frequently experience worse outcomes than their more advantaged peers. For example, children from disadvantaged backgrounds:

- still too often lack access to basic material necessities, including basic food and nutrition, good-quality housing, and modern necessities like the internet. For example, on average across European OECD countries, more than 10% of low income children are living in very poor quality housing.
- are more likely to experience poor health outcomes, with those with low socio-economic status over-represented among children reporting poorer self-rated health, as well as among overweight and obese children. On average across OECD countries, more than one in six disadvantaged 11-, 13-, and 15-year olds rate their own health as only “fair” or “poor”, compared to one in ten among the most advantaged. And, around 25% of disadvantaged children in this age group are considered overweight or obese based on the World Health Organization’s definition, compared to 16% from the most advantaged households.
- do worse in education. They are far less likely to perform well on international student assessments, such as OECD PISA. For instance: on average across OECD countries, only 6% of disadvantaged 15-year-olds reached “top performer” status on the OECD PISA tests, compared to 29% among the most advantaged. They are also far more likely to report limited ambitions for future education.
- more often report poorer social and emotional outcomes, including weaker perceived support from family, lower self-belief, and lower life satisfaction. On average across the OECD, as many as 19% of disadvantaged 15-year-olds report low satisfaction with their life as a whole, compared to 14% among the most advantaged, with gaps as large as 10 percentage points in some countries.

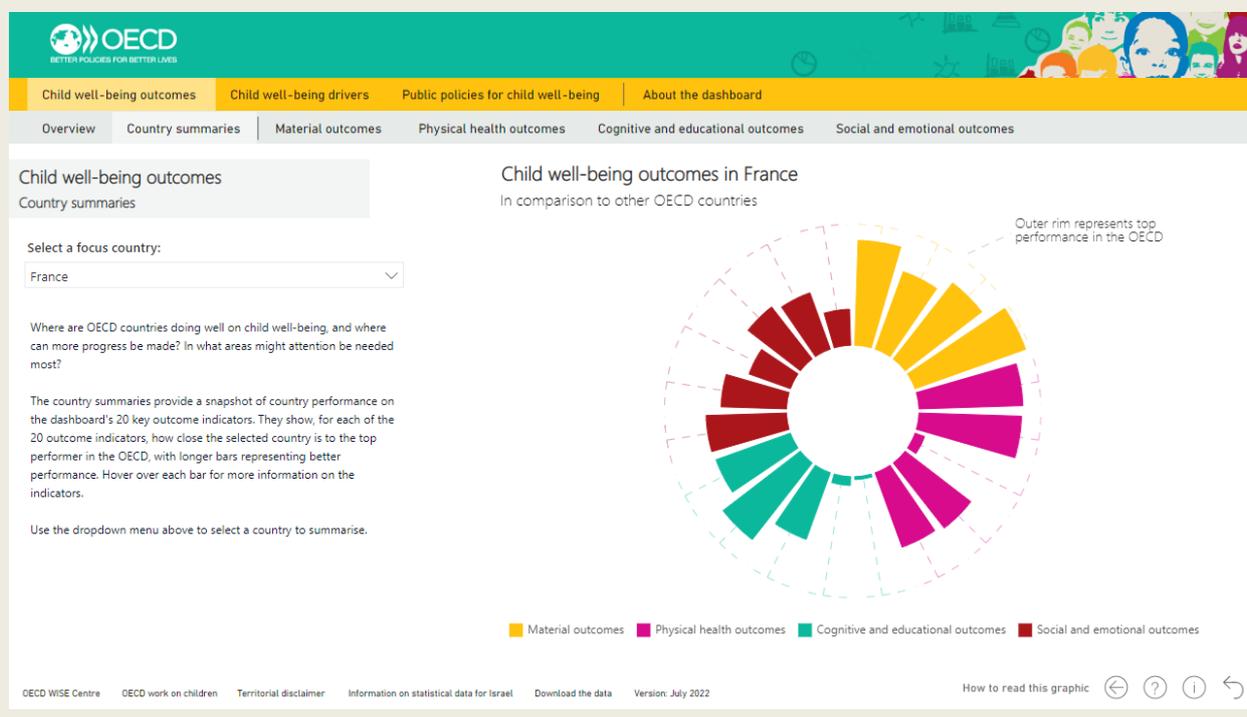
### Box 1. THE OECD CHILD WELL-BEING DASHBOARD

Good policies need good data, and good child well-being policies need information on the many areas of children’s lives that matter for their well-being and quality of life. To help countries better understand how they are performing on child well-being, the OECD has developed the OECD Child Well-being Dashboard – offering a range of comparative data on children and their well-being.

