Child well-being in rich countries: international comparisons Unicef report

Date 31 May 2013

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Summary

- In Child well-being in rich countries, Unicef offers an international perspective in order to stimulate debate and policy development on how best, with the benefit of experience elsewhere, to improve children’s lives.
- The UK compares poorly on many of the indicators. This briefing summarises the main findings, highlighting UK performance and recommendations to government.
- The report offers a useful context to policy discussion and review. It will be of interest to lead members and officers with responsibility for children’s services, public health, education and housing, as well as those with a strategic policy remit.

Briefing in full

Introduction

The United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef) argues that there are both moral and practical imperatives to prioritising children’s well-being. Failure to invest adequately in children and young people risks compromising the outcomes for the individual and for wider society. Rising levels of disengagement, poor health, unemployment, anti-social behaviour and crime come at significant public cost.

Measuring progress on how the well-being of children is being protected and promoted is essential to policy-making, to advocacy, to the cost-effective allocation of limited resources and to the processes of transparency and accountability. It is a relatively new area of study and Unicef describes its report as ‘work in progress’ with some gaps and limitations in the measures used. Notably, it lacks:

- data on children’s well-being in the formative earliest months and years;
- child-oriented measures (on issues such as parenting, opportunities for safe unsupervised play, the experience of looked-after children and the impact of the media in children’s lives);
- immediacy, in that much of the data derives from 2009-10.

Nonetheless, Unicef is confident that its report is the best statistical snapshot of children’s lives across the developed world and that its value lies in benchmarking progress and reflecting the impact of sustained policy and investment approaches over time.
Child well-being in rich countries: Report Card 11

Child well-being in rich countries compiles and compares data from 29 of the world’s most advanced economies. It aims to:

- encourage the monitoring of children’s well-being;
- enable international comparison;
- stimulate national reflection, debate and policy development to improve children’s lives.

The concept of child well-being is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - that every child has a right to develop to their full potential. 26 indicators are used to create an international league table. There is also a subjective assessment by children themselves. As the report is an update of an earlier publication, it is also able to offer a perspective on changes during the first decade of this century.

Part one: a league table of child well-being

The international league table of child well-being compares progress for children across the developed world. Five dimensions of children’s lives are considered, each addressed by a number of specific and internationally comparable indicators.

1 Material wellbeing: national performance is assessed on the basis of indicators on monetary deprivation (specifically, relative child poverty rate and relative child poverty gap) and material deprivation (child deprivation rate and low family affluence rate).

- The UK is placed 14th out of 29 countries. It has one of the lowest rates of child deprivation (5.5 per cent) in the developed world but the child poverty gap, at 23 per cent, is comparatively high.
- The lowest child deprivation rates (below 5 per cent) are found in the five Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Ireland, with the UK coming close at 5.5 per cent; France and Italy have child deprivation rates higher than 10 per cent.
- Finland is the only country with a relative child poverty rate of less than 5 per cent.

2 Health and safety: national performance is assessed on the basis of indicators on health at birth (specifically, infant mortality rate and low birthweight rate) and preventive health services (immunisation rates, childhood mortality and child death rate).

- The UK is ranked 16th out of 29 overall. Its infant mortality rate, a long-established indicator of child health, is 4.4 per 1000 live births which is almost twice that of Sweden or Finland (2.5 per 1000).
- Three of the richest nations in the developed world – the UK, Canada and the USA – are in the bottom third of the infant mortality league table.
- Greece and Hungary head the league in relation to immunization coverage (99 per cent) whilst in three of the richest countries (Austria, Canada and Denmark), it is less than 90 per cent.

3 Educational well-being: national performance is assessed on the basis of indicators on participation (participation in early childhood education and in further education (FE), and those
The UK is placed 24th out of 29. It does well in terms of early childhood education and comparatively well in educational achievement but falls down the league table by virtue of having the lowest percentage of young people in FE in the developed world and almost 10 per cent of young people NEET.

