



Un/Equal Childhood: Deep Dive in Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Bulgaria

Policy Brief



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List of Acronyms:

| | |
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| ASA | Agency for Social Assistance |
| CABMA | Combating the Antisocial Behaviour of Minors Act |
| ECEC | Early childhood education and care |
| ECG | European Child Guarantee |
| EU | European Union |
| FTPC | Family-type Placement Centre |
| MES | Ministry of Education and Science |
| MH | Ministry of Health |
| MLSP | Ministry of Labour and Social Policy |
| NSI | National Statistical Institute |
| RDE | Regional Department of Education |
| RHI | Regional Health Inspectorate |
| UN | The United Nations |
| WHO | World Health Organisation |

Introduction

Poverty and deprivation in childhood can have lifelong detrimental impacts, undermining an individual's health, educational attainment, income earning capacity, and social connection. Evidence has shown that children in lower income families have worse cognitive, behavioural and health outcomes. However, to refer to child poverty in monetary terms alone would not reflect the way children experience poverty: to them poverty is, along with income, also about being deprived in the immediate aspects of their lives, which includes areas such as lack of a caring family, and lack of access to healthcare, education, healthy nutrition, adequate housing and protection. On the grounds of their social exclusion and marginalization, children exposed to the risk of poverty are often kept from accessing high-quality basic services and such lack of access enhances in turn the risk of poverty and places a child at risk of a cycle of persistent, sometimes life-long poverty and disadvantages.

In 2020 one in three children in Bulgaria lived at risk of poverty or social exclusion.¹ One of the EU headline targets for 2030 set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is reducing the number of people in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million, including 5 million children.² The aim of the **European Child Guarantee** approved by the Council Recommendation dated June 2021 is the implementation by 2030 of policies that will ensure for children living in need access to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, healthcare, healthy nutrition and adequate housing.³

1. Children in need: profile and main drivers of poverty and social exclusion

Children in need are children who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, as well as children who are highly vulnerable due to specific factors.⁴ The deep dive in child poverty in Bulgaria highlights the main drivers of child poverty and social exclusion, as well as the specific risks of increased vulnerability of the following groups of children: homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; children with disabilities; children with mental health issues; children with minority ethnic background, particularly Roma; children with migrant background; children in alternative, particularly institutional care; and children in precarious family situations.

➤ *Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion*

The share of children under 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Bulgaria in 2020 was 36.2% – one of the highest in the EU and significantly higher than the EU average, which is 24.2%.⁵ Poverty and social exclusion have a much bigger effect on children than on adults.⁶ **Large families** (nearly 67% of two-adult families with three or more dependent children) are most at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The next risk group comprises **single parents** (nearly 49% of single-parent families with dependent children). **Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion whose parents have primary or less than primary education are ten times more** than children whose parents have higher education. Children in **households with very low work intensity (less than 20%)** account for the highest share of poor

1 Eurostat. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion – new definition, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_PEPS01N_custom_1837232/default/table?lang=en

2 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan {SWD(2021) 46 final}, Brussels, 4.3.2021.

3 Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee.

4 Ibid.

5 Eurostat. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion – new definition.

6 Compared to the share of the total population at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the share of children under 18 is by 2.6 percentage points higher. Ibid.

children – 90.3%, which, however, decreases progressively as parents' work intensity increases.⁷

The risk of poverty has different dimensions with the various **ethnic groups**. The only ethnic group within which **the share of the poor exceeds the share of the non-poor is the Roma one**, the former being twice as high as the latter at that (66.2% poor as opposed to 33.8% non-poor)⁸; when it comes to the risk of poverty or social exclusion, the difference increases up to four times.

In 2020 there were significant regional differences in the risk of poverty or social exclusion among children under 18. Virtually every second child in the North West NUTS2 region lives at risk of poverty or social exclusion. To compare, the risk of poverty or social exclusion in the South West NUTS2 region is 26.6%, in the South East NUTS2 region it is 43.6%. The differences are even larger at NUTS3 regional level — while in Razgrad it is 2.8%, in Sofia region and Gabrovo —approximately 8%, in Sliven and Vidin the difference is 47.5% and 46.5% respectively.⁹

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic-driven crisis is most unfavourable for the most excluded groups. The Eurostat experimental early estimate on the change in the income inequality and in the poverty indicators during the pandemic-marked 2020, compared to 2019, reveals an increase in the 'risk of poverty' indicator for the children under 18¹⁰, as well as for the population in the age group 18–64 in Bulgaria.¹¹ According to research across EU, the loss of income from gainful employment is highly concentrated in some particular groups, such as young people aged 16–24.¹²

