

Quality Housing for All Young Children – from the start

March 2023

First Years, First Priority is a joint initiative of Eurochild and ISSA.

We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe.

Introduction

Safe and secure housing is fundamental for children's healthy growth and development, including in infancy and the early years. A child's home environment affects their physical and mental health as well as their education, their safety and their relationships with their family and caregivers.¹ All children, no matter their circumstances, have the right to live in safe and healthy homes, where they can grow, learn, play and thrive.

Despite the lack of comprehensive data on the full extent of homelessness and precarious housing in Europe, we know that many infants and young children experience overcrowding, housing deprivation and hidden homelessness, and are forced to live in temporary accommodation which is unsuitable for them and their families. Rising poverty, the cost-of-living crisis and insufficient affordable or social housing are contributing factors², and housing is an increasingly important issue on the EU agenda.

Our recommendations

We ask EU governments and institutions to take measures to:

- Ensure access to affordable and quality housing for all households with infants and young children, through a range of measures including limits on rent increases, access to sufficient housing benefits, support with energy costs, protections against evictions and increased availability of social housing
- Improve national data collection on homelessness and housing deprivation among families with young children, to inform and improve policy-making
- Address poverty and social exclusion as underlying causes of homelessness and housing deprivation, and invest in adequate social protection systems that prevent family poverty and provide an effective safety net for those in vulnerable situations
- Ensure that the Child Guarantee triggers the necessary reforms that support families and young children in need to access adequate and secure housing, especially those living in vulnerable and precarious situations
- Ensure that housing policy takes into account the specific needs of women and children, in pregnancy, infancy and childhood, including those escaping domestic violence³

¹ Center on the Developing Child Harvard University *Place Matters: The Environment We Create Shapes the Foundations of Healthy Development Working Paper No. 16*, 2023

² Save the Children *Guaranteeing Children's Future How COVID-19 cost-of-living and climate crises affect children in poverty and what governments in Europe need to do* 2023

³ For example, the Child Guarantee National Action Plan of Greece includes a measure providing housing for women victims of violence and their children

Young children need safe and secure housing

All infants and very young children need a safe and stimulating home environment, which enables them to receive nurturing care from parents and other caregivers, to develop, learn and thrive. The development of infants and young children relies heavily on the quality of care their parents/caregivers can provide, in a home environment that is secure and meets household needs, including safe spaces where they can learn to walk, talk, play and interact.

According to the latest Eurostat data, **child poverty in the EU has increased from 24% to 24.4% from 2020 to 2021**. Compared to 2020, increases have been noted in **17 countries**. With the cost of living and energy prices rising significantly, many families struggle to make ends meet. This pushes families, even those with two earners, to have to leave their homes.⁴

Across Europe, many **households face increased risks of homelessness and housing insecurity**. In the EU, households with children have a higher incidence of severe housing deprivation than the general population.⁵ Children are a high-risk group for overcrowding in many EU Member States,⁶ with many families forced to live in unsuitable temporary or emergency accommodation, including shelters, hostels and hotels, often for weeks and months, or even years.⁷ For example, between 130,000 and 190,000 households, including 100,000 children, are experiencing a housing crisis in Czechia.⁸ Ireland is facing a huge challenge in providing housing for children at risk of poverty, with many low-income families with children particularly affected and the numbers living in emergency accommodation increasing month-on-month.⁹

Homelessness and poor housing conditions have a range of **impacts on young children's health, both physical and mental, and on their development and wellbeing**. Housing quality, stability and safety have direct and indirect effects on their lives. Homelessness, or the risk of homelessness, affects parents' and caregivers' ability to provide nurturing care for infants and young children, and the time and space to play, learn and grow. Poor quality housing is linked to a range of physical and mental health problems, including a significant higher risk of ill-health and disability in childhood and early adulthood. This includes a higher risk of meningitis, of respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchitis (due to damp, mould and poor ventilation), slower growth, anxiety and depression, and behavioural problems.¹⁰ Overcrowded, poor quality and insecure housing are also risk factors for parental mental health, child protection interventions and family separation.

Homelessness and housing deprivation increase the **risks of complications during pregnancy, and worsen health outcomes for both mothers and infants**.¹¹ While there is limited evidence on the specific impacts of housing deprivation on infants, the available research shows a significant decline in general developmental function between 4-30 months, and that housing deprivation during pregnancy is linked to increased risk of preterm birth, low birthweight, poor mental health in parents and children, and developmental delays.¹²

⁴ Eurochild *(In)visible children Eurochild 2022 report on children in need across Europe*

⁵ Culora A. & Janta B., produced for the European Commission, *Understanding the housing conditions experienced by children in the EU* March 2020.

⁶ 'Housing deprivation' refers to living in a space which is considered overcrowded and with or more housing deprivation measures defined by Eurostat

⁷ Ibid

⁸ European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) *Family Homelessness in Europe*, 2019

⁹ [Bydleni-jako-problem-2021.pdf \(socialnibydeni.org\)](#)

¹⁰ Eurochild *(In)visible children Eurochild 2022 report on children in need across Europe*

¹¹ Culora A. and Janta B., for the European Commission *Understanding the housing conditions experienced by children in the EU* 2020

¹² Mhatre N. *Homelessness hurts moms and babies* National Partnership for Women & Families and National Birth Equity Collaborative, 2021

¹³ National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) *An unstable start - All Babies Count: Spotlight on homelessness* 2015

Young children and housing deprivation - who is most at risk?

