

## **Child poverty in multicultural societies**

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### ***Abstract***

This paper focuses on children poverty in multicultural societies and childhood in poverty. It is an attempt to outline some of the theoretical and methodological problems of childhood poverty research. Poverty and social exclusion were hot issues in the political agenda of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 setting among other things a child poverty elimination target. Yet in order to identify measure and alleviate childhood poverty we do not only need to define ambiguous and contested concepts like poverty, inequality, childhood and social exclusion but we also need to deal with methodological deficiencies, especially in large-scale surveys measuring poverty. Taking all in mind, we will highlight some aspects of childhood poverty research by reviewing few major longitudinal studies and we will present some empirical findings with respect to citizenship status and poverty for Greece.

## **Introduction**

Poverty, deprivation and social inequalities have been topics of social science research since decades as one of the key common social objectives within the European Union is the reduction of poverty and social exclusion.

This presentation focuses on childhood in poverty in multicultural societies. It is an attempt to outline some of the theoretical and methodological problems of childhood poverty research as it is a very complicated and challenging issue.

Children in disadvantage have become a disturbing reality world wide and particularly in the E.U. Poverty and social exclusion were hot issues in the political agenda of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 setting among other things a child poverty elimination target.

Among the “classic” factors responsible for the re(emergence of poverty, a number of traits which are characteristic of modern societies have been identified and it was concluded that the lack of education, exclusion from the labour market, low and uncertain employment status, single-parent family situations all contribute to a risk of poverty. At the same time there is a rapid impoverishment of families with children – there is a close correlation between poverty and number of children, employment status of parents, family structures, ethnicity etc.

However, in order to identify, measure and alleviate childhood poverty we do not only need to define ambiguous and contested concepts like poverty, inequality, childhood and social exclusion but we also need to deal with methodological deficiencies, especially in large-scale surveys measuring poverty. We need to measure disadvantages through a number of approaches (income, poor housing conditions, absolute deprivation etc).

Taking all in mind, we will highlight some of the methodological shortcomings of childhood poverty research by reviewing few major longitudinal studies and we will present some empirical findings.

### **I. Methodological Concerns**

*What is poverty?*

As we already mention, there are strong links with worklessness, ethnicity, lone parenthood, sickness and disability and poverty (Ridge, 2002:3). But what is

poverty? And how possible is to create effective indicators accurately measuring the concept?

However, there is no general agreement on a standard definition of poverty. This is because there are different perceptions of poverty between the theorists who study the phenomenon, the researchers who measure poverty and the political elites that design policies in order to combat poverty (Karagiorgas, et. al., 1999:34).

There are mainly two methodological and economic approaches of poverty- 'absolute' and 'relevant poverty' (see (Balourdos, 2005:133). *Absolute poverty* is defined as a condition where an individual or family has insufficient income and resources to ensure what is 'absolutely necessary' for maintaining and reproducing physical strength (see Karagiorgas, et. al., 1999:35). In other words, a person is poor when his/her nutrition, clothing and dwelling are such that may have harmful impacts on his/her health (*ibid*). This definition suggests a biological dimension of poverty. However, measuring *absolute poverty* has many methodological deficiencies which we cannot be discussed in full detail as this is beyond our scope.

Peter Townsend was the first to contest the previous definition and instead he defined *poverty* as: insufficient resources that can practically exclude a person or family from the customs and ordinary standards of living and from participating in social activities (Karagiorgas, et. al., 1999:42). This is more or less the definition of the concept of *relative poverty* which suggests that are our needs are not biological but they are socially and culturally defined (*ibid*). In that last regard, poverty is interpreted as 'inequality'.

In the developed countries economic poverty is principally measured in relation to 'relative poverty'. There is a lot of debate going on around these two concepts *absolute* and *relative poverty*. But our understanding of deprivation or inequality cannot be restricted to these merely economic concepts.

- Is poverty simply a lack of economic resources that do not satisfy basic needs of our human existence as social and cultural beings?

