

SITUATION ANALYSIS OF
**CHILDREN AND
ADOLESCENTS**
IN NORTH MACEDONIA 2024

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SITUATION ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

This report was commissioned by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and prepared by the international consultant Dr. Anita Ramsak. The statements in this report are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policies or the views of UNICEF.

Forward

UNICEF regularly takes stock of the progress made for children in North Macedonia. Bringing together in one place comprehensive data to spotlight the realities faced by children, this Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents highlights the hard-won achievements and ongoing challenges, making the invisible visible by shedding light on disparities in the realisation of children's rights and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Over the past five years, there has been significant progress including improved legislative and policy frameworks and reforms of social services. In terms of outcomes for children, there have been reductions in maternal, neonatal, and under-five mortality rates. Nearly all boys and girls are attending primary and lower secondary school, and no child is placed in large-scale residential institutions.

However, there are also areas of stagnation and backsliding. Child poverty remains a persistent issue. Declining learning outcomes, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, threaten the potential of children and the country's human capital. Childhood should be a time of joy, learning, and growth, but for many children violence, at home, in schools and in the digital space, remains a widespread problem. Roma children, children with disabilities and children living in low-income households continue to be left behind the national development progress, facing stigma and discrimination across many aspects of life.

New challenges have emerged, putting children's health and well-being at risk. Declines in routine vaccine coverage due to hesitancy and misinformation pose significant risks. Environmental health hazards, such as air pollution and severe heatwaves are increasingly impacting children's health and well-being, particularly for the most vulnerable. Rising obesity rates require addressing access to unhealthy food and promoting healthy lifestyles. Likewise, adolescent mental health has become a pressing concern, with responses needed across education, health and social protection sectors.

This comprehensive analysis underscores the importance of equity in the realisation of children's rights, essential to breaking cycles of disadvantage and ensuring every child can reach their full potential. These rights are not just legal obligations, they are moral imperatives and powerful accelerators for the country's overall development and prosperity — fostering economic growth, improving living standards, and enhancing social cohesion.

While this analysis serves to support evidence-based policymaking to advance children's rights and development, it is also an urgent call to action for all stakeholders to renew their commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and deliver on their pledge to reach the SDGs. With determination and partnership, we can ensure that every child and adolescent in North Macedonia is thriving, learning, protected, and empowered – they deserve nothing less.

Lesley Miller
UNICEF Representative

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full Form	Abbreviation	Full Form
AVMU	Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services	MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
CoE	Council of Europe	MKD	Macedonian denar (currency)
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education	MOE	Ministry of Education
CSO	civil society organization	NAP	national action plan
CSR	corporate social responsibility	NAPPD	National Action Plan on the Rights of the Child
CSW	centres for social work	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child	NEET	not in education, employment, or training
CRM	child rights monitoring	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
DCC	day care centre	OOSC	out-of-school children
ECE	early childhood education	PCV3	Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (third dose)
ECI	Early Childhood Intervention	PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
ECTHR	European Court of Human Rights	PM2.5	Particulate Matter with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometres
EU	European Union	PPP	public-private partnerships
EU-SILC	European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions	RCP	Roma Community Project
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency	RIA	regulatory impact assessment
GDP	gross domestic product	SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
GDI	Gender Development Index	SEN	special educational needs
GEMR	Global Education Monitoring Report	SRH	sexual and reproductive health
GMA	Guaranteed Minimum Assistance	SSO	State Statistical Office
HDI	Human Development Index	TMEE	TransMonEE Database (Transitional Monitoring in Eastern Europe)
HPV	human papillomavirus	UHC	universal health coverage
ICPD25	International Conference on Population and Development	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
ICT	information and communication technology	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
ILO	International Labour Organization	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
KAP	knowledge, attitudes, and practices	VET	vocational education and training
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and others	WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
LiTS III	Life in Transition Survey III	WHO	World Health Organization
		WRO	Women's Rights Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 Situation Analysis (SitAn) offers a comprehensive assessment of the status of children and adolescents in North Macedonia, highlighting progress, challenges, inequities and opportunities in the realization of their rights and the achievement of child-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The human-rights and equity focus of the SitAn provides insights to inform policy dialogue and advocacy, and orient national programmes and policies for children. As such, SitAn plays an important role in child rights monitoring aimed at guiding government entities, civil society organizations, UN agencies, development partners and communities in advancing policies and actions to improve the lives of all children in North Macedonia. SitAn employs a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data, including literature reviews, stakeholder consultations, and primary data collection during a five-day in-country visit, with a focus on equity and rights-based analysis to address disparities among demographic groups. Despite a robust methodology, the analysis may be constrained by a lack of recent disaggregated data and quality gaps in administrative data.

North Macedonia is experiencing significant demographic shifts, with an 18 per cent decline in the child population from 2011 to 2023 and a low fertility rate of 1.5 well below the replacement rate, indicating a shrinking population. Urbanization is on the rise, with 63 per cent of children now living in urban areas. The country also faces a consistent pattern of negative net migration, with 1,000 more people leaving than entering per annum, except during COVID-19. Essential services, however, have not adapted adequately to these demographic shifts, which negatively impacts their capacity to meet the population's evolving needs, particularly the needs of children and most vulnerable groups.

Legal and policy environment

The country's integration into European structures and the accompanying reforms are shaping policies affecting children directly and indirectly. North Macedonia has made strides in aligning its legislative and policy framework with international standards and the European Union (EU) Acquis, notably through the recent adoption of the Law on Justice for Children (2024) and

amendments to the Criminal Code (2023). Despite these advances, important amendments, such as Family Law amendments to address child marriage, are still pending. Efforts to adopt a National Action Plan on Child Rights and establish a national monitoring body are underway, aiming to enhance accountability for children's rights and improve coordination.

Public investments in sectors crucial for children, **such as education, health and social services**, are consistently below the average EU and regional levels undermining the sustainability of ongoing reforms. The healthcare expenditure stands at 4.8 per cent of GDP (compared to the EU's 7 per cent) and education spending—at 4.2 per cent (against the EU average of 4.8 per cent), with social assistance spending at only 1.3 per cent (below 2.1 per cent average of Western Balkan countries and below 1.6% in lower-middle-income countries). Social services spending was minimal, under 0.1 per cent of GDP in 2019, indicating a need for increased funding in this area. The equity and efficiency of public spending is a major concern, particularly in education, as low system performance compared to other national systems with similar levels of expenditure suggests misallocations, inefficiencies, and the lack of focus on quality outcomes. According to international assessments, budget transparency and public participation in the budgetary process is limited, with minimal opportunities for the public and children's advocates to influence budget allocation.

Availability of up-to-date and disaggregated data on children is limited, hindering evidence-based policy making as well as effective monitoring and identification of key disparities or emerging trends. Efforts are underway to collect and report on child-related data by the Statistical Office, and improve data management through digital systems, such as the e-health system Moj Termin, the Educational Management Information System (EMIS), and an integrated case management system. However, challenges remain in data quality, regular data inputs, system integration, and effective use for policymaking. The country's statistical capacity score, which measures the ability to produce reliable, timely, and internationally comparable data, dropped from 87 in 2018 to 72 in 2020, making it the lowest in the region, apart from

Bosnia and Herzegovina. This underscores the need to enhance data collection and utilization capacities for evidence-based policy decisions.

Reform progress

North Macedonia has embarked on the implementation of several critical reforms in child protection, education, and healthcare, largely due to strong governmental commitment. Key initiated reforms and related achievements include:

- **Significant progress in deinstitutionalization**, reaching zero placements of children in large-scale institutions.
- **The primary education law ensures integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools**, positioning the country as a regional leader in inclusive education, though challenges remain. The pending adoption of the Law on Secondary Education and vocational education and training (VET) adjustments will further support the transition of these students into secondary education. Integrating children with disabilities will continue to require additional investments, including improved accessibility, teacher support, and assistive devices.
- **Progress has been achieved in social protection, including a comprehensive reform of the cash benefits system that started in 2019**, which expanded the coverage of the key anti-poverty benefit and Child Allowances. Coverage of the Guaranteed Minimum Assistance was further extended between 2020 and 2022 within the response to the socio-economic effects of the pandemic. However, concerns remain that the current coverage and levels of support may still be insufficient to reduce child poverty.
- Efforts to **strengthen community-based social services are underway**, with improvements in regulation, oversight, and increased local authority involvement. Case management has been introduced in centres for social work (CSWs) to enhance integrated service provision.
- North Macedonia **rolled-out International Classification of Functioning (ICF) framework** to assess children and youth with disabilities

up to the age of 26 taking into consideration physical, psychological, and social factors.

While these reforms mark substantial progress, sustained investment is essential to maintain and build upon these achievements, ensuring that the benefits reach all children.

Key areas of concern and ongoing challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the war in Ukraine and the subsequent energy and food crises, have strongly impacted North Macedonia, straining its economy, stalling employment, and creating cascading effects on essential services, such as health, education, and social protection. These challenges have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and widened disparities, particularly affecting marginalized populations.

Nevertheless, North Macedonia has demonstrated commitment and progress in improving child welfare and rights through policy reforms and collaboration with international bodies. While there is a positive trend in many child rights outcome indicators, significant gaps persist compared to EU and regional averages, with disparities influenced by wealth, ethnicity, and geography. Roma children are particularly disadvantaged on the majority of indicators, as well as children in the lowest wealth quintiles. The urban to rural divide is variable: children living in rural areas are disadvantaged in pre-primary education, while those in urban areas experience higher levels of poverty. The following have been identified as key persisting and emerging challenges for children:

1. Increasing child poverty and material deprivation remains a significant driver of inequality among children and young people, with 32.7 per cent of children living below the national poverty line (compared to 23 per cent of the population), and a particularly high rate of 79 per cent among Roma children. Social assistance is limited, with an allocation of only 1.3 per cent of GDP. Only 22.6 per cent of households with children from 0 to 15 years old receive child or family cash benefits, compared to the EU's 88.4 per cent. Inadequate responses to child poverty include limited coverage of social benefits, low investment in social services addressing social exclusion, inadequate data on child poverty, and accessibility barriers. Additionally, communication

and institutional barriers prevent eligible households from accessing support, perpetuating high poverty rates and material deprivation among vulnerable populations.

2. Learning outcomes are declining, and education system indicators significantly lag behind EU standards, with only some issues attributable to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, 66 per cent of students did not attain foundational proficiency in reading, 74 per cent did not achieve proficiency in mathematics, and 65 per cent did not reach proficiency in science. Socio-economic and ethnic disparities further widen these gaps, with Roma and low-income children disproportionately below the national averages. Organized learning participation before primary school is low at 50 per cent, compared to 85.6 per cent in the EU, with less than 8 per cent of Roma children enrolled in pre-school institutions. Data on completion rates and out of school rates are unreliable, with available data indicating significant disparities in completion rate of Roma children. According to a World Bank report, an estimated 14,000 primary and 22,000 secondary students are out of school. Girls, socio-economically advantaged students, and non-Roma children consistently perform better. Structural issues include low funding and spending inefficiencies, with a low student-to-teacher ratio of 10, far below the OECD average of 15, and an inefficient allocation of human resources and infrastructure. Most educational expenditures are directed to salaries, leaving minimal resources for system improvement.

3. Violence against children remains a pervasive problem, and new forms are emerging, such as online violence and technology facilitated violence, with an increase in exploitative and harmful online content for children. Almost three quarters of all children (73 per cent) are exposed to violent discipline at home—physical punishment and psychological aggression rates are even higher for boys, Roma children, and children with disabilities. Similar to the situation in other Western Balkan countries, peer violence is significant, with 19 per cent of students experiencing bullying. The country also has a high prevalence of child marriages (8 per cent), affecting in particular Roma women and girls (45 per cent), those with low education attainment and from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Structural challenges—such as inadequate funding for prevention and response services, overburdened CSWs and weak integrated responses and protocol

implementation—compound these issues. Social norms and a lack of awareness about non-violent discipline methods contribute to the persistence of violent practices, underscoring the need for increasing of parenting initiatives.

4. Roma children in North Macedonia face severe exclusion, with particularly high poverty and deprivation rates, and low educational enrolment and attainment compared to national averages. Structural barriers—such as limited institutionalized measures for tailored support, and institutional discrimination—restrict the use of social services, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exclusion into the next generation. Discrimination often goes unreported due to fear or resignation, highlighting the need for targeted policies and resources to break this cycle and ensure the effective inclusion of Roma communities.

5. The country faces significant environmental health hazards, with extremely poor air quality, more frequent and severe heatwaves and limited institutional response to mitigate risks for children. The age-standardized mortality rate due to household and ambient air pollution is 96 per 100,000—more than double the EU and regional averages. In 2019, respiratory diseases caused 39.8 per cent of child morbidity, particularly impacting urban areas. With an annual mean PM2.5 level that is five times higher than WHO recommendations and more than double the EU average, air quality in North Macedonia is the worst in the Western Balkans. Key challenges include insufficiently child-sensitive policies and institutional frameworks at the central and local levels, and limited resources directed to schools and health facilities to address environmental hazards. Public engagement in environmental protection is still low, as economic concerns overshadow environmental issues, highlighting a need for incentives to support green transition, increased investments in climate adaptation and community involvement in mitigation efforts.

6. Malnutrition manifests in both undernutrition affecting young Roma children, and overweight and obesity in the general population of children. The breastfeeding practices are concerning, with only 10 per cent of children put to the breast within one hour of birth and 28 per cent exclusively breastfed for the first six months, well below the global average of 48 per cent. Almost one third of children aged 7 to 9 years **are overweight**

and around 15 per cent are obese, with boys more affected than girls. The shift towards energy-dense, nutrient-poor diets due to urbanization exacerbates these issues, underscoring the need for public health interventions to improve dietary habits from the earliest age and promote physical activity. Other challenges include weak regulatory controls over unhealthy food marketing, inadequate breastfeeding support and counselling by healthcare professionals, limited parenting support programs, cultural norms that hinder breastfeeding, and financial barriers limiting access to nutritious food, particularly among the Roma population.

Some of the other trends include:

- Child mortality rates are decreasing and close to EU averages, with improvements in ethnic disparities. However, the healthcare sector struggles with low investment and limited coverage in preventative care and nutrition affecting child health. Around 20,000 children lack effective health insurance and therefore adequate access to healthcare services.
- Immunization rates are low. Coverage for the third dose of the Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (PCV3, for preventing pneumococcal diseases such as pneumonia, meningitis, and sepsis) is only 56 per cent, and for the second dose of the Measles-Containing Vaccine (MCV2, for preventing measles infection)—88 per cent, with vaccine hesitancy and low HPV awareness, particularly among urban and wealthier households.
- Mental health concerns are rising among adolescents, with 30 per cent reporting moderate to severe depression and 42.1 per cent experiencing anxiety during COVID-19 and limited access to child mental health and well-being services. Undiagnosed pre-clinical depression is experienced by 29.9 per cent of women in perinatal period (pregnant and 12 months after giving birth), implying significant influence on mother-infant bonding.
- Despite the recent legislative changes, the justice system makes limited use of alternatives to detention for children, such as mediation, while there are gaps in data for child victims and witnesses.
- Access to safely managed sanitation is the lowest in the European region (12 per cent

nationally). Menstrual health management is inadequate, with 29.5 per cent of women unable to afford menstrual products.

- Despite legislative progress, youth engagement remains low. About 80 per cent of youth are socially inactive, with only 19 out of 81 municipalities establishing youth councils due to financial and administrative limitations.
- Although digital access has expanded, with nearly universal internet use among youth, digital literacy remains limited, with 67 per cent of teenagers spending over five hours online daily and the high prevalence of problematic gaming behaviour, affecting 28 per cent of 11-year-old boys and 16 per cent of girls.

Conclusions and recommendations

North Macedonia has achieved notable progress in child welfare, education, and social protection over recent years. However, systemic challenges continue to hinder equitable outcomes, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable children: children living in poverty, Roma children and children with disabilities. Addressing these challenges requires a strategic, multi-sectoral approach that integrates robust data systems, strengthens interagency collaboration, and prioritizes targeted interventions for the most at-risk groups. The following recommendations aim to leverage existing advancements while tackling persistent disparities to ensure that every child has access to opportunities that enable their full development and well-being:

1. Strengthen interagency and multi-sectoral collaboration and foster cooperation across all sectors, including social protection, healthcare, education, and justice systems to develop child-centred policies and deliver holistic support with a focus on reaching the most vulnerable children. This should include integration and cooperation with civil society organizations.
2. Enhance social protection by expanding outreach and services for most vulnerable children, increasing the funding and coverage of social assistance and child allowances, including prioritizing children who live in poverty, Roma children and children with disabilities.

3. Enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of child-related benefits and services, including by professionalizing and optimizing the workforce in the Centres for Social Work, fully rolling out and mainstreaming digital integrated case management platforms. To address the lack of child-relevant services, the authorities should expand funding for community-based services, strengthen outreach efforts through patronage nurses, vaccination teams and multidisciplinary mobile units, and ensure sufficient capacities and resources to provide culturally sensitive support for marginalized communities, including Roma populations and other excluded groups.
4. Optimize the school network, resource allocation, and teacher distribution while enhancing teacher professional development, and inclusive education systems to improve efficiency, equity, and quality towards greater convergence with OECD and European standards.
5. Promote positive parenting through community-based programs and enhanced parental support while expanding access to quality early childhood education by increasing service availability and ensuring financial accessibility with a focus on reaching the most vulnerable children, aligning early childhood education expansion with European averages to ensure foundational learning for every child, and support gender empowerment.
6. Establish earmarked, sustainable funding for Roma inclusion programs in healthcare, education, and social protection, ensuring Roma participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies, while addressing institutional biases. This should be supported by a robust evaluation framework to enhance accountability and optimize impact.
7. Mainstreaming climate change and environmental protection across all sectors impacting children requires leveraging funding to adequately address the high vulnerability of children as well as the growth potential of child-sensitive investments. Actions should focus on the continuous integration of climate education, the development of green infrastructure in schools and health facilities, and the implementation of climate-sensitive social protection programs. Policies and funding must prioritize the specific needs of children from marginalized or high-risk areas who are disproportionately affected by climate change, ensuring equitable and inclusive adaptation and mitigation efforts.



1. INTRODUCTION

Aims and purpose

The primary aim of this Situation Analysis (SitAn) is to provide a comprehensive assessment of the situation of children and adolescents in North Macedonia, focusing on the progress and challenges towards the realization of their rights and the achievement of child-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a focus on equity. The SitAn also identifies key barriers, bottlenecks, and opportunities to inform policy dialogue, partnerships and interventions to improve the lives of children.

The SitAn is a crucial part of the child rights monitoring (CRM) programmatic framework and is a UNICEF flagship publication that helps identify and analyse knowledge and gaps related to inequities and child deprivations. The SitAn informs policy dialogue and child-focused advocacy, advancing equitable achievement of child-related global and national goals. It is expected to influence priorities in the new Country Programme Cycle (2026–2030).

Methodology, limitations, and constraints

This SitAn employs a mixed-method approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data. The main methods include a review of national and international literature, primary data collection via interviews and focus groups, and extensive stakeholder consultations. The SitAn focused on equity and employed a rights-based analysis, ensuring that the disparities between various demographic groups (age, gender, geographic location, socioeconomic status, etc.) are captured

and addressed. Primary data was collected during a five-day in-country visit in June 2024, which included interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions with parents and children, and direct observation in the correctional facility, schools, and ethnically diverse communities.

Despite the robust methodology, some limitations and constraints exist. First, the time frame for data collection, particularly during in-country visit, may limit the depth of analysis. Secondly, while every effort is made to ensure that all demographic groups are represented, there may be underrepresentation of some particularly vulnerable groups due to geographic or social barriers. Additionally, and most importantly, there are limitations related to the availability of recent disaggregated data, which may limit the precision and level of detail in the analysis.

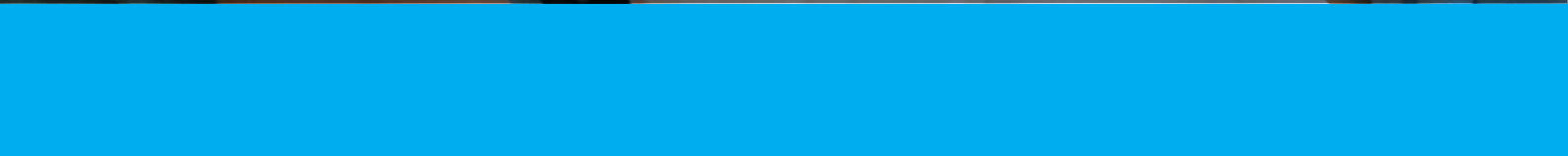
Target audience

The targeted audience is a wide range of stakeholders involved in the promotion and protection of child rights in North Macedonia, including government entities, particularly line ministries in charge of child rights issues, as well as civil society organizations (CSOs), UN Agencies and development partners. Additionally, policymakers, social service providers, academic institutions, and organizations working directly with children and adolescents are key audiences who will utilize the insights from the SitAn to inform their policies, advocacy and actions addressing existing gaps. Finally, SitAn also aims to engage communities, parents, and youth, providing them with a platform for their voices to be heard and considered in policy development.



CHILD RIGHTS

LANDSCAPE AND GOVERNANCE



2. CHILD RIGHTS LANDSCAPE AND GOVERNANCE

2.1 Demographic Profile

North Macedonia, a landlocked country in Southeast Europe, is facing sweeping demographic changes, with the child population steadily declining, while services fail to adjust to the changing demographic trends.

The country's population has shrunk by 9.2 per cent over two decades, and in 2021 stands at 1,836,713, while the ethnic composition of the resident population has not shifted much since 2002. Children (Table 1) make up 20.3 per cent of the population or 372,558, with those under 14 years constituting 16.9 per cent. Gender analysis shows a slightly imbalanced distribution, with 192,145 boys (51.6 per cent) and 180,413 girls (48.4 per cent).¹ The sex ratio of 1.076 exceeds the natural, or biologically expected range of approximately 1.06.²

According to the 2021 Census, 2,255 children (0.61 per cent of 372,558 children) were identified as having disabilities, with 60 per cent being boys (1,357) and 40 per cent being girls (898).³ According

Table 1: Children in North Macedonia

Category	Total	Percentage
Total Child Population	372,558	20.3%
Boys	192,145	51.57%
Girls	180,413	48.43%
Children under 14 Years	62,962	16.9%
Children with Disabilities	2,255*	0.61%

Source: SSO, 2021.

to the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 9 per cent of children aged 2 to 17 years have one or more functional difficulties, the share rising to 19 per cent among Roma children.⁴

Table 2: Ethnicity of children

Category	Total	Percentage
Ethnicity		
- Macedonian	179,896	48.1%
- Albanian	116,251	31.2%
- Turkish	18,252	4.9%
- Roma	14,524*	3.9%
- Other	11,177	3%
- Unspecified Ethnicity	32,558	8.8%

Source: SSO, 2021.

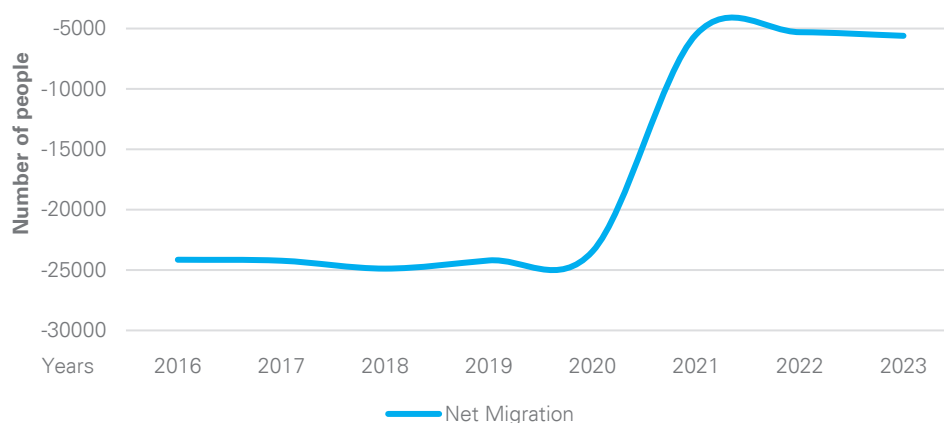
In terms of ethnicity (Table 2), 48.1 per cent of children are Macedonian, 31.2 per cent are Albanian, 4.9 per cent are Turkish, 3.9 per cent are Roma,⁵ and 3 per cent belong to other ethnic communities and for 8.8 per cent of the children the ethnicity remains unspecified.

Life expectancy has been increasing and as of 2019, life expectancy at birth is 77.9 years for women and 73.6 years for men.⁶

The fertility rate in 2022 was relatively low, at about 1.5 children per woman,⁷ which is below replacement, estimated at 2.1 for developing countries, and is resulting in decreasing population.⁸ **The migration trends signal outward migration, particularly among the youth between 20 and 39 years, driven by economic opportunities abroad and better living standard in other countries.**

Figure 1: Net migration

In 2023, the net migration (Figure 1) was -1,000, which means that 1,000 more people left the country than entered.⁹ The country also has one of the largest diasporas in the region relative to its population.¹⁰ As of 2019, approximately 658,000 citizens of North Macedonia, or 32 per cent of the domestic population, were living abroad, and about 48,700 children of citizens of North Macedonia were born abroad in the period 2009–2019.¹¹



Source: WB/Transmonee.org.

A significant emigration desire exists among youth, with 62 per cent expressing willingness to leave if given the opportunity. Emigrants often fall into educational extremes, either with very low or very high qualifications. This trend has socio-economic consequences, such as workforce reduction, brain drain, and challenges in the health sector due to the outmigration of medical professionals.

