

Child poverty and child wellbeing

THIS ARTICLE draws on the results of a new league table of child wellbeing. Produced by researchers from the University of York, it covers 29 European countries (the 27 countries in the European Union, plus Norway and Iceland). It includes 43 separate indicators, summarised in seven domains of child wellbeing. The Netherlands comes top of the table of overall child wellbeing, followed by Norway and Sweden. The UK is twenty-fourth, well below countries with similar levels of affluence. Only Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta do worse.

Because most of the data is drawn from 2006, it provides a snapshot and not a trend. This three-year time difference also means that many government policy initiatives from the last few years are not fully reflected in the data (either because investment was not in place or because policies may take a while to become apparent). The figures should, therefore, be read as a criticism of UK society, but not necessarily of recent social policy. In general terms, the recent emphasis on the material circumstances of children, on education and health inequalities and of early intervention has been right and must continue over the long term. It is the dose that has been inadequate, not the medicine. Still, the findings are disappointing for the UK. They show how poorly we perform on child wellbeing, and how much better we could and should do.

What does the league table show?

The Netherlands leads the rankings and is also in the upper third of the table in each of the domains. The top of the table is dominated by Scandinavian countries, with Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Finland and Denmark all in the best achieving six countries. The bottom of the table is dominated by Eastern European countries. The larger European countries tend to come in the middle of the table, with Germany at eighth place, France fifteenth and Italy nineteenth. The UK is ranked twenty-fourth.

The wellbeing index presents an overall country position, as well as performance on each of the seven domains which make this up. In four of seven domains (health, subjective wellbeing, material resources and education) the UK



Enhancing children's lives and improving child wellbeing should be the central objective of any children's policy. But what do we mean by 'wellbeing'? The term is used to describe the quality of childhoods, as they are lived. It includes the many different factors that affect children's lives: material conditions; housing and neighbourhoods; how children feel and do at school; their health; exposure to dangerous risks; and the quality of their relationships with their family and friends. Poverty influences each of these and is a major impediment to ensuring the wellbeing of our children. Here, Paul Dornan draws on recently published research from the University of York to explore different aspects of child wellbeing and what they mean for policy in the UK.

scores in the bottom third of the table. In the remaining three domains (personal relationships, behaviour and risk, and housing and the environment) the UK is ranked in the middle of the table. The UK is not in the top third of countries in any domain.

What explains the UK's performance?

The league table has seven domains, made up of 19 components which are themselves constructed from 43 indicators. As such, the UK's position is explained by its overall performance

The child wellbeing index								
Rank	Country	Health	Subjective wellbeing	Children's relationships	Material resources	Behaviour and risk	Education	Housing and environment
1	Netherlands	2	1	1	7	4	4	9
2	Sweden	1	7	3	10	1	9	3
3	Norway	6	8	6	2	2	10	1
4	Iceland	4	9	4	1	3	14	8
5	Finland	12	6	9	4	7	7	4
6	Denmark	3	5	10	9	15	12	5
7	Slovenia	15	16	2	5	13	11	19
8	Germany	17	12	8	12	5	6	16
9	Ireland	14	10	14	20	12	5	2
10	Luxembourg	5	17	19	3	11	16	7
11	Austria	26	2	7	8	19	19	6
12	Cyprus	10			13			11
13	Spain	13	4	17	18	6	20	13
14	Belgium	18	13	18	15	21	1	12
15	France	20	14	28	11	10	13	10
16	Czech Republic	9	22	27	6	20	3	22
17	Slovakia	7	11	22	16	23	17	15
18	Estonia	11	20	12	14	25	2	25
19	Italy	19	18	20	17	8	23	20
20	Poland	8	26	16	26	17	8	23
21	Portugal	21	23	13	21	9	25	18
22	Hungary	23	25	11	23	16	15	21
23	Greece	29	3	23	19	22	21	14
24	United Kingdom	24	21	15	24	18	22	17
25	Romania	27	19	5		24	27	
26	Bulgaria	25	15	24		26	26	
27	Latvia	16	24	26	22	27	18	26
28	Lithuania	22	27	25	25	28	24	24
29	Malta	28	28	21		14		

Notes: ■ indicates top third of the table; ■ the middle; and ■ the bottom. Blank cells are where insufficient data was available. The index is made up of 43 indicators, arranged in components which then form specific domains. Methodological details can be found in a briefing on CPAG's website.

on these different indicators. While individual indicators might be thought to bias a table, the strength of the index is that the combination of many indicators picks out a general pattern.