➤ *Homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation*

In 2020 **children from poor households in Bulgaria were much more often exposed to severe housing deprivation (39%)** compared to other children from non-poor households (6%).¹³ The share of poor households with children is twice higher than the share of non-poor households under the main indicators for access to housing, such as share of housing costs in the total household budget, the weight of housing costs and utility arrears.¹⁴ Unlike most EU Member States, the housing overburden rate in Bulgaria is higher in rural areas (16.4%) compared to cities (13%).¹⁵ For the Roma population, most of which lives in poverty, a further specific driver of homelessness and severe housing deprivations are the high number of dwellings out of zoning and with no building documentation, in neighbourhoods with poor housing conditions and no infrastructure.¹⁶

7 Logistic regression data analysis, performed by the research team of NSI/Eurostat data for 2020.

8 NSI. Poverty and Social Inclusion Indicators for 2020.

9 NSI. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/8262/poverty-and-social-inclusion-indicators-district>

10 See Eurostat. At-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP). Year-on-year change 2019-2020, Age < 18.

11 See Eurostat. Early estimates of income inequality during the 2020 pandemic, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_estimates_of_income_inequalities_during_the_2020_pandemic. See също: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_estimates_of_income_inequalities_during_the_2020_pandemic#At-risk-of-poverty_rate_by_age_group_shows_contrasting_changes. The development of flash estimates of poverty and income inequalities is based on models that capture the complex interaction between labour market developments, the effects of economic and monetary policies and the implementation of social reforms. See Eurostat. Nowcasting income indicators during the pandemic (FE 2020). Methodological developments. June 2021, p. 4.

12 See European Commission, The Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee. Monitoring Report on the Employment and Social Situation in the EU Following the Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Winter 2020/2021, pp. 22-24, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23592&langId=ro>

13 Eurostat. Severe housing deprivation rate by age, sex and poverty status, <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

14 Eurostat. Housing cost overburden rate by poverty status, <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

15 Eurostat. Is Housing Affordable?, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/housing/bloc-2b.html?lang=en>

16 World Bank. "A Roof Over Our Heads – Housing in Bulgaria." 2017, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/702751508505445190/A-roof-over-our-heads-Housing-in-Bulgaria>.

➤ **Children with disabilities**

Official data show that the number of children with permanent disabilities¹⁷ in Bulgaria is 27,500¹⁸ as of 2021; the total number of children with disabilities is higher, however there are no accurate data including also children with developmental difficulties. The absence of a unified, inter-institutional system for collecting data on the number of children with disabilities, the type of disability and the specific needs of children seriously hinders the implementation of efficient policies for equal access of children with disabilities to basic services. Data from a 2021 UNICEF Bulgaria study confirmed the **correlation between the presence of disability on the one hand and the higher levels of poverty and early school leaving** on the other.¹⁹ Families of children with disabilities are more likely to struggle to meet their daily needs and have a higher share of non-working mothers and fathers who are less active in the labour market.²⁰ Factors such as **inaccessible architectural environment, lack of appropriately skilled professionals, as well as lack of suitable curricula** deepen the inequalities for children with disabilities in the access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), as well as education and school-based activities. **Societal stigma** is a barrier that has not been properly studied and addressed in the inclusion policies for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities are particularly severely affected where there is an overlay of discrimination factors such as minority ethnic background, gender, migrant background, etc.

➤ **Children with mental health issues**

As of 2019, some 73,808 children aged 10–19 (11.2% of all children in this age group) have some kind of mental health disorder.²¹ The healthcare system has **no available systematically gathered data by NUTS2 region and type of mental illnesses among children**, hence it is difficult to plan the necessary measures and programmes for general mental health promotion and care. Children with mental health issues in general are poorly addressed in the policies laid out in the various national documents. There is a focus on children over 14, although, based on WHO data, half of life long mental health disorders start before the age of 14.²² **The stigma associated with mental health issues** is a barrier before children and young people to obtain professional help.²³

➤ **Children with minority ethnic background (particularly Roma)**

The poverty and social exclusion rates among Roma children are disproportionately high compared to the share of poverty and social exclusion in the respective age group in the whole population. Roma children account for 46.5% of the total number of poor children in Bulgaria, and 56.7% of the number of children experiencing severe housing deprivation²⁴ against a 10.8% share of Roma population in the age group 0–19.²⁵ The risk of poverty is significantly higher for children from households where parents have primary and less than primary education; are unemployed and economically inactive; in

17 Established through expert medical examination type and degree of disability or a degree of permanently reduced work capacity of 50% or more, Law on Persons with Disabilities, Supplementary Provisions, paragraph 1, item 2

18 Data provided to the research team by the Agency for People with Disabilities (APD) in June 2021

19 UNICEF Bulgaria. *Study on Violence against Children in Bulgaria. Volume I: Prevalence of violence against children and related knowledge, attitudes and practices among children and adults in Bulgaria*, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/10236/file>

20 See Giulio, P., D. Philipov, and I. Jaschinski. "Families with Disabled Children in Different European Countries". *Families and Societies Working Paper series*, 23/2014, pp. 14–17, available at: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/WP-23GiulioEtAl.pdf>

21 UNICEF. Regional Brief for Europe. *The State of the World's Children 2021*. "On My Mind: Promoting, Protecting and Caring for Children's Mental Health", <https://www.unicef.org/media/108121/file/SOWC-2021-Europe-regional-brief.pdf>.