North Macedonia **is experiencing steady urbanization**, and approximately 59 per cent of the population and **almost two-thirds of the child population (62.5 per cent) live in urban settlements**.

The capital city, Skopje, is the largest urban centre, home to around one-third of the country's population.

2.2 Political economy and governance

The country has made significant progress in European integration, joining NATO in 2020 and beginning EU accession talks in 2022. The EU supports North Macedonia's socio-economic development and reforms through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, focusing on governance, rule of law, and social policies as well as the recently adopted Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans.¹² Reforms aligned with EU Acquis Chapters 23 and 24 emphasize judiciary improvements, anti-corruption measures, and fundamental rights, with particular attention to child rights through the National Programme for Adoption of the Acquis. From 2021 to 2025, priorities include deinstitutionalization, community-based services and establishing a National Action Plan and a monitoring body for child rights.¹³ Additionally, EU-backed initiatives, such as the Youth Guarantee, have been supporting youth employment since 2018. The European Child Guarantee to be rolled out in 2025, aims to support access to essential services for children who experience social exclusion due to poverty or other forms of disadvantage.¹⁴

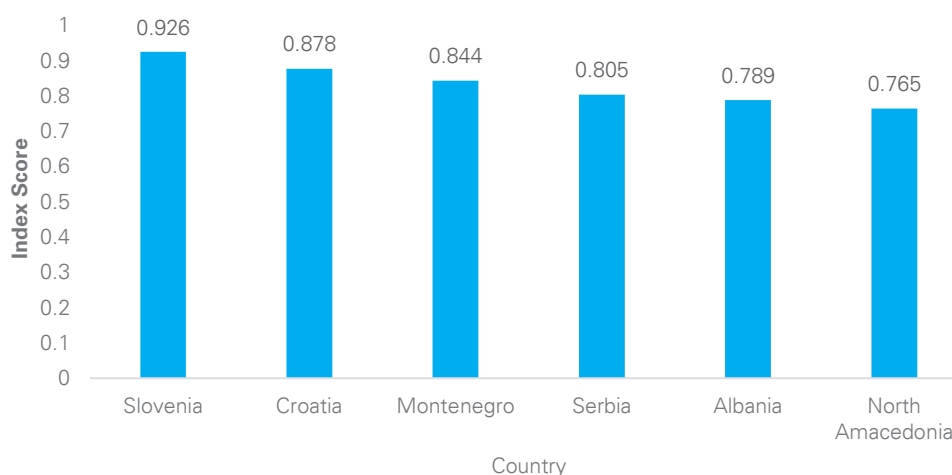
Challenges from political polarization and the need for reform consensus remain.¹⁵ A notable shift occurred in 2024, when the VMRO-DPMNE party won 45 per cent of the vote, forming a coalition government and electing the country's first female President.¹⁶ This led to a comprehensive governmental restructuring and reorganization of the number of ministries from 16 to 20 and redefined the responsibilities of several existing ministries.

The country is divided into eight statistical regions and 80 municipalities, excluding the City of Skopje, **with ongoing decentralization efforts yielding mixed results.** Decentralization in education¹⁷ and

social services, introduced with recent reforms, require continuous capacity building, increased resources at the municipal level and strengthened oversight.¹⁸

The Human Development Index (HDI) value showed consistent growth until 2019 but began to decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2022, the HDI had fallen to 0.765, down from 0.796 in 2018. This decrease placed the country slightly behind its regional peers and marked a regression to 2015 levels, reflecting a broader global trend of setbacks in human development.¹⁹

Figure 2: Human Development Index



Source: UNDP / *Transmonee.org*.

At risk of poverty levels, which had steadily declined from 41 per cent in 2009 to 21.8 per cent in 2019, began to rise again in recent years. By 2021, poverty had increased to 23 per cent (up from 22 per cent

in 2020), impacting over 450,000 people. Among children, 32.8 per cent were living below the national poverty line in 2021, an increase from 30 per cent in 2020.²⁰

Table 3: Socio-economic indicators

Indicator	Value
Human Development Index	0.765
At Risk of Poverty Rate – total (2021)	23%
At Risk of Poverty Rate (2021) – children	32.8%
Unemployment Rate (2023)	15.7%
Youth Unemployment Rate	28.6%
NEETs (2023)	19%

Source: SSO, WB, ILO.

Economic growth has been challenged by the impact of the COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, leading to a GDP decline and rising inflation, especially in food and energy prices. The GDP growth rate was 1 per cent in 2023, down from 2.1 per cent in 2022. Public expenditure efficiency remains a significant challenge, affecting government's ability to invest in areas crucial for children's development and rights, with a significant portion of the government's budget (80 per cent) being tied up in mandatory spending. The country's fiscal revenues are low—only 33 per cent of GDP in 2022, which is much lower than the regional average and the EU standard.²¹

Despite a decrease in overall unemployment to 13 per cent in 2023, youth unemployment remains high at 28.6 per cent,²² while other structural issues, such as a large informal economy, lower women participation in the labour force (42.6 per cent women vs 62.8 per cent men),²³ and skill mismatches persist.²⁴ Efforts are ongoing to improve vocational educational training, but major skills shortages persist relative to labour market needs, entailing long school-to-work transitions.²⁵ Governance and anti-corruption efforts show gradual progress, with North Macedonia ranking 67th in the World Rule of Law Index 2024,²⁶ and 76th in the 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index,²⁷ reflecting modest advancements but highlighting the need for further improvements.

The country has made progress in digital transformation, with 86.6 per cent of households having internet access and 99.6 per cent covered by 4G/LTE in early 2022.²⁸ Key public sectors have begun digitalization, although with limited interoperability between systems in different sectors. More infrastructure, resources, and support are needed for full implementation, particularly in education, which requires 123,000 additional PCs to meet OECD standards.²⁹ Digital governance efforts are hampered by low public engagement and limited digital skills among civil servants. Digitalization may also create barriers for vulnerable groups, such as Roma, children with disabilities, and refugees, highlighting the need for a comprehensive Digital Skills Development Strategy to address these gaps.³⁰

A close-up photograph of a child's hand reaching out to touch a colorful abacus. The abacus has several rows of beads in various colors: blue, white, green, yellow, orange, pink, and purple. The child's hand is in the foreground, with the index finger pointing towards the green beads. The background is blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a classroom or play area setting.

THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR
CHILD RIGHTS

3. THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

3.1 Legislation And Policy

North Macedonia, as a signatory to numerous international conventions, has shown a commitment to children's rights. The country has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its two optional protocols,³¹ while the CRC Optional Protocol on a Communications Procedure is yet to be ratified. The most recent Concluding Observations for the country were released by the Committee in October 2022³² containing a range of recommendations aiming to guide the country towards the full implementation of children's rights. North Macedonia has also ratified significant human rights instruments, including Council of Europe Lanzarote³³ and Istanbul Conventions,³⁴ protecting children against sexual abuse and women and children against domestic violence. In 2023, the country ratified Protocol No. 16 to the European Convention on Human Rights, enabling its highest courts to seek advisory opinions from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on complex cases.³⁵ Notably, in *Elmazova and Others v. North Macedonia*, the ECtHR ruled that Roma students were discriminated against through segregation in two primary schools, highlighting ongoing challenges in upholding equality in education.³⁶

The country has recently implemented legal reforms in education, justice, and social protection aiming to strengthen the protection and promotion of women's and children's rights. **These reforms align the country's legal framework with international human rights standards, address critiques from local and international bodies,** and support North Macedonia's EU accession by ensuring compliance with the EU acquis.³⁷ Some of the recent reforms include adoption of The Law on Primary Education (2019), which ensures every child's right to education, prohibits discrimination, and promotes inclusivity with specific measures for Roma children; The Law on Justice for Children (2024) aligns international standards to protect children's rights in the justice system. The Law on the Prevention of and Protection from Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2021) includes provisions to safeguard children, particularly those with disabilities, from violence.

The slow pace of legislative reform and the backlog in the legal system, however, pose challenges to its effective application,³⁸ while several laws or amendments still need to be adopted to ensure full compliance.

Box 1: Key laws pending adoption

- **An amendment to the Law on Primary Education** to provide long-term solutions for children in the Educational Correctional Facility, who are currently deprived of their right to education. Revisions are also considered to strengthen the provisions against segregations in schools that disproportionately affects Roma children.
- **Adoption of the Draft Law on General Secondary Education**, which is crucial for improving the quality of secondary education and for allowing for educational transition of vulnerable groups, such as Roma, children with disabilities, those in correctional facilities, and migrant and refugee children, from primary to secondary education.
- **Adoption of the Draft Law on Vocational Education and Training** designed to ensure that the skills children acquire in schools are aligned with the needs of the labour market, and supportive and inclusive environment is created for every student.
- **Amendments of the Family Law**, aiming to better reflect international norms regarding child adoption and family care, as well as to address legal loopholes used for child marriages.

As of 2024, **North Macedonia lacks a comprehensive national action plan for children’s rights, which was also one of the key concerns expressed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.** The last National Action Plan on the Rights of the Child (NAPPD) was revised in 2012 but expired in 2015, and since then, no

new action plan has been adopted. The **National Action Plan on Child Rights**, currently being developed with EU support, aims to address this gap and consolidate existing provisions on children scattered around different strategies. It also aims to support the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

Box 2: Key youth related strategies

In recent years the country has developed several strategic documents aimed at addressing specific issues affecting children:

- **National Youth Strategy (2023–2027)**, coordinated by the Agency for Youth and Sport, addresses participation, education, health, and safety of young people between 15 and 29 years of age, with an emphasis on integrating the views of young people in policymaking. Despite these positive steps, young people’s actual involvement in legislative and decision-making processes remains minimal, reflecting a need for more effective mechanisms of participation.
- **National Strategy on Prevention of and Protection of Children from Violence (2020–2025)**, coordinated by the National Commission for the Prevention and Countering of Abuse and Neglect of Children, focuses on eliminating violence against children. Funding limitations and insufficient intersectoral coordination undermine its potential impact.
- **Strategy on Justice for Children (2022–2026)**, coordinated by the Ministry of Justice, focuses on improving child justice by promoting alternatives to custody and supporting the resocialization of children in conflict with the law.
- **National Action Plan for Roma Women and Girls (2022–2024)**, coordinated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, seeks to improve justice and equal access to rights and opportunities for Roma women and girls, focusing on combating intersectional discrimination, particularly in employment.
- **National Action Plan for Mental Health of Children and Adolescents 2030**, coordinated by the Ministry of Health, was adopted in October 2024. It focuses on promoting the mental well-being of children and adolescents through strengthening mental health services, enhancing early detection and prevention of mental health issues, and reducing stigma surrounding mental health.
- **Equality and Non-Discrimination Strategy (2022–2026)**, coordinated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, aims to enforce anti-discrimination laws, promote tolerance and inclusion, and involve children and civil society in monitoring its effectiveness.
- **Parenting Strategy (2022–2030), pending adoption**, was developed to support positive parenting, promote non-violent discipline, and strengthen mental health and well-being of parents, with a systematic and cross-sectoral approach.

While North Macedonia has made notable strides in creating a legal and policy framework conducive to the rights of children, full implementation of the set strategies and plans remains challenging. Furthermore, there are number of other gaps in policy making, when it concerns children, including: ³⁹

- **The country lacks specialized mechanisms for systemic assessment and evaluation** of the impact of laws, policies, and budgetary decisions on children's rights. Although children's rights are intended to be considered in the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) processes designed to analyse the potential economic, social, and environmental impacts of proposed regulations, there is little evidence that this is consistently done. The effectiveness of RIA in embedding children's rights into law and policy remains unclear, as

highlighted by recommendations from the CRC Committee.

- **The structure for and systematic engagement of children in drafting laws and policymaking is missing.** While children and youth have participated in consultations for initiatives like the National Strategy on Prevention and Justice for Children and are now, to some extent, involved in NAP on children's rights, overall systemic child participation in decision-making processes remains low and dependent on individual initiatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) or UNICEF.
- **Evidence-based policy and legislative development** cannot be consistently ensured, due to extensive data gaps and weaknesses in data management, analysis, and utilization.⁴⁰

3.2 Public Finance

North Macedonia's budget structure lacks specific allocations for children, with no mechanisms to monitor or evaluate the adequacy, effectiveness, and equity of spending related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child—a gap also noted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.⁴¹

According to available data, overall budget allocations to child-related sectors as a percentage of GDP remain consistently below EU and regional averages, raising concerns about adequate investment in children's needs and rights:

- **Education spending** was 4.2 per cent of GDP in 2023,⁴² below the EU average of 4.8.⁴³ Budget priorities in 2022 included primary education (40 per cent), secondary (25 per cent), higher education (20 per cent), vocational and special education (6.5 per cent) and pre-primary education (8.5 per cent). Furthermore, inefficiencies and outdated funding mechanisms limit equitable access to quality education.⁴⁴
- **Public expenditure on health care** decreased from 5 per cent of GDP in 2003, to 4.8 per cent by 2022. This positions the country among the lowest public healthcare spenders, well below the EU average of 6 per cent, and the Western Balkan average of 5.2 per cent.⁴⁵ Almost 42

per cent out-of-pocket spending indicates inefficiencies in the funding of the health sectors, despite relatively high coverage of health insurance (90 per cent), disproportionality impacting access to health care of low-income groups.⁴⁶ Allocations for preventive activities are only 1-2 per cent from the health budget, with insufficient transparency and accountability, as well as limited coverage of vulnerable categories.⁴⁷

- **Social protection expenditure in 2019** totalled over 11 per cent of GDP, with a significant emphasis on social insurance, accounting for 9.9 per cent, a figure that exceeds the Western Balkans average of 8.5 per cent. The allocation for social assistance in 2019 increased to 1.3 per cent of GDP following a 2019 reform yet remains well below the regional average of 2.1 per cent and the averages of low and lower-middle-income countries, including regional peers, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia. Furthermore, investment in social services remains 0.1 per cent of GDP, indicating minimal support for essential services.⁴⁸ This disparity calls for an increase in financial commitments towards social assistance and services.

Insufficient and, in some cases, decreasing budget allocations also raise concerns about the sustainability of reforms in social protection, justice, and education initiated since 2019. Several assessments,⁴⁹ including from the European Commission, highlight inadequate financial and human resources, particularly for implementing the Law on Primary Education and the human rights-based disability assessment model, potentially undermining the effectiveness of these reforms.⁵⁰

Other challenges surrounding budgetary processes include:

- **There is a level of misalignment between planning, policymaking, and budgeting**, often resulting in uncoded strategies without dedicated funds or tracking mechanisms, which hampers program implementation
- **Budget transparency in the country is also low**, as evidenced by the 2023 Open Budget Survey, where North Macedonia scored 35 out of 100, well below the global average of 45. This score ranks the country in the lowest tier in the region, with only Bosnia and Herzegovina performing worse.⁵¹
- **The opportunities for public involvement, including CSOs and children, in the budget process are minimal**, scoring just 7 out of 100, compared to the global average of 15 in the same survey.⁵³

Box 3: Recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child for North Macedonia

- Increase funding for children's rights, prioritizing children in vulnerable situations.
- Redirect potential savings to support children and families, focusing on disadvantaged groups such as children with disabilities, those living in poverty, and Roma children.
- Safeguard budgets for sectors supporting children's rights from economic challenges and emergencies.
- Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the adequacy, effectiveness, and equity of budget allocations for implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

3.3 Child Rights And Governance Stakeholders

The child rights governance is fragmented, involving various government institutions, civil society, and international stakeholders. **There is no single government body with a responsibility for coordinating and monitoring child rights**, and although several bodies with competences related to child rights monitoring (CRM) are in place, they do not cover the full range of children's rights. The existing bodies (see Box 4), composed of representatives of

different institutions, in general face issues of **underfunding and insufficient inter-agency cooperation, infrequent meetings, lack of decision-making power and general ability to produce reliable and actionable insights, due to challenges in data collection**. This fragmentation leads to unstructured frameworks and weak accountability mechanisms, including deficiencies in comprehensive data collection and significant gaps in execution accountability.

Box 4: Selected bodies with full or partial child rights monitoring responsibilities

- **State Council for Prevention of Children’s Delinquency** focuses on issues surrounding juvenile delinquency and coordinates national efforts in this area. It also faces challenges due to inconsistent data collection and inadequate funding, which impair its ability to produce reliable and actionable insights.⁵⁴
- **National Coordination Body for Protection of Children from Abuse and Neglect** was established to develop a systematic approach to monitoring and preventing child abuse and neglect and has had varying levels of activity and effectiveness. It too suffers from the general issues of underfunding and insufficient inter-agency cooperation.
- **National Coordination Body for Implementing the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** is made up of representatives of the key ministries and two representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) for persons with disabilities. However, the body faces challenges such as limited coordination with the independent Organization of Persons with Disabilities and CSOs, as well as insufficient financial and human resources—all of which hinder its effectiveness.
- **The National Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings and Illegal Migration** along with its Subcommittee for Combatting Child Trafficking, coordinates efforts to prevent child trafficking and protect child victims. The Subcommittee plays a key role in coordinating stakeholders, raising awareness, and strengthening the legal framework, though it relies on data provided by Commission members and lacks a dedicated budget for implementing activities.
- **Intersectoral Body for Human Rights** coordinates human rights efforts across different sectors and is involved in treaty reporting, including reports under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). However, it struggles with infrequent meetings, budget constraints, and data quality issues, which hinder its capacity to function effectively. The CRC reporting was also done without consultation of children.

The absence of a national body responsible for coordinating all policies related to the implementation of the CRC and Optional Protocols was also one of the key concerns raised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.⁵⁵ The National Commission for the Rights of the Child (NCRC) established in 2007 was dissolved in 2017 due to ineffectiveness, budget issues, membership turnover, and lack of political support, leaving a gap in centralized child rights monitoring.⁵⁶ Efforts are underway, with EU support, to establish a national multistakeholder expert body to monitor child rights and develop a comprehensive monitoring framework.⁵⁷ The structure and modalities of this body, including measures to ensure its sustainability, are still being defined.

Key independent child rights monitoring stakeholders

Key independent child rights monitoring stakeholders in the country include the Assembly, CSOs, children, academia, and the Ombudsperson’s Office.

Ombudsperson. The Department for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Persons with Disabilities, part of the Ombudsperson’s office since 2009, plays a vital role in protecting children’s rights through handling complaints, conducting research, and issuing reports. In 2022, it received 252 complaints on children’s rights, including 12 related to disabilities, and issued 103 opinions, with 87 accepted.⁵⁸ However, the department struggles with a limited budget, staff shortages, and lack of an independent budget, affecting its autonomy and effectiveness. Its recommendations often go unimplemented, reflecting the Ombudsperson’s limited authority, and low awareness among children limits the use of its services.

The Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination (CPPD), operational since 2021, addresses discrimination and promotes equality across society. In 2023, it developed educational modules for children aged 6 to 14 and received 520 complaints, including cases involving minors in correctional facilities and students with disabilities.⁵⁹

The Assembly plays a key role in CRM through its legislative and oversight functions, using parliamentary committees⁶⁰ to review and monitor child-related legislation in areas like education, health, and social policy. Despite mechanisms such as parliamentary questions and inquiry committees, systematic oversight of children's rights remains weak, with studies indicating sporadic attention to these issues in plenary and committee sessions and limited implementation of CRM recommendations.⁶¹

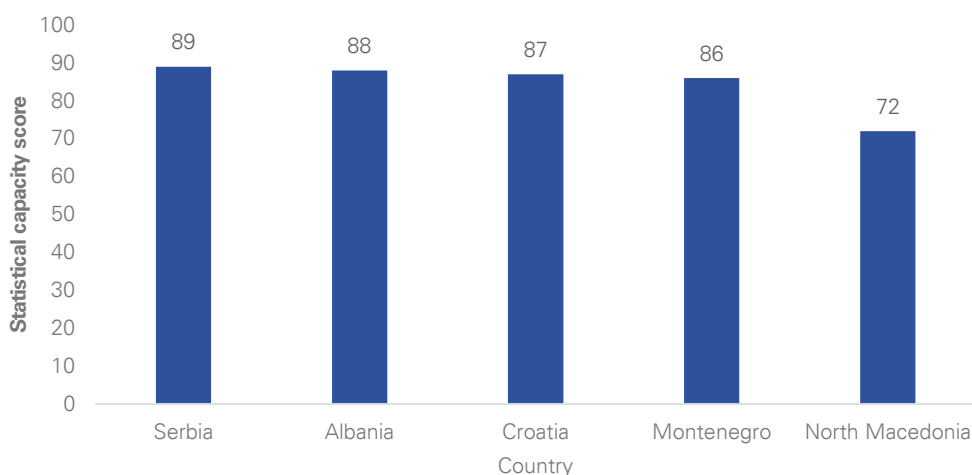
CSOs. Numerous national and local CSOs in North Macedonia are actively engaged in children's rights, often working on project-based, donor-dependent initiatives. While they play a crucial role in policy input, implementation, and monitoring, their efforts are often ad-hoc, project and funding dependent and face challenges like inconsistent data collection and political barriers. Although the government has adopted strategies to enhance collaboration with CSOs, these organizations often find their involvement to be more formal than substantive, highlighting the need for a deeper, more meaningful, engagement.⁶²

3.4 Data and evidence on children

Despite recent efforts, the availability of disaggregated and up to date data across child rights domains remains limited. The state's capacity to produce reliable, timely, and internationally comparable data has declined, as reflected in the Statistical Capacity Score (Figure 3), which dropped from 87 in 2018 to 72 in 2020—the lowest in the Western Balkans, apart from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has urged the Government of North Macedonia to improve data disaggregation by age, sex, disability, geographic location, ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic background to better understand the situation of all children, especially the most vulnerable.

Figure 3: Statistical Capacity Score



Source: WB/Transmonee.org.

Persistent data gaps in several child rights domains⁶³ also hinder a comprehensive assessment of children's conditions, particularly for marginalized groups and affect the ability of the government for evidence-based decision making and planning.⁶⁴

Apart from data availability, several studies also raised questions about data quality. North Macedonia has made progress in developing data systems to monitor and improve children's rights and access to services, including the Moj

Termin e-health system, Education Management Information System (EMIS) for education, and an integrated case management system for social protection. However, these systems face challenges such as lack of interoperability, data quality issues, inconsistent data entry, and insufficient training for users like teachers, healthcare providers, and social workers.

The State Statistical Office (SSO) coordinates the national statistical system and produces child rights data in line with national laws and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) commitments. Despite modernization efforts, it faces challenges from underfunding, limited capacity, and weak intersectoral coordination, impacting data standardization and sharing.⁶⁵

The SSO also conducts surveys like the Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Labor Force Survey, providing child and gender-specific data and published in 2024 the Demographic Profile of Children in the Republic of North Macedonia report, which combines statistical and administrative data by age, ethnicity, and location to inform child-focused policies.⁶⁶ **Linkages between SDG monitoring and children's rights, including targets and the tracking of the 45 child-rights-related SDGs, have not been fully developed.** Although the SSO reports on EU-level SDGs, comprehensive systematic monitoring of SDGs has not been implemented, and complete data for child and youth-related SDGs⁶⁷ are not consistently available.

Box 5: Recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child for North Macedonia

- Establish a comprehensive data collection system covering all rights under the Convention on Child Rights and its Optional Protocols.
- Ensure data disaggregation by key factors (e.g., age, sex, disability, ethnicity) to analyse the situation of vulnerable children, including those in alternative care, affected by violence, with disabilities, or in conflict with the law.
- Enhance intersectoral coordination and develop a standardized system for monitoring Sustainable Development Goals and evaluating policies and programs for implementing the Convention.

3.5 Business And Children's Rights

The business sector's engagement in promoting outcomes for children is in its early stages, with limited debate around the children's rights and business principles,⁶⁸ or UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. However, the Human Rights and Business Country Guide, developed by the Danish Institute for Human Rights and INTER PARTES Skopje, provides essential guidance for companies on integrating human rights and child rights considerations into their operations, emphasizing the importance of children's rights in broader human rights due diligence.⁶⁹

The private sector's presence in children's rights is most notable in education and health.

In education, private institutions include 24 kindergartens and 13 private secondary schools with 1,665 students in 2017/18. Higher education has also seen growth, with 11 private institutions

serving 6,648 students in 2018.⁷⁰ Private sector involvement in vocational education has increased with reforms, particularly through the dual education concept, inspired by the German model, that aligns curricula with labour market needs. Initiatives like "Learn smart, work professionally" reflect this collaboration, with 90 per cent of companies willing to offer internships.⁷¹ Some of the child specific services though under-regulated, such as the 35 Early Child Intervention Centres operational in 2022, are provided primarily by the private sector.⁷² In health care, the country implemented structural reforms that privatized services offered by general practitioners, pediatricians, dentists, gynecologists, school doctors, and pharmacists. These providers were required to establish formal contracts with the Health Insurance Fund (HIF) under a newly introduced capitation payment model.⁷³ As a result of these reforms, many

primary health care services are now delivered by private providers operating in single private practices. These practitioners are part of the Health Network system of certified providers designed to ensure geographical access to health services—and are contracted by the HIF.⁷⁴

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthropy focused on children's rights is growing. One of the examples includes UNICEF and the Telekom Foundation "Bullying bye-bye!" campaign, promoting online safety and addressing cyberbullying.⁷⁵ Other initiatives include the Codex of Cooperation, which partners with hospitality companies to prevent forced labour in tourism, and the

UNFPAs Expanding Choices project, which promotes family-friendly workplace policies to support care responsibilities and advance gender equality.⁷⁶

However, the involvement of the business sector in promoting children's rights, including the potential for well-regulated public-private partnerships (PPPs), remains to be fully explored, including opportunities for leveraging technology and innovation through PPPs, utilizing CSR programs for funding, and using businesses as platforms for advocacy and awareness campaigns. These initiatives can be instrumental in reaching parents and the wider community on various critical issues related to children's rights.

