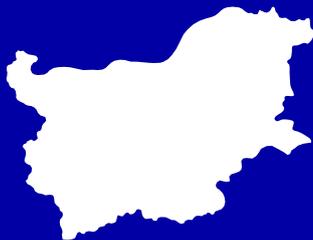


**first years**  
*first priority*



Early Childhood Development in

# BULGARIA

Country Profile 2021\*

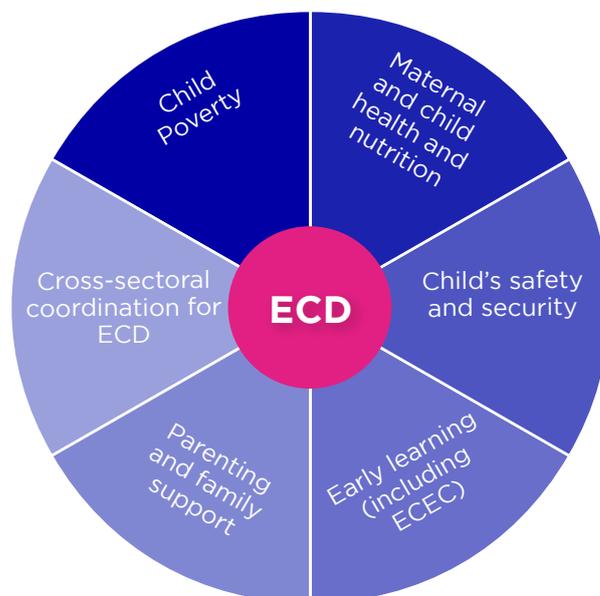


Bulgaria is the poorest country in the European Union (EU), with more than one-third of children living at risk of poverty (over 570.000 according to Eurostat, 2018). The country also has the second-highest infant mortality in the EU, with the probability of a child dying between birth and five years of age 70% higher than the EU average (Eurostat, 2020). Over the past few years, **early childhood development (ECD)** has received the government's increased attention with important progress made in delivering ECD policies and supporting families with young children by bringing together the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and the Social Assistance Agency. However, ECD policies and services are still fragmented. Better mechanisms are needed for effective coordination, both at the national and local levels. A specific, comprehensive, cross-sectoral ECD strategy has not yet been developed. At present, there is no formal policy guaranteeing a minimum level of funding for ECD

## Country PRIORITIES

- Track data on child poverty and social exclusion especially for families with children under three years of age, with low level of education, and from vulnerable backgrounds.
- Ensure equal access to prenatal care for all pregnant women and home visiting services for children under three years of age and pregnant women.
- Provide free medication for children under three years of age living in poverty, with the prospect of covering all children up to six years of age.
- Increase the access rate to **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** services.
- Invest across sectors in the professionalisation of the staff working in services for young children.
- Improve the system for registering and analysing data on cases of violence against young children to inform measures and actions.
- Allocate one percent of GDP to quality ECEC.
- Augment social benefits for families with young children, including adequate financial support for poor families caring for children, with a focus on children up to one year of age.

services to ensure sustainability. The new Law on Social Services has been in force since July 2020, which regulates the planning and implementation of services of an integrated nature, including for young children, but is still in the early stages of its implementation.



**POLICY AREAS IMPACTING ECD** →

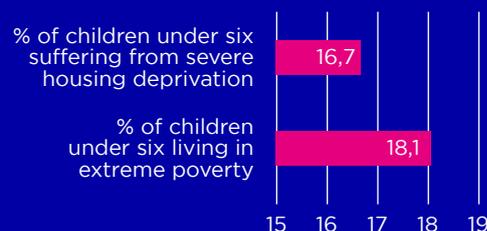
**1**

## CHILD POVERTY

In Bulgaria, there is a **lack of data on child poverty and social exclusion for children under six**. According to the 2020 Country Report in the framework of the European Semester, in Bulgaria, a high share of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion, especially among children, persons with disabilities, and Roma. The report confirms low levels of educational qualification and family background as the main determinants of poverty risk. It also highlights the inequality of opportunity among children, high levels of housing deprivation, and the severe challenges facing the Roma population.