-From a social justice point of view, doesn't the notion of poverty include also lack of human or civil rights, lack of educational and labour market opportunities, lack of skills, lack of protection and lack of freedom to enjoy descent living standards?

If all of the above are also included in the notion of human poverty then how can we really measure deprivation or how do we assess it. Also "***if poverty is defined***

*as a relative poverty, what is the most useful basis of comparison?* Should poverty be measured in relation to the median of the nation state, or the OECD countries, or the EU ? Of course, we cannot provide answers to all questions.

### *How do we assess poverty?*

A question that arises and it applies in to all empirical studies of poverty is whether the level of income is an adequate indicator to the level of material well-being.

A fundamental issue **in panel studies** is how to establish a reliable line where deprived groups can be differentiated from those that are not. Hence, we can conceptualize the *poverty line* as a methodological tool in the economic analysis of poverty that is meant to delimit the population of interest. This entails a dichotomous perception of the population's living conditions and well-being.

Generally, the controversies surrounding poverty statistics are well-known: there is a lot of criticism as to the attempts to fix "*poverty line*" in relation to average income or average expenditure; measures tied to social assistance have obvious weaknesses and none has come up with a method for measuring poverty among isolated or homeless children (Robbins, 1994:59-60), undocumented migrants - minority children (because they simply disappear from the official "count").

There is considerable consensus within the EU that the income poverty line should be drawn at 50% or 60% of each countries median income (UNICEF, 2005:22, Sakelis, 2005:116).

However, "there is also wide agreement that social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty and that direct measures of deprivation and exclusion are required in addition to income data.

In total, 18 such indicators have so far been developed, all of them intended to be compatible and comparable between member states of the EU" (UNICEF, 2005:22).

In sum this analysis includes the following:

- Employment income
- Property income
- Social provisions and pensions
- Money transfers from other households /Transfers paid to other household

However, the distribution of income and poverty are influenced by welfare which is affected by many factors and it is difficult to be assessed.

For convenience, organisations such as Eurostat (EU) and the OECD have, in recent years compared the extent of child poverty in industrialised countries by using a relative standard of income, such as half the average or median household income.

Nevertheless, most cross-national studies and household panel surveys do not provide a clear picture of children's lives. "*Poor children*" and especially "*poor migrant or minority children*" are invisible social categories which tend to be ignored or excluded from statistical accounting (see Ridge, 2002). Generally, the target population in most large-scale studies is all persons aged 16 and above residing in households of the survey area. In other words, *children are merely passive members of households* (Ridge, 2002).

In addition most of the studies provide a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of child poverty, but research focusing on ethnic minority is very scarce.

The indicators of well-being are also based on the assumption that family income affects child outcomes but other indicators are not included. For example, we have insufficient or no information about child abuse/neglect, child labour, child care, good schools, quality of school life, safe neighbourhoods, crime etc. Poor children do not only have less access to material resources but also they have less access to community resources.

Large and important gaps in child poverty research continue to exist, especially with regard to comparative studies of child welfare and studies of the situation of immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities. In particular, foreign born children or those born to immigrant parents are only beginning to receive attention in the research literature. "Some research is beginning to emerge regarding the impacts of ethnic and racial minority status on children" (OECD, 2003:24).

## **II. Measuring Child poverty: Statistical data**

As we have already mentioned above, the distribution of resources within households is the most common issue to indicate child poverty. So "children living with poor parents" corresponds to "children poverty".

Estimates from cross-national studies differ according to the data source and the method of calculation. Other factors which differ the level of poverty line to national average incomes are the age of children, the existing national tax-benefits systems etc (see Annex-Table 1).

Different data from EU confirm that there are some countries where the risk of poverty is lower for children than for others. The Nordic countries for example (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) have the lowest rates. There are other countries consistently identified as having higher relative child risk as: Ireland, Italy and the UK. The remaining countries of the central and southern Europe tend to have child rates that are in the middle.