3.6 Knowledge, Attitudes And Practices

Discrimination and stigma associated with Roma, manifest in the form of resistance to their integration into communal spaces such as schools and neighbourhoods, remain a challenge. In 2021, 20 per cent of Roma respondents reported experiencing discrimination based on their ethnicity in key areas of life, including employment, education, healthcare, and housing. This rate of discrimination highlights a significant gap, as the EU Roma framework aims to reduce discrimination levels to 13 per cent by 2030. Additionally, 81 per cent of respondents who faced harassment in 2021 did not report the most recent incident, pointing to a low reporting rate among Roma individuals.⁷⁷ This lack of reporting could indicate distrust of the authorities or a lack of awareness regarding support systems available for victims of discrimination and harassment. Roma students experience further discrimination and segregation in schools, as some schools become predominantly Roma due to non-Roma parents transferring their children to other schools.⁷⁸

Gender norms and patriarchal values. Entrenched patriarchal norms shape societal attitudes towards women and girls, influencing gendered educational and career paths, which lead to disparities in fields of study and employment. Traditional gender norms also contribute to the acceptance of gender-based violence and child/early marriages, particularly within certain communities, such as the Roma. There has also been the emergence of anti-gender movements, often supported by religious

institutions, particularly opposing the integration of comprehensive sexuality education, stalling educational reform, and promoting opposition to LGBTQ rights.⁷⁹ Youth attitudes reveal significant intolerance toward LGBTQ individuals, with 54.7 per cent viewing homosexuality as "deviant behaviour" and 43 per cent expressing discomfort with LGBTQ neighbours, marking them as the least desired neighbours.⁸⁰

The availability of parenting programs is limited, and most parents view parenting as an innate skill rather than one to be learnt. A majority (70 per cent) believe that parenting is developed intuitively, while only 13 per cent are aware of any available programs or materials on positive parenting. Additionally, a significant portion of parents (70 per cent) feel they have the right to discipline their children as they see fit, and 57 per cent assert that no external party should influence their parenting methods. This highlights a strong preference for autonomy in parenting decisions, coupled with limited uptake of support resources.⁸¹

Overall economic pessimism in the country and widespread desire to emigrate. Surveys like Life in Transition Survey III (LiTS III) and the 2022 Balkan Barometer reveal economic pessimism, with over 70 per cent of people perceiving a widening gap between rich and poor and only 38 per cent believing that children born today will have a better future. Additionally, 59 per cent express dissatisfaction with the economic situation, and 41

per cent expect further decline in the next year.⁸² This sentiment is particularly strong among youth, with 62 per cent considering emigration if given the opportunity, and 77 per cent of those who emigrate not planning to return—a 14 per cent increase since 2021.⁸³ This pervasive pessimism impacts social cohesion, reduces policy engagement, and is conducive to emigration.

Effective inclusion reforms must address the ongoing resistance within the social services workforce, particularly among educators, social workers, and healthcare providers. This resistance, often rooted in traditional views and ingrained prejudices, particularly against the inclusion of children with disabilities, anti-discrimination efforts for Roma communities, and challenges to entrenched gender norms, can impede the practical implementation of inclusive policies.

Disability Discrimination and Stigma. Despite efforts to include children with disabilities in mainstream schools and improve public perception, significant stigma and discrimination persist in the country. Society largely views disabilities through a medical or charity-based lens, with limited understanding of reasonable accommodation and inclusive rights.⁸⁴ There are misconceptions about inclusive education, fearing it detracts from other students' learning; only 24 per cent support mainstream inclusion, while 66 per cent believe it diverts teachers' attention. Though awareness is slowly shifting, with support for a rights-based model increasing from 30 per cent in 2014 to 41 per cent in 2018, deep-rooted social and cultural biases, gender disparities, and a lack of accessible environments continue to hinder the full realization of disability rights.⁸⁵



HEALTH AND NUTRITION

4. HEALTH AND NUTRITION

4.1 Health Care System

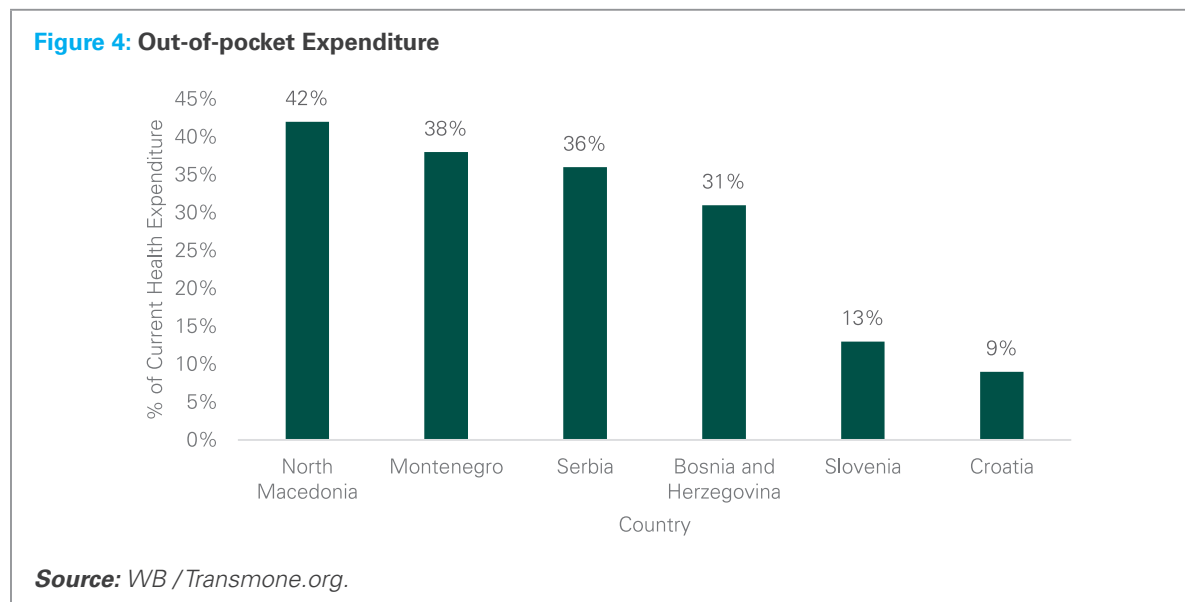
Table 4: Health System Indicators

Indicator	North Macedonia		EU (average)	Source
Proportion of total government spending on health – SDG 1.a.2	4.8% (2022)	3.76% (2018)	6% (2022)	WB /WHO
Universal Health Care Coverage Index – SDG 1.a.2	73.5 (2021)	74.4 (2017)	82.0 (2021)	WHO

Since 2019, the country has been reforming its primary healthcare system to adopt a community-oriented care model. This reform aims to standardize the roles of healthcare professionals, including nurses and physicians, by implementing clinical guidelines and protocols for patient care transitions, referrals, and discharge. IT improvements are also underway to enhance service integration. However, low investments in healthcare, particularly in preventative care and nutrition, and declining Universal Health Care (UHC) coverage (Table 4) from

74.4 in 2017 to 73.5 in 2021 **indicate a gradual reduction in essential health services, leaving the country below the EU average coverage of 82 per cent.**⁸⁶

North Macedonia lags regional counterparts on a range of healthcare indicators due to persistent challenges in healthcare access and slow progress on key health indicators. Apart from declining public funding for health some of the key mapped challenges include:



- **High out-of-pocket costs.** (Figure 4) Despite nearly universal insurance coverage (90 per cent), **high out-of-pocket costs (42 per cent)**⁸⁷ **disproportionately impact low-income households**, resulting in barriers

to healthcare access. In 2018, 7 per cent of households faced catastrophic health spending with the poorest households being the most affected (15 per cent).⁸⁸ In 2019, 20.000 children remain without health insurance.⁸⁹

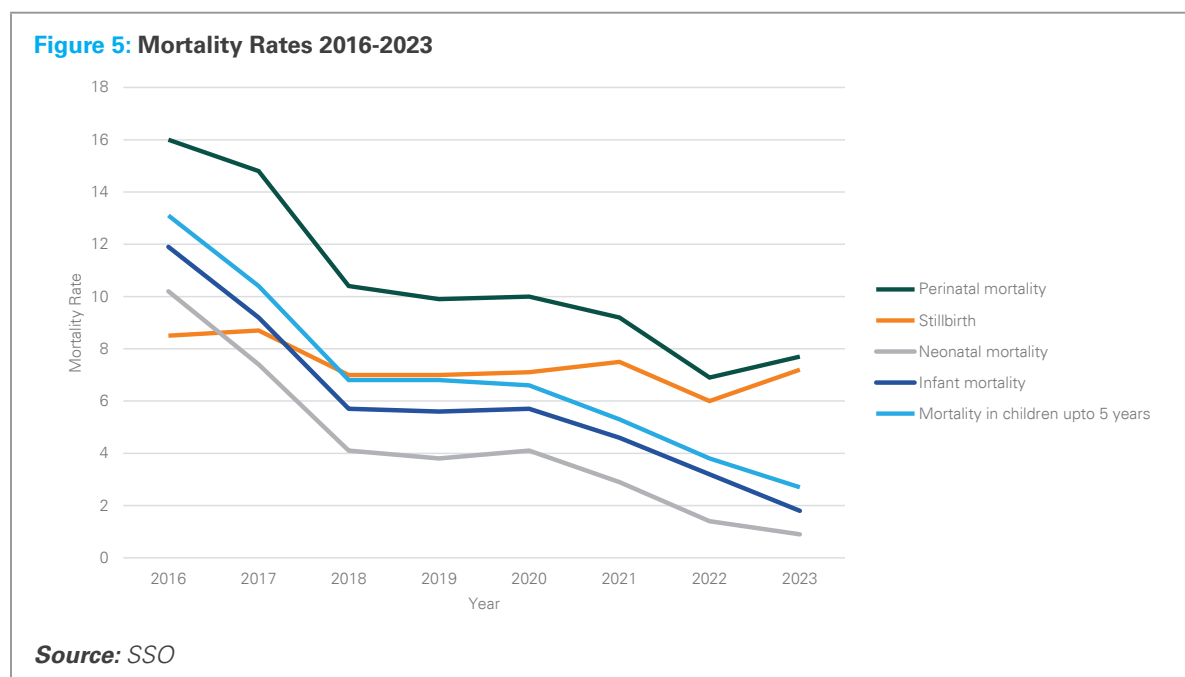
- **Underutilization of data systems.** Since its inception, the e-health centralized health information system MojTermin has enhanced data management and expanded modules, offering insights into the activities and capacities of healthcare providers. Nevertheless, **data utilization for effective planning remains limited and the system is underutilized.** Legal, operational barriers, outdated methods, poor integration and inconsistent data entry hinder effective data use, including maternal, neonatal and child health monitoring.⁹⁰ Inadequate digital health records also impact the accuracy of immunization data, particularly in marginalized communities.
- **Reporting and data gaps.** Challenges in data accuracy and underreporting of crucial health metrics, including stillbirths, neonatal deaths, and maternal mortality (with no reports for 2022–2023)⁹¹ impede effective maternal and neonatal health monitoring and strategic interventions. Inconsistent application of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) further complicates the collection and accuracy of these critical health indicators.⁹²
- **Shortages and rural-urban disparities.** The health workforce shortages persist despite modest improvements, with 312 physicians and 440 nurses per 100,000 people in 2019—well below the EU average for nurses (863 per 100,000).⁹³ The concentration of health professionals in urban areas creates rural-urban disparities in access to specialized services like gynaecology, child psychiatrists, paediatricians and neonatologists, with many concentrated in urban centres like Skopje.⁹⁴ In 2023, one family gynaecologist serves approximately 2,240 women of reproductive age, with all 153 gynaecologists located in urban areas.⁹⁵ Furthermore, despite a slight increase in family planning visits,⁹⁶ only 2.6 per cent of women and adolescents are accessing these services, highlighting significant barriers to reproductive health access.⁹⁷ Additional barriers include long travel distances, gender norms, discrimination, and medicine costs,⁹⁸ with Roma women facing heightened challenges due to institutional discrimination and financial constraints.
- **Underutilization and underfunding of home visiting patronage nursing services.** Patronage nursing services, crucial for maternal and child health, remain underutilized, with a lack of standardized practices and regulatory frameworks, insufficient funding, inadequate resources (e.g., transport, mobile phones and internet access) and poor collaboration with other healthcare providers. More investments are needed to strengthen the home visiting service in underserved rural areas, Roma and Albanian communities.⁹⁹
- **Underinvestment in preventive health, including Early Childhood Intervention services.** Preventive measures, such as home visits, developmental monitoring, and health promotion activities, are non-existent or underutilized, despite their potential to improve outcomes for children and women and reduce long-term costs. Intersectoral Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services are underfunded, disorganized, and lacking a regulatory framework or national strategy.¹⁰⁰
- **Addressing climate hazards.** Climate hazards, including heatwaves, air pollution and allergen exposure, increase respiratory health risks and the spread of vector-borne diseases. So far, the country's health system has limited capacity to respond to climate risks as a public health emergency and needs to upgrade the e-health system, MojTermin, with climate-related functionalities to improve response capabilities.¹⁰¹

4.2 Maternal And Child Health

Table 5: Maternal and Child Health Indicators

Indicator	North Macedonia		EU (average)	Source	
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) – SDG 3.2.1	1.8	5.2 (2016)	3.1 (2021)	IPH Skopje / WHO	WB /WHO
Neonatal mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) – SDG 3.2.1	0.9	4.1 (2018)	2.1 (2021)	IPH Skopje / WHO	WHO
Births attended by skilled health personnel – 3.2.1	100%	100% (2018)	98.5%	IPH Skopje / WHO	WB /WHO
UHC Service Coverage sub-index on reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health – SDG 3.8.1	66.9	67.7	89.5	WHO	WHO

There have been significant strides in improving maternal, newborn, and child health, with marked reductions in maternal, neonatal, and under-five mortality rates (Figure 5).



The neonatal mortality rate, which is the probability of dying in the first 28 days of life dropped from 5.2 per 1,000 live births in 2016 to 1.8 in 2023, while the under-five mortality rate declined to 2.7 per 1,000 in 2023, below the regional and EU average. However, following continuous decline, stillbirth rates¹⁰² have increased from 6 per 1,000 in 2018 to 7.2 in 2023,¹⁰³ indicating continuous need for monitoring and improving the quality of health services.

There were no recorded cases of maternal mortality in 2022 and 2023, although past data (10.07 per

1,000 in 2021 and 5.2 per 1,000 in 2020) suggests potential gaps in reporting. All deliveries are attended by skilled health personnel, ensuring widespread access to professional care.

The usage of C-section is 38 per cent (2019), which has increased significantly from 25 per cent in 2011, and can be considered as excessive as per WHO guidelines (10–15 per cent),¹⁰⁴ although the 2020 audit report on perinatal mortality noted an improved referral systems and reduced unnecessary Caesarean sections.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, the percentage of C-sections among Roma is lower, by about 21 per cent.¹⁰⁶

The positive trends in the maternal and child mortality reflect the efforts of government and partners, including policy frameworks like the **Pediatrics Master Plan 2030** and **Perinatal Care Master Plan 2030** introduced to improve neonatal and child health outcomes.¹⁰⁷ The establishment of the **Safe Motherhood Committee** and **Perinatal Mortality Audit Working Group** has strengthened evidence-based healthcare interventions, while improved referral systems have enhanced access to tertiary care.¹⁰⁸ Roma health mediators are being highlighted as improving healthcare access for marginalized women.¹⁰⁹



Despite the progress in maternal and child health, regional and ethnic disparities in access to maternal and child healthcare persist among vulnerable groups. For instance, infant mortality

rates vary across regions, with the highest in the Pelagonia Region (3.1 per 1,000) and the lowest in the Southwest Region (0.7 per 1,000), against a national average of 1.8 per 1,000 live births.¹¹⁰

4.3 Immunisation

Table 6: Immunisation key indicators

Indicator	2023	2018	EU average	Source
% of surviving infants who received the third dose of PCV3 vaccine – SDG 3.b.1	56%	30%(2020)	89.1%	WHO/UNICEF/ Transmone.org
% of surviving infants who received the third dose of DTP3 vaccine – SDG 3.b.1	86%	92%	93.4%	
% children who received the 2nd dose of measles-containing vaccine (MCV2) – SDG 3.b.1	88%	94%	88.5%	WHO/UNICEF/ Transmone.org
Percentage of females who received the last dose of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine per national schedule – SDG 3.b.1	57%	41%	57.2%	WHO/UNICEF/ Transmone.org

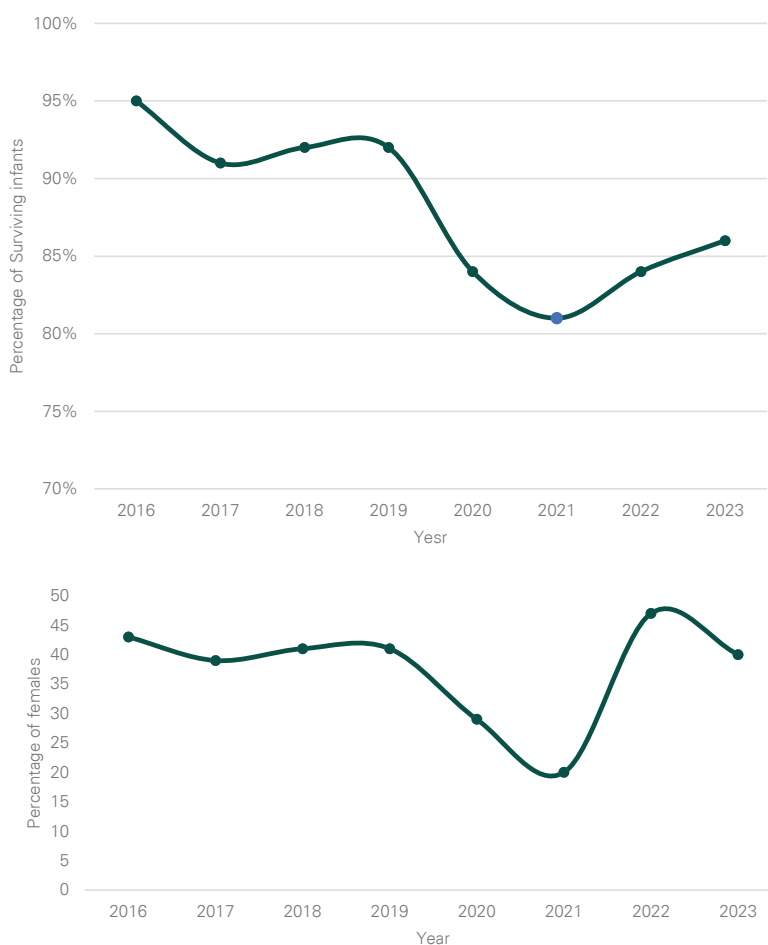
The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted routine immunization services in North Macedonia, with significant drops in coverage for key vaccines due to vaccine hesitancy and misinformation. However, by 2022, some recovery was observed, with the latest rates for 2023 (Table 6), standing as follows:

- 88 per cent of children received the **second dose of the Measles-Containing Vaccine (MCV2)**, a significant drop from the 97 per cent coverage recorded in 2017, although this aligns with the EU average of 88.5 per cent.
- Only 56 per cent of surviving infants received the third dose of the Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (PCV3)** in 2023, a figure far below the EU average

of 89.1 per cent, resulting in around 10,000 infants yearly missing protection against severe diseases like pneumonia, meningitis, and sepsis.

- 86 per cent of infants received the third dose of the DTP-containing vaccine (Figure 6)**, a decline from 92 per cent in 2018, which leaves children vulnerable to diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (whooping cough).
- HPV vaccine coverage (Figure 6), critical for preventing cervical cancer**, in 2023 was 56.6 per cent, similar to the EU average of 57.2 per cent. Challenges persist, including in vaccinating adolescent girls, potentially due to vaccine hesitancy, lack of awareness, or accessibility issues.¹¹¹

Figure 6: DTP3 and HPV Immunisation Rates 2016-2023



Source: WHO/UNICEF/Transmone.org.



inequality

An analysis of Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2019 data reveals **disparities in vaccine coverage (Table 7)**, showing that in 2019 only 57 per cent of Roma children aged 24–35 months were fully immunized per national schedules, while national average was 74 per cent. This health disparity emphasizes the urgent need for targeted public health interventions and outreach within Roma communities to close the immunization gap.¹¹²

To combat misinformation and vaccine hesitancy, especially heightened during COVID-19, the Ministry of Health introduced the **Misinformation Management System (MMS)**, which engaged the public through multimedia campaigns and collaborations with journalists. This effort, supported by UNICEF, also included development of an **e-health platform** to provide reliable vaccine information

Table 7: Immunization coverage for children in Roma settlements (age 24–35 months):

Indicator	Roma 2019	National 2019
Children aged 24-35 months who received basic antigens	74.1%	84%
Children aged 24-35 months who received all antigens	56.8%	73.6%
Children aged 24-35 months with no vaccinations	7.4%	1.1%

Source: MICS, 2019/2018.

and address hesitancy.¹¹³ Furthermore, legislation mandates vaccinations, such as the compulsory measles vaccination for kindergarten enrolment, yet enforcement and public adherence remain inconsistent. Development of a national immunization

strategy is underway but is challenged by budget constraints, particularly in areas such as training, updates and demand generation activities.¹¹⁴

services remain underutilized for promoting vaccination, with no place to coordinate and integrate immunization support.¹¹⁵

Despite signs of recovery, challenges remain:

Uneven distribution of vaccination teams and weak coordination: Immunization services suffer from uneven distribution of vaccination teams compared to the size of the population they serve, staff shortages, and inadequate coordination among healthcare providers, particularly in rural and underserved areas. The home visiting patronage

Vaccine Hesitancy and Misinformation: Despite efforts, anti-vaccine movements and low awareness about the **HPV vaccine** impact the vaccine uptake, particularly among younger populations and urban and wealthier households (34.67 per cent in 2019), and those headed by better-educated adults.¹¹⁶ A U-report survey found that 55 per cent of U-Reporters aged 15-19 lacked knowledge about HPV vaccine.¹¹⁷

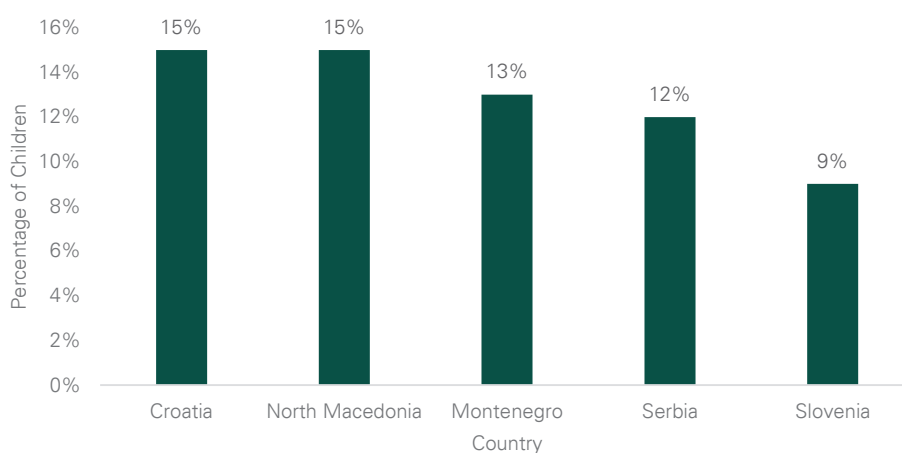
4.4 Nutrition

Table 8: Nutrition Indicators

Indicator	2011	2019	EU average	Source
Stunting prevalence among children under 5 years of age – SDG 2.2.1	5	4	n/a	MICS
Overweight prevalence (weight-for-height among children under 5 years of age) – SDG 2.2.2	12	11	7.8	MICS
Percentage of infants (under 6 months) who are exclusively breastfed	23	28	32.2	MICS

North Macedonia faces challenges in child nutrition, with high shares of overweight and obese children and low breastfeeding rates. Key considerations are as follows:

Figure 7: Obesity prevalence among school-aged children



Source: Cosi 5 / Transmone.org.

- **Thirty-two per cent of 7–9 year-olds are overweight or obese**, the rates are notably higher in urban areas (40 per cent) and among children from higher socioeconomic

backgrounds. Boys from affluent families are 23 per cent more likely to be overweight or obese compared to girls.¹¹⁸



inequality

- **Exclusive breastfeeding rates increased slightly to 28 per cent in 2019**, up from 23 per cent in 2011, but remain below regional averages and the WHO target of at least 50 per cent. Only 10 per cent of infants are breastfed within the first hour of birth, with particularly low rates in rural areas (5 per cent).¹¹⁹ This practice helps infants receive colostrum, the first milk rich in nutrients and antibodies.¹²⁰
- **Stunting rates in the Roma community are significantly higher at 11 per cent, compared to the national average of 4 per cent**,¹²¹ indicating systemic inequalities and lack of access to healthcare, nutrition, and education for this group.