22 World Health Organization. *Adolescent Mental Health Key Facts*, available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health> World Health Organization. *Adolescent Mental Health Key Facts*: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>

23 UNICEF Bulgaria. *1 in 5 adolescents experiences a mental disorder each year*: <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/beyond-smiles-how-are-you-really>

24 Eurostat. *Severe material deprivation rate by age and sex*: <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>; NSI. *Poverty and Social Inclusion Indicators for 2020*, https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/SILC2020_FRTG25T.pdf; authors' calculations.

25 See NSI. *Bulgaria – Census 2011*.

households with three or more children; as well as households living in rural areas. Poverty is both a result and a driver of social exclusion for Roma children, who are largely excluded from ECEC services, are more likely to leave school early, live in overcrowded dwellings with poor housing conditions and have no effective access to healthcare.²⁶ **The lack of systematic measures aimed at overcoming anti-Roma sentiments** jeopardises the efficiency of the efforts of government in the fight against poverty and social exclusion of Roma.²⁷

➤ *Children with a migrant background*

According to NSI data, in 2020 a total of 2,656 children aged 0-19 coming from non-EU states settled in Bulgaria.²⁸ In 2021, a strong rise in the number of unaccompanied children seeking international protection in Bulgaria was reported – 2,268 against 799 for the entire 2020.²⁹ Despite the growing number of child migrants, their profile and specific needs are poorly recognised by public officials. Research on this subject has identified a need to **raise the awareness and provide better training opportunities to staff in the institutions working with children** to meet the social integration needs of migrant children.³⁰ Policy development should take into account the fact that **the migrant background of at least one parent is a driver of child poverty**.³¹ The education system has demonstrated some serious success in the integration of migrant children in recent years; however, most unaccompanied children have remained outside this system. The vulnerability of children and families seeking or having international protection has also increased due to the **rejection attitudes** among part of the local people and some media.³²

➤ *Children in alternative care*

The total number of children with issued protection measures living in alternative care as of 31.12.2020 was 9,562³³ – a decrease by almost 23% in the number of children placed in all types of alternative care in the last 5 years. Based on expert analysis this reduced number cannot be explained by a higher efficiency of the child protection system, since the measures for prevention of moving children out of their birth families remain a weak link in this system.³⁴ **The factors that increase the risk of placing children in alternative care are poverty, disability and precarious family situations.** Available data confirm the disproportionately high share of children with Roma background in alternative care, contributing factors for which are the high levels of poverty and the lack of access to social protection.³⁵ Children placed in CBSs/SPBSs as a correctional measure under the CABMA are usually left out of analyses of the functioning of the child protection system.

26 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. *The Situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States*. 2012. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-employment-1.en.pdf

27 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. A persisting concern: Anti-Gypsyism as a barrier to Roma inclusion. 2018: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-anti-gypsyism-barrier-roma-inclusion_en.pdf.

28 NSI. International migration by age and sex, available at: <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/3072/international-migration-age-and-sex>

29 State Agency for Refugees with The Council of Ministers. Statistical data on unaccompanied minors who sought international protection in 2020 and Statistical data on unaccompanied minors who sought international protection in 2021, <https://www.aref.government.bg/bg/node/238>

30 Величкова, А., Димитрова, Д., Ал-Шаргаби, Ж., Йорданова-Рабчева, С. „Предизвикателства при оценката на най-добрия интерес на детето в рамките на процедура при предоставяне на международна закрила на деца“; и Славкова, М. „Предизвикателства пред децата в ситуация на принудителна миграция“, published in *Бежанците: днес и утре*. 09/04 (2021) Академичен бюлетин.

31 Eurostat. *Children at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion*. 2019.

32 Еролова, Й. „Предизвикателства пред бежанците в България“, публикувана в Борисова, М. и кол. (съставители и редактори). *Българи в чужбина, чужденци в България*, Sofia 2017, pp. 336-343, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lina-Gergova/publication/330343148_Blgari_v_cuzbina_cuzdenci_v_Blgaria/links/5c39df20299bf12be3c29077/Blgari-v-cuzbina-cuzdenci-v-Blgaria.pdf ; See also, Накова, А. „Бежанците в представите на българите“, published in *Бежанците: днес и утре*. Академичен портал по въпросите за принудителната миграция и бежанците, <https://academia.bcrn-bg.org/2020/11/24/бежанците-в-представите-на-българите/>.