Complementing the [OECD Child Well-being Data Portal](#), the [OECD Child Well-being Dashboard](#) is a tool for policy makers and the public to monitor countries’ efforts to promote child well-being. Built using a selection of headline indicators from the Data Portal, the Dashboard is structured on the basis of the OECD Child Well-being Measurement Framework (OECD, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>). The Dashboard contains 20 key internationally comparable indicators on **children’s well-being outcomes** stretching across four core child well-being outcome areas: their material well-being; their physical health; their education and learning; and their social and emotional well-being. It also contains a range of additional contextual indicators on **important drivers of child well-being** and on **child-relevant public policies**.

Indicators for the Dashboard have been selected considering both the information they provide on children’s current well-being, and their importance for children’s development, future skills and well-being outcomes later in life. Data limitations mean that most of the indicators focus on children in middle childhood and adolescence. The data are drawn mostly from large international child surveys, which makes it possible to report on disparities between and within countries across different groups of children; most indicators can be updated at regular intervals to monitor trends over time.

Figure 1. The OECD Child Well-being Dashboard



## **These well-being inequalities are rooted in the poorer environments that socially and economically disadvantaged children face at home, in school, and in the community**

The inequalities in children's well-being are rooted in the poorer quality of environments that children from disadvantaged backgrounds face at home, in school, and in the community. In almost all of these areas, as "Starting unequal" shows, disadvantaged children frequently experience poorer conditions than more advantaged children:

- At home, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often more likely to miss out on important family activities and experience poorer quality relationships with parents. For example, on average across OECD countries, 36% of disadvantaged 11-, 13-, and 15-year-olds report finding it difficult to talk to their parents, compared to 28% among the most advantaged.
- At school, children from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently experience poorer quality learning environments, are more likely to experience bullying, and more often report a lack of connectedness to their school and others. On average across the OECD, two-thirds of 15-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds report feeling like they belong at school, compared to three-quarters among the most advantaged.
- With peers, children from disadvantaged backgrounds less frequently feel like they have enough friends, and less often report feeling well supported by their friends. On average across OECD countries, only just over half (58%) of disadvantaged 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds report feeling high support from their friends, falling to as low as 30% in some countries.
- In the community, children from disadvantaged backgrounds more often grow up in poorer quality local areas, placing limits on their opportunities to socialise and participate in community life. On average across European OECD countries, 11% of low income children live in households that report problems with crime and violence in their area, compared to 7% for high income children.
- And online, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be less well positioned to make the most of the digital world. Disadvantaged 15-year-olds are often significantly less likely than advantaged 15-year-olds to report using digital devices for schoolwork, or regularly reading news online. In many countries, they are also far less likely to strongly believe that the internet is a valuable resource for accessing information. By contrast, there is little difference in children's risk of experiencing cyberbullying or problematic social media use by socio-economic status.

## **The pandemic is likely only to have make things worse for disadvantaged children**

The pandemic and the associated policy responses impacted practically all areas of children's lives, including their schooling, their lives at home, and their ability to spend time with friends and other people outside the family, all of which could have long-term effects on their well-being, including their psychological well-being.

Due to limits on the regularity of international child data collections, much of the data used in "Starting unequal" refer to years prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Findings can be seen as a baseline picture of child well-being at the start of the crisis. However, the available evidence further suggests that children who were disadvantaged prior to the crisis have been more heavily impacted by the crisis (OECD, 2021<sup>[2]</sup>; UNICEF, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>; Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>) with the likely consequence that the inequalities reported here have widened.

## Child well-being dashboards help navigate better futures for disadvantaged children

Improving the well-being of children from disadvantaged backgrounds requires strong policy action. This includes policy action to mitigate the impact of social and economic disadvantage, but also poverty- and disadvantage prevention policies that aim to tackle disadvantage at source (OECD, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>). Examples of the latter include policies to help parents into work (including skills and training programmes and work incentives policies) and family support policies, like early childhood education and care support, which both help parents to work and can foster children's early learning and development. Support for parents from the pre-natal period, and for children throughout childhood, is crucial for detecting and responding to possible unmet needs before problems become more serious and difficult or costly to address (OECD, 2009<sup>[7]</sup>; Riding et al., 2021<sup>[8]</sup>). The provision of family and social support services to meet the nutritional, health, housing, educational and social needs of children and parents is also important for ensuring that disadvantages in different areas do not combine and accumulate (Riding et al., 2021<sup>[7]</sup>). Schools have a role to play too, including by paying attention to children's well-being and the specific needs of disadvantaged children, as well as by tackling possible discrimination in children's and teacher's behaviours and in school evaluation processes (Cerna et al., 2021<sup>[8]</sup>).