As it is apparent from the data of Figure 1, at the top are Denmark and Finland where the proportions are now less than 3 per cent and in general all the Nordic countries have rates below 5%. In the middle-rank countries between 5-15% we found all the most populous European countries except Italy (which has the highest child poverty in Europe). Below this group we found five countries : United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand and Italy (15-17%).

According to more recent data (2005) it is significant that in the bottom with very high rates we find six non-european countries: Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand (16,3%) and the United States (21,9%) which has much less comprehensive welfare states and less effective social safety nets. Finally, Mexico has the highest rate (27,7%) (UNICEF, 2005) (Figure 2).

Data from the same study show that during the 90ties the proportion of children living in poverty in the developed world has risen in 17 out of the 24 OECD countries for which data are available (Figure 3).

### ***Professional status of parents***

The professional status of parents is an important issue to identify child poverty. As it is illustrated in Table 2, the poverty risk is relatively high among children aged 0-17 years living in jobless households and our data confirm the rise of the relative levels.

### ***Immigrant and Minority Children***

Exploring the relationship between child poverty and migration , we are presenting as an example some data showing the differences between native born German children and those born to immigrants, foreigners and ethnic Germans (those who migrated from Eastern European countries to Germany). Foreign born children *have*

a higher poverty risk and tend to be on less favourable educational tracks than native-born German children". In particular, for children living in households headed by non-citizens the probability of poverty almost tripled from about 4 per cent in the early '90s to 15 per cent at the end. Additionally, children of the older guest worker generation of immigrants have about 10 per cent, higher poverty rates than citizens but at the same time lower poverty rates than all non-citizens (Corak, Fertig and Tamm, 2005:8).

#### **Data for Greece: Immigrant and Minority children**

In Greece immigrants were only recently recorded in the Census of 2001 though there was under-recording of undocumented immigrants up to almost 10% . Basically, there are no formal retrospective data (past work, family and immigration histories) or figures related to demographic characteristics and processes (i.e. fertility, mortality, household and family structure (see also Charalambis, Maratou-Alipranti, Hadjiyanni, eds, 2004).

Studies conducted show the gradual decrease of the school population, especially in the primary schools (Maratou-Alipranti et al., 2002; Drettakis, 2002). Thus, the number of school age children by native-born parents enrolled in the primary and secondary schools declines, whereas the corresponding number of migrant children of foreign-born parents increases fast (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Immigrant children registered in primary and secondary schools

School years	Pupils with parents:			Total
	Migrants	%	Indigenous	
1995/96	47,666	3,0%	1,484,277	1,531,943
1996/97	54,943	3,6%	1,450,351	1,505,294
1997/98	67,210	4,6%	1,404,050	1,471,881
1998/99	79,737	6,0%	1,352,144	1,431,881
1999/00	86,238	6,3%	1,271,377	1,357,615
2002/03	96,526	8,5%	1,043,967	1,140,493

Sources: Ministry of Education Data

In 2002 96,526 pupils from immigrant parents enrolled in primary and secondary schools of the country and are almost twice as many as in 1995 (47,666). In 1995 Immigrant children made up 5% of the total school population in 1995 but about 9% in 2002 (Table 4).

Most likely, however, the increase was larger because many pupils born by naturalised ethnic Greek parents are registered as native-born. The distinction between native-born and recently naturalised Greeks is still made in the schools because pupils who do not speak Greek in their families are, as a rule, lagging behind the others, causing problems to teachers and resulting in racist anti-migrant and xenophobic reactions.

A study that was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research in 1998-9, which aimed at the determination of “Areas of Educational Priority (PEP)” in Greece, shows the extent of educational attrition and failure in Greece. In sum, the study revealed that in areas with a large number of foreign and minority ethnic students the percentage of school drop-outs and poor educational performance is high due to learning disabilities and language problems (Maratou-Alipranti, Teperoglou, Tsiganou, 2006).