Child health

The child health domain is constructed from indicators of infant mortality, low birth weight, immunisation figures and children's health behaviour (such as exercise, eating fruit or brushing teeth). Although the UK does quite well on health behaviours, it scores badly on immunisation rates for key childhood diseases. Sweden's position at the top of the table is helped by good performance in the 'child health from birth' component (which includes both the infant mortality and birth weight indicators).

Subjective wellbeing

The Netherlands scores best on the subjective wellbeing domain. This domain includes questions about how children feel about their lives, whether they like school, feel pressured by school work, and how children rate their own health. The UK's position is weakened by children being more likely to report poor or fair health than children in other countries. The Netherlands does particularly well, with children reporting high wellbeing in school.

Children's relationships

The relationships domain explores the quality of family and peer group relationships, gauged by how easily children can talk with their parents or classmates. Again, the Netherlands tops the table (followed by Slovenia and Sweden).

France is the worst performer, whilst the UK is roughly in the middle of the table. France's position stems from bad results on both classmate and parent-child relationships, both areas on which neighbouring Netherlands does well. Overall, the UK is fractionally better than average, with classmate relations having improved (from questions asked in 2001 to 2005/06). The quality of family relationships (judged by the ease with which children can talk to their parents) are below average in the UK.

Material resources

Material wellbeing captures issues such as income poverty, material deprivation (including 'economic strain') and parental worklessness. The UK's position is particularly influenced by the high number of children living in families in which no parent works. Only Lithuania and Poland do worse than the UK. Iceland scores best on this domain, followed by Norway and Luxembourg.

Behaviour and risk

This domain covers violence, child deaths (mostly accident-related) and risky behaviour (including early sexual intercourse, smoking, drinking and drug use). Sweden is the best performer here; Lithuania the worst. The UK is in the middle of the table. The Swedes do well on all aspects of the measure, but particularly so in having a lower level of violence or violent behaviour. Lithuanians do badly on all of the components. The UK scores relatively badly on risky behaviour, but actually has lower than average violence rates and child mortality.

Education

The education domain covers attainment (maths, reading and science scores), participation (staying-on rates and pre-primary enrolment) and those not in education and training. Belgium does best; Romania worst. The UK's position is influenced by lower levels of educational participation (covering both pre-school and 15–19 education) and relatively high levels of youth inactivity. On education attainment (derived from reading, maths and science scores) the UK scores slightly above average.

Housing and environment

The housing and environment domain covers overcrowding, aspects of the quality of neighbourhoods and housing problems. Norway scores best on this indicator, doing well on each indicator. Latvia has the worse rank, scoring below average in each area. The UK does comparatively well on overcrowding and housing problems (households with children reporting

more than one problem such as a leaking roof, damp, or access to bath/shower or sole use flushing toilet) but badly on the quality of children's environments (indicated by households with children reporting crime, dirt or pollution as problems in their area).

Lessons for the UK

The researchers explored a number of possible reasons for countries' different performances in the league table, comparing their rank position to a series of other indicators.

- A relationship exists between economic strain (measured by access to necessities) and overall wellbeing. In general terms, the greater the strain, the worse the child wellbeing.
- A relationship exists between child wellbeing and children reporting high life satisfaction. Countries with high overall child wellbeing also tend to have more children reporting high life satisfaction.
- A relationship exists between GDP per head and child wellbeing. Richer countries tend to have better child wellbeing. However, countries can buck this trend: the Netherlands has higher wellbeing than its GDP would suggest, whereas the UK does less well.
- A relationship exists between lower inequality and higher wellbeing. More equal societies, such in Scandinavian countries, tend to do better on child wellbeing than less equal societies such as in Eastern Europe or the UK.
- The researchers compared wellbeing to the proportion of surveyed children living in lone- or step-parent families and found no association. Poor child wellbeing is therefore not explained by a large number of lone-parent or step-parent families. Policy focused on favouring particular family forms is unlikely, therefore, to boost child wellbeing.
- A relationship exists between the resources spent on families (in public services and incomes) and child poverty. Countries that devote more resources to families tend to have less child poverty. While higher spending does not guarantee good child wellbeing, countries that do well on child wellbeing invest more in their children. ■

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This article summarises a longer briefing available at www.cpag.org.uk/info/ChildWellbeingandChildPoverty.pdf. The briefing draws on J Bradshaw and D Richardson, 'An Index of Child Wellbeing in Europe', published in *Child Indicators Research*, April 2009.