This policy action should be co-ordinated and coherent. The breadth and depth of disadvantages experienced by children with low socio-economic status mean that policy efforts are needed on multiple fronts. This is well recognised in many countries, who have plans to support vulnerable children in a variety of life areas. In Europe, the Child Guarantee adopted in June 2021 by the European Council is an additional instrument that requires EU countries to set up action plans to guarantee vulnerable children's access to a set of key services, including early childhood education and care, education (including school-based activities), healthcare, nutrition, housing.

Because different areas of child well-being and different aspects of children's lives are frequently interconnected, children need consistent support across all domains if they are to see real changes to their life experiences and outcomes. Therefore, policy efforts are likely to be fully effective only when designed and delivered in a co-ordinated and coherent way, with government departments, agencies and other actors from within and outside government working cooperatively around shared objectives. The challenge is to put in place policy structures that account for the multi-dimensional and inter-dependent nature of child well-being, and that ensure the many relevant actors share an understanding of key challenges and work together towards common goals.

Child well-being indicator dashboards, such as the OECD Child Well-Being Dashboard, are one of several tools that can help governments develop more co-ordinated and coherent policy approaches. Well-being indicator sets and dashboards help provide policy-makers and key stakeholders with a more complete and comprehensive picture of people's (in this case, children's) lives, and a shared understanding of issues which can serve as organising frameworks for policy development. By providing a common frame of reference, indicator dashboards can help governments establish shared goals and policy priorities, in turn supporting strategic alignment and promoting co-operation across departments and agencies (Exton and Shinwell, 2018<sup>[9]</sup>).

Limits in data availability constrains the potential of using child well-being indicators to steer policies. The data used in the OECD Child Well-being Dashboard show that even at the international level, there is already the potential for child well-being indicators to shed light on many important child policy challenges and priorities. The Dashboard focuses on a few overarching indicators in different areas of child well-being, with priority given to outcomes that are important for children's well-being both now and in the future (i.e. their *well-becoming*). Indicators capture both children's outcomes and their environments, as well as on their activities and perceptions, both of which are important mediators of the potential effects that environments can have on outcomes.

However, there are still many important data gaps to fill when it comes to capturing child well-being, particularly for children in very vulnerable situations and for several aspects of children's material and social and emotional well-being. Improving the availability of data on these important aspects shaping children's opportunities remains a key challenge at both national and international levels.

## Further reading

- Cerna, L. et al. (2021), "Promoting inclusive education for diverse societies: A conceptual framework", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 260, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/94ab68c6-en>. [8]
- Exton, C. and M. Shinwell (2018), "Policy use of well-being metrics: Describing countries' experiences", *OECD Statistics Working Papers*, No. 2018/07, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/d98eb8ed-en>. [9]
- OECD (2021), *COVID-19 and Well-being: Life in the Pandemic*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1e1ecb53-en>. [2]
- OECD (2021), *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-Being and Policies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/e82fded1-en>. [1]
- OECD (2018), *Good Jobs for All in a Changing World of Work: The OECD Jobs Strategy*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264308817-en>. [11]
- OECD (2018), "Poor children in rich countries: Why we need policy action", *OECD Policy Brief on Child Well-Being*, <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/Poor-children-in-rich-countries-Policy-brief-2018.pdf> (accessed on 9 July 2019). [5]
- OECD (2014), "The crisis and its aftermath: A stress test for societies and for social policies", in *Society at a Glance 2014: OECD Social Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, [https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/soc\\_glance-2014-5-en](https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2014-5-en). [12]
- OECD (2010), *OECD Employment Outlook 2010: Moving beyond the Jobs Crisis*, OECD Publishing, Paris, [https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/empl\\_outlook-2010-en](https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/empl_outlook-2010-en). [10]
- OECD (2009), *Doing Better for Children*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264059344-en>. [6]
- Riding, S. et al. (2021), "Looking beyond COVID-19: Strengthening family support services across the OECD", *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 260, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/86738ab2-en>. [7]
- Thorn, W. and S. Vincent-Lancrin (2021), *Schooling During a Pandemic: The Experience and Outcomes of Schoolchildren During the First Round of COVID-19 Lockdowns*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1c78681e-en>. [4]
- UNICEF (2021), *The State of the World's Children 2021 - On My Mind: Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*, UNICEF, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/sowc-2021/> (accessed on 2 March 2022). [3]

## Resources

OECD Child Well-Being Portal: [www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being).

OECD Child Well-Being Data Portal: [www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being/data](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being/data).

## Contacts

For more information contact us: [wellbeing@oecd.org](mailto:wellbeing@oecd.org).

**OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE)**

[www.oecd.org/wise](http://www.oecd.org/wise)

---

This paper is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and the arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.