Young children from low-income households are at greater risk of severe housing deprivation or overcrowding, and more exposed to homelessness.¹³ Across the EU, severe housing deprivation is especially prevalent among single parent households and couples with three or more children.¹⁴ Children in migrant families are also at greater risk of severe housing deprivation and overcrowding, across Member States.¹⁵ Undocumented single mothers are especially vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, exploitation and violence.¹⁶

Roma households are disproportionately affected by housing deprivation in the EU – 52%, approximately three times more than the general population, and many face discrimination when looking for housing.¹⁷ Roma children experience higher rates of housing deprivation and are much more likely to live in overcrowded housing and in households without access to tap water.¹⁸ Research by the **Romani Early Years Network (REYN)** found that 18% of Roma children in Bulgaria, and 50% in Slovakia, do not have access to parks or playgrounds near their homes.¹⁹ In Bulgaria, 44% of Roma families do not have access to hot water.²⁰ In Ireland, Traveller families face disproportionately high levels of severe housing deprivation, including leaking roofs, damp and rotting window frames or floors.²¹

All Young Children Have the Right to Adequate Housing

Adequate housing is a human right, enshrined in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**.

The **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** states that all children have a right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted that insecure or overcrowded living conditions and unsafe and unsanitary environments can all limit or deny children the opportunity to enjoy their human rights.

The **EU Strategy on Rights of the Child** recognises that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living, and to equal opportunities, from the earliest stages of life. This includes adequate housing.

Principle 19 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** states:

- access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided to those in need
- vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction
- adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion

In 2021, representatives from EU governments, the Commission, the European Parliament, civil society and social partners signed the **Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness** and launched the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness. The Lisbon Declaration recognizes that some people, including children, are particularly affected by homelessness, and pledged to work together to address homelessness in the EU, as part of delivering the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.

¹³ European Commission *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* 2021

¹⁴ Culora A. and Janta B., for the European Commission *Understanding the housing conditions experienced by children in the EU* 2020

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Picum *Access to early childhood education and care by undocumented children and families* 2022

¹⁷ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights *Roma in Ten European Countries. Main results*, 2022

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Romani Early Years Network (REYN) *The Situation of young Roma Children in Europe – a new milestone in early childhood research* 2022

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Fundamental Rights Agency *Travellers in Ireland. Key results from the Roma and Travellers Survey 2019*

The European Child Guarantee

The European Child Guarantee recognises the importance of adequate housing for tackling the social exclusion of children and their risk of homelessness. Member States are asked to ensure that homeless children and their families receive adequate accommodation, prompt transfer from temporary accommodation to permanent housing, and provision of relevant social and advisory services. The Child Guarantee asks governments to assess and revise national, regional and local housing policies to ensure the interests of families with children in need are taken into account, and to provide them with priority and timely access to social housing or housing assistance.

The Child Guarantee is an opportunity for governments to identify children and families who are most affected by housing deprivation and homelessness and catalyse improvements to support their right to adequate housing. This includes improved data collection on housing deprivation (including among very young children), investment in social housing, increased housing benefit and social support for households facing poverty and insecure housing. These measures should be included in Member States' Child Guarantee National Action Plans, in the European Semester process and Country Reports.²² Of the 19 Child Guarantee national plans submitted as of 1 March 2023,²³ several include measures to address social housing needs.

Examples of promising initiatives from national governments

- ❖ **Spain's Child Guarantee National Action Plan** envisages an increase in public housing and priority access for families with young children and adolescents,²⁴ including access to adequate housing for children in vulnerable situations, an increase in cash transfers to support housing expenses, and measures to fight energy poverty.²⁵ Spain is also planning a ban on evictions of families with children for those without alternative housing.²⁶
- ❖ **Romania's Child Guarantee National Action Plan**²⁷ includes ambitious targets to prioritise vulnerable families with children for social housing and be eligible for housing benefits and support for renting where necessary.²⁸
- ❖ **Bulgaria's Child Guarantee National Action Plan** envisages the adoption of a housing strategy, improved accommodation for migrant children, support to Roma and migrant children and to children with disabilities.²⁹

Conclusion

Addressing homelessness and housing deprivation across Europe must be an integral part of Member States' efforts to fight poverty and social exclusion, and to advance children's rights. Moreover, housing deprivation or poor housing conditions are among the main reasons for taking a child away from family. Safe and affordable housing is fundamental to help ensure all children, from their youngest years, can grow up in their families and receive the nurturing care they need to develop and thrive.

For more information, please contact Dr. Agata D'Addato, Eurochild Head of Programmes and Campaign Coordinator (agata.daddato@eurochild.org).

²² Eurochild *(In)visible children Eurochild 2022 report on children in need across Europe*

²³ Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden

²⁴ *Child Guarantee National Action Plans at a glance – Eurochild*

²⁵ Save the Children *Guaranteeing Children's Future How COVID-19 cost-of-living and climate crises affect children in poverty and what governments in Europe need to do 2023*

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Awaiting final approval from the Government of Romania and submission to the European Commission, at the time of writing

²⁸ Save the Children *Guaranteeing Children's Future How COVID-19 cost-of-living and climate crises affect children in poverty and what governments in Europe need to do 2023*

²⁹ *Bulgaria's Child Guarantee National Action Plan – An overview – Eurochild*