The Greek Ministry of Education trying to improve the provided education has implemented programs of multicultural education (Katsikas, Politou, 1999). However, the 26 multicultural schools that help the foreigners with the Greek language do not seem to be adequate (Greek-Dutch Seminar 2001:37-38 and 125). Displaying, however, the well known urge of the migrants to try hard, more and more are doing well and a fair number are the best in class, challenging native-born classmates and their parents (Labrianidis/Lymeraki, 2000).

### **Minority children**

The only formally recognised minority are the Muslims of Thrace as stipulated by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) who were excluded from the population exchange (Clogg, 2002). Perhaps the most recent official data on minority groups are those of the 1951 census<sup>1</sup> but the official classification of the population by religion and mother tongue is problematic. For instance, it is hard to separate the Pomaks (Slavic-speaking Muslims) who live in Western Thrace from the Turks and Roma due to the official reticence to give figures for ethnic minorities (Poulton, 1993: 182).

Children of the Muslim minority in Thrace lack any educational opportunities. Pre-school attendance rates are very low (5%) (Katsikas and Politou, 1999:168). Pre-school education would give them an opportunity to start learning the Greek language before entering primary school as most children do not speak Greek at home (see Katsikas and Politou, 1999:168-169). Particularly, Pomak children suffer a ‘linguistic bombardment’ from both their Muslim teachers who teach them Turkish and the Christian teachers who teach them Greek (Katsikas and Politou, 1999:170). The Table 5 below shows the educational attrition among the minority students in two Prefectures of Thrace in 1996/97. Totally, 48% of students in primary education and 12% in secondary left school during that period.

**Table 5. Number and percentages of minority students in Rhodope and Xanthi – 1996/7**

Prefectures	Number of minority children in Primary education	%	Number of minority children in Secondary education	%
Rhodope	3.710	53%	511	12%
Xanthi	3.753	44%	886	13%
Total	7.463	48%	1.397	12%

Source: Katsikas, Politou, 1999

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<sup>1</sup> See census results in ONSG, *Résultats du Recensement de La Population*, Effectué le 7 Avril 1951, Volume I. *Aperçu historique-Rapport méthodologique – Analyse des résultats Tableaux par superficie et altitude* (Athènes, 1961), CVII-CXV.

## **Conclusions**

Summarizing, as it has been previously illustrated the identification and measurement of children's poverty constitute a difficult enterprise with many theoretical and methodological gaps. Childhood poverty was until recently ignored. Also the fact that there are different definitions as well as methods of measurement make this pressing issue very complicated. The distribution of resources within households is the most common issue to indicate child poverty. So "children living with poor parents" corresponds to "children poverty". The deficiencies that appear in large-scale studies are related to the validity of indicators measuring particular concepts, information accuracy as this is affected by timing of data collection, sample attrition, lack of information on children's wellbeing. Moreover, there are no relevant data and studies for immigrant and minority children in Greece.

## ANNEX-Tables and Figures

Table 1. The relative poverty risk of children in the European Union: previous comparative studies (1999-2000).

Study:	Eurostat		Immervoll <i>et al</i>		Oxley <i>et al</i>		Bradbury and Jäntti	
	All	Children	All	Children	All	Children	All	Children
Austria	13.0	15.5	-	-	-	-	4.8	5.6
Belgium	17.0	20.0	10.6	10.9	7.8	4.1	5.7	6.1
Denmark	12.0	4.5	4.2	3.1	4.7	3.5	4.9	5.9
Finland	-	-	4.2	2.3	4.9	2.1	3.2	3.4
France	16.0	18.5	10.4	11.5	7.5	7.1	9.4	9.8
Germany	16.0	20.0	10.7	13.8	9.4	10.6	8.5	11.6
Greece	21.0	19.0	38.9	34.9	13.9	12.4	-	-
Ireland	18.0	24.0	27.8	35.3	-	-	12.2	14.8
Italy	19.0	23.0	26.6	30.7	14.2	18.7	15.6	21.2
Luxembourg	12.0	18.0	3.3	2.4	-	-	4.4	6.3
Netherlands	12.0	15.0	7.8	9.1	6.3	9.1	6.5	8.4
Portugal	22.0	23.0	46.9	51.8	-	-	-	-
Spain	18.0	23.5	34.9	39.0	-	-	10.3	13.1
Sweden	-	-	8.4	5.1	6.4	2.7	2.9	3.7
UK	19.0	25.0	15.7	22.2	11.9	18.6	15.1	21.3