While there is no comprehensive national strategy on nutrition, components of nutrition and healthy lifestyle promotion are integrated into the Health Strategy 2021–2030 and the Action Plan on Food and Nutrition. There are also plans for a National Strategy for Health-Promoting Schools, which could provide a more structured approach to childhood nutrition and physical activity.¹²² The other key identified challenges include:

- **Lack of policies and an unsupportive school environment.** There is an absence of strong, coordinated regulatory policies across sectors, especially regarding the accessibility, affordability and marketing of unhealthy foods to children, compounded by a lack of clear definitions for healthy food. There is a correlation between advertising and the availability of unhealthy, calorie-dense foods in schools and higher obesity rates among

children. In 2019, only 31.2 per cent of schools were free from sugary beverage and unhealthy food advertisements, and schools allowing these ads reported higher rates of overweight and obesity.¹²³ Although school nutritional standards exist, they are not monitored, resulting in inconsistent implementation.¹²⁴

- **Dietary habits are shifting due to increased urbanization and modernization**, leading to greater availability and consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. The dietary habits show that 75% of girls and 78% of boys had breakfast every day, while 40% of children consumed fruit daily, and 37% consumed vegetables daily.¹²⁵
- **Financial deprivation limits access to a variety of nutritious foods for low-income families, including those among the Roma community.** Income disparities significantly impact caloric intake and access to healthy food, with individuals earning over MKD 36,000 per month consuming 16 per cent more calories than those with monthly incomes below MKD 12,000.¹²⁶ Additionally, low-income families have reduced access to healthy options like fresh fruits and vegetables.
- **Limited parenting support services and programs around the importance of early breastfeeding and healthy eating habits. Exclusive breastfeeding and nutrition counselling is not prioritized** among healthcare professionals, including nurses and midwives, and not sufficiently integrated in the postpartum care routine.¹²⁷

4.5 Adolescent physical, mental, and reproductive health

Table 9: Indicators on adolescents

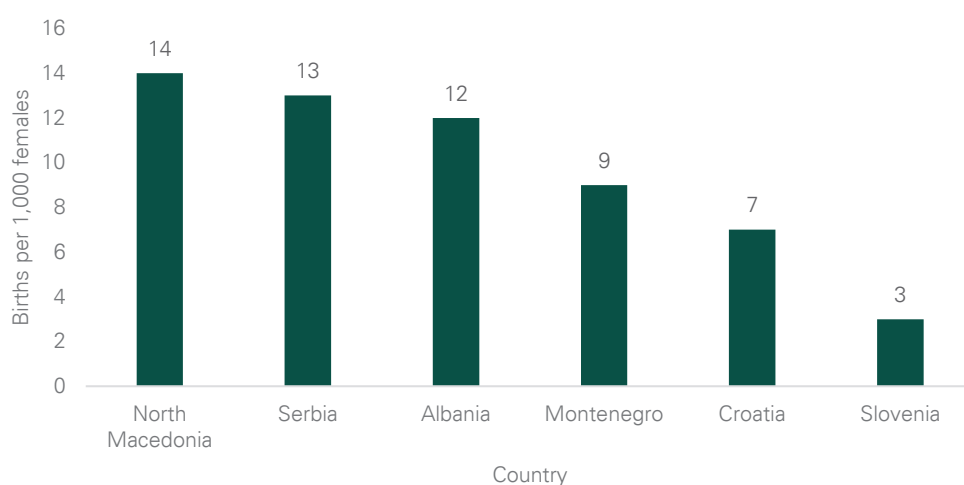
Indicator	2023	2016	EU average	Source
Suicide mortality rate for 15–19-year-olds (per 100,000 population – SDG 3.4.2).	3,3 (2019)	N/A	4,9	WHO / Transmonee.org
Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 women aged 15-19) – SDG 3.7.2	13,4 (2023)	16	8,7	SSO / Eurostat Transmonee.org

Mental health and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, with high adolescent birth rates (13.4 per cent in 2023) remain a critical challenge, particularly impacting vulnerable youth and marginalized groups.

Available data indicates a rise in mental health issues among children and adolescents, despite significant gaps in monitoring. Nearly 30 per cent of adolescents reported moderate to severe depression during COVID-19, and 42.1 per cent experienced significant anxiety. Stigma continues to be a major barrier to accessing care, with 94.2 per

cent of adolescents feeling uncomfortable discussing mental health issues due to societal judgment and stigma.¹²⁸ While the youth suicide rate (3,3 per 100,000 and higher for boys at 4,5 per 100,000) remains below the regional average, studies show a concerning increase in mental health challenges, particularly among younger populations.

Figure 8: Adolescent Birth Rate



Source: SSO / Transmone.org.

The adolescent birth rate (Figure 8) decreased to 13.4 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in 2023 from 14 in 2022 and 16 in 2018 but remains much higher than the EU average and slightly higher than the Western Balkans average, with urban areas accounting for 58.1 per cent of these births.¹²⁹ Contraceptive use among young people is low (14 per cent in 2020), with 35 per cent relying on withdrawal and only 10 per cent using condoms.¹³⁰ The use of contraception is assessed as even lower for marginalized groups such as Roma women and women with disabilities, due to inaccessible facilities, provider prejudices, and insufficient financial resources.¹³¹

Risky behaviours are common, with 69 per cent of 16-year-old boys and 64 per cent of 16-year-old girls reporting having consumed alcohol at least once in their lives and 38 per cent of 16-year-olds reported having tried or used tobacco at least once in their lives.¹³²

There are ongoing efforts to address mental health challenges faced by children and young people, particularly with the adoption of the National Action

Plan for Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents (2024–2030)¹³³ in October 2024. Several ongoing initiatives have been supported, such as the training of over 100 patronage nurses, and community-based campaigns like the “Walk and Talk” events have aimed to reduce stigma and promote mental health awareness.¹³⁴

According to WHO data, the number of new HIV infections in North Macedonia remains low, with a rate of 0.03 per 1,000 uninfected individuals. This figure has remained stable since 2021, with a confidence range of 0.02 to 0.05, reflecting consistent progress in preventing new infections.

Some of the barriers to adolescent health include:

- **Underfunded infrastructure and insufficient access.** Variability in budget allocations for mental health from 2017 to 2020¹³⁵ has led to gaps in services, especially at the primary healthcare level, where prevention and early intervention remain largely inaccessible.¹³⁶ Only one inpatient specialist centre treats children

and adolescents, with only two outpatient centres in the country. There is a severe shortage of child psychiatrists (there are fewer than two per 100,000), and existing community mental health services cater mostly to adults, limiting care for younger populations. There are no specialized youth psychologists, and the need for improved training and resources for educators and counsellors to effectively support students' mental health is urgent.¹³⁷

- **Weak intersectoral cooperation.** Lack of coordination between health, social, and education sectors, coupled with limited number of child and adolescent mental health specialists and lack of prevention, hinders early detection and delivery of integrated mental health services.
- **Health promotion efforts, especially in sexual and reproductive health and mental health and well-being, remain inadequate,** exacerbating barriers to healthcare access

for vulnerable groups, such as Roma and rural populations.¹³⁸ Efforts to implement comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) face setbacks due to cultural stigma and anti-gender opposition, leaving the country without a CSE national strategy, despite positive outcomes from initial pilot programs of integrating of CSE in schools.¹³⁹ In 2023, only **3.3 per cent of adolescent girls up to the age of 19** were covered by family planning advice, indicating low overall accessibility of SRH services.¹⁴⁰

- **Menstrual health management remains a pressing concern for women and girls.** Findings of a 2021 study¹⁴¹ indicate that 29.5 per cent of women cannot afford standard menstrual products, resorting to alternatives like newspapers or self-made textile pads. Schools lack adequate facilities, leading to girls' missing school during menstruation, especially in rural areas, where 90 per cent of girls report missing school for 4–5 days.¹⁴²



ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

5. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Table 10: SDG Indicators on environment and climate change

Indicator	2022	2022	EU average	Source
Percentage of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology – SDG 7.1.2	81%	81%	100%	WHO
Age-standardized mortality rate attributed to household and ambient air pollution (per 100,000 population) – SDG 3.9.1	96 (2019)	96 (2019)	23.6	WHO
Annual mean concentration of particles PM2.5 ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) – SDG 11.6.2	25% (2019)	25% (2019)	11.7%	WHO

North Macedonia's hazard profile encompasses a range of natural and human-made risks, including floods, earthquakes, extreme temperatures, landslides, epidemics, and technological incidents, with air pollution increasingly becoming an endemic threat to health. Over the past two decades, disasters have caused an estimated \$667 million in damage. With the progression of climate change, the frequency and severity of such events are expected to rise, further straining societal resilience. Without investments in adaptation, the projected damage could reach 4 per cent of North Macedonia's GDP by 2050.

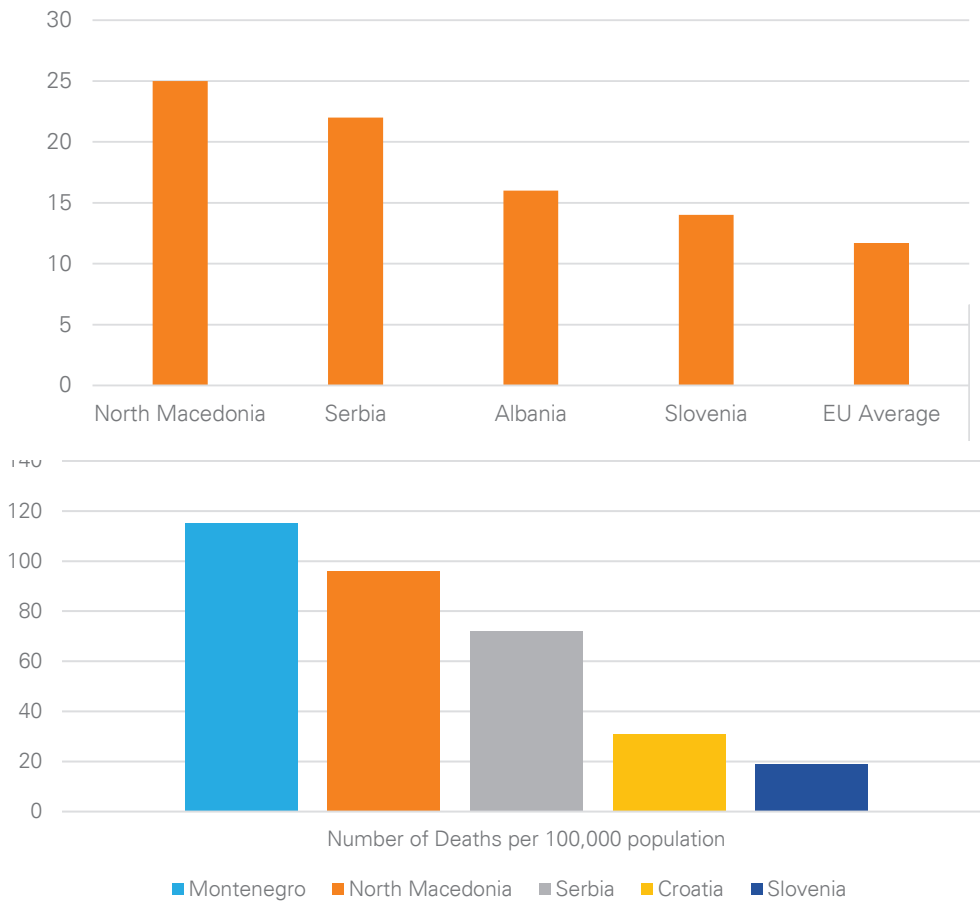
Climate change heightens vulnerabilities (Table 10) in North Macedonia, with temperatures projected to rise by 1.9°C by 2050 and 3.8°C by 2100.

Extreme heatwaves, such as the one of July 2024 with a 42°C peak, pose significant health risks, especially for younger children and pregnant women, who face increased risks of labour complications and high blood pressure. Rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns are leading to more frequent droughts, wildfires, and severe water scarcity, especially in the eastern region, where precipitation is projected to decrease by up to 5 per cent by 2050 and 13 per cent by 2100.

Air pollution in cities such as Skopje, Kavadarci, and Tetovo poses a significant public health crisis, especially for children, with pollution levels surpassing WHO safety limits for more than 100 days each year.¹⁴³

Skopje ranks among the world's most polluted cities (Figure 9), contributing to household and ambient air pollution mortality rate, which at 96 per 100,000 is more than four times the EU average (23.6 per 100,000). The fact that preschool children in urban areas are twice as likely to suffer from respiratory diseases

compared to rural children highlights the heightened health risks associated with urban pollution.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, 39.8 per cent of child morbidity related to respiratory issues, and significant economic losses, estimated at 17.5 per cent of GDP in 2019, underscore the urgent need for action to reduce air pollution.¹⁴⁵

Figure 9: Air quality influence on people health

Source: WHO / Transmone.org.

Some challenges in effectively addressing the impact of climate change on children include:

- **Institutional and legislative constraints and limited child-sensitive strategies.**

North Macedonia has advanced climate policy through commitments to international agreements and alignment with EU standards, introducing new laws to strengthen environmental protection, such as the Law on Waters, Law on Environmental Inspection, and adding “Ecocide” to the Criminal Code. However, the lack of a comprehensive climate adaptation framework and the stalled draft Law on Climate Action hinder effective integration of climate resilience in policies,¹⁴⁶ while **national strategies lack child-sensitive measures** and do not prioritize children’s needs in mitigation efforts. Air quality regulations are improving; however, enforcement is hindered by limited

administrative and technical capacities.¹⁴⁷ High rates of pollution-related morbidity, especially among children, underscore the need for stronger air quality monitoring, better-equipped facilities, and expanded healthcare resources.

- **Limited resources and fragmented data management hinder effective climate adaptation efforts at the local and community levels.**¹⁴⁸

This results in insufficient adaptation planning, particularly in essential sectors like transportation and urban planning,¹⁴⁹ and a lack of robust institutional frameworks at the municipal level to develop local climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

- **The lack of publicly available information on environmental health hazards affecting children,** as well as data on child-specific health risks, pollution sources in public facilities, and behavioural barriers to health-

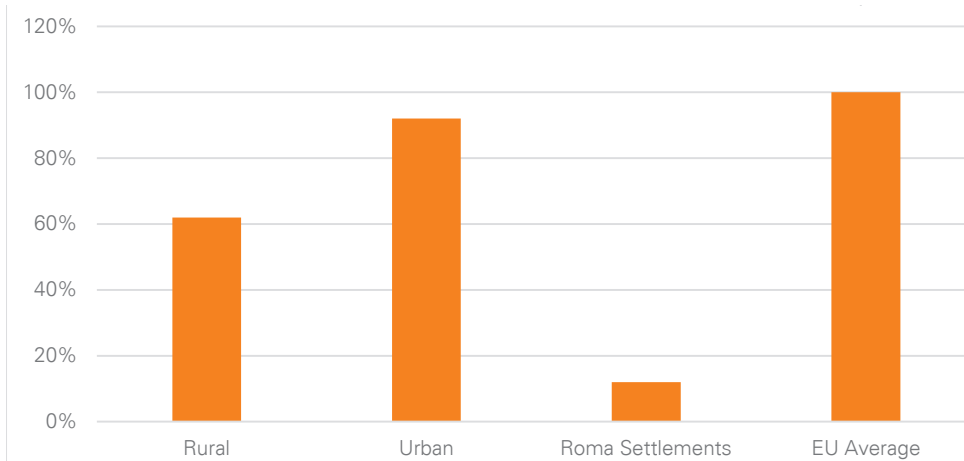
seeking and eco-friendly actions, hamper effective climate and health policy planning in North Macedonia.

- **Schools and health facilities lack resources and measures to address environmental health hazards and adapt to climate change.** Approximately 13 per cent of schools are highly exposed to floods, 28 per cent—to medium or higher landslide risks, and 1.7 per cent—to wildfire risks due to proximity to forests. These exposures heighten the risk of school closures, which negatively

affect student learning and, consequently, human capital development. Enhancing climate resilience in schools through green infrastructure is essential to mitigating educational impacts of climate change.¹⁵⁰

- **High energy and carbon intensity, largely driven by coal-based energy¹⁵¹ and inefficient household heating, significantly contribute to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.** Reliance on coal and other fossil fuels not only elevates carbon emissions but also heavily impacts local air quality.¹⁵²

Figure 10: Access to clean fuels and technologies for cooking



Source: WHO, FRA, 2021.



inequality

- **Limited access to modern energy-efficient technologies compounds these environmental pressures, especially in rural and low-income areas.** (Figure 10) Only 62 per cent of the rural population relies on clean fuels and technologies for cooking, compared to 92 per cent in urban areas.¹⁵³ Energy inequality is also evident in household heating: in 2020, 43 per cent of households in the lowest income quintile used solid fuels for heating, while only 11 per cent in the highest quintile did so.¹⁵⁴ **Roma settlements are especially disadvantaged in this regard: only 12 per cent of residents have access to clean fuels and technologies, far below the national average.**¹⁵⁵

Constrained public motivation to act. Despite rising awareness and concern over climate change,¹⁵⁶ public participation in environmental protection remains limited due to competing socio-economic concerns. A 2021 survey has shown that many view climate change as having a negative impact on children’s quality of life, but economic issues like poor living standards (40.5 per cent) and unemployment (34.8 per cent) take priority over pollution concerns (8.4 per cent). Despite awareness, only 19.3 per cent are strongly motivated to act, with younger and educated citizens more inclined to engage in environmental protection.¹⁵⁷



EDUCATION

6. EDUCATION

6.1 Education System

North Macedonia has embarked on educational reforms guided by the **National Education Strategy and Action Plan (2018–2025)**, which aims to create a more equitable and inclusive system. The adoption of 2019 Primary Education Law modernizes curricula and provides tailored support for vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities. Additionally, ongoing draft reforms in secondary and vocational education are aiming to improve

The country’s **Human Capital Index** (Table 11) reflects these challenges, showing that a child born today will attain only 0.56 of their potential productivity due to limitations in education and health, notably below the regional average of 0.69 for Europe and Central Asia. Although girls perform slightly better than boys, both remain below regional benchmarks.¹⁵⁹

Some of the challenges include:

- **Inefficient use of funds, with low financing and inadequate distribution.** Resource allocation is inefficient, with 89 per cent of primary education funding directed toward

educational quality and workforce readiness, especially for marginalized communities, to enhance their educational and employment prospects. A new national assessment system is being piloted, aiming to standardize evaluations, helping track student progress and refine curriculum effectiveness.¹⁵⁸ Despite ongoing efforts, several obstacles persist in achieving educational equity and quality in North Macedonia.

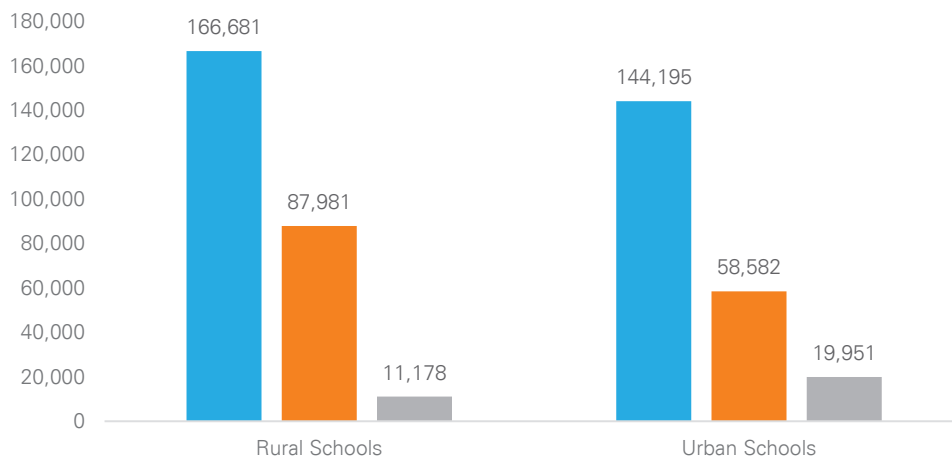
Table 11: Human Capital Index

Boys	Girls	Overall MKD	Europe and Central Asia
0.54	0.57	0.56	0.69

Source: WB, 2020.

staff salaries, leaving limited resources for facility maintenance, capital expenditures, and professional development. Early childhood education is underfunded, which restricts access for most young children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

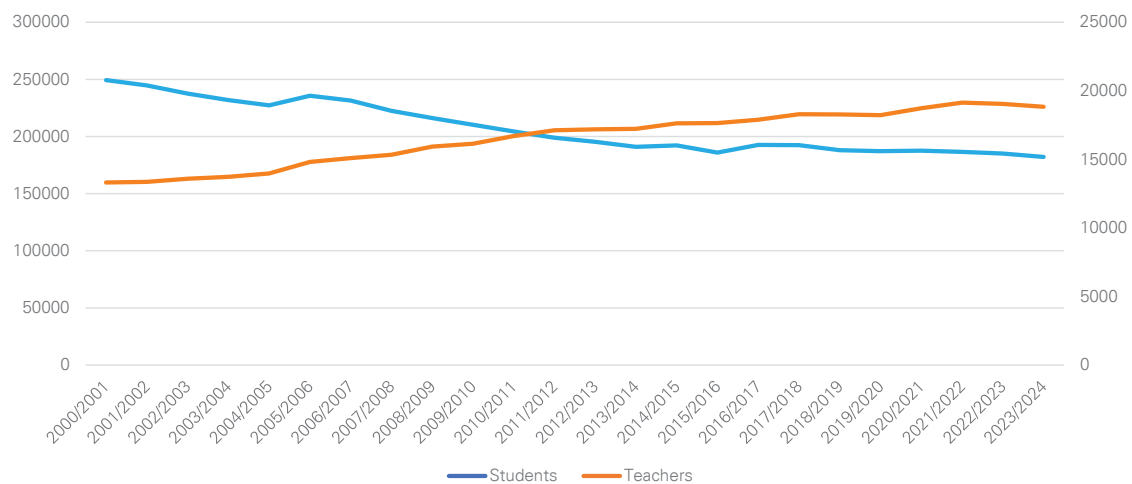
Figure 11: Differences in expenditures per student in Macedonian denars



Source: OECD/MOE.

- Outdated education funding formula.** The outdated education funding formula, currently under review, fosters fiscal inefficiencies.¹⁶⁰ The model provides a base sum per municipality and a standard amount per student, adjusted by population density and special needs. This results in higher per-student funding in smaller municipalities (Figure 11) without incentivizing efficient resource use.¹⁶¹
- Inefficient school network.** The education system faces optimization challenges due to a declining student population, with a student-to-teacher ratio (Figure 12) dropping from 18 in 2000/2001 to 10 in 2020/2021, well below the OECD average of 15 and EU average of 13.5. Two thirds of the municipalities (53 of 80) have fewer than 10 students per teacher, highlighting resource allocation inefficiencies. While 90 per cent of students attend central schools, 10 per cent are in satellite schools, where resources are more limited.

Figure 12: Number of students vs. teachers



Source: OECD/MOE.¹⁶²

Additionally, two thirds of central schools run double shifts, with some requiring a third due to overcrowding, while many satellite schools operate below capacity. In 2021, less than 1 in four municipalities (23 per cent) met the minimum class size of 20, with most classes having 11–15 students.¹⁶³

Data and monitoring gaps. The Education Management Information System (EMIS) is constrained by technical and functional limitations undermining data collection and analysis. Incomplete coverage, lack of interoperability with other governmental systems, and outdated methods inhibit data-driven policymaking and accountability, especially in monitoring the education of marginalized children.¹⁶⁴

- Digital divide.** Efforts are ongoing to integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) into education. This includes establishing

e-learning portals, learning management systems, and continuous training for staff to effectively use new technologies and ICT tools in education.¹⁶⁵ Despite digital advancements the education system struggles with a technology gap. With only 0.43 computers per student—below the OECD’s recommended 0.83—many schools lack the infrastructure to support digital learning.¹⁶⁶ This shortfall disproportionately impacts rural and low-income students, limiting access to digital resources and exacerbating inequities in education.

- Continuous interethnic segregation.** North Macedonia has implemented grants for multicultural activities and teacher training in intercultural education and established a national commission to remove stereotypes from textbooks and create inclusive content. However, the school system remains linguistically segregated, with 65 per cent of multi-language primary schools in 2021/22

using separate buildings and 58 per cent operating in language-based shifts, limiting interethnic interaction.¹⁶⁷ Additionally, Roma students experience further segregation, as some schools become predominantly Roma due to non-Roma parents transferring their children to other schools. About 46 per cent

of Roma children in North Macedonia attend schools where most or all students are Roma, reflecting significant educational segregation.¹⁶⁸ This separation, along with a lack of diverse curriculum materials, reinforces social isolation and restricts intercultural understanding.¹⁶⁹

Box 6: Recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child for North Macedonia

- Increase education budget allocations and revise the funding formula to ensure a more balanced distribution between salaries and capital expenditure.
- Adopt pending laws and reforms on General Secondary Education and Vocational Education and Training
- Optimize the school network by addressing both underutilization and overcrowding issues.
- Invest in upgrading digital infrastructure and technological resources to improve learning conditions.