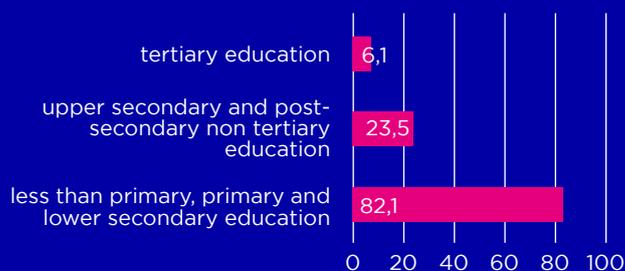


### Child poverty



2020 Data  
Source: Eurostat

### At-risk-of poverty rate for children under six by educational attainment level of their parents



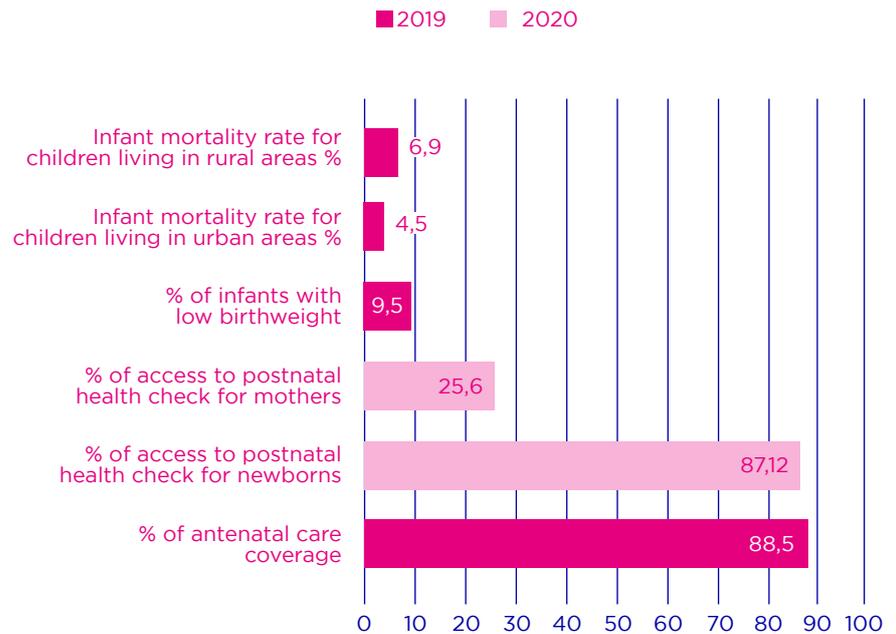
2020 Data  
Source: Eurostat

## 2

## MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

In Bulgaria, antenatal care coverage is quite high. However, although access to postnatal health checks for newborns is high, this is not the case for the mothers. In addition, the **infant mortality rate is higher for children living in rural areas** as opposed to those living in urban areas. Although there is no ethnically disaggregated data, observations show that the infant mortality rate in locations with a concentrated Roma population is significantly higher than the national average.

### Maternal and child health



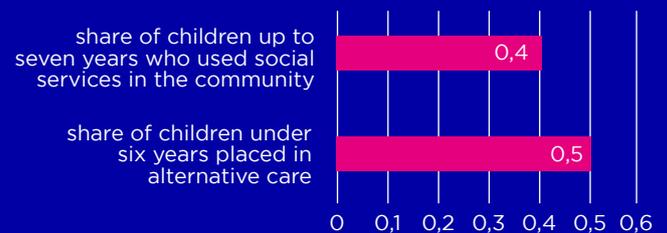
Sources: National Health Insurance Institute; National Statistics Institute; Eurostat

## 3

## CHILD SAFETY AND SECURITY

The safety and security of children are the responsibility of various services. Information on the safety and security of children in the age range birth to three years is not available. Where such data is available, it focuses mainly on the number of users of the respective services without analysing trends. Children entering the system are at a higher risk of violence and separation from their biological families. Data on those who did not enter such systems are not available. As far as the share of children under six years of age who have suffered physical, sexual, or mental violence in the last year is concerned, according to preliminary data of the Ministry of Interior, the total number of crimes against children in 2019 was 2.268. However, there is no unified system for registering cases of violence against children in Bulgaria. According to the Social Assistance Agency, in 2019, the reports received by the Child Protection Departments for violence against children increased by 65 compared to the

### Child safety and security



2020 Data  
Source: Social Assistance Agency

previous year. The total number of cases was 1.171; 446 were open cases. According to the National Telephone Line for Children (2019), children are most likely to be abused within their own families. A total of 463 reports to the National Telephone Line for Children were related to family violence. Other reports included violence on the street (85), at school (20), within institutions (12), in adoptive families (none), with relatives (21), and in a public place (26).