Educational well-being is highest in Belgium, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands which all score significantly above average; Greece, Romania, Spain and the USA show the lowest levels.

The FE participation rate exceeds 80 per cent in all of the more populous developed countries except the UK (74 per cent); 90 per cent of young people in Belgium, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia are in FE.

Denmark, Norway and Slovenia have NEET rates below 3 per cent whilst Ireland, Italy and Spain have NEET rates of over 10 per cent and the UK almost 10 per cent.

Finland, Canada and the Netherlands take the top three places in terms of achievement levels. Three of Europe’s wealthiest countries (Austria, Luxembourg and Sweden) are in the bottom half of the achievement table. The UK ranks 11th.

4 Behaviour and risks: national performance is assessed on the basis of indicators on health behaviours (being overweight, eating breakfast, eating fruit and taking exercise) and risk behaviours (teenage fertility rate, smoking, alcohol and cannabis use, and exposure to violence (fighting and being bullied)).

Overall, the UK is placed 15th out of 29 countries. It is one of only four developed countries to see a decline in the percentage of overweight children and has one of the biggest falls in smoking and consumption of alcohol and cannabis. It continues to have high rates of alcohol abuse and ranks 27th for teenage pregnancy rates.

Childhood obesity levels are running at more than 10 per cent in all countries except Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In Canada, Greece and the USA, childhood obesity levels exceed 20 per cent.

Teenage births are highest (over 29 per 1,000) in the UK, Romania and the USA.

Alcohol abuse by young people is 10 per cent or less in France, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and the USA; cannabis use rates of 20 per cent or more are reported in Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Spain, Switzerland and the USA.

Germany has the lowest percentage of children who report being involved in fighting whilst Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden have low levels of both bullying and fighting. The UK occupies a middle position in relation to both.

5 Housing and environment: national performance is assessed on the basis of indicators on housing (rooms per person and multiple housing problems) and environmental safety (murder rate and air pollution).

The UK is placed 10th out of 29 countries. UK children fare comparatively well (in the top third) in terms of overcrowding and outdoor air pollution but fall to the middle of the table by virtue of the high number of reported problems with housing standards.
In 17 of 26 countries, the average home has more rooms than people. Of the nine countries with fewer rooms than people, eight are in Central and Eastern Europe.

The lowest levels of air pollution are found in Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg and the USA (all below 20 parts per million) and the highest levels found in Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland and Romania.

Part two: what children say about their own well-being

Subjective well-being is addressed as a separate measure in its own right, to be considered in conjunction with the objective measures in Part 1. The report explores the issue of subjective well-being, both in terms of what children are actually saying about their lives and the validity of subjective data.

It compiles league tables on children’s own life satisfaction assessment and another reflecting the quality of the close relationships in a child’s life, which Unicef identifies as one of the most critical of all factors in assessing well-being.

1 Life satisfaction: the overview shows the proportion of children aged 11, 13 and 15 in each country who report a high level of life satisfaction.

- The UK occupies a middle position, 14th out of 29, with 86 per cent of children saying they have a high level of overall life satisfaction.
- In the top five countries – Finland, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands and Spain – approximately 90 per cent of children report a high level of life satisfaction. Only in Poland and Romania does the ‘high life satisfaction’ rate fall below 80 per cent.
- Children in Canada, Germany, Portugal and the USA are in the bottom third of the league table along with Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

2 Children’s relationships with parents and peers: the quality and contribution of the child’s closest relationships are based on indicators which aim to provide an approximate guide, that is: the percentage of children who find it easy to talk to their mothers, find it easy to talk to their fathers and find their classmates kind and helpful.