33 Information provided by the ASA under the Access to Public Information Act, 24.08.2021

34 UNICEF Bulgaria. Analysis of the child protection system in Bulgaria. 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/documents/analysis-child-protection-system-bulgaria>

35 European Roma Rights Centre, *Blighted Lives: Romani Children in State Care*, January 2021.

➤ **Children in precarious family situations**³⁶

International research studies have identified **precarious family situations related to the effects of poverty** as the reason for a number of child protection risks, including different forms of violence.³⁷ The experience in different countries indicates that **family social protection measures are a key element of a cross-sectoral strategy for prevention of violence against children**.³⁸ **Children with one or both parents working abroad** form a significant group of children in precarious family situations, which according to a UNICEF analysis from 2014 includes every fourth or fifth child in Bulgaria and over 40% of children in the North West NUTS2 region.³⁹ Children from this group often face serious difficulties in finishing school, getting adequate healthcare and social and emotional support.⁴⁰ Children in precarious family situations are also the **teenage mothers**, whose number remains high – 12.5% of births are to mothers under the age of 20 years (against the EU average of 3.7%)⁴¹ More than 12,000 **children having an imprisoned parent(s)** remain outside the scope of policies for addressing child poverty, despite being at increased risk of poverty, violence and difficulties at school.⁴²



36 Within the meaning of the Council Recommendation on establishing a EU Child Guarantee, ‘children in precarious family situations’ means children exposed to various risk factors that could lead to poverty or to social exclusion. This includes: living in a single-earner household; living with a parent with disabilities; living in a household where there are mental health problems or long-term illness; living in a household where there is substance abuse, or domestic violence; children of a Union citizen who has moved to another Member State while the children themselves remained in their Member State of origin (so-called Skype-children); children having a teenage mother or being a teenage mother; and children having an imprisoned parent.

37 World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. *European Report on Preventing Child Maltreatment 2013*; *European Report on Preventing Child Maltreatment 2018*.

38 The Alliance of Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Save the Children, and UNICEF. *Social Protection and Child Protection: Working together to protect children from the impact of COVID-19 and beyond*.

39 UNICEF Bulgaria. *Ефекти върху децата, оставени от родители, които работят и живеят в чужбина*, 2014: <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/доклади/ефекти-върху-децата-оставени-от-родители-които-работят-и-живеят-в-чужбина>

40 Ibid.

41 Eurostat. *Young and older mothers in the EU*, 2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20190801-1>

42 National Network for Children. “The National Network for Children Supported an Initiative to Set Up a National Network in Support of Parents in Prison and their Children”, 28.05.2018

2. Access of children in need to basic services

Many of the barriers for access to basic services for different groups of vulnerable children overlap. Such are the **financial barriers, structural problems** such as the unbalanced territorial distribution of services and professionals, deficits in the system of **inclusive education**, as well as **inefficient cross-sectoral cooperation**. It is necessary to pay attention to the tendency among **state institutions staff to emphasize the disengagement and ignorance of parents as leading factors for the social exclusion of children**.⁴³ Stigmatisation and discriminatory practices remain both an important factor and part of the barriers not recognised by professionals in the systems of social assistance, education and healthcare.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted inequalities between children and had the biggest impact on the most vulnerable groups. The additional economic, health, education and social challenges in the context of the pandemic and the state of national emergency have clearly highlighted the most problematic areas in addressing child poverty and social exclusion.

➤ Access to ECEC services

Financial constraints result in **higher levels of exclusion from ECEC services⁴⁴ of children from households at risk of poverty or social exclusion** – in 2019 the share of children from the age group 4–7, who did not attend kindergarten was respectively: 41.5% of children with Bulgarian, 42.7% of children with Roma, and 33.3% of children with Turkish backgrounds.⁴⁵ To compare, the share of children from age 4 to starting first grade in 2019 who did not attend kindergarten was 17.3%.⁴⁶ With respect to **children with disabilities**, some additional barriers are the large sizes of groups in kindergartens⁴⁷, as well as the inaccessible structural environment.⁴⁸ Access of children with disabilities under 3 to ECEC services has also been hindered by the **lack of inclusive education standards** in this age group. The involvement of parents in the ECEC services, being one of the underlying factors for their quality⁴⁹, is a challenge for the teachers working with children in early age.⁵⁰ A combination of awareness raising and sensitisation initiatives among parents about the importance of ECEC and measures to increase the skills of those working in the system to work with parents, including working in multicultural settings, would have a potentially high impact.

➤ Access to school education

In 2018 the share of 15-year-olds from families with unfavourable socio-economic status who were underachievers in reading, maths and science was 70% or 45 percentage points higher than the students from families with favourable socio-economic status.⁵¹ This gap shows that **the intergenerational transmission of low educational attainment and of poverty is a factor limiting the access to education for children**.⁵² A serious lag in attainments equivalent to three years of schooling was observed

43 Data from online consultation with a total of 682 respondents – 507 social workers from ASA structures at regional and local levels; 129 experts from RDEs; 43 experts from RHIs; and 3 representatives of municipal administrations. The research team ranked the degree of impact of different barriers on the access of vulnerable groups of children to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, healthcare, healthy nutrition and adequate housing based on the respondents' replies.