## EARLY LEARNING

In Bulgaria, there is no guarantee of a place in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children under three years of age. In 2019, **most children under three were cared for only by their parents**, and only 21,6% of children under three were attending formal childcare services. In addition, the available data indicate that the share of Roma children in the age group from four to six years who do not attend kindergarten is high (between 25% and 45% in different age cohorts).

Crèche personnel is comprised of nurses or midwives with Bachelor's degrees (the primary caregivers), childminders (with a high school diploma), and pedagogues with Bachelor's degrees. However, only one pedagogue is appointed in a crèche with 60 children, indicating that early learning is not considered a priority for this age group.

### Types of policies available to facilitate access to ECEC services for children from vulnerable families:

- Law on school and pre-school education 2016: According to this Law, state and municipal kindergartens receive additional funding to work with children from vulnerable groups.
- By-law on inclusive education 2017: According to the Ordinance, in kindergartens, general and specific support for children's personal development is provided by psychologists or pedagogical advisors, speech therapists, resource teachers, and other professionals, in line with children's needs. The early assessment of the children's needs is facilitated.
- Strategy on educational integration of children and students from ethnic minorities: The educational integration of children (including children from three to six years of age) from ethnic minorities is fostered through specific measures.

### Early learning



2019 Data

Note: Percentages were calculated based on the total number of children under three years old (provided from the National Statistics Institute) and number of children in and out of services

### The capacity of ECEC services to ensure the inclusion of children under six from historically marginalised groups

Access to kindergartens is provided via organised transport in rural areas (one vehicle for several villages). Additionally, the number of kindergartens is not enough in ethnically segregated communities (i.e., Roma), and when available, access is limited due to economic constraints. In order to tackle financial barriers for poor families, in 2020 the Council of Ministers decided to provide state funding to all municipalities to support removal or reduction of fees for children at the mandatory preschool age. However, each municipality was given the autonomy to define the categories of children to receive support and it is yet to be seen whether this new policy has improved access for the vulnerable groups. At the same time, often teachers are not sufficiently prepared or trained to work in multicultural environments.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream ECEC services is formally guaranteed. A certain number of places are provided for children with special needs in each ECEC group. Yet two barriers impact the inclusion of children with disabilities — the large number of children in the groups and the lack of teachers' competencies to work with them.

## PARENTING AND FAMILY SUPPORT

In Bulgaria, families with children can benefit from various allowances to support them in raising their children.

**Only a few parenting support services reaching out to vulnerable groups exist, and most belong to the social sector.**

Such services include the centres for community support.

There are some regulations for work-life balance in place.

**Types of policies available regulating work and family life balance include:**

- Labour Code 1987
- Family Code 2009
- National Strategy for promoting the equality of women and men 2021-2030

### Benefits available to parents with young children:

- Monthly allowances for raising a child until high school graduation, but not after the age of 20
- Monthly allowances for raising children under the age of one
- Monthly allowances for raising a child with a permanent disability

## CROSS-SECTORAL COORDINATION

In Bulgaria, **there is no explicitly stated national multi-sectoral ECD strategy** (or any other policy document), nor is there a coordinating body overseeing ECD policies, funding, and spending in a cross-sectoral manner at the national or municipality levels. Yet, **there are in place formal mechanisms for collaboration between services.** Those mechanisms ensure cooperation in the field of child protection to ensure an effective system for prevention and control of the execution of children's rights and ensure cooperation in cases of violence.



\*The information provided in this Country Profile reflects the situation at the end of May 2021.



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The views expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

## Country Profile Contributor

TRUST FOR SOCIAL ACHIEVEMENT

## 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 programmes and services connects 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 programmes 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 organisation 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 organisation supports policies and programmes which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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**National Coordinators:** Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Children's Rights Alliance (Ireland), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain).

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