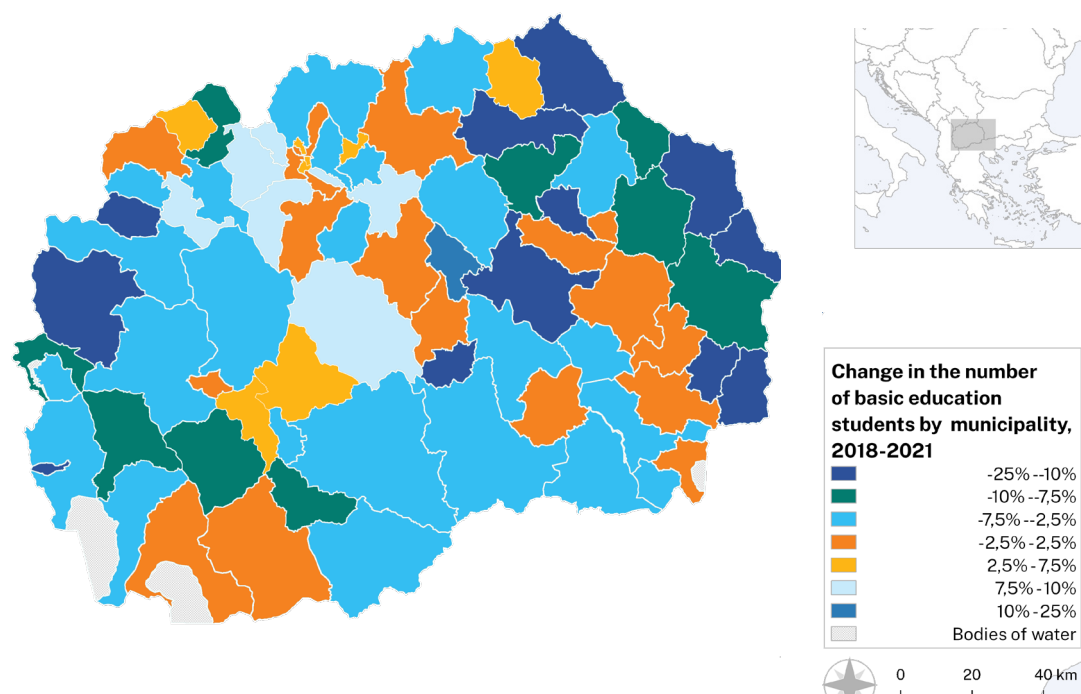
6.2 Education Access And Participation

Table 12: Education SDG indicators

Indicator	2022 / 2023	2013	EU average	Source
Participation in organized learning (adjusted net enrolment rate, one year before official primary entry age, administrative data) – SDG 4.2.2	50% (2022)	47% (2017)	96.2%	Eurostat / UNESCO
Primary education completion rate – SDG 4.1.2	99%	99%	99%	SSO / UNESCO
Lower secondary education completion rate – SDG 4.1.2	99%	99%	97.9%	SSO / Transmone.org
Upper secondary education completion rate – SDG 4.1.2	97.3%	98%	86.9%	SSO / Transmone.org

North Macedonia has made improvements in education access and equity with enrolment rates rising across all education levels and completion rates for all levels of education being consistently

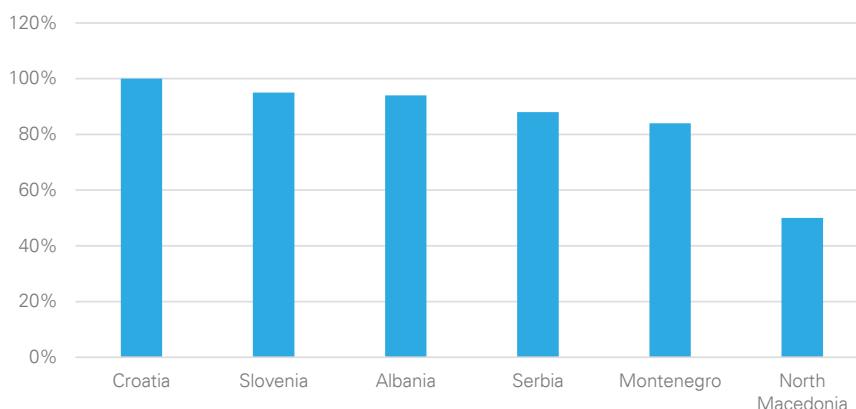
above 97 per cent (Table 12).¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, there remains a wide disparity between Roma and other children at all levels of education.

Figure 13: Change in the number of students in basic education by municipality, 2018–2021

Source: Moe /OECD.¹⁷¹

North Macedonia's education system has experienced a 9 per cent decrease in total student enrolment over the past decade (Figure 13), driven by a decreasing school-age population. Upper secondary schools saw the largest drop (24 per cent), while pre-primary enrolment increased by 139 per cent from 2006 to 2022. However, the coverage of pre-primary education at only 27 per

cent remains low.¹⁷² The change in enrolment varies across municipalities, with eastern and western areas seeing the most significant declines, while areas near the capital showed modest increases.¹⁷³ There were 182,245 students in the regular primary and lower secondary schools and 66,678 in upper secondary schools at the end of the school year 2022/2023.¹⁷⁴

Figure 14: Participation in organized learning

Source: UNESCO/Transmone.org.

Participation in organized learning (Figure 14) one year before entry to the mandatory primary school rose slightly from 47 per cent in 2017 to 50 per cent in 2022, which is significantly lower than the EU average of 96.2 per cent and lower than in all the countries in the region. Low enrolment in early childhood education contributes to poor foundational skills, which, in turn, leads to low school readiness and weak academic performance throughout students' schooling.

In 2022/23, administrative data from the State Statistical Office (SSO) reported a primary education completion rate of 99.2 per cent, with no gender disparity, aligning with the EU average of 99 per cent. For upper secondary education, the completion rate was slightly lower at 97.3 per cent (99.6 per cent for girls and 99.4 per cent for boys), exceeding the EU average of 87 per cent.¹⁷⁵

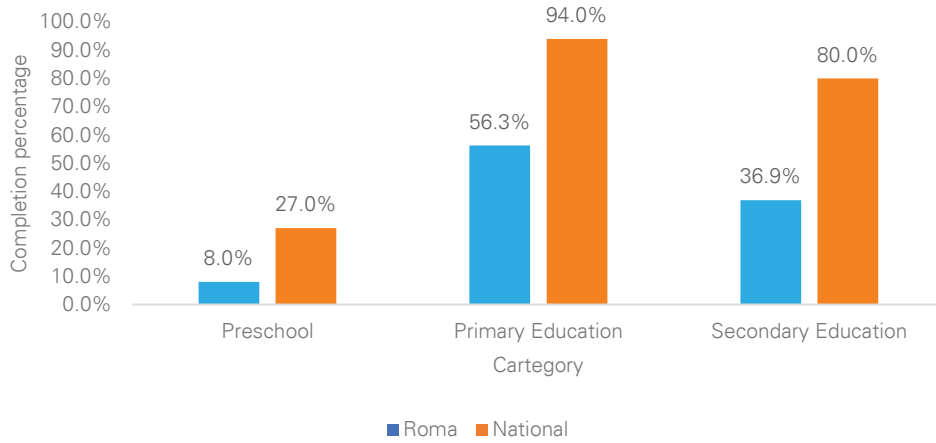
However, 2019 MICS data indicate that only 87.4 per cent of children aged 17–19 completed upper secondary school, suggesting potential gaps in administrative data management. While gender parity exists in basic education, boys are more likely to transition to upper secondary school (97 per cent vs. 93 per cent for girls).¹⁷⁶

Low-income families and Roma communities experience persistent barriers in accessing quality education, leading to lower enrolment and retention rates. The country has increased investments in Roma education, with initiatives such as the introduction of Roma mediators in primary education, targeted scholarships, and mobile social worker teams to improve support for marginalized students, indicating a solid commitment to educational inclusion.



inequality

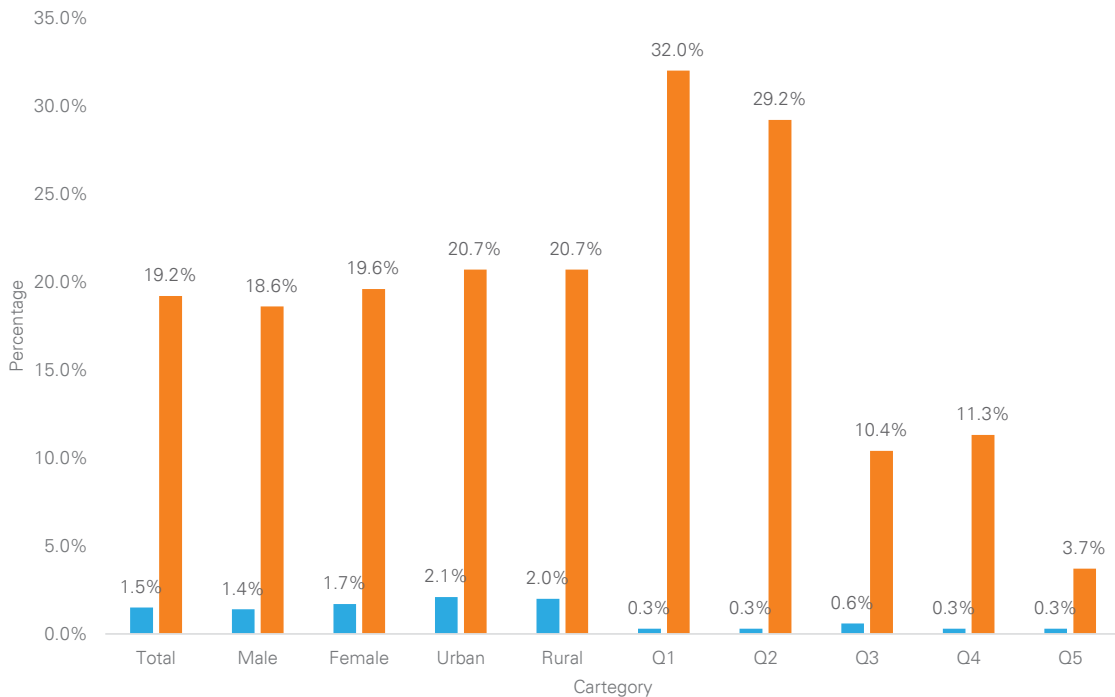
Figure 15: Primary and secondary completion rates: Roma vs. national averages



Source: MICS, 2019.

Yet, Roma children continue to encounter substantial barriers across all education levels, with enrolment rates far below national averages, with compounded disadvantages starting from pre-primary level. Less than 8 per cent of children in Roma settlements are enrolled in pre-primary education, while only 56.3 per cent Roma children aged 17–19 complete primary education (94 per cent nationally), 36.9 per cent complete upper secondary (87.4 per cent nationally in 2019) (Figure 15).¹⁷⁷ Within Roma settlements, girls’ enrolment declines further with each education level.

Figure 16: Share of children aged 6 o 14 that report being out of school



No recent data on out-of-school children (OOSC) was available although according to the World Bank report an estimated 14,000 primary and 22,000 secondary students are out of school.¹⁷⁸ The last available data (Figure 16) indicate that OOSC rate has dropped from 7.2 per cent in 2006 to 1.5 per cent in 2019, with poorer and urban children more likely to be out of school. In 2019, the OOSC rate for children in Roma settlements was 19.2 per cent, which is over 12 times the national average. Roma girls have a slightly higher likelihood of being out of school compared to boys, with a Gender Parity Index of 1.04.¹⁷⁹ **A 2017 study in North Macedonia identified barriers to primary**

education enrolment for out-of-school children, mainly of Roma origin. Financial constraints (93 per cent), absence during enrolment (38 per cent), and lack of interest (23 per cent) were primary factors. Many children faced high dropout rates due to relocation (69 per cent) and economic hardship (39 per cent), with challenges like family migration, lack of documentation, school segregation, and insufficient devices for online learning in 2020 exacerbating access issues.¹⁸⁰ Early marriage, affecting nearly all married girls (97 to 100 per cent), further hindered education, especially among Roma girls, as socio-economic and cultural norms often prioritize marriage over schooling.¹⁸¹

Efforts to integrate children with disabilities (Table 13) have advanced, yet barriers persist, including insufficient resources and public perceptions. The legislative frameworks support children with disabilities. The transformation of state special schools into resource centres in 2021 and a 680 per cent increase in the inclusive education budget from 2020 to 2023 have facilitated progress in inclusive education and enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education has shown steady progress, with 1,186 students enrolled in 2022, distributed between mainstream schools (332) and resource centres (854). However, there is a gender imbalance, with 65.94 per cent boys and 34.06 per cent girls. **Enrolment in upper secondary special education is notably lower, reflecting a gap in transition.**

Table 13 Comparison of Number of Students with Disabilities in Education (2015 vs 2022)

Education level	2015	2022	Europe and Central Asia
Preschool education	174	289	0.69
Primary education (first to fifth grade)	359	332	0.69
Primary education (sixth to ninth grade)	380	321	0.69
Secondary education	260	244	0.69

Source: MOE / OECD, 2023.

80 per cent of secondary schools reported an absence of accessible pedagogical resources, and 63 per cent had no special educators on staff, indicating a substantial need for further efforts to achieve inclusive education.¹⁸⁴ The 2017 study of knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) highlighted significant barriers to inclusive education revealing that only 24 per cent of the public supported integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools, while 66 per cent expressed concerns that inclusion might negatively affect other students' learning.¹⁸⁵



inequality

A reduction in special primary schools from 44 in 2017/2018 to 36 in 2021/2022 aligns with inclusive reforms, and the number of educational assistants increased from 720 in 2022 to 820 in 2023.¹⁸² Despite some progress, many schools, especially in rural areas, still lack essential resources like assistive technologies, accessible infrastructure, and trained staff, which hinder the integration of students with severe disabilities. A 2018 survey found that, while 53 per cent of schools have ramps, most lack elevators, suitable restrooms, or accessible materials.¹⁸³ Furthermore,

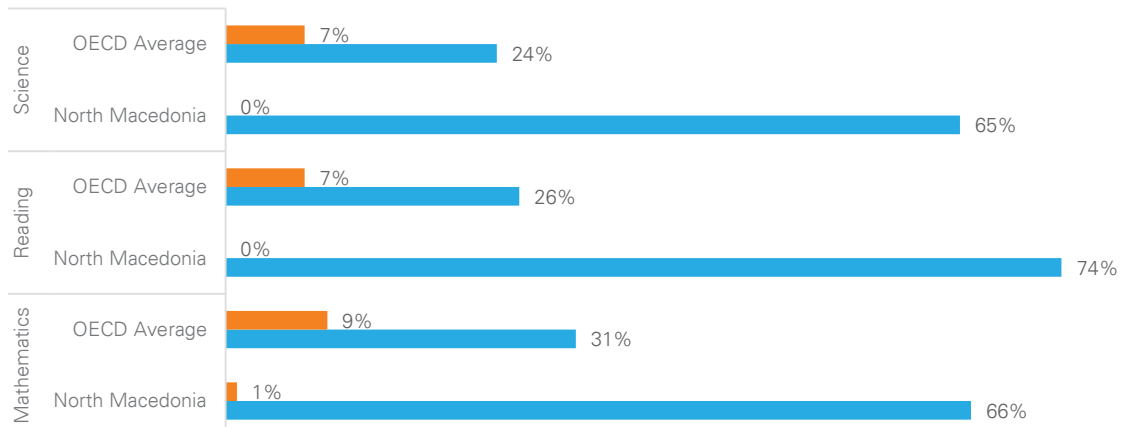
6.3 Learning quality and skills

Table 14: Learning quality and skills indicators

Indicator	2022	2018	EU average	Source
% of students at the end of lower secondary education reaching minimum proficiency in math – SDG 4.1.1	34%	39%	69.9%	PISA/OECD
% of students at the end of lower secondary education reaching minimum proficiency in reading – SDG 4.1.1	26%	45%	64.8%	PISA/OECD
% of youth (15–24 years) not in education, employment or training – SDG 8.6.1	19% (2023)	24%	12%	ILO

The quality of education in North Macedonia remains a significant concern (Table 14), as both national and international assessments indicate declining educational outcomes, with lower average scores in core subjects. Students in North Macedonia scored below the OECD average (Figure 17) in mathematics, reading, and science in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing. Only 34 per cent of students reached at least Level 2 proficiency in mathematics compared to the OECD average of 69 per cent. Similarly, only 26 per cent of students reached this level in reading (compared to the OECD average of 74 per cent), and 35 per cent in science (compared to the OECD average of 76 per cent).¹⁸⁶

Figure 17: Comparison of low and high performing students on PISA



Source: PISA/OECD, 2022.

These scores have been worsening since 2018, with considerable disparities between genders and among ethnic and socio-economic groups:

- Socio-economically advantaged students outperform disadvantaged students by 76 points in mathematics and 75 points in reading.¹⁸⁷
- Urban students outperform rural counterparts by nearly 1.5 years in science scores in 2019.
- MICS 2019 showed that only 20 per cent of children in Roma settlements have foundational



- Girls outperformed boys in both mathematics (by 6 points) and reading (by 26 points). Additionally, the share of low-performing students was slightly higher among boys than girls across these subjects.

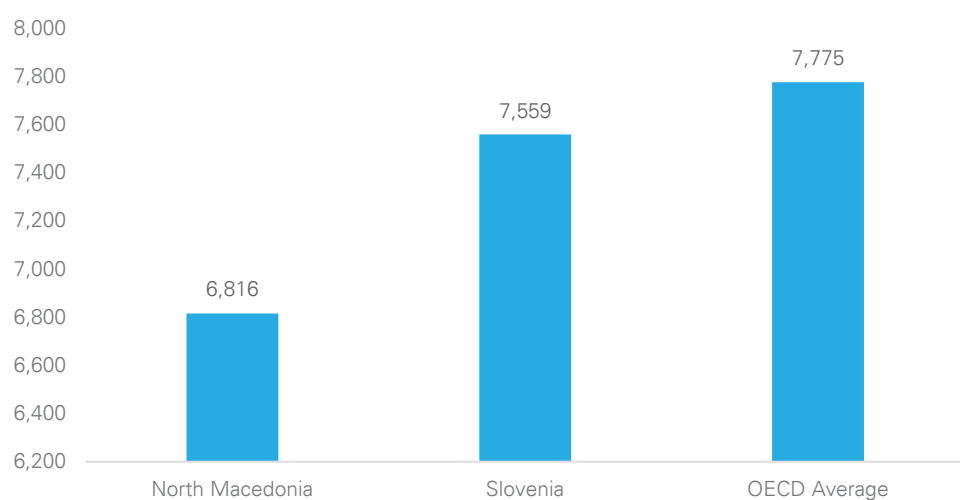
reading skills, compared to 45 per cent among the general population.¹⁸⁸

Matura exam results also show urban students achieving higher grades more frequently than rural students, reflecting regional inequities in educational quality. The low educational outcomes are the result of several interlinked challenges, including:

- **Curriculum relevance.** The pre-school and

general secondary education curricula are outdated and poorly aligned with competency-based standards and labour market needs. Teachers face limited support in implementing recent reforms, limiting the curriculum's relevance across different educational stages. The reforms in secondary education and vocational and technical education aiming to address this are pending adoption.

Figure 18: Instruction time between ages 6 and 14



Source: OECD/MOE.

- **Limited instruction time in schools (Figure 18).** Students receive nearly 900 fewer instructional hours by age 14 than the OECD average, with a total of 6,816 hours from ages 6–14, versus 7,775 hours in OECD countries and 7,559 hours in Slovenia. This limited time stems from overcrowded central schools two-thirds of which operate with double shifts and some with triple shifts, reducing available classroom hours per day.¹⁸⁹
- **Insufficient attention to teacher professional development.** Teachers face limited opportunities for professional development, with scarce resources for training and fragmented appraisal systems that do not fully support growth. Many teachers lack assessment literacy, often relying on rote, summative assessments instead of formative methods that could better guide student progress. In-school support teams are underutilized, focusing more on managing high-risk students than on broader instructional improvements. This situation constrains teachers' ability to address individual student needs effectively and limits overall teaching quality.¹⁹⁰
- **Barriers to parental engagement and awareness of effective parenting.** Parental engagement in education has declined, with only 41 per cent of students in PISA 2022 reporting parent-teacher discussions, down from 65 per cent in 2018. Awareness of early childhood development is also low; just 25 per cent link it to cognitive growth, 3 per cent to psychological growth, and under a third recognize ages 0–5 as vital for brain development.¹⁹¹ Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and

Roma communities face limited access to educational resources, including books and learning materials. Only 12.4 per cent of Roma children have three or more books at home, compared to 74.2 per cent of Macedonian children.¹⁹²

- **Underutilization of the multi-professional support teams.** Multi-professional support teams, which include pedagogical advisors, psychologists, and special education needs (SEN) advisors, are constrained in their roles, focusing mainly on high-risk students rather than enhancing instructional practices and teacher development school wide. The teams lack structured guidance and resources to support broad school improvement, limiting their impact on inclusive, effective teaching. Additionally, schools face shortages in resources for mental health and well-being services, leaving many students unsupported

amidst social and economic pressures, which affect their engagement, performance, and overall educational outcomes.¹⁹³

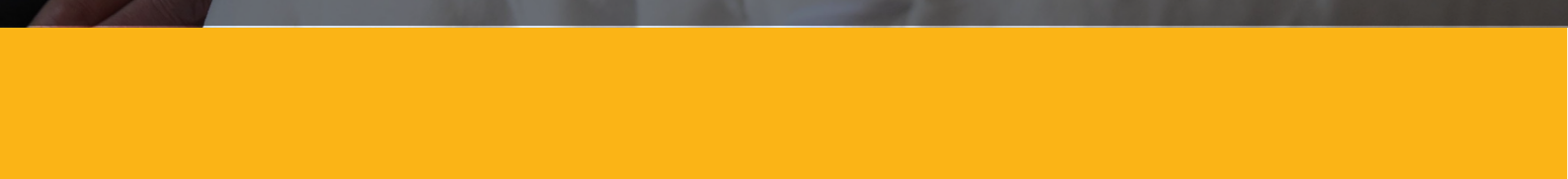
- **Challenges in transition from school to employment.** Despite ongoing reforms in vocational education and training (VET), there remains a disconnect between VET curricula and the evolving demands of the labour market. Without strong alignment, graduates face challenges in finding employment, especially those from low-income backgrounds or rural areas where career guidance and job placement support are limited. Many young people struggle to transition from education to stable employment, with an average of 2.5 years required for graduates to find stable jobs. Skill mismatches are common, particularly among VET graduates, with a significant proportion of young workers either under or over-educated for their positions.¹⁹⁴

Box 7: Recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child for North Macedonia

- Ensure full implementation of the national action plan and strategy (2020–2025) on child abuse and violence prevention, with adequate human, technical, and financial resources.
- Strengthen social work centres by increasing staff and ensuring 24/7 availability, while formalizing coordination with health and law enforcement sectors for a unified approach to supporting children at risk of violence. Ensure that child victims of all forms of violence have access to trauma-focused therapy and other appropriate rehabilitation.
- Implement mandatory reporting and child-friendly, multi-agency responses for all cases of violence against children, including neglect and sexual abuse, both offline and online.
- Ensure child victims and witnesses of violence are promptly interviewed by trained professionals in child-friendly facilities.
- Expand family social services, including parenting programs, nationwide with sufficient resources, and strengthen child-inclusive educational campaigns to raise awareness about ending violence, including sexual abuse, online violence, peer violence, and trafficking.
- Conduct comprehensive research on peer violence and carry out a national survey on violence against children, covering child sexual exploitation, reported cases, investigations, prosecutions, and sanctions.



FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND PROTECTION



7. FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND PROTECTION

7.1 Violence Against Children

Table 15: Share of children experiencing violence by caregiver

Indicator	2019	2017	EU average	Source
% of children (1–14 years) who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers – SDG 16.2.1	73%	N/A	61.3%	EU-SILC/SSO

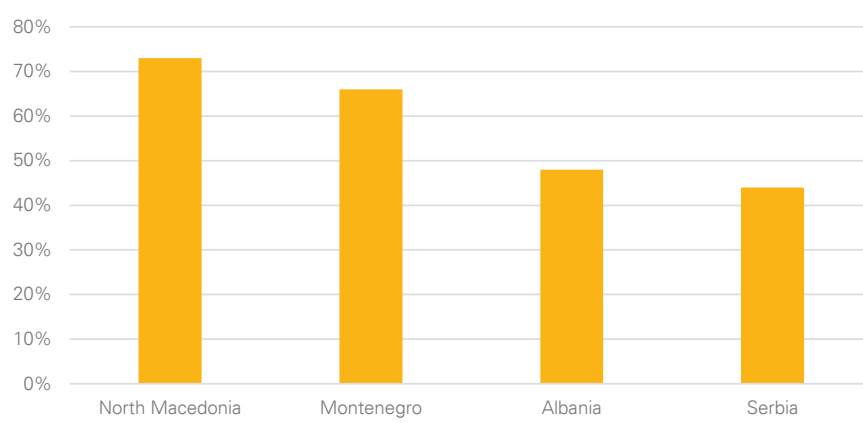
Violence against children remains a significant and complex issue, compounded by societal norms, systemic challenges, and limited access to specialized services. Despite legislative frameworks designed to protect children, the prevalence of violence (Table 15) remains the highest in the Western Balkan region, with indications that cases are significantly underreported due to cultural stigmas and gaps in institutional responses.

The available data show the following trends:

- High rates of physical punishment and violent discipline (Figure 19):** 73 per cent of children aged 1–14 experienced physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in 2019, the highest rate in the Western Balkan region. This rate is higher for boys (76 per cent) than girls (70 per cent) and reaches 82 per cent in Roma settlements.