44 For the purposes of this analysis, the ECEC services shall include the services of nurseries and kindergartens.

45 NSI. Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC 2019) and estimates made by the authors.

46 Eurostat. Pupils from age 4 to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level, by sex - as % of the population of the corresponding age group, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uae_enra10/default/table?lang=en

47 For Our Children Foundation. Bulgaria Grows with its Children: Building Professional Competences of the Early Childhood Workforce. Sofia, 2020

48 National Strategy for People with Disabilities 2021-2030, p. 9.

49 Шалапатова. И. Прилагане политиките на Европейския съюз за ранно детско образование и грижа в България, Dissertation Paper. 2020

50 For Our Children Foundation. Bulgaria Grows with its Children: Building Professional Competences of the Early Childhood Workforce. Sofia, 2020, p. 50.

51 European Commission. Education and Training Monitor 2020. Bulgaria: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2020/countries/bulgaria.html>

52 Ibid.

also among students whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian.⁵³ The educational inequality of children from low-income families is pre-conditioned by the **low level of inclusion in education**, displayed in a strong concentration of children from vulnerable groups in particular schools and lack of social and cultural diversity in schools.⁵⁴ These conditions form a more unfavourable teaching environment and conversely lower learning outcomes.⁵⁵

Specific barriers to the access to education are **the segregated education of Roma children⁵⁶** and **the lack of accessible environment and resources to support children with special educational needs⁵⁷**. A challenge to achieving quality inclusive education is also **the insufficient training of teachers** in terms of both teaching children with different learning abilities and teaching in multicultural environments.⁵⁸ **Public preconceptions prevent the inclusion** of children with disabilities, children with mental health issues, Roma children and migrant children.

According to international studies and MES data, one impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is **the worsening of the existing educational inequalities** among children from families with different socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵⁹

For children with special educational needs the limited access to education due to insufficient resource support is aggravated in the distance learning setup, and many children are prevented from attending any kind of education activities because of the lack of technical equipment and education resources corresponding to their needs.⁶⁰ **The exclusion of Roma children from education** during the pandemic was exacerbated due to the lack of digital devices for distance learning and the absence of opportunities for support by parents at home.⁶¹

➤ Access to healthcare

Children from families with income under the poverty line are more likely to have unmet medical needs than children from non-poor families.⁶² Access to healthcare services is hampered due to the high percentage of out-of-pocket payments by patients in total healthcare expenditure.⁶³ Seventy per cent of out-of-pocket payments cover costs of pharmaceuticals and medical devices against 35% EU average.⁶⁴ **Access to healthcare services for children with disabilities imposes extra financial costs on the family** due to the limited funds available for outpatient treatment, tests and consumables covered by the state budget. Structural problems such as unbalanced territorial distribution of services and professionals hinder the access for children from small settlements. There are **increased health risks for both**

53 Gortazar, Lucas; Kuznetsova, Dessislava. A Policy Agenda to Boost Human Capital in Bulgaria. World Bank, Washington, DC, 2019. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/32305> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO

54 UNESCO. 2021. Global Education Monitoring Report 2021 – Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia – Inclusion and education: All Means All. Paris, UNESCO. See also PISA 2018 Results (Vol. II). Where All Students Can Succeed.

55 OECD. PISA 2018 Results. (Vol. II) Where All Students Can Succeed. "Chapter 4: Social Diversity and Equity in Learning Outcomes", <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/2a009264-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/2a009264-en>. See също и OECD. Balancing School Choice and Equity. An international perspective based on PISA, стр. 68.

56 European Commission. Midterm review of the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies. COM(2017) 458 final

57 Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria. Annual Report, 2018

58 OECD. Results from TALIS 2018: Country Note: Bulgaria, 2019.

59 Blaskó, Zs., da Costa, P., Schnepf, S.V. Learning Loss and Educational Inequalities in Europe: Mapping the Potential Consequences of the COVID-19 Crisis. IZA DP No 14298, April 2021, p. 10, document available at: www.iza.org The research is conducted based on a sample of 4 400 students from 22 European Union member states, including Bulgaria. Data from the international TIMSS 2019 survey of the International Association for Educational Assessment is used. TIMSS survey is focused on monitoring trends in student achievement in mathematics and curriculum-based sciences. The data contains also information about the parents, teachers and the children's schools.

60 Децата и Covid – 19. Въздействие на кризата върху правата и интересите на децата в република България. Special report of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria, May 2021.

61 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. "Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – impact on Roma and Travellers.", p.12-13.

62 Eurostat. Children with unmet needs for medical examination or treatment by income group, household composition and degree of urbanization. 2017.