**Notes:** All studies use household disposable income as the income concept (although there may be differences in interpretation of what this means in practice). All countries except Sweden use the wider household as the unit of income aggregation. Sweden uses the nuclear family.

- not available.

highlighted figures are those where child poverty is less than all-person poverty.

### Sources:

**Eurostat:** Mejer and Siermann, 2000 Table 3.

Data: ECHP wave 3 (1995 incomes)

E-scale: modified OECD (children < 14)

Children: under 18.

Poverty line: **60%** national median

**Immervoll *et al*** (2000) Table 1.

Data: EU12: ECHP wave 2 (1994 incomes); Sweden and Finland: from national income distribution statistics for 1994.

E-scale: modified OECD (children < 14)

Children: **under 16**.

Poverty line: 50% mean **EU15 income** (national incomes adjusted by PPS).

**Oxley *et al*** (2000) derived from Table 9

Data: OECD questionnaire to national income distribution experts (various years 1993-1995)

E-scale:  $N^{0.5}$

Children: under 18.

Poverty line: 50% national median

**Bradbury and Jäntti** (1999) Table 3.6

Data: LIS data (various years **1987-1995**)

E-scale:  $[N_{adults} + 0.7 * N_{children}]^{0.85}$  (children < 18)

Children: under 18.

Poverty line: 50% national median

**Figure 1.** UNICEF- Child poverty league table, 2000  
(% of children living in households with income below 50% of the national median)