SDG 16.2.1: 73% of (1-14) experienced any physical punishment and /or psychological aggression by caregivers (2019)- MICS
 highest in the region; BIH: 55%; AL: 48%; SR:B 44%
 higher for boys: 70% (girls 70%)
 higher in Roma Settlements 82%
 Higher for children with functional disabilities: 80%

Figure 19: Rates of physical punishment and violent discipline



Source: MOE / OECD, 2023.

In 2019, a knowledge, attitude and practices (KAP) survey found out that 79 per cent of parents in North Macedonia reported using at least one form

of violent discipline (psychological aggression or physical punishment), although the survey noted a gradual shift toward positive discipline practices.

- **Bullying is prevalent in educational institutions**, with 19 per cent of students reporting regular bullying in 2022, aligning with the OECD average (20 per cent). The rate is particularly high for LGBTIQ+ students, with 68 per cent experiencing bullying, ridicule, or threats during their schooling due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Digital violence against children, including online sexual exploitation and abuse, is increasing.** The number of shared explicit child abuse media files doubled from 6,045 in 2021 to 12,310 in 2023. Notable cases, such as the 2020 “Public Room” 203 incident, have underscored the serious consequences of online abuse, particularly involving the sharing of explicit content and cyberbullying, with women and children

being targeted for harassment. Increasing online time increases the risks.

Reported cases of violence against children have increased across various public institutions from 2018 to 2022, partly due to changes in reporting mechanisms. Police records reveal a sharp rise in registered cases, jumping from 153 in 2021 to 1,104 in 2022, with boys accounting for 59.8 per cent of victims. Social Work Centres and educational institutions report similar trends, with the highest incidence among children aged 6–14.

In the home, violence against women and violence against children intersect in multiple ways. They frequently occur in the same household, where children may witness intimate partner violence against their mothers and may themselves be maltreated or harshly punished by a caregiver.¹⁹⁵

Box 8: Violence against women/Gender-based violence data

A 2018 survey revealed that:

- 60 per cent of women believe violence against women is common, with 30 per cent considering it very common.
- Fourteen percent report experiencing physical or sexual violence since age 15, with higher rates among Macedonian-speaking women (16 per cent) than among Albanian-speaking women (7 per cent).
- Psychological violence by intimate partners is prevalent, affecting 44 per cent, while 30 per cent have faced sexual harassment since age 15, and 10 per cent in the past year.
- Seven percent report being stalked, including 4 per cent of Albanian-speaking women.

These figures are concerning, considering many children who witness domestic violence continue to experience it in some form as adults—either as victims or perpetrators.

The following challenges continue to affect the North Macedonia child protection efforts:

- **Limited financial investment for implementing the legal framework.** The country has strengthened its legal and policy framework with the 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code, the 2021 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, and the National Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children

from Violence (2020–2025). However, limited funding for the strategy and insufficient support for initiatives led by civil society organizations (CSOs) have weakened implementation. Both the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the EU have raised concerns over inadequate resources allocated to child protection.¹⁹⁶

- **Fragmented data collection and monitoring, with data gaps.** Inadequate and inconsistent data collection, with limited disaggregation

across institutions, has hindered effective responses to violence. Efforts are ongoing to digitalize case management systems, although bottlenecks persist. The National Coordination Body for Protection of Children Against Abuse and Neglect, reconstituted in 2017 to enhance data collection protocols and case management across sectors, remains under-resourced and lacks decision-making authority.¹⁹⁷

- **Under-resourced centres for social work (CSWs) and lack of integrated support:** CSWs are severely under-resourced, struggling with reduced staff, and increased caseloads. This shortage of qualified personnel, combined with administrative burdens, hampers effective case management, particularly in preventive social work.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, although multisectoral teams and assistance protocols have been established across 12 cities, their practical implementation remains problematic,¹⁹⁹ with insufficient interagency coordination. There is limited engagement from the health sector, which is faced with inconsistent reporting, and underdeveloped protocols for identifying, diagnosing, and referring victims, hindering effective response to violence.²⁰⁰
 - **Gaps in child-friendly and specialized preventive and response services.** There are no comprehensive services for child victims and witnesses of violence. Limited psychosocial support with significant service gaps is provided through shelters, emergency orders, and specialized care for girls and women with disabilities.²⁰¹ The underdeveloped Children's House (Barnahus) model is included in the National Strategy for the Prevention of and Protection of Children from Violence (2020–2025). Although the concept has been developed, no further progress has been made toward its implementation. Minimal offender intervention services further weaken protection and prevention of recidivism. This is compounded by the overall lack of prevention programmes of violence against children across sectors and lack of mental health and psychosocial support, including on child discipline, bullying, cyberviolence, sexual abuse and exploitations and gender-based violence.
 - **Challenges in reinforcing violence-free school environment.** North Macedonia has taken steps to promote a violence-free school environment through updated reporting guidelines and anti-bullying training programs introduced by the Bureau for Development of Education.²⁰² However, challenges remain due to understaffing in the Ministry of Education's specialized unit, inconsistent data handling, and the optional nature of anti-bullying training, highlighting the need for increased prioritization.²⁰³
 - **The response to online abuse and violence is hindered** by insufficiently trained law enforcement and social workers, and a lack of tailored services for child victims of online sexual abuse; there are also opportunities to enhance international cooperation to prosecute transnational child sexual exploitation, increasing CSO involvement in preventive measures, and raising awareness among parents and children about online risks.²⁰⁴
 - **Institutional discrimination and stigma restrict access to support services for Roma women and children.**²⁰⁵ They are linked to biases, lack of sensitivity training, stereotypical attitudes, language barriers, and limited resources.²⁰⁶ State institutions and the public generally overlook the seriousness of child marriage, often dismissing it as a cultural norm within Roma communities.²⁰⁷
- Cultural norms and societal attitudes.** Cultural norms often normalize violence against children and women, with corporal punishment widely accepted and traditional beliefs about discipline shaping parenting practices. Many parents, while recognizing potential harm—64 per cent acknowledge at least one negative effect of physical punishment—still justify its use; 59 per cent believe hitting is acceptable under certain circumstances, and 40 per cent view it as an effective disciplinary tool. Reflecting these attitudes, the 2019 KAP study found that 57 per cent of parents feel that others should not interfere in their parenting methods.²⁰⁸ This cultural backdrop discourages help-seeking and erodes trust in support systems, as fear, embarrassment, and mistrust of authorities deter victims from reporting.

Box 9: Recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child for North Macedonia

- Ensure full implementation of the national action plan and strategy (2020–2025) on child abuse and violence prevention, with adequate human, technical, and financial resources.
- Strengthen social work centres by increasing staff and ensuring 24/7 availability, while formalizing coordination with health and law enforcement sectors for a unified approach to supporting children at risk of violence. Ensure that child victims of all forms of violence have access to trauma-focused therapy and other appropriate rehabilitation.
- Implement mandatory reporting and child-friendly, multi-agency responses for all cases of violence against children, including neglect and sexual abuse, both offline and online.
- Ensure child victims and witnesses of violence are promptly interviewed by trained professionals in child-friendly facilities.
- Expand family social services, including parenting programs, nationwide with sufficient resources, and strengthen child-inclusive educational campaigns to raise awareness about ending violence, including sexual abuse, online violence, peer violence, and trafficking.
- Conduct comprehensive research on peer violence and carry out a national survey on violence against children, covering child sexual exploitation, reported cases, investigations, prosecutions, and sanctions.

7.2 Alternative Care

North Macedonia has significantly advanced child deinstitutionalization, transitioning from large institutions to family-based and smaller group care systems under the National Strategy on Deinstitutionalization (2018–2027). All large institutions have closed, favouring family-based alternatives, with community-based services gradually developing as supportive options.

The number of children in **residential care reduced from 235 children in 2015 to 99 in 2023 (Table 16)**.²⁰⁹ These children reside in small-group homes, and many of them are children with disabilities or in conflict with the law. This marks a key success in reform efforts.²¹⁰ However, despite a 2019 law prohibiting the placement of children under three in institutions, 20 such children were in small group homes in 2022, indicating routine placements rather than last-resort measures.²¹¹

The number of foster families has grown, with 365 families caring for 616 children in mid-2024.

Foster care is mostly managed by the Skopje centre, reflecting the significant progress in the promotion of foster care and strengthening of the system through the establishment of three foster family support centres, including one operated by SOS Children’s Village. Support centres offer assessments, training, and resources for foster families. Seventy-five children with disabilities were in foster care in 2022.

Table 16: Children in alternative care and adoption

Number of children in residential care (2023)	99
Number of children in foster care (mid-2024), including kinship care	616
Number of children in formal kinship care (2023)	135
Number of adopted children (2023)	19

Source: SSO, UNICEF, TransMonEE, Resource Center.

Children in **formal kinship care** numbered between 70 and over 135 from 2020 to 2023. **Adoption numbers have been steady between 17 and 21 adoptions in the recent years**, indicating limited use of this option. From 2020 to 2023, younger children, especially those aged 0–6, were more frequently adopted, aligning with global trends. In 2023, out of 19 adopted children, six had disabilities.

While foster care systems have made progress in recent years, with improvements in family-based care and support structures, the following challenges have been mapped, requiring additional investments and support:

- **CSW capacity gaps.** High turnover, limited capacity, inadequate training, and under-resourcing among CSW social workers undermine consistent case management, essential assessments, and trauma-informed care for children. This often results in procedural delays and administratively driven placements, with insufficient reviews and minimal efforts to maintain family connections for reintegration. The lack of resources limits the ability of CSWs to support family-strengthening efforts, hindering gatekeeping processes and leading to preventable family separations.
- **Foster care challenges.** Despite achievements in strengthening the foster care system, foster family support centres face resource and staffing shortages, affecting their full potential to recruit and train new foster parents. Strict eligibility criteria, such as a maximum age limit of 50, further reduce the pool of foster carers, while inadequate financial and other support deters families from fostering children with complex needs. This results in a shortage of foster families, particularly for children requiring specialized care, such as victims of domestic violence. There is also a **critical shortage of foster families willing to take in children in conflict with the law.** This limitation reduces the options for community-based rehabilitation, pushing more children toward institutionalized detention.
- **Barriers in adoption.** To increase adoption rates, the Family Law—currently under revision—needs to align with international standards. Furthermore, key challenges include a lengthy matching process that can take up to three years and a restriction preventing foster parents from adopting their foster children, which may not always serve the child’s best interests.
- **Challenges with small-group homes.** Small-group homes, while an improvement over large-scale institutional care, struggle to provide a true family-type environment due to high staff turnover, shift-based caregiving, and limited therapeutic and psychological support. Caregivers, previously working in large-scale residential care, often feel unprepared and may respond punitively to behavioural issues. The Ombudsperson has highlighted concerns about inadequate staff training, and the lack of exit strategies, particularly in homes for children with behavioural difficulties. Additionally, there is a lack of cross-sectoral coordination and specialized services, especially for addressing substance abuse, underscoring the need for collaborative support across healthcare, social work, and community services.
- **Limited transition planning and support:** Children aging out of care lack adequate transition support, with limited programs for independent living. Vulnerable groups, such as Roma children and those with disabilities, face heightened risks of homelessness and marginalization due to these gaps in community-based support and tracking post-care. Community-based services for children with complex needs are growing, aiming to reduce dependence on institutional care and support family reunification. However, challenges remain in expanding services like personal assistance, support for independent living, temporary accommodation, and specialized foster care to meet demand.
- **Financial limitations and challenges in sustaining the positive achievements of the reform.** The sustainability of deinstitutionalization efforts heavily relies on consistent national funding and political commitment, which has weakened with the political changes post-2020. Despite a substantial rise in the social services budget—from 25 million MKD in 2018 to 242 million MKD in 2022, with only 11 per cent allocated to child protection—concerns remain about insufficient funding for community-based care and over-reliance on external donors.

7.3 Justice For Children

The justice for children system in North Macedonia has made strides in legislative reform, notably with the adoption of the **Law on Justice for Children in 2024 and National Strategy for Prevention and Justice for Children (2022–2027)**. These frameworks outline goals such as reducing recidivism, supporting community-based alternatives to detention, and providing fair trial rights, aiming to align the system more closely with international standards.

Children and youth have participated in consultations for the National Strategy on Prevention and Justice for Children, supporting reintegration and reducing recidivism.²¹²

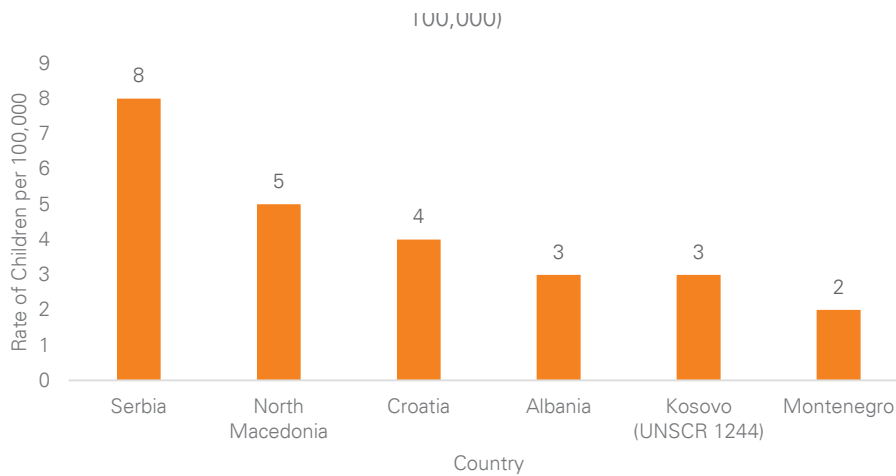
Despite these legislative advancements, the system faces challenges in implementation and infrastructure, with the following trends noted:

Table 17: Children in contact with the law

Child victims of crime registered by the police during the year (per 100,000 population) (2023)	367
Witnesses of crime	N/A
Children in conflict with the law in detention (2023)	17

Source: TIMEE Data Collection /Tranmone.org.

Figure 20: Rate of children in detention



Source: TIMEE Data Collection /Tranmone.org.

- Limited use of alternative measures.** Recent legislative shifts towards alternative measures aim to reduce the reliance on detention as a primary response for children in conflict with the law. From 2015 to 2022, child detention numbers fluctuated, ranging from 8 in 2019 to 29 in 2021, (Figure 20) with boys making up the majority. Most police stations lack child-specific facilities, raising concerns about child-friendly processes despite assurances that children are not held with adults.²¹³ In 2021, alternative measures were employed for 25 children and in 2022, only for four children.

Growth in institutional measures: There is an increasing application of institutional measures for children, with 18 children subjected to institutional

placements in 2022 (12 in 2021). **There is an increase in imprisonment,** with the number of children sentenced to prison rising from one in

2020, to two in 2021, and four in 2022, indicating a move toward more severe punitive approaches.²¹⁴

Several critical bottlenecks have been identified, impacting the effectiveness of interventions and highlighting areas for improvement:

- **Fragmented and inconsistent data collection.** Despite recent updates by the State Statistical Office (SSO) that allow to include the children in disaggregation of among victims, witnesses, and offenders, data collection remains incomplete and unreliable. Inconsistent data hampers the ability to monitor trends, assess program effectiveness, and make evidence-based decisions, particularly regarding recidivism rates, the number of child witnesses, and outcomes for children post-detention.²¹⁵ The 15-member Multi-stakeholder State Council for Prevention and Justice for Children oversees justice for children initiatives but struggles due to limited resources, unfilled positions, and inactive municipal councils, limiting its impact on the ground.²¹⁶
- **Barriers in training, child-friendly infrastructure and processes, and access to legal support.** The justice for children system faces significant challenges, including limited training for staff, insufficient child-friendly adaptations in courts and police stations, and a lack of dedicated facilities for children, with only 8 out of 38 police stations having specialized interview rooms, with only 20 per cent of child interviews conducted in these designated spaces in 2022.²¹⁷ These deficiencies raise concerns over the increase risks of secondary victimization. Additionally, less than half of children in juvenile cases had legal representation in 2022, with free legal aid remaining scarce.²¹⁸
- **Educational and corrective measures in North Macedonia's justice for children system are inadequate.** Facilities such as the Educational Correctional Facility in Volkovija, Tetovo, and the child prison in Ohrid do not provide access to education to children who are placed there, violating their right to education. Furthermore, they fail to provide sufficient vocational and psychological support, disrupting formal education and hindering rehabilitation, despite recent advocacy for legal amendments to ensure access to education.²¹⁹
- **Misconceptions about responsibility and rehabilitation.** Public understanding of justice for children remains limited, with misconceptions regarding the minimum age of criminal responsibility and the rehabilitative nature of justice for children.²²⁰
- **Early intervention and prevention services for children and families are limited,** with gaps in counselling, engagement programs, and effective monitoring. Resource constraints at Centres for Social Work, high staff turnover, and inadequate social worker training persist. Schools are required to provide counselling for issues such as academic performance, but execution and parental involvement are lacking.²²¹ Additionally, many municipal councils for prevention and justice for children are inactive due to insufficient local funding, hindering coordinated efforts to prevent children from coming into conflict with the law and protecting vulnerable children.²²²
- **Limited collaboration among institutions.** The social work centres, schools, law enforcement, and the judiciary work in isolation, lacking the active engagement needed to support children in conflict with the law. This disconnect prevents a unified, child-centred approach to justice.

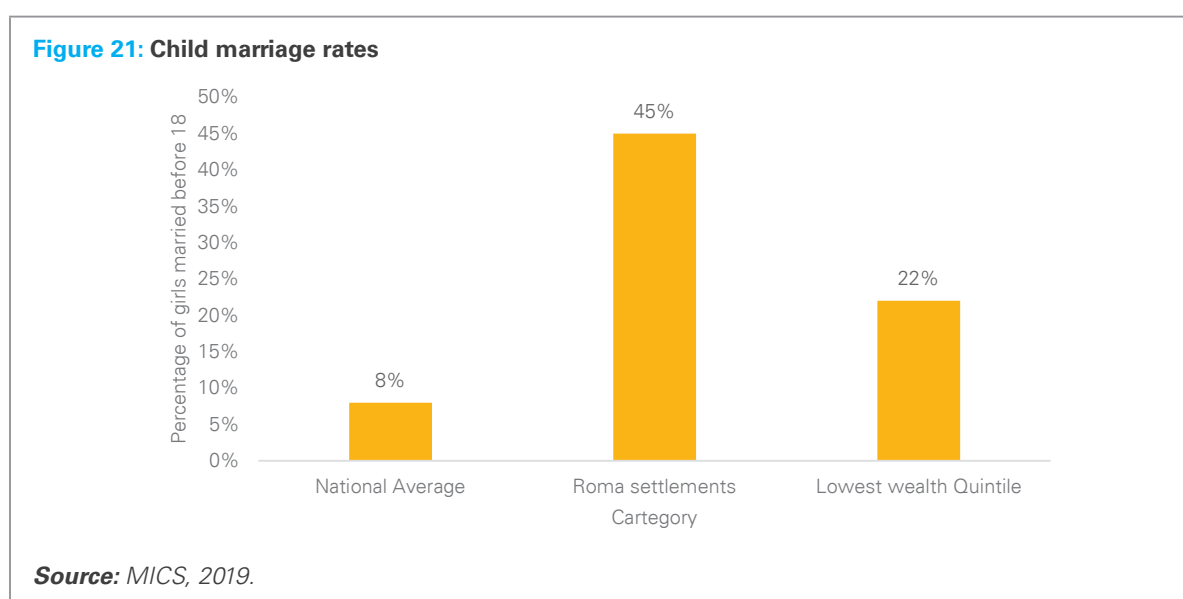
7.4 Child Marriage And Other Harmful Practices

Table 18: Share of women (20-24 years) married or in union before age 18

Indicator	2019	2016	EU average	Source
Percentage of women (20–24 years) married or in union before age 18 – SDG 5.3.1	8	N/Aa	N/A	MICS, 2019

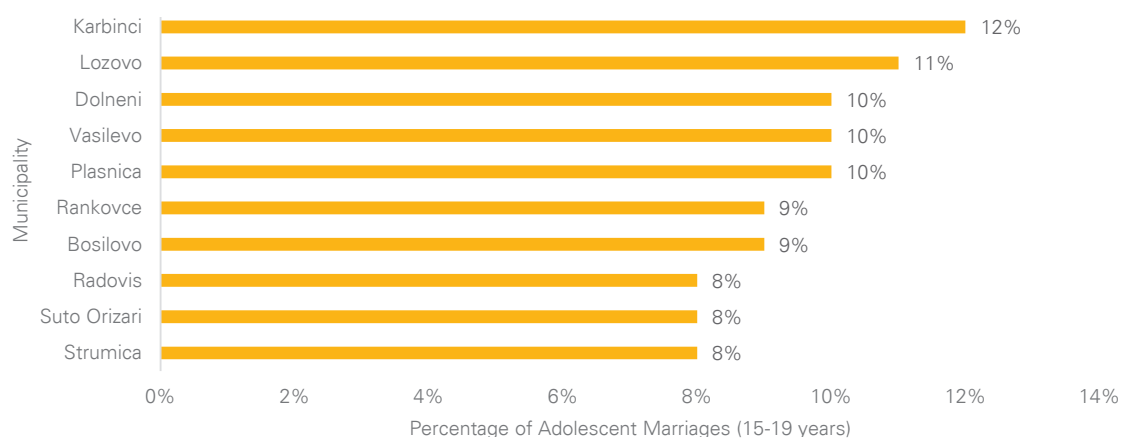
Child marriage remains a prevalent issue (Table 18), especially within the Roma community, and is influenced by socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, and limited access to education

and healthcare. At the Nairobi Summit of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD25) in 2019, North Macedonia committed to eliminating child marriage by 2030.²²³



Child marriage is affecting 8 per cent of girls, with significantly higher rates (Figure 21) in Roma communities (45 per cent), among girls from the lowest wealth quintile (39 per cent married before 18, compared to 0 per cent in the highest quintile) and young women with lower education attainment (29 per cent of those married before 18 have primary or no education, compared to <1 per cent

of those with higher education).²²⁴ The problem is slightly more prevalent in specific municipalities. However, underreporting due to unregistered marriages obscures the full extent of this child rights violation, with NGOs estimating that percentage can be as three times higher. Recent reports linking forced marriages to trafficking, including among girls.

Figure 22: Highest percentage of adolescent marriages by municipality

Source: SSO, 2021.

Child marriage (Figure 22) also poses a significant barrier to girls' education, especially among Roma communities. Approximately 20.5 per cent of girls at upper secondary school age are married, drastically reducing their educational prospects. This impact is particularly severe for Roma girls, where early marriage strongly correlates with school dropout rates—almost all married Roma girls (97 to 100 per cent) are out of school.

In contrast, out-of-school rates are lower for non-married girls, at 46 to 74 per cent.²²⁵ Despite efforts to reduce child marriage, several bottlenecks continue to hinder progress in effectively addressing this issue:

Inconsistencies in legal framework. North Macedonia has committed to eliminating child marriage by 2030, yet legal inconsistencies remain. Family Law allows children as young as 16 to marry with court approval, which conflicts with the Criminal Code that criminalizes the cohabitation of an adult with a minor and prohibits extramarital living with a child. Although the Istanbul Convention mandates criminalizing forced marriage, North Macedonia lacks specific legislation, relying instead on broader human and child trafficking statutes that do not fully meet the convention's requirements.²²⁶

Social Perceptions and limited interventions and support. State institutions and the public generally lack awareness of the severity of child marriage as an issue needing systematic intervention,²²⁷

often viewing it as a cultural norm within Roma communities. This perception hinders efforts to address child marriage as gender-based violence, treating it as a customary practice rather than a violation warranting legal and social action.²²⁸

Limited availability of preventive and response services.

High dropout rates, minimal sexual and reproductive health education, and healthcare access, along with stigma restrict young married girls' options, pushing them into early domestic roles. The need for contraception is evident, as child marriage is often justified by pregnancy and preserving "family honour." Additionally, there is limited ongoing support for child brides, particularly in rural areas, where access to counselling, healthcare, and education is scarce. This gap leaves young brides isolated, at greater health risk, and with few opportunities for personal development.²²⁹

Cultural and social norms and limited opportunities.

In some communities, particularly among the Roma, deeply rooted cultural norms around gender roles and family honour drive child marriage, often perceived as economic relief in poverty-stricken areas. Additionally, migration patterns—such as grooms from abroad seeking brides in North Macedonia—sustain this practice, as families view these unions as potential opportunities for a better life, though this connection requires further study.²³⁰

Box 10: Recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child for North Macedonia

- Implement targeted measures to eradicate child marriage and raise awareness about the negative impacts of such harmful traditional practices on children, particularly among the Roma population.



**POVERTY AND ADEQUATE
STANDARD OF LIVING**

8. POVERTY AND ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING

8.1 Poverty And Social Protection

Table 19: Poverty indicators

Indicator	2021	2018	EU average	Source
% population living below the national poverty line – SDG 1.2.1	23%	22%	16.9%	EU-SILC/SSO
% of children living below the national poverty line – SDG 1.2.1	32.7%	29.3%	16.1%	EU-SILC/SSO
% Percentage of children/households receiving child/family cash benefit – SDG 1.3.1	23%	n/a	88.3%	ILO/SSI

Significant reforms were initiated in North Macedonia's social protection system in 2019, notably with the adoption of new social protection

- Social assistance (Table 20) expanded through the Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA)**, raising income eligibility and broadening coverage to 35,748 households by 2023. Introduction of the GMA increased both income eligibility thresholds and benefit amounts, positively impacting the financial stability of vulnerable households.²³¹
- The number of child allowance beneficiaries increased from 5,517 in 2017 to over 45,000 in 2023** due to updated eligibility criteria.²³² **Introduction of educational allowances, conditional on attendance**, is supporting low-income families in prioritizing education.²³³

A new case management approach was implemented in social work centres, providing a holistic view of beneficiaries' needs. This system allowed for better coordination among social services, offering targeted support to families with complex needs.