63 In 2019 household out-of-pocket (OOP) payments made up 37.8% of current health expenditure compared to 15.4% EU average. State of Health in the EU. Bulgaria. Country Profile. 2021

64 COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT. Country Report Bulgaria 2020. 2020 European Semester: Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011., pp. 54-55: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

mothers and newborns from vulnerable groups, especially among Roma women, significant part of whom have no health insurance and hence have limited access to healthcare services.⁶⁵

Children with developmental delays or disabilities, especially in the age group 0–3 are at risk of not being referred for specialised consultation in due time and of having delayed diagnosis due to **serious problems in the operation of the system for prevention and early diagnosis of disabilities**.⁶⁶ Children placed in alternative care face a higher risk for limited access to healthcare services due to insufficient funding secured by the financial standard for FTFC.⁶⁷ The lack of interaction between healthcare professionals and other professionals working with young children is an obstacle to address problems in a timely and comprehensive manner, especially for children from vulnerable groups.⁶⁸ This problem is exacerbated also by the fact that the available sectoral data are not systematised and quite often institutions from other sectors have no access to it.⁶⁹

A number of studies have identified the negative impact of the Covid-19 restrictive measures on **children's mental health**. According to data from the Ombudsman⁷⁰, distant learning increases stress levels among children and triggers emotional issues. The lack of support services has a negative impact on the mental state of children with disabilities. Increased level of anger and anxiety were observed among children in residential services and institutions.⁷¹

➤ Access to healthy nutrition

Regarding the main indicators on healthy nutrition and nutritional outcomes for children, Bulgaria is lagging seriously behind other European countries. Low birthweight babies as of 2018 were 9.2% against EU27 average – 6.6%⁷²; as of 2016, 61.7% of children aged under 18 were overweight, over 3 percentage points higher than the average for WHO European region countries.⁷³ **Malnutrition** and the consumption of low-quality food products **prevail in poor households**⁷⁴; 52.3% of Roma children cannot get a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day due to financial reasons compared to 9.7% of children from the Bulgarian ethnic group.⁷⁵ Due to **the lack of specialised national programmes for healthy nutrition outside childcare establishments and schools**, children from vulnerable groups, especially in the age group 0–3, are in a more disadvantaged position, because a large part of them do not attend nursery or kindergarten. There is no comprehensive policy framework to promote healthy nutrition that also takes into account the difficulties faced by families living at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

65 According to EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) data, Bulgaria is the country with the highest share of Roma population with no health insurance – 59% of the women and 57% of the men. EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. Analysis of FRA Roma survey results by gender (2013), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/193477/20130917ATT71422EN-original.pdf>.

66 UNICEF Bulgaria. Ситуационен анализ на услугите за малки деца със затруднения в развитието и с увреждания в България. (Situation Analysis of the Services for Young Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities in Bulgaria) 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/7036/file/BGR-sit-an-cwd-in-bulgaria.pdf>

67 Unpublished analysis of the Permanent Expert Working Group on Deinstitutionalisation with SACP of 2018, presented to the Inter-departmental Working Group for the Management of the Process of Deinstitutionalisation.

68 See For Our Children Foundation. Ранното детско развитие в България. Изследване на системите, подкрепящи ранното детско развитие, взаимовръзките и взаимодействието между тях и с родителите. See also, UNICEF Bulgaria. Analysis of the Child Protection System in Bulgaria, 2018.

69 Interviews with experts, June 2021

70 Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria. Децата и COVID-19. Въздействието на кризата върху правата и интересите на децата, (Children and COVID-19. Impact of Crisis on the Rights and Interests of Children), pp. 13, 33.

71 Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria. Доклад от оценка на въздействието на мерките срещу разпространението на Covid19 върху правата на уязвимите групи деца в България, p. 21.

72 OECD. Health at a Glance: Europe 2020: State of Health in the EU Cycle, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/8960f330-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/8960f330-en>

73 World Health Organization. European Health Information Gateway. Overweight, https://gateway.euro.who.int/en/indicators/h2020_6-overweight/visualizations/#id=17077&tab=table

74 UNICEF. The State of the World's Children. Children, food and nutrition. 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/documents/state-worlds-children-2019>

75 NSI: https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/SILC2019_ARTRFBK.pdf

➤ **Access to adequate housing**

In 2020 **children aged under 18 from poor households** were much more likely to live in overcrowded housing compared to children from non-poor households⁷⁶; almost half of poor households with dependent children were unable to keep their homes adequately warm⁷⁷; three times more children from poor households compared to children from non-poor households lived in a dwelling with a leaking roof or damp walls⁷⁸. There are **serious inequalities in the access to adequate housing between the Roma and the rest of Bulgaria's population**, both in terms of basic living conditions, and housing security, with a large part of dwellings being outside the zoning plans or without legal documentation.⁷⁹ There is a lack of data on housing conditions for children with disabilities. The main barriers for all vulnerable groups are the high poverty rates among the population **and the high prices of housing compared to the income of the population**. At the same time **public expenditure on housing support for people from vulnerable groups was one of the lowest in the EU** – a total of BGN 540,000 for 2019⁸⁰, which is 0% of total social protection expenditure.⁸¹ Total housing support and social inclusion support expenditure in Bulgaria in 2019 was 0.2% of GDP, compared to the EU average of 1% for the same year.⁸² There is also no comprehensive housing policy for families with dependent children.