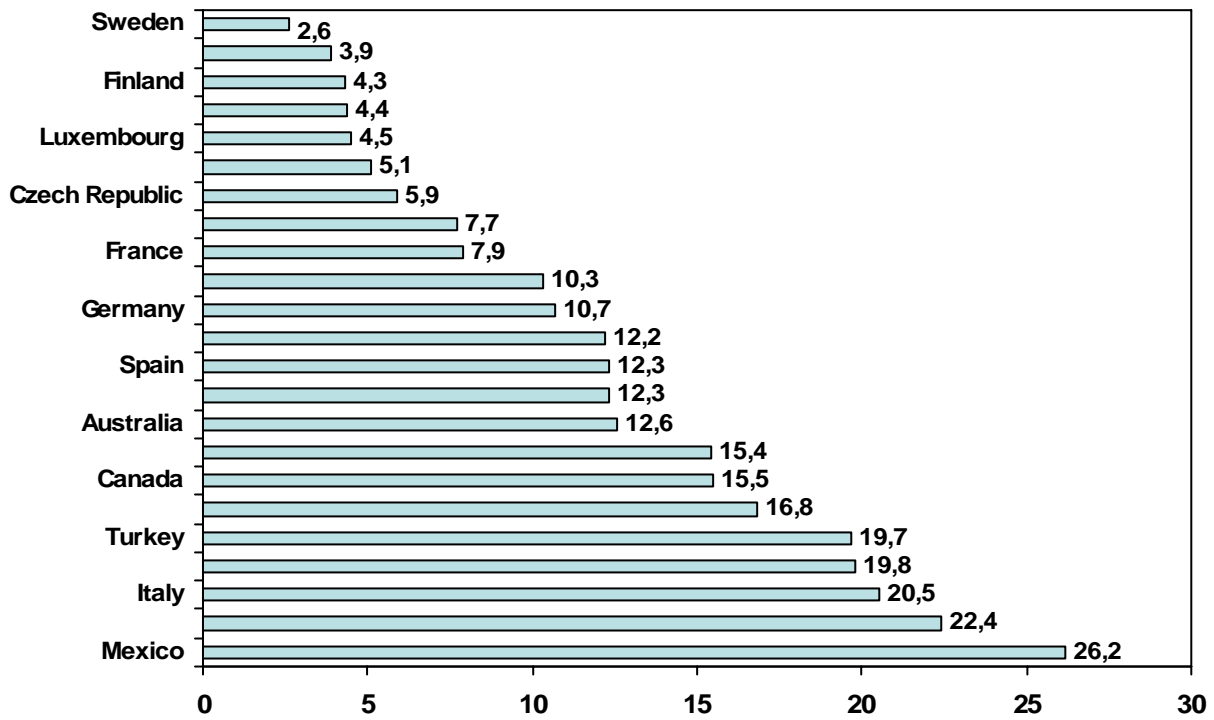
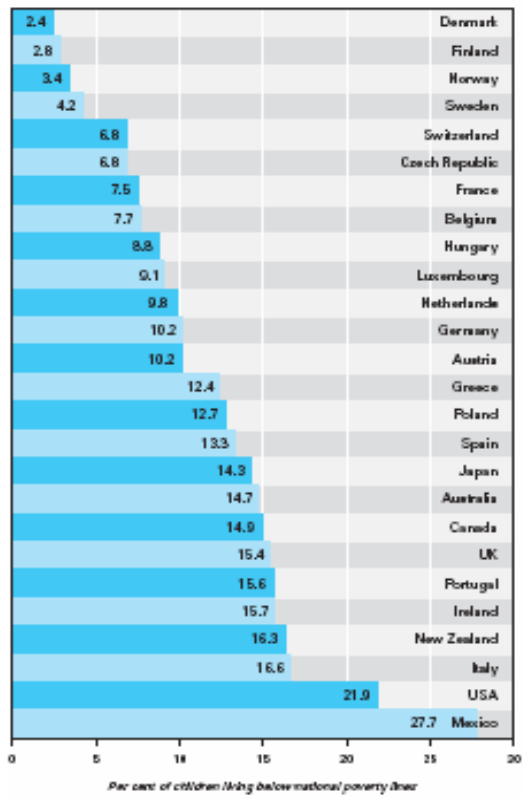


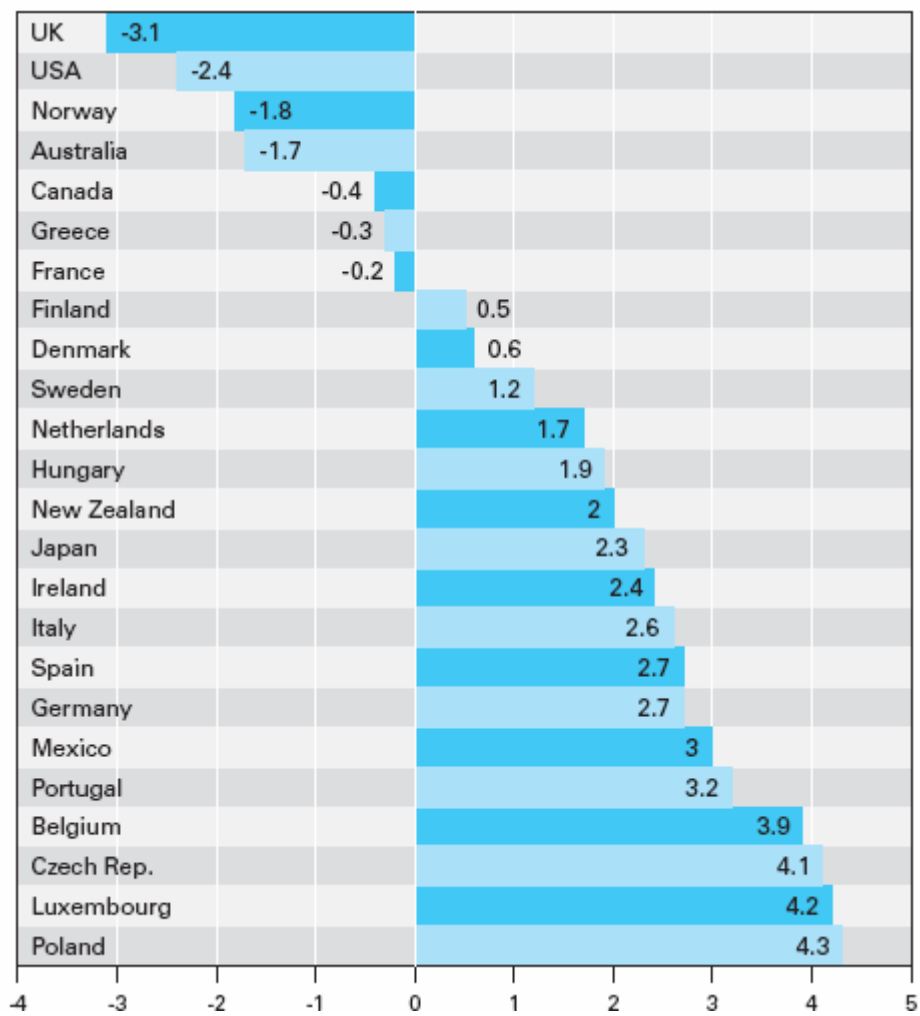
Figure 2. UNICEF The Child Poverty League, 2005