- The UK is in the bottom half of the table where the average scoring for children’s assessment of all three relationships is 72 per cent: 63 per cent find their classmates kind and helpful; 83 per cent finding it easy to talk to their mothers; and 69 per cent to talk to their fathers.
- Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden are the only countries ranked in the top group for all three relationships with at least 80 per cent average scoring; Canada, France and the USA are the only countries ranked in the bottom group for all three relationships (below 69 per cent).
- In every country, children found it more difficult to talk to fathers than to mothers, the gap between the two measures being, on average, 16 percentage points.

Comparison between Part 1 and Part 2 assessments

Unicef regards the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ measures of child well-being as measuring slightly different concepts. Overall, there is a strong correlation between objective and subjective assessments, with some notable contrasts:
• Over half of the 29 countries featured have a similar ranking position (within five places) whichever method of assessment is used. In the UK, children’s assessment of their life satisfaction places it 14th in the league table compared to 16th in the objective well-being league table.

• The Netherlands and the Nordic countries perform strongly on both subjective and objective measures, whilst most Central and Eastern European countries are found in the bottom half of both tables (with the notable exception of Estonia which rises by 14 places when children assess life satisfaction themselves).

• Greece, Spain and Italy which fare poorly in the objective leave are assessed well by their children: Germany, Luxembourg, Canada and Poland fare significantly less well when well-being is assessed by theirs.

Part three: changes in child well-being in advanced economies over the first decade of the 21st century

The report compares its 2009-10 data with the 2001-03 data used in its predecessor. It asks whether child well-being has risen or fallen in economically advanced nations over the first decade of the 2000s. Taking account of some changes in measures and methods which make a straightforward comparison possible, the analysis focuses on a smaller selection of indicators across 21 countries to form a ‘limited overview’ of progress.

• Overall, the rank order of countries has remained reasonably stable over the decade, but with some significant changes.

• The UK found itself at the bottom of the league table, along with the USA, at the start of the century. It has now risen to 16th out of 21 countries.

• As well as the UK, Austria, Greece, Hungary and the USA appear in the bottom third of the table at both ends of the decade.

• Finland and the Netherlands lead the child well-being tables in both 2001/2002 and 2009/2010.

There has been a general and widespread improvement in almost all indicators of children’s well-being through the decade.

• The incidence of ‘low family affluence’ has fallen below 20 per cent everywhere except Hungary, and the Central and Eastern European countries are closing the gap on the more established industrial economies of the West.

• The UK saw a decline of more than two percentage points in FE enrolment rates in the context of a rise in two thirds of the other countries.

• In terms of educational achievement, little has changed: Finland remains the outstanding performer with Canada and the Netherlands in second and third places.

Trends in three of the risk behaviours most likely to damage the short- and long-term well-being of children reveal significant, although not universal, progress.

• The great majority of developed countries saw a decline in the percentage of children who report being involved in fighting and being bullied.

• The percentage of children and young people who smoke cigarettes has fallen in all countries. In the UK, Germany, Norway and Portugal, the rate has more than halved.
• Over three-quarters of the 21 countries saw declines in alcohol use (the proportion of children reporting being drunk on at least two occasions). The UK saw the biggest decline: from 30 per cent to just under 20 per cent.

• Four fifths of countries report a fall in cannabis use with the UK reporting one of the biggest falls, halving use among young people (from 34 per cent to 17 per cent).

• Only in the UK, Belgium, France and Spain has the percentage of overweight children declined. The USA continues to have the highest proportion of overweight children, reaching almost 30 per cent in 2009-10.

• The exceptions to the falling trend in 18 countries of teenage births were the UK, Belgium and Spain. For the UK this is especially significant as it started (and ended) the decade with the highest rate in Europe.

A comparison of the children’s subjective assessment of well-being shows:

• a small rise in overall life satisfaction in half of the 21 countries, with children in the UK, Norway and Portugal recording the biggest rises in life satisfaction;

• children in the Netherlands report the highest level of life satisfaction throughout.