76 Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_LVHO05A__custom_1175295/default/table?lang=en

77 Eurostat. Inability to keep home adequately warm, 2020, EU SILC survey ilc_mdcs01.

78 Eurostat. Total population living in a dwelling with a leaking roof, damp walls, floors or foundation, or rot in window frames or floor, EU SILC survey, ilc_mdho01.

79 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. Roma – Selected findings. 2016

80 Eurostat. SSPROS main expenditure types – housing, SPR_EXP_SUM, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/SPR_EXP_SUM__custom_2059871/default/table?lang=en

81 NSI. Social protection expenditures 2019, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/4078/social-protection-expenditures>

82 Eurostat. Expenditure on social protection benefits by function, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Expenditure_on_social_protection_benefits_by_function,_2019.png

3. National Policies for reducing child poverty and social exclusion in the areas of the European Child Guarantee

As of 2021, **Bulgaria does not have an updated National Strategy for the Child**, outlining the government policy in this field, contrary to the provisions of the Child Protection Act.⁸³ The legislative framework relating to **social assistance** fails to create an enabling environment for overcoming poverty due to inadequate coverage of the guaranteed minimum income⁸⁴ and the low social protection expenditure rate. Despite the increase in social protection expenditure by approximately 15% in 2020 compared to 2019, as percentage of GDP it remained lower than the 2019 EU27 average by approximately 8 percentage points.⁸⁵ Key anti-poverty and anti-social exclusion measures are set out in the statutory framework for **social protection through social services**.

The **National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2021-2030** is the main document which sets out objectives, measures and activities for child poverty reduction. Its activities are based on an integrated approach, which is consistent with the rights of the child. Including a detailed analysis of the drivers of child poverty, updating the measures, systematic monitoring of these measures against target values, a national data base and setting up the planned innovative coordination mechanism to tackle poverty and a comprehensive framework of indicators would contribute to better implementation of the Strategy and to creating an enabling environment for the implementation of national policies in this area. Measures to promote employment of parents are envisaged in the **Employment Strategy 2021-2030**, such as encouraging employers to hire unemployed parents with children, training to update the knowledge and skills of parents after parental leave, etc.

SECTORAL POLICIES HIGHLIGHTS

➤ *ECEC policies*

The strategic framework⁸⁶ focuses on early childhood development and inclusive services for ECEC, identified as a tool to reduce the intergenerational transmission of poverty. The envisaged introduction of common standards for early childhood development for both nurseries in the healthcare system and kindergartens in the system of education is aimed at addressing the weaknesses resulting from the normative division of the system between the MES and the MH. However, there are no indicators to measure the quality of inclusive education; nor are there result indicators for the measures to include vulnerable groups of children in ECEC services.

➤ *School education*

The strategic and statutory framework⁸⁷ enables the design and implementation of policies for access to quality education for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The main gaps relate to the lack of measures targeting some vulnerable groups of children as defined by the ECG; the lack of indicators measuring the outcomes of policies for children living in poverty; and measures for training of professionals working with children from vulnerable groups within the education system (e.g. resource teachers).

83 As per the Child Protection Act the state policy for child protection shall be implemented on the basis of a National Strategy for the Child adopted by the National Assembly, and founded on the principles of the CPA. See CPA, Article 1(3).

84 European Commission. Country Report Bulgaria 2020. European Semester: Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011/

85 Eurostat. Social Protection Expenditure early estimates 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20211116-1>. See also Eurostat. Expenditure on social protection benefits, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Social_protection_statistics_-_social_benefits&stable=1

86 Main documents – Preschool and School Education Act and the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030.

87 Main documents – Preschool and School Education Act and the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030.

➤ **Healthcare**

The statutory health insurance framework⁸⁸ does not provide protection from additional financial burden for meeting the medical needs of children at risk of poverty or social inclusion. The strategic documents⁸⁹ covering the period till 2030 in this field recognize the vulnerability of children with minority background, from families of long-term unemployed, with severe mental health issues and physical disabilities, but they say nothing at all about any analysis of the current problems these children are facing, nor about any targets against which to monitor the results of the planned measures. Child mental health indicators are not analysed in the strategic document, however there are measures planned to improve the quality of child and adolescent psychiatry.

➤ **Healthy nutrition**

There is no overall strategic framework for healthy nutrition and policies aimed at ensuring healthy nutrition for children in vulnerable situations. Measures targeting the nutrition of children living in poverty are mainly limited to the provision of food within childcare establishments and schools, which however fails to cover all children and address healthy nutrition, especially in early childhood.

➤ **Adequate housing**

Adequate housing policies were not established as of 2021 and there is no clarity on plans to establish such policies. There is a lack of both legislation and a strategic framework and mechanisms to ensure access to adequate housing conditions for people and families from vulnerable groups. In this context, the prospect of creating a statutory and strategic framework to ensure adequate housing conditions for children living in poverty seems extremely remote and urgent measures are needed.