Source:

UNICEF, 'Child Poverty in Rich Countries, 2005',  
*Innocenti Report Card No.6.*

Figure 3. UNICEF Changes in child poverty rates during the 1990s



Source:

UNICEF, 'Child Poverty in Rich Countries, 2005',  
*Innocenti Report Card No.6.*

**Table 2. Children aged 0-17 living in jobless households, EU countries (2000-2004)**  
Share of persons aged 0-17 who are living in households where no-one works

Both the numerators and the denominators come from the EU Labour Force Survey.

		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
EU (25 countries)	:		9.5 (e)	9.8 (e)	9.8 (e)	9.8 (i)
EU (15 countries)		9.7 (e)	9.4 (b)	9.8 (e)	9.9 (e)	9.8 (i)
Euro-zone		8.2 (e)	7.8 (b)	8.1 (e)	8.4 (e)	8.3 (i)
Euro-zone (12 countries)		8.1 (e)	7.8 (b)	8.1 (e)	8.4 (e)	8.3 (i)
Belgium		10.8	12.9	13.8	13.9	13.2
Czech Republic		8.0	8.0	7.6	8.4	9.0
Denmark	:	:	:	5.6	5.7	6.0
Germany		9.0	8.9	9.3	10.3	10.9
Estonia		8.6	11.2	10.1	9.0	9.6
Greece		5.3	5.3	5.1	4.6	4.5
Spain		6.5	6.4	6.6	6.0	6.3
France		9.4	9.2	9.6	9.6	9.6
Ireland		10.2	10.4	10.8	11.8	11.8
Italy		7.6	7.0	7.2	7.0	5.7
Cyprus		4.8	3.9	3.9	3.4	2.6
Lithuania	:	:	:	8.4	6.1	6.5
Luxembourg		4.1	3.4	2.8	3.1 (i)	3.0
Hungary		13.5	13.5	14.3	12.6 (b)	13.2
Malta		7.9	7.9	7.6	8.0	8.9
Netherlands		8.0	6.0	6.0	7.0	7.0 (i)
Austria		4.3	4.1	4.4	4.3	5.6 (i)
Poland	:	:	:	:	:	:
Portugal		3.9	3.6	4.2	5.0	4.3
Slovenia		4.0	3.8	3.8	4.0	3.8
Slovakia		12.5	9.3 (u)	12.1	11.8	12.8
Finland	:	:	:	:	5.7	5.7
Sweden	:	:	:	:	:	:
United Kingdom		17.0	16.9	17.4	17.0	16.8
Bulgaria	:	:	19.0	18.7	16.6	15.6
Croatia	:	:	:	10.3	10.4	7.4
Romania		7.2	6.8	9.8 (b)	10.2	11.1

Source: Eurostat, 2004

Figure 4. Poverty and citizenship in Germany, 2001.

