

*Country*  
**FACT SHEET**  
**2020\***



# PORTUGAL

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\* The information provided in the country fact sheets reflects the situation by end of August 2020.

**first years**  
*first priority*

**A FAIR START  
FOR *every* CHILD  
IN EUROPE**

## NATIONAL CONTEXT

Portugal has made adequate efforts over the past year to deliver on early childhood development policies and to support families with young children. 

Portugal has a national law or act guaranteeing access to basic ECD services in Education, Health, Nutrition, and/or Social and Child Protection for all children under six. 

Portugal has made no important progress over the past years in delivering early childhood development (ECD) policies and in supporting families with young children.

Since 2015, children from the age of four have legal entitlement to ECEC (Law 65/2015) and children up to 18 years old can access free of charge the National Health System (decree-law 61/2015). However, this is not a guarantee of access to timely healthcare. Families who can afford it have the private health sector to meet their children's health needs, but those who cannot are being left behind when it comes to their child's health and well-being. Portugal has one of the highest households' out-of-pocket payments for healthcare of the EU28 at 28%<sup>1</sup>.

Since 2015 (Law 142/2015), family-based care has been established as the preferential measure for children in alternative care, especially for those up to six years old. However, the proportion of children in alternative care living in family-based arrangements in Portugal is low and has been decreasing (from 7% to 1.8%) over the past years. In 2019 (latest data available), there were 867 children under six years old in alternative care, and only 16 of them (1.8%)<sup>2</sup> lived in family-based care. This is happening even though the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended to Portugal to "(...) take all the necessary measures to ensure that alternative care for young children, especially those under the age of three years, is provided in family-based settings; (...) "<sup>3</sup>.

Concerning children in vulnerable situations, two national cross-sectoral services, that are both dependent on referrals, are in place in Portugal:

- Sistema Nacional de Intervenção Precoce na Infância, created in 2009 with the Decree Law 281/2009, that targets children (from birth to six years) with developmental delays. This service is known to have a low coverage when considering the number of cases referred. It relies on coordination between the Ministries of Health, Education and Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, with the involvement of families and the community.
- Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção de Crianças e Jovens em Risco, created in 2015 with the Decree Law 159/2015, which was updated in 2017 by the Decree Law 139/2017, and targets children and young people at risk or in peril. It works through local Committees for the Protection of Children and Young People (created with the Decree Law 189/1991 and reformulated in 1999, following the Law 147/99), to which children/young people can be referred by anyone who perceives that there is a risk or peril situation (neglect, abuse, domestic violence, school drop-out, etc.)

\* This country sheet is based on a contribution from national coordinators, including the ratings - between  (worst) and  (best)

1 OECD (2019), Health at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris. Out-of-pocket payments are expenditures sustained directly by patients.

2 Instituto da Segurança Social, I.P., 2020. CASA 2019 - Relatório de Caracterização Anual da Situação de Acolhimento das Crianças e Jovens.

3 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014), Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic report of Portugal (available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/52f89eb84.html>)

# IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE DURING THE FIRST WAVE

The COVID-19 crisis has negatively impacted Portuguese families with young children, especially families in vulnerable situations. Many families have been experiencing (partial or total) income losses since March 2020, even families that were not in a vulnerable situation before the crisis, thus causing increased food insecurity in the country. Access to healthcare has become even more challenging and a surge of mental health needs especially among infants has been witnessed. When it comes to education, many children have been left behind due to the lack of electronic devices to access online activities.

Despite the increased needs of families and children, and all the measures adopted to tackle the immediate and short-term consequences, to the best of our knowledge no measures to support families with young children in coping with the long-term effects of COVID-19 have been proposed or adopted at the national level.

## EUROPEAN SEMESTER

The 2020 Country Report published in the framework of the European Semester highlights some important data about the ECD situation in Portugal. Although work-life balance evolved positively until 2011, that balance has been decreasing since then. The average family expenditure per child (birth to17) as a share of GDP per capita was 6.7% against the EU average of 12.4% in 2017 (only slightly increased from the 2008 level of 6.4%). The OECD 'better life index on work life balance' highlights that Portugal's low fertility rate (1.28; the lowest in the OECD) is attributed to the lack of support. The enrolment of children below three years of age in childcare has risen sharply over the last decade to 47.1% compared to an EU average of 35.1% in 2018. However, the situation was slightly less positive (94,2%) than the EU average (95,4%) for children aged four to six years in 2017. **The report affirms that family support measures should be improved to achieve a better work-life balance and boost the coverage of early childhood education and care.**

The Country-Specific Recommendations make clear reference to the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences on access to education. They state that around 6% of households still have no access to the internet, affecting an estimated 50,000 pupils. Disparities between urban and rural areas further accelerate those figures, creating inequalities as students from socio-economically advantaged families are better placed to manage the challenges posed by distance learning compared to other pupils. Measures should be taken to support people suffering from digital exclusion to overcome the obstacles in accessing distance learning.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the above mentioned challenges and taking into account the fact that the 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations do not address explicitly young children's health and children in institutional care, it is highly recommended that Portugal takes action to reduce child health inequalities, through early detection and intervention, by improving the timely access to high quality health services for all children especially those most in need. These services should include periodic health screenings, particularly in educational settings (nurseries and kindergartens). Portugal should take steps to improve the transition of institutionalised children to family-based care as well. Deinstitutionalisation reforms must become a priority.



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## The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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