Overall findings

• Children’s well-being is highest, and consistently so, in the Netherlands, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

• There does not appear to be a strong relationship between per capita GDP and overall child well-being: three of the poorest countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Romania) occupy the bottom four places along with one of the richest (the USA).

• There have been some significant changes over the first decade of the 2000s, notably a widespread improvement in most indicators of children’s well-being.

• The data captures the very start of the economic downturn and it is inevitable that the subsequent rise in unemployment and fall in public expenditure will have impacted on children’s lives. Close monitoring is essential to prevent the heaviest burden of economic recession from falling on those least able to sustain it and to avoid a slide from the achievements of the past decade.

UK highlights

In the 2007 Unicef report *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries: A comprehensive assessment of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations*, the UK came bottom out of the 21 countries in the study. In the 2013 report, the UK’s position is 16th out of 29 (below Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Portugal). Notwithstanding its move up the league table, the UK’s position remains disappointing. The high rates of teenage pregnancy, young people NEET, alcohol abuse, and infant mortality are the issues giving greatest cause for concern.

Unicef identifies a general downgrading of youth policy since 2010 which, combined with cuts to local government services, are having a profoundly negative effect on young people. In its summary report on the UK, the following recommendations are made to the UK Government:

1. Devise and support policies and programmes to close the gaps in child well-being.
2. Identify the resources being invested in children: better resource allocation is a prerequisite to making better-informed decisions about expenditure.

3. Undertake regular analysis of the effects of decision-making on children at central and local government level.

4. Prioritise children’s rights and ensure children’s policy is more visible in and across government; give one government department oversight of policies affecting children, and maintain investment from the early years through to young adulthood.

5. Maintain the commitment to eradicating child poverty in the UK by 2020.

6. Ask children how they feel about their lives: under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to be asked and a right to be heard.

Comment

This is a useful and interesting overview on international differences. The UK’s overall league table position is disappointing, but there are findings from which to take some comfort: 86 per cent of UK children report a high level of life satisfaction, even though this the position is 14th out of 29 countries.

In attempting international comparison across so broad a range of indicators, Unicef’s conclusions risk over-simplification. Having found the ‘advanced societies’ such as the UK and USA, at the bottom of the league table, its first (2007) report of this kind suffered credibility. And, methodologically, there is (too) much discussion about the statistical validity of the report. Ultimately, there are sufficient truisms and resonances to substantiate both statistical findings and policy recommendations in this report. The DfE response, as published in the Daily Telegraph, makes the point that the data relate to 2010 or earlier and that Government policy to increase to 40% of the cohort the number of two-year olds in early years education and additional opportunities for 16-18 year olds. It could have made the point that the Government is already pursuing many of Unicef’s recommendations.

However, the value of the report is that it enables national and local policy makers to ask better questions about provision using international comparisons. For local authorities looking at children’s services in the round, this provides an extremely useful and illuminating context to UK and, potentially, their own local performance.

Many of the indicators are on issues that directly engage local responsibilities: education, public health, housing and the environment. Unicef advocates an approach to children’s well-being which transcends departmental and organisational limits: child well-being is multi-dimensional in nature and requires a coordinated response. It also seeks a broad, ambitious policy agenda that shapes the context to children’s lives for optimum impact: in particular, the need to address and reduce social inequalities across the board.

Above all, the international comparisons – many of which are intriguing, even surprising – substantiate its most powerful assertion: that child poverty is not inevitable but maybe affected by government policy; and that child well-being reflects the priority given to children’s policy and children’s budgets. Wealth, or the lack of it, is no excuse!

Local champions for children should take heart from the transnational conclusions to argue the case for: protecting investment in children before cuts are made to services; and ensuring the impact on children is among a local authority’s first considerations.

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External Links


Related Briefings
*Working Together to Safeguard Children – revised statutory guidance* (April 2013)

*Children’s Rights Reviewed: 2012* (February 2013)

*Measuring Child Poverty: A consultation on better measures of child poverty* (December 2012)

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