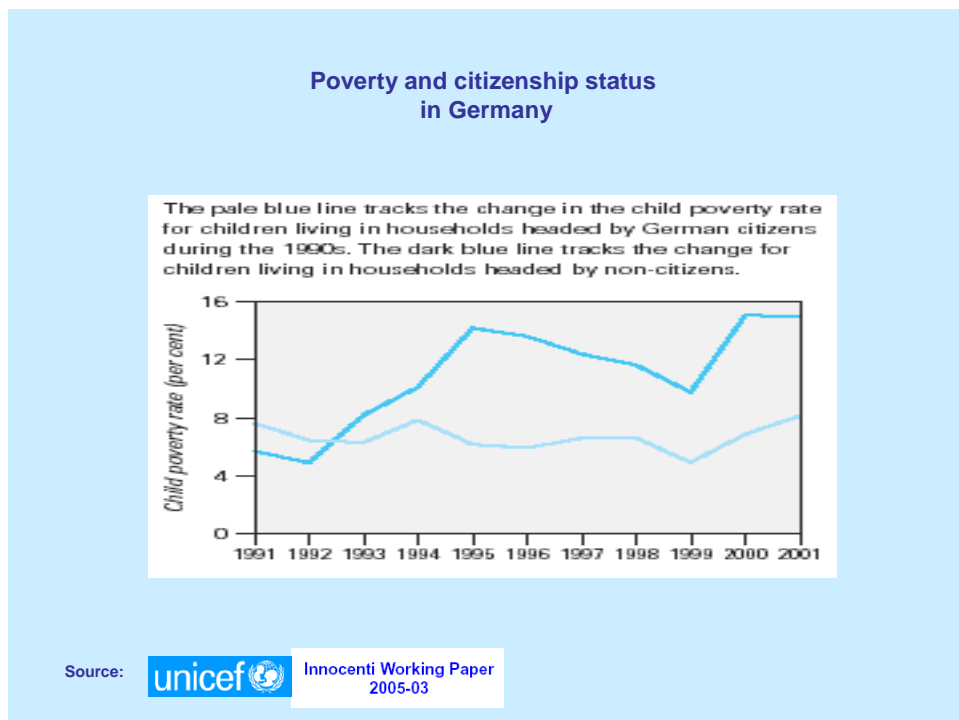


Table 3. Child poverty in different families, 2000 (as poverty line of 50 per cent of the national median)

<b>Poverty rates</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>Lone-parent families (%)</b>	<b>Other families (%)</b>	<b>Risk of poverty (ratio)*</b>
TURKEY	29,2	19,6	1,5
SPAIN	31,6	11,8	2,7
ITALY	22,2	20,4	1,1
GREECE	24,9	11,8	2,1
POLAND	19,9	15,1	1,3
LUXEMBOURG	30,4	2,9	10,5
HUNGARY	10,4	10,3	1,0
NETHERLANDS	23,6	8,5	3,6
FRANCE	26,1	6,4	4,1
IRELAND	46,4	14,2	3,3
BELGIUM	13,5	3,6	3,8
CZECH REP.	30,9	3,6	8,6
GERMANY	51,2	6,2	8,3
FINLAND	7,1	3,9	1,8
NORWAY	13,1	2,2	6,0
DENMARK	13,8	3,6	3,8
SWEDEN	6,7	1,5	4,5
UK	45,6	13,3	3,4
USA	55,4	15,8	3,5
CANADA	51,6	10,4	5,0
AUSTRALIA	35,6	8,8	4,0
MEXICO	27,6	26,1	1,1

Source: UNICEF, 2000. *Innocenti Report Card*, Issue No 1, p.10.

\* Risk of poverty for children in lone-parent families relative to that in other families

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