The 2019 Social Protection Law expanded community-based social services, including personal assistance, respite care, and kinship care, specifically benefiting children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. **The social service reforms now empower municipalities and private providers** in delivering tailored local services, while the Ministry and social work centres focus

laws and adjustments to child protection and health insurance frameworks. Some of the key achievements included:

Table 20: Social assistance

Category	2014	2018	2022
Number of children receiving special benefits	7,165	7,235	6,404
One-time monetary assistance for first newborn	8,773	7,413	6,016
Number of children receiving child benefits	17,602	9,175	42,417
One-time monetary assistance for second newborn	N/A	N/A	5,455

Source: SSO.

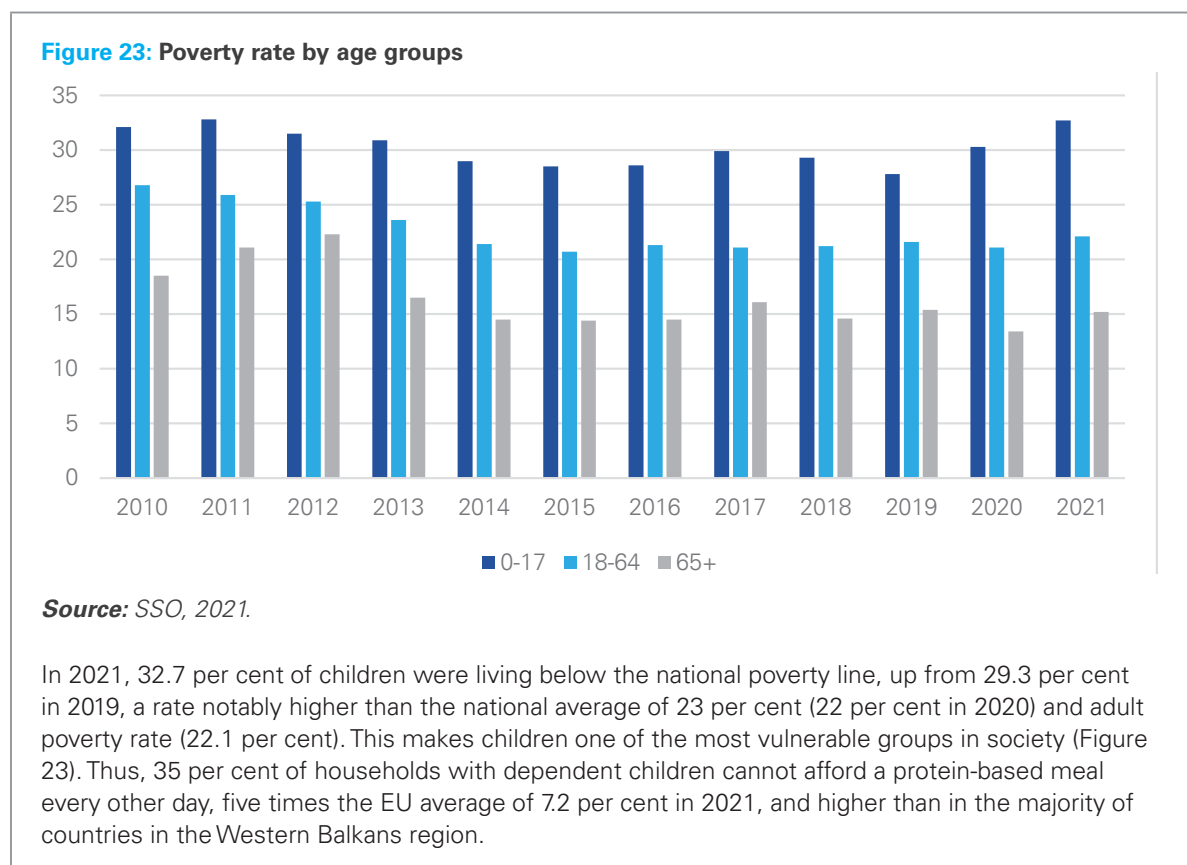
on setting standards and financing. Key innovations include new financing models and licensing for non-public providers, and support for beneficiary activation through coordinated planning.²³⁴

Despite these advances however, child poverty has been rising and remains a pressing issue. Current poverty levels, which are higher than the 2015 baseline, are well off reaching the SDG targets.

In 2021, 32.7 per cent of children were living below the national poverty line, up from 29.3 per cent in 2019, a rate notably higher than the national average of 23 per cent (22 per cent in 2020) and adult poverty rate (22.1 per cent). This makes children one

of the most vulnerable groups in society (Figure 23). Thus, 35 per cent of households with dependent children cannot afford a protein-based meal every other day, five times the EU average of 7.2 per cent in 2021, and higher than in the majority of countries in the Western Balkans region.

Key challenges and bottlenecks persist in North Macedonia’s social protection system, as evidenced by the continued high levels of poverty and include:

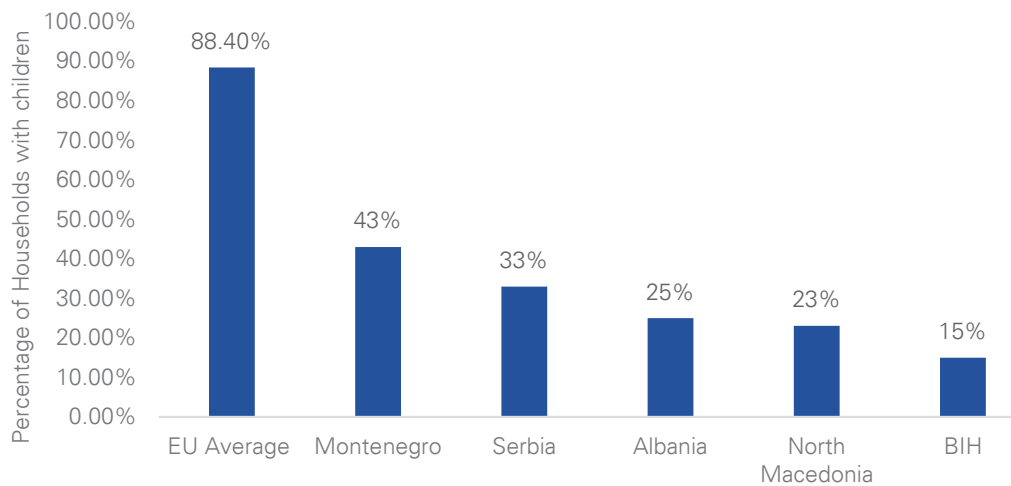


The ethnic disparities are profound (Table 21), with European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Survey of 2021 and 2018/2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) **highlighting that Roma population faces drastically higher levels of deprivation compared to the general population**, with 91 per cent Roma population experiencing material deprivation in 2018/2019, and 79 per cent of Roma children living in households at risk of poverty in 2021. Additionally, over half of Roma households suffer from housing deprivation, and 90 per cent live in overcrowded conditions, far exceeding national averages.

Table 21: Poverty and deprivation among Roma

Indicator	Roma Population (%)	General Population (%)
Children aged 0–17 at risk of poverty (%)	79	29
Children living in severe material deprivation (%)	69	32
People living in housing deprivation (%)	50	17

Source: FRA, 2021.

Figure 23: Poverty rate by age groups

Source: SSO, 2021.

The current coverage and adequacy of cash benefits thus remain insufficient. In 2019, social assistance programs reached more than one-third of households in the poorest quintile, a higher rate than in many Western Balkan countries but still much lower than the 53 percent average for Europe and Central Asia indicating that there is still scope to improve coverage among the less well-off. Furthermore, overall, only 50.5 per cent of the population is covered by social protection compared to the EU average of 92.6 per cent, and **just 22.6 per cent of households with children from 0 to 15 years old receive child or family cash benefits, far below the EU's 88.4 per cent.** These gaps emphasize the need to expand coverage and improve awareness to support vulnerable populations effectively.

Key challenges and bottlenecks persist in North Macedonia's social protection system, as evidenced by the continued high levels of poverty and include:

- **Insufficient social assistance funding.** In 2019, social protection expenditure exceeded 11 per cent of GDP, with social insurance alone accounting for 9.9 per cent, surpassing the Western Balkans average of 8.5 per cent. Although **a 2019 reform increased social assistance spending to 1.3 per cent of GDP**, this remains well below the regional average of 2.1 per cent and lags peer countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Investment in social services is minimal, under 0.1 per cent of GDP, indicating limited government engagement in essential services.²³⁵ Furthermore, while the reform has made significant progress, challenges remain in terms of sustainability, as ongoing financing and infrastructure development are needed to support the new system.²³⁶
- **Inadequacy and low coverage of social benefits.** Despite recent reforms and the introduction of the GMA, which resulted in 42,417 children receiving benefits in 2022, over 120,000 children still live in poverty, underscoring the need for further improvements in social protection.
- **Inadequate institutional generation and dissemination of data on child poverty.** The lack of recent disaggregated data on child poverty and material deprivation limits the understanding of multidimensional child poverty and hampers evidence-based adjustments to social protection services.
- **Limited capacity and resources in social services:** CSWs, essential for delivering social assistance, services, and integrated

case management, face challenges due to staff shortages, heavy workloads, and limited training, with regional disparities further impacting their capacity, particularly outside urban centres.

- **Weaknesses in provision of integrated cross-sectoral support to address complex needs of families living in poverty and excluded.**

An integrated case management system was introduced to improve social services, but its implementation faces challenges, including high workloads, limited technical capacity, and resistance to a single case manager model in social work centres. Fragmentation, due to insufficient collaboration across healthcare, education, and social sectors, as well as a lack of data-sharing protocols and service integration, reduces the system’s effectiveness, particularly for vulnerable children. These barriers prevent the full potential of the reform from being realized.²³⁷

- **Barriers to access basic social services for the most disadvantaged households.**

Access to basic social services remains limited for disadvantaged households with children due to restrictive eligibility criteria, gaps in

social assistance programs, and exclusion from health insurance. Efforts to decentralize services to municipalities face challenges from limited municipal capacity, resulting in disparities in service availability, inadequate infrastructure, and reduced provisions in rural areas and Roma settlements, especially outside the capital.²³⁸ Low-income families experience significant financial pressures, with additional burdens from school-related and healthcare costs (42 per cent of health care cost are out-of-pocket expenses nationwide), and energy poverty, with approximately 13 per cent of household income spent on energy in 2020.²³⁹

- **Communication and outreach weaknesses and barriers to access prevent many families, especially in marginalized and impoverished areas,**

from being informed about their entitlements, with 27 per cent of eligible households during COVID-19 unaware of or discouraged from applying for education allowances.²⁴⁰ This includes low awareness, procedural barriers, perceived and institutional discrimination, corruption, distrust in institutions, and fear of repercussions for those in the grey economy.²⁴¹

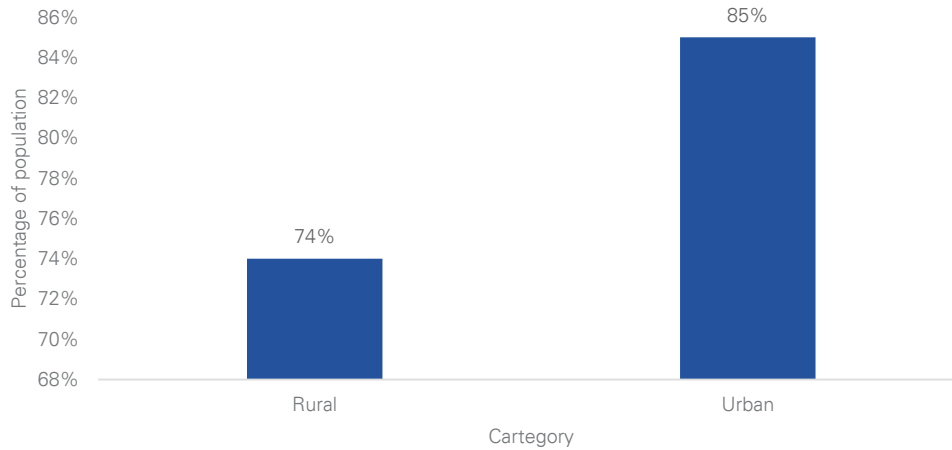
8.2 Water And Sanitation

Table 22: Water and sanitation indicators

Indicator	2022	2017	EU average	Source
% population using safely managed drinking water – SDG 6.1	80%	80%	97.4%	WHO/UNICEF
% of population using safely managed sanitation service – SDG 6.2	12%	12%	89.3%	WHO/UNICEF

Significant portions of the population still lack access to safely managed water and sanitation services (Table 22). As of 2022, 20

per cent of the population, or 1 in 5 people, did not have access to safely managed drinking water services.

Figure 25: Percentage of population using safely managed drinking water services

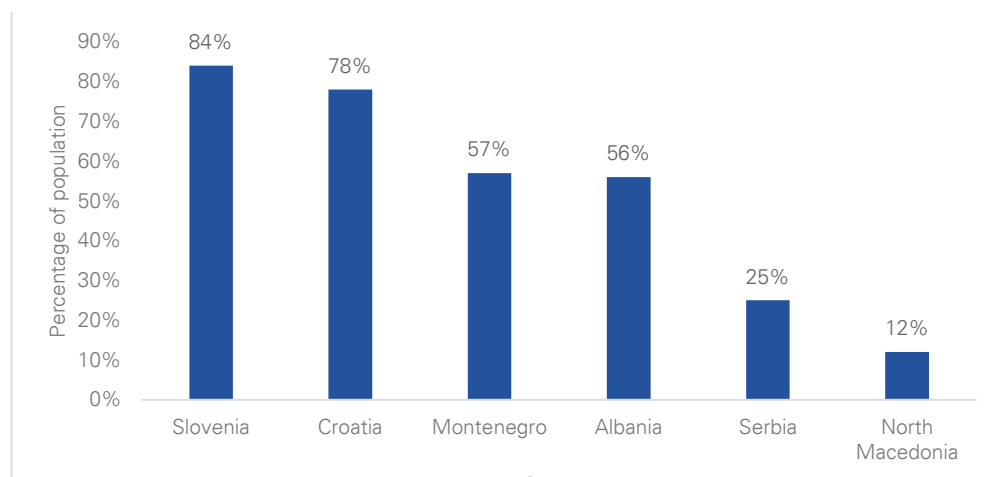
Source: WHO/UNICEF/Transmone.org.



inequality

Furthermore, rural and remote areas, and Roma communities, still face significant disparities (Figure 25): 85 per cent of urban residents have access to safe drinking water, compared to only 74 per cent in rural areas. Over recent years, the access rate has remained relatively stable, with no significant improvement or decline since 2016. Additionally, **7 per cent of Roma live without indoor tap water compared to 2 per cent nationwide.**²⁴²

The basic sanitation coverage has shown improvement, increasing from 84.3 per cent in 2017 to 86.8 per cent in 2022.²⁴³ Socio-economic and ethnic inequalities persist: according to European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) 2021 survey, **only 69 per cent of the poorest households in Roma settlements use basic sanitation facilities** not shared with other households.²⁴⁴

Figure 26: Percentage of population using safely managed sanitation services

Source: WHO/UNICEF/Transmone.org.

While there is almost universal access to basic sanitation, significant challenges persist in access **to safely managed sanitation** with only 12 per cent of the population having access. (Figure 26). Access to safely managed sanitation means that sanitation system is designed and used to separate human excreta from human contact at all steps of the sanitation service chain from toilet capture and containment through emptying, transport, treatment (in-situ or offsite) and final disposal or

end use. The access is far below the EU average of 89.3 per cent and the lowest in the region and varies between urban (8 per cent) and rural (18 per cent) areas.

The low access²⁴⁵ is linked to ongoing challenges from urbanization, climate change, old infrastructure and inadequate administrative capacities, which complicate efforts to fully align with EU legislation.²⁴⁶



PARTICIPATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS

9. PARTICIPATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS

9.1 Child And Youth Participation

Youth participation and engagement in decision-making has seen notable legislative progress, especially with the adoption of the **Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies** in January 2020 which mandates the establishment of youth councils in municipalities and the creation of youth centres to foster active involvement. **National Youth Strategy for 2023–2027** has been adopted in September 2023. This strategy involved thematic groups covering critical areas like youth participation, education, and employment, with 24 working groups engaging institutions, civil society organizations, and youth across the country.

Other legislative changes, such as the **Law on Primary Education**, promote participation through student parliaments and school ombudsperson roles, allowing students to engage in school governance. Additionally, the **Law on the Protection of Children** and the **Law on Justice for Children** emphasize the rights of children to be informed, express opinions, and be heard in matters concerning them.²⁴⁷ The **Strategy for Positive Parenting**, currently pending adoption, further encourages children to voice their opinions and expect responses from their parents, creating a family environment where children feel valued.²⁴⁸

Despite this legal framework, challenges remain in the practical implementation of youth and child participation initiatives. Data on adolescent and youth participation is limited, including their engagement in administrative processes, with recent studies highlighting very low civic and political engagement among young people.²⁴⁹ Key findings include:

- **Social inactivity.** Approximately **80 per cent** of young people describe themselves as socially inactive, with active participation declining from 26 per cent in 2021 to 20 per cent in 2023.
- **Perceived lack of influence.** A majority (54 per cent) feel they cannot influence authorities, and seven out of ten young people have never been consulted by local or national authorities.
- **Low organizational involvement.** Most youth (74.4 per cent) are not part of any organization, showing a decrease in civic engagement. Only 9.9 per cent of youth participate in political parties, while 5 per cent are active in youth or civic organizations.
- **Not in education, employment or training (NEET).** in 2021 there were approximately 94,000 young people 15–29 years of age who were not in employment, education or training, corresponding to approximately one-quarter (24.2 per cent) of the total youth population. The rate was higher for girls (26.1 per cent), then boys (22.4 per cent),²⁵⁰ while 4 out of 5 Roma youth were NEETs.²⁵¹

Additional gaps and trends in youth participation:

- **Education.** Despite the **Law on Primary Education** providing for student parliaments and school ombudsperson to facilitate participation, data on the functionality of these bodies is scarce. Secondary schools lack consistent mandates for similar structures, with individual schools independently deciding on their establishment.²⁵²
- **Local-level participation.** While the **Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies** requires the creation of local youth councils by 2023, less than a quarter of municipalities had implemented these councils due to financial and administrative constraints.²⁵³ This lack of accountability and oversight has hindered the establishment of functional councils in many municipalities, reducing youth participation opportunities at the community level.²⁵⁴
- **Insufficient funding.** The **National Action Plan on Youth 2023–2027** aims to create a sustainable funding mechanism for youth-focused activities, with a focus on rural and regional equity.²⁵⁵ However, funding for youth-led initiatives remains inconsistent, with limited incentives for municipalities to support local youth councils and civic engagement programs.²⁵⁶

- **Socio-cultural barriers.** Societal norms and stereotypes discourage children’s active participation in public discourse,²⁵⁷ especially among vulnerable groups such as girls, rural children, and Roma youth. Disinterest and apathy, stemming from a lack of supportive environments, also reduce youth engagement.
- **Financial constraints.** Many youth organizations face budget challenges, relying on low-cost or volunteer-based projects, which restrict their ability to engage effectively. Limited public funding and dependence on international support jeopardize the sustainability of youth initiatives.²⁵⁸
- **Structural mechanisms.** Standardized mechanisms for child and adolescent participation are lacking. Organizations like **UNICEF** and other civil society organizations (CSOs) have supported initiatives aiming to strengthen participation of children, such as the Kids Takeover Assembly event on World Children’s Day 2023 and the **U-Report platform**, which provides youth with a channel to voice community concerns.²⁵⁹ However, there is often limited follow-up on children’s contributions to policy discussions. Without clear feedback channels, children and adolescents may feel undervalued, reducing motivation for active involvement.²⁶⁰

9.2 Information, Internet And Protection Of Privacy

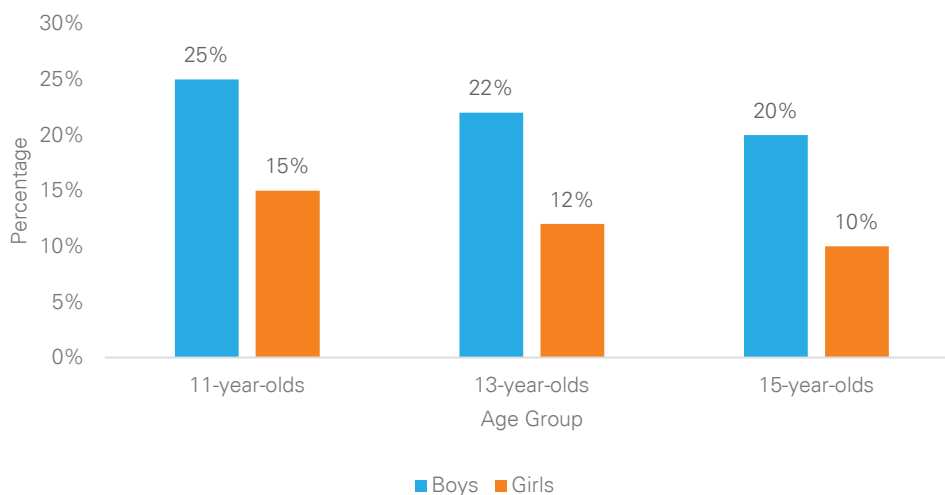
Table 23: Internet users indicator

Indicator	2022	2017	EU average	Source
Internet users per 100 inhabitants – SDG 17.8.1	84	74	89,9	SS0

The Macedonian government has launched various initiatives to address digital literacy and internet safety. Key strategies, including the **Strategy for Innovation (2012–2020)**²⁶¹ and the **National Youth Strategy (2023–2027)**,²⁶² emphasize media and digital literacy. The Bureau for the Development of Education, with support from the USAID-funded YouThink project, has created a **Media Literacy Framework** integrated into primary education, covering subjects from first to sixth grade. Information and communication technology (ICT) education has been strengthened, with ICT now a compulsory primary education subject, allocating 150 hours to foster digital competence—a regionally notable level of instruction.²⁶³

The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMU) actively promotes media literacy through initiatives such as the Media Literacy Network, Media Literacy Days, surveys, and training programs. Additionally, civil society organizations, through the Media Literacy Network, support youth and the public in developing critical thinking and media content evaluation skills, specifically targeting disinformation.²⁶⁴ Nevertheless, challenges remain, including:

- **Digital literacy gaps and online safety.** Internet usage among youth in North Macedonia is nearly universal, with 98.8 per cent of young people (aged 15–24) accessing it daily. However, digital literacy remains limited; only 13.7 per cent of this age group have advanced digital skills, significantly below the EU average of 39.5 per cent.²⁶⁵ Furthermore, 41 per cent of young people feel indifferent about their online safety, and 24 per cent know someone who has experienced data misuse.²⁶⁶
- **Internet access inequity.** Despite extensive advancements in digital infrastructure, with 99.6 per cent 4G/LTE broadband coverage across the country,²⁶⁷ a digital divide persists, especially among marginalized groups. Roma communities, low-income families, and persons with disabilities face limited internet access, **with around 30 per cent of residents in Roma settlements lacking home internet in 2019, compared to the national average of 19 per cent.**²⁶⁸ Affordability issues and regulatory barriers further limit digital inclusivity for low-income groups, people with disabilities, refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless individuals, deepening existing inequities.²⁶⁹

Figure 27: Prevalence of adolescents at risk of problematic gaming by age group

Source: WHO, 2023.

- Excessive online time with high prevalence of problematic gaming (Figure 27).** 67 per cent of teenagers spend over five hours online daily, with much of their activity centred around gaming and social media.²⁷⁰ The country has a high prevalence of adolescents, particularly boys at risk of problematic gaming, with 28 per cent of 11-year-old boys and 16 per cent of girls affected—both figures exceeding the Eastern and Central Europe average of 12 per cent.²⁷¹ This extensive screen time, coupled with

limited awareness of responsible internet use, underscores an urgent need for comprehensive digital safety education and the need to strengthen media literacy to address these growing concerns.

The data suggest that strengthening media literacy across all education levels is essential, as schools—especially vocational institutions—provide limited support on internet safety, leaving parents as primary advisors.²⁷²



CROSS-CUTTING

10. CROSS-CUTTING

10.1 Roma Children

The State Statistical Office estimated the **Roma population at 46,000 in 2021, with around 20,000 Roma children aged 0–17 years, representing about 3.9 per cent of the child population.**²⁷³

However, this figure may be underreported due to challenges in census accuracy. The Council of Europe (CoE) suggests that Roma make up approximately 9.6 per cent (176,324) of the overall population, indicating the possibility of a higher child population among Roma than officially recorded.²⁷⁴

Roma children in North Macedonia experience the highest levels of deprivation across multiple indicators, reflecting a severe gap in access to healthcare, education, social protection, and other essential services. Structural barriers—such as limited funding, lack of tailored support, and institutional discrimination—restrict access to essential services, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exclusion. Discrimination often goes unreported due to fear or resignation, highlighting the need for targeted policies and resources to break this cycle and support Roma communities effectively.

High levels of poverty and material deprivation.