88 According to the Health Insurance Act children aged under 18 are health insured at the expense of the national budget.

89 These documents include: Draft National Health Strategy 2021-2030 (by late 2021); National Programme for Improvement of Maternal and Child Health 2021-2030, and National Strategy for the Mental Health of the Citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030

4. Key recommendations

The multidimensional nature of child poverty requires prioritisation of the key measures that will redress inequalities for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Steps are needed towards:

Provision of reliable and up-to-date information on children from vulnerable groups and their access to basic services and complex data analysis for decision-making;

Removing financial and non-financial barriers for all children to access health, education, social and other public services;

A partnership approach of involving and supporting parents/carers;

Systematic and consistent work to eliminate stigma and discriminatory practices.

Three main priorities can be identified to structure the objectives and measures against child poverty and social exclusion:

1. **Introduction of a comprehensive approach** to the planning, implementation and monitoring of policies addressing child poverty and social exclusion, including:
 - defining child poverty as a problem with its own specifics, indicators and target values for the results achieved;
 - building **mechanisms for cross-sectoral information exchange** and cooperation;
 - developing and securing resources for a **workforce strategy** in the health, social and education sectors.
2. **Comprehensive support to parents of children** living in poverty and social exclusion, including:
 - increasing the **efficiency of social assistance and social security**;
 - introducing a **family-centred approach** in the work of sectoral services (health, education, social sector);
 - supporting **parents' employment**.
3. **Access of children in need** to services in the intervention areas of the European Child Guarantee.

1.1. Improving access to ECEC services

Possible approaches

- Adoption of a National Early Childhood Development Strategy, including quality standards for inclusive ECEC services for all children aged 0–7 years;
- Securing a place in nursery or kindergarten for all children;
- Reducing the staff-to-child ratio to achieve individualisation and consideration of the specific needs of each child;
- Development of competences of both pedagogical and support staff, as well as nurses in nurseries for working with children in early age, working with children with different needs and in partnership with the parents;
- Upholding the policy to remove the financial barriers preventing access to ECEC services;
- Measures to raise awareness and sensitise, and increase parents' understanding about the importance of ECEC for child development through the work of social services, education and health mediators.

1.2. Improving access to **education and school-based activities**

Possible approaches

- Measures to reduce the inter-school segregation of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and Roma children;
- Measures to reduce the impact of socio-economic factors on educational attainments of children;
- Measures for provision of accessible architectural environment in all schools and increasing the number of professionals providing educational support to children with special educational needs;
- Strengthening the role of educational mediators (municipal and in educational institutions) to raise awareness and sensitise parents about the benefits of education;
- Systematic implementation of measures to counter stigma and rejection of vulnerable groups of children and to create a culture of acceptance of differences in the school environment, including training for working in multicultural environments and *zero tolerance* measures for hate speech.

1.3. Improving access to **healthcare services**

Possible approaches

- Ensuring free access for children to preventive care, treatment, rehabilitation and habilitation, as well as free access to the necessary medicines for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion;
- Expanding the scope and number of examinations and tests covered by Regulation 26 on access of uninsured pregnant women to regular examinations and tests during pregnancy;
- Measures to overcome the unbalanced distribution of healthcare services and professionals, and for access to healthcare services for families with children from vulnerable groups in smaller settlements;
- Improving the capacity of the system for prevention and early diagnosis of disabilities by implementing up-to-date and universal screening tools, training for out-patient care professionals, standard procedures for referring children for early intervention;
- Setting specific measures in the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030 for social inclusion of children with mental health issues;
- Revising the financial standards in residential services to ensure that adequate resources are available to provide specialised medical care for children in these services.

1.4. Access to services related to the provision of **healthy nutrition**

Possible approaches

- Developing and implementing a comprehensive strategic framework for healthy nutrition, based on cross-sectoral cooperation, with common national targets, including for children in need;
- Measures to prevent malnutrition in vulnerable groups of children through social assistance and social services for families.

1.5. Access to **adequate housing**

Possible approaches

- Developing, securing and implementing a comprehensive strategic framework and statutory framework to ensure access to housing and adequate housing support for people in poverty and social exclusion with a special focus on families with dependents;

- Taking measures to prevent homelessness among children and improve the housing conditions in which they live as part of a National Housing Strategy;
- Ending the practice of demolishing illegal buildings, which are the only housing without a working mechanism to support social peace and guarantee the rights of children of evicted families.

In addition, in terms of the access to basic services, it is recommended that regular surveys be conducted among families living at risk of poverty or social exclusion regarding their access to information and services in the five core areas of ECG, with a particular focus on the views and experiences of the children from the groups at increased risk. The findings of those surveys should be analysed thoroughly and used for management decision-making in implementing policies to reduce the risk of poverty or social exclusion.



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