With 79 per cent of Roma children aged 0–17 at risk of poverty compared to the national average of 28 per cent, the economic disparity is stark. A significant percentage of Roma population live in housing deprivation (50 per cent vs. 17 per cent general population), with 69 per cent of Roma children facing severe material deprivation compared to 32 per cent of all children in the country. High unemployment and low education and training participation (60 per cent of Roma youth are not in employment, education, or training) compound these issues, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.²⁷⁵

Housing deprivation. Many Roma face inadequate housing conditions, particularly overcrowding, with around 90 per cent living in overcrowded households (compared to 44 per cent national average). This overcrowding severely impacts privacy, quality of life, and health. Additionally, 7 per cent of Roma households lacks access to tap water within the dwelling, creating significant hygiene and health challenges (compared to 2 per

cent of general population).²⁷⁶ Legalizing Roma homes remains a slow and complicated process. Approximately 28 per cent of Roma lack legal housing status due to complex administrative procedures and prohibitive costs, further aggravating their living conditions.²⁷⁷

Health and nutrition disparities. Health disparities are evident, with 74.5 per cent of Roma children aged 24–35 months fully immunized, compared to the national average of 84 per cent. Nutritional deficiencies are also prevalent, as 12 per cent of Roma children under five experience stunted growth (national average: 4 per cent), and only 26 per cent meet minimum diet diversity standards (national average: 54 per cent).²⁷⁸ Roma community, including children, faces challenges in obtaining health insurance coverage. As of 2021, only 69 per cent of Roma individuals reported having medical insurance, compared to 90 per cent in the general population.²⁷⁹ Limited access to health insurance exacerbates health disparities, as uninsured individuals often forgo necessary medical care due to cost concerns. This disparity is influenced by factors such as lack of personal identification documents, unemployment, and systemic discrimination.²⁸⁰ The 40 Roma mediators registered in 2022 could only marginally facilitate access to healthcare and outreach services.²⁸¹

Wide disparities in education. Roma children are at a disadvantage from the start in education, with, according to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), only 12 per cent of children aged 3–6 attending early childhood programs (Fundamental Rights Agency study estimation is even lower, at 2 per cent), well below the national rate. This limited early education access sets back foundational learning and development, contributing to poor educational outcomes. By the time they reach school age, many Roma children struggle to catch up. For primary education, 78.8 per cent of children aged 17–19 in Roma settlements completed school in 2019, significantly lower than the national average of 98.3 per cent. Similarly, for lower secondary education, the completion rate among Roma adolescents aged 17–19 was 56.3 per cent, compared to the national average of 94.0 per

cent. The gap widens further for upper secondary education, where only 36.9 per cent of Roma youth aged 21–23 completed school, in stark contrast to the national average of 87.4 per cent. Language barriers, poverty, discrimination, and limited parental involvement further reduce education quality. Parental engagement is low; while 83.4 per cent of parents receive report cards, only 32.8 per cent attend school celebrations, and a mere 7.6 per cent participate in parent-teacher meetings, compared to 25.7 per

High child protection concerns. Roma children (Table 24) face critical child protection concerns, with high rates of violent discipline, early marriage, and overrepresentation in correctional facilities. Approximately 82 per cent of Roma children aged 1–14 experience violent discipline, exceeding the national average of 73 per cent. Roma children constitute 75 per cent of those in correctional institutions in 2020 (9 out of 12)²⁸⁴ and 97 per cent of child beggars (328 out of 337 found on streets).²⁸⁵

Early marriage is also prevalent, with 46 per cent of Roma women aged 20–24 married before the age of 18, compared to a national average of 8 per cent. High rates of early pregnancies among Roma adolescents—19 per cent of females aged 15 to 19 have been pregnant or given birth before their 18th birthday, compared to 3.5 per cent nationally—further reflecting the protection challenges. Gender-based violence is widespread, yet only 60 per cent of Roma women who report domestic violence receive information on their rights, and few receive medical care after reporting abuse.²⁸⁶ **Institutional biases and lack of tailored approaches to address Roma children’s unique needs prevent effective service provision.**²⁸⁷

cent nationally. Just 12 per cent of children have three or more books at home—Roma children often lack the foundational start necessary for academic success.²⁸² Early marriage also compounds dropout rates, as almost all married Roma girls (97 to 100 per cent) leave school.²⁸³ Initiatives such as doubling the number of Roma mediators and increasing the Roma education budget reflect efforts to address these barriers yet are not yet sufficient for the scale of existing challenges.

Table 24: High protection concerns

75% of children in educational-correctional institutions are Roma (9 out of 12).
97% of child beggars are Roma (328 out of 337 found on streets; 72% boys).
46% of Roma women aged 20–24 were married before 18.

Source: MICS, 2019, Ombudsperson, 2020, 2019.

Institutional discrimination and social stigma. The Strategy for Inclusion of Roma (2022–2030) highlights systemic racism against Roma, calling for its recognition in public policies and legislation.²⁸⁸ In 2021, 20 per cent of Roma reported discrimination in employment, education, healthcare and housing,²⁸⁹ with the EU Roma framework aiming to reduce this to 13 per cent by 2030.²⁹⁰ Widespread mistrust of institutions due to a history of exclusion and discrimination leads to low service utilization and reduced participation in service design by the Roma community. For example, 81 per cent of those facing harassment did not report incidents, often due to distrust of authorities or lack of support awareness, while significant percentage shared experiences of discrimination in job-seeking (25 per cent) and housing (19 per cent).²⁹¹

10.2 Disability

Table 25: Share of children with functional difficulties receiving disability cash benefits

Indicator	2022	2017	EU average	Source
Internet users per 100 inhabitants – SDG 17.1	84	74	89,9	SSO

Despite significant progress with deinstitutionalization and inclusive primary education reform, children with disabilities encounter numerous barriers to full participation in society, primarily due to systemic

gaps in policy implementation and resource allocation, while the absence of comprehensive data on children with disabilities restricts service provision and policy targeting.

The 2021 Census identified 2,255 children (0.61 per cent of the child population) as having disabilities, with a gender breakdown of 60 per cent boys and 40 per cent girls.²⁹² MICS 2019 found a higher prevalence, with 9 per cent of children experiencing functional difficulties, and Roma children (with 21 per cent) particularly affected, especially by communication difficulties (6 per cent among Roma children versus 2 per cent nationally) (Table 26).²⁹³

Table 26: Children with disabilities in North Macedonia

Total children with disabilities	2,255 (0.61% of child population)
Gender distribution	60% boys (1,357), 40% girls (898)
Children with functional difficulties	9% of children
Roma children with functional difficulties	21% of Roma children

Source: SSO/Census, 2021, MICS, 2019.

Major progress amid institutional and financial constraints for full inclusiveness.

North Macedonia has made notable strides in deinstitutionalization, achieving zero placements of children in large-scale institutions, and has positioned itself as a regional leader in inclusive education through primary education reforms to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schools. The pending adoption of the Law on Secondary Education and vocational education and training (VET) adjustments will further support these students’ transition to secondary education. However, full inclusiveness faces institutional and financial constraints. The European Commission has highlighted the lack of resources to fully implement the Law on Primary Education and the human rights-based disability assessment model.²⁹⁴

Disability assessment reform. Recent amendments to the Law on Social Protection and Primary Education promote a shift from a medical to a bio-psycho-social disability model based on the International Classification of Functioning, assessing overall functionality to connect children to essential services in healthcare, education, and social protection. In 2022, this system improved disability recognition for 7,651 children, though challenges persist, including waiting times, funding limitations, and some resistance from educators and parents. Ongoing efforts aim to address these barriers and strengthen children’s ability-focused assessments. With this improved service access, there is a need for further social welfare support and health insurance reforms, particularly regarding coverage for disability-related costs.²⁹⁵

Limited social and community services for children with disabilities. Deinstitutionalization efforts have transitioned many children to foster care or small group homes, but comprehensive community-based support remains lacking. The Law on Social Protection mandates services like personal assistance, temporary relief accommodation, and foster care for children with disabilities, yet many are not fully implemented, and service quality remains low. Too few day care centres in larger cities, inadequate transportation, and lack of access to early childhood care hinder caregivers’ employment.

Despite inclusive education policies being well-received by educators, implementation issues remain due to inadequate resources and training necessary for full implementation, including trained educational assistants and speech therapists, and physical inaccessibility of school facilities.

Box 11: School accessibility (2018)

- **53%** of schools had ramps, but most lacked elevators, adequate restrooms, and accessible materials.
- **80%** of schools surveyed reported a lack of accessible pedagogical or didactical resources for children with disabilities.
- **63%** of schools did not have any special educators on staff.

Source: CSWs,²⁹⁶ Ombudsperson.²⁹⁷

Inclusive education. Legislative frameworks such as the Law on Primary Education promote inclusive education, with the efforts made to transform special schools into resource centres and to model inclusive practices in kindergartens and primary schools. Progress has been achieved through an inclusive budget increase,²⁹⁸ expansion of educational support staff, facility renovations for accessibility,²⁹⁹ and continuous teacher development.

Healthcare access. Limited availability of specialized health services, especially outside urban centres, remains a barrier. Families with children with disabilities face additional financial strain due to uncovered medical costs. Additionally, issues like long waiting lists, lack of diagnostic services, and inadequate training of healthcare providers to communicate effectively with children with disabilities persist.³⁰⁰

Efforts are ongoing to establish an intersectoral early childhood intervention (ECI) system model.³⁰¹ However, overall, the gap in the availability of ECI remains. Recent study indicates that only 58 per cent of eligible children receive ECI services, leaving approximately 7,379 children without necessary support. It also highlighted that lack of laws, regulations, or established policies governing ECI services or a national strategy, leaving the system underfunded, disorganized without clear guidelines for parents or criteria for establishing ECI centres. The process for registering ECI centres remains undefined.³⁰²

Discrimination and stigma. Knowledge of inclusive and rights-based approaches remains limited, with persistent misconceptions about disability, particularly in rural areas and among policy implementers. Societal views lean toward a charity-based perception of disability, and stigmatization is widespread. Gender biases in disability reporting and rural-urban disparities create additional barriers for certain groups, especially girls with disabilities.³⁰³ The 2018 knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) study showed positive trends, with support for a social rights-based model of inclusion rising from 30 per cent in 2014 to 41 per cent in 2018, while the support for the charity model declined from 25 per cent to 16 per cent, and 86 per cent of people believing that society should adapt to support children with disabilities rather than expecting them to adapt. However, it also showed a negative public perception of the inclusion of children with disabilities. Only 24 per cent of the public believed that children with disabilities should be included in mainstream education, while 66 per cent felt that such inclusion would deprive other children of teachers' attention.³⁰⁴

10.3 Gender

Table 27: Gender indicators

Indicator	2023	2017	EU average (2022)	Source
Sex ratio at birth (males per 100 females)	1036	105,3	105,6	SSO/Eurostat
Adolescent birth rate (per 1,000 live births) – SDG 3.7.2	13.4	16.0	8.7	SSO / Eurostat Transmonee.org
Adjusted gender parity index for upper secondary education completion rate – SDG 4.5.1	1.03	1.14	1.061	GEMR / Transmonee.org
Adjusted gender parity index for students at the end of lower secondary education achieving a minimum proficiency level in reading – SDG 4.5.1	1.314(2022)	1.405 (2018)	N/A	PISA, 2022

Gender ratings show mixed progress. There has been improvement in EU Gender Equality Index from 62 in 2019 to 64.5 in 2022.³⁰⁵ However, the country's Gender Development Index (GDI) of 0.950 (2022), compared to Albania's 0.977, Slovenia's 0.999 and Serbia's 0.986, places North Macedonia behind other countries in Southeast Europe.³⁰⁶

Legislation supporting rights of women and girls. North Macedonia has ratified international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Istanbul Convention, which aim to combat violence against women and promote gender equality. The national legislation includes the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. In July 2022, a National Strategy on Gender Equality 2022–2027 was adopted, while other relevant documents guiding the country's efforts include National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Istanbul Convention (2018–2023), and the Second

National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (2020–2025). These documents outline specific actions and goals to ensure comprehensive and sustained progress in promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls throughout the country. However, enforcement remains weak and underfunded, and gender stereotyping continues to be a significant barrier.³⁰⁷

Gender norms. Traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and patriarchal attitudes, which start from a young age, continue to shape societal and family expectations. The emergence of an anti-gender movement, particularly in response to initiatives like comprehensive sexuality education in schools, has fuelled concerns, including a rise in online hate speech and sexual harassment targeting gender rights advocates. Addressing these challenges requires reshaping societal norms to promote gender equality and reduce violence against women.³⁰⁸

Socio-economic, ethnic, and gender disparities intersect, amplifying vulnerabilities and limiting access to essential services.

Gender gap in labour market. Gender gaps are evident in labour participation, with women disproportionately shouldering the burden of unpaid domestic work:

46 per cent of women of working age are out of the labour force compared to 23.3 per cent of men,³⁰⁹ with unemployment remaining particularly high among Roma women, with just 8 per cent formally employed.³¹⁰ Half of the women (50.5 per cent) are inactive at the labour market due to caregiving responsibilities, versus only 1.7 per cent of men (Table 28).³¹¹

The disparity in caregiving responsibilities and domestic work not only limits women's time for personal and professional development but also impacts the country's economic productivity.³¹² Over one-fifth of the country's inactive young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) (22.1 per cent or over 20,000 young people) are detached from the labour market due to care and family responsibilities — and almost all of them (96.7 per cent) are women.³¹³ Expanding kindergarten access is seen as a crucial economic strategy, potentially increasing GDP by at least 5 per cent annually through boosted employment and earnings.³¹⁴

Different forms of gender-based violence.

Violence against women and children in North Macedonia has a significant gender dimension, with widespread underreporting due to societal norms. A 2019 survey revealed that 60 per cent of women consider violence against women common, with nearly 30 per cent viewing it

Table 28: Labour market inactivity due to care responsibilities

	Female	Male
% inactive due to caregiving responsibilities	50.5%	1.7%

Source: EU.

as very common; however, only 2 per cent of women who experienced violence from a current partner reported it to the police.³¹⁵ Technology-facilitated violence is also rising, especially among young adults aged 18–24, with notable incidents like the “Public Room” case on the Telegram app in 2020, where explicit photos and private information of women and girls were non-consensually shared, resulting in widespread harassment.³¹⁶ Furthermore, early marriage is prevalent, particularly among lower educated, socially disadvantaged and Roma young women. Nevertheless, child protection data shows a higher proportion of boys involved in violence cases, representing 59.8 per cent of police reports and 56 per cent of cases managed by social work centres, and data on sexual exploitation is unavailable. Boys experience a higher rate of punitive disciplinary practices, with 76 per cent subjected to physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers, compared to 70 per cent of girls.³¹⁷

Table 29: Disparities between boys and girls in key indicators

Indicators	Girls	Boys	Source
Total number of children, %	180,413 (48.43%)	192,145 (51.57%)	SSO, 2021
% out-of-school children (primary school age)	1.4%	1.9%	MICS, 2019
% of students performing above level 2 in reading (PISA 2022)	32%	22%	OECD, 2022
15–29 years of age not in employment, education or training (NEETs) (2021)	26.1%	22.4%	ILO, 2022
% children who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers	70%	76%	MICS, 2019
Rate of children (0–17 years) in formal alternative care at the end of the year (per 100,000) (2022)	135	127	TMEE Data Collection: 2023
Rate of children (0–17 years) in detention at the end of the year (per 100,000) (2022)	0	10	TMEE Data Collection: 2023
The prevalence of adolescents at risk of problematic gaming (among 11 years old)	16%	28%	WHO, 2024

Sexual and reproductive health. Access to adequate sexual and reproductive healthcare is a challenge, particularly for women in rural and remote areas, Roma women, and LGBTQI+ persons,³¹⁸ with only 3.3 per cent of adolescent girls having access to family planning in 2023.³¹⁹ The country's placement in the Global Gender Gap Report for "Health and Survival" at the 89th place out of 153 countries underscores these challenges.³²⁰

Education. North Macedonia demonstrates strong enrolment and completion rates at the secondary level, with slight gender disparity favouring girls. Girls are slightly more likely to complete upper secondary education, reflected in a gender parity index of 1.03 in 2022. The disparity is even more pronounced in literacy proficiency at the lower secondary level, where the gender parity index is 1.314, indicating a significant gap with girls outperforming boys in reading.³²¹ The recent study on menstrual poverty also revealed impacts on

school attendance among female students. In rural areas, **90 per cent of female students reported avoiding attending school for 4–5 days during their menstrual period.** In urban areas, **75 per cent of girls avoid school for 2–3 days** while menstruating. The most common reasons cited are inadequate conditions for managing menstrual hygiene at school and the high cost of menstrual hygiene products.³²²

LGBTIQ+ youth. A recent survey highlights the stigma and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ youth, placing the country among the least accepting in the Western Balkans. LGBTQ+ youth encounter extensive challenges, particularly in educational settings, where 68 per cent of survey respondents reported experiencing bullying, ridicule, teasing (increase from 51 per cent in 2019), insults, or threats at school due to being LGBTQ, reflecting broader patterns observed across Europe.³²³

Box 12: Attitudes Towards LGBTQ+ youth

- 68% LGBTQ+ report bullying in school
- 55% of youth view homosexuality as "deviant behaviour"
- 43% expressed discomfort with LGBTQ+ neighbours

Source: FRA, 2021; WFD, 2023.

Fifty-five per cent of surveyed youth view homosexuality as a "deviant behaviour," while 43 per cent express discomfort with LGBTQ+ neighbours, making them the least desired group as neighbours, followed closely by refugees, at 36 per cent.³²⁴ This reflects a significant prevalence of heteronormative and negative perceptions toward LGBTQ individuals among the youth population and highlights the barriers to LGBTQ+ acceptance and inclusion in North Macedonia.



CONCLUSIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

11. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite challenging contexts, including the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the economic pressures of rising inflation, North Macedonia has shown a commitment to advancing children's rights through legal and institutional reforms, including deinstitutionalization, inclusive education, strategic frameworks, and adherence to international commitments. Progress has been reflected in several indicators, yet significant disparities remain. Outcomes for children generally fall behind those of the EU and, in many cases, behind other Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, disparities within the country exacerbate inequalities, affecting particularly children living in Roma settlements. Critical negative trends can be observed particularly in areas, such as increasing child poverty, low and decreasing educational achievements, new risks and threats of violence against children and increasing impact of environmental degradation and climate change on children's health.

Despite the country progress in reforming its social protection system, including the expansion of benefits like the Guaranteed Minimum Assistance and Child Allowance, poverty rates among children remain alarmingly high and are increasing. However, challenges remain in addressing child poverty and ensuring an adequate standard of living for vulnerable populations. The bottlenecks, such as the limited coverage of child benefits, underfunded social services, and weak outreach and intersectoral collaboration, hinder the full realization of these reforms.

Despite progress in education reform and efforts toward inclusiveness, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable quality education for every child. Declining funding, inefficient resource allocation, and an outdated school network that fails to adapt to changing demographic trends have contributed to a decline in education quality and outcomes. International assessments highlight low proficiency rates in core subjects, further exacerbated by significant disparities related to gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity and geography. Limited access to quality early childhood education, particularly in underserved areas and for Roma children, affects foundational learning opportunities. These findings emphasize the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these issues.

Entrenched societal norms, economic challenges, and systemic barriers, including institutional discrimination, continue to influence knowledge, attitudes, and practices, particularly affecting vulnerable children and women, including Roma, LGBTIQ+ youth, and individuals with disabilities. Support for parents remains limited. Discrimination and stigma are present, while traditional gender roles and resistance to inclusion reforms hinder progress toward greater equality. Economic pessimism and high rates of youth emigration further exacerbate social challenges, reducing policy engagement and social cohesion.

Children from Roma communities consistently lag behind on key child rights indicators, including poverty, education, health, and protection, and face persistent stigma in all aspects of life. Limited access to basic services, widespread discrimination, and systemic institutional biases perpetuates cycles of marginalization, poverty and social exclusion. Although measures such as increased budgets for Roma education, a doubling of the number of Roma mediators, and national strategies aimed at inclusion are being implemented, the overall efforts to address structural barriers to their enjoyment of basic children's rights remain inadequate to the magnitude of existing inequities.

Child rights governance remains fragmented, with gaps in coordination, accountability, and sustainable funding across both governmental and independent stakeholders. The centralized coordinating body planned to be established with EU support and the national action plan for children promise increased accountability for child rights and more coordinated actions.

Financing for children's rights and aligning public finance systems with the needs and rights of children remains a critical challenge. Insufficient and declining budget allocations and inefficiencies in public spending in critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and social protection hinder the country's ability to effectively implement reforms and get on track to achieve planned outcomes for children, including child-related SDGs.

Persistent gaps in data availability, quality, disaggregation, and intersectoral coordination hinder the government's ability to effectively

monitor the situation of children, especially the most vulnerable, and **implement evidence-based policies and programmes**. Strengthening the capacity of the State Statistical Office, improving interoperability of data systems, and aligning SDG monitoring with child rights frameworks are critical to ensuring reliable and comprehensive data that can drive impactful policies and programs for children.

Violence against children remains a pervasive issue, driven by cultural norms, systemic challenges, and limited institutional capacity to effectively respond to and prevent incidents violence. Although the country has strengthened its legal framework and introduced initiatives like the National Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence, gaps in funding, data collection, and service delivery continue to impede effective implementation. High rates of violent discipline, bullying, and online abuse highlight the urgent need for both preventive and responsive measures. Institutions, particularly centres for social work, are under-resourced and overburdened, making it difficult to address the complexities of violence against children and gender-based violence. Child marriage remains an obstacle to advancing gender equality and protecting child rights, disproportionately affecting girls from Roma communities, low educated and low-income households.

Significant progress has been made in advancing deinstitutionalization and expanding family-based alternative care, reflecting a strong commitment to child-centred reforms. However, continued efforts are required to ensure the full and effective implementation of these initiatives. Key challenges include addressing capacity gaps in the social work system, resource shortages for foster care and small-group homes, and inadequate transition planning for children aging out of care. Financial constraints and reliance on external donors further jeopardize the sustainability of these reforms.

The progress in certain areas of health and nutrition, including reductions in infant and neonatal mortality, is showing North Macedonia's commitment to improving health and chances for an equal start for all children. Nevertheless, continuous efforts are needed to ensure equitable access to quality healthcare and nutrition, particularly for marginalized groups. Issues such as low public healthcare investment, limited emphasis on preventative health, and rising rates of

childhood obesity highlight the need for increased preventive interventions.

Adolescents continue to face barriers to mental and reproductive health due to gaps in access to youth-friendly services and persistent stigma. Vulnerable populations, including Roma youth, face additional barriers.

The country is increasingly facing environmental and climate-related challenges, including high air pollution levels, rising temperatures and heatwaves, and increasing vulnerability to natural disasters. These issues disproportionately impact children, particularly in urban and marginalized communities, exacerbating health risks and economic inequities. While policy advances and international commitments signal progress, gaps in enforcement, child-sensitive strategies, and local-level adaptation hinder effective climate action.

The country has achieved near-universal access to basic water and sanitation services. However, gaps remain in ensuring safely managed water and sanitation for all. Disparities between urban and rural areas, and especially low access rates within Roma communities, highlight the need for targeted interventions to bridge socio-economic and geographic inequalities. This underscores the urgent need for infrastructure modernization, climate-resilient planning, and improved administrative capacity.

Priority recommendations

1. Enhance social protection by expanding outreach and services for children living below the poverty line, increasing the funding and coverage of social assistance and child benefits, including prioritizing Roma children and children with disabilities.
4. Improve efficiency, equity, and quality of education through optimizing the school network, resource allocation, and teacher distribution while enhancing teacher professional development, and inclusive education systems towards greater convergence with OECD and European standards. Expand access to quality early childhood education (ECE) by increasing service availability and ensuring financial accessibility with a focus on reaching the most vulnerable children, aligning ECE expansion with European averages to ensure foundational learning for every child, and support gender empowerment.

3. Restructure centres for social work (CSWs) to enhance their effectiveness and efficiency by professionalizing and optimizing the workforce and fully rolling out and integrating digital case management platforms. This should go hand in hand with expanding funding for community-based services, strengthening outreach efforts through patronage nurses, vaccination teams, and multidisciplinary mobile units, and ensuring sufficient capacities and resources to provide culturally sensitive support for marginalized communities, particularly Roma and children with disabilities.

4. Strengthen interagency and multi-sectoral collaboration and foster cooperation across all sectors, including social protection, healthcare, education, and justice systems to develop child-centred policies and deliver holistic support with a focus on reaching the most vulnerable children. This should include integration and cooperation with civil society organizations.

6. Establish earmarked sustainable funding for Roma inclusion programs in healthcare, education, and social protection, ensuring Roma participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies, while addressing the institutional biases. This should be supported by a robust evaluation framework to enhance accountability and optimize impact.

7. Mainstreaming climate change and environmental protection across all sectors impacting children requires leveraging funding to adequately address the high vulnerability of children as well as the growth potential of child-sensitive investments. Actions should focus on the continuous integration of climate education, the transition towards green infrastructure in schools and health facilities, and the implementation of climate-sensitive social protection programs. Policies and funding must prioritize the specific needs of children from marginalized or high-risk areas who are disproportionately affected by climate change, ensuring equitable and inclusive adaptation and mitigation efforts.

8. Systematically integrate social and behavioural change initiatives into policies, strategies, and implementation processes to challenge harmful stereotypes, reduce stigma, and promote inclusive attitudes across all domains impacting children's well-being and rights. Promote positive parenting through community-based programs and enhanced parental support. Efforts should be invested into awareness raising, community engagement, and capacity building for service providers to ensure inclusive and culturally sensitive practices, combating persistent discrimination particularly towards Roma and children with disabilities.

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