

Making the case for monitoring and reporting on EU-wide progress in deinstitutionalisation and reform of child protection systems

Interim findings & recommendations from the DataCare Project

The 2009 Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, direct States to ensure that children grow up in their families where possible, that alternative forms of care provide a supportive, protective care environment, and that children living in residential care who have a family network can be reintegrated.

Having better data on the numbers of children in alternative care, and their situation, including information on their own views and experiences, is important not only for improving the quality of care and outcomes for children in alternative care, but also as an indicator of how a country supports its most vulnerable. Quality data on children in alternative care informs our understanding of the efficacy of social welfare and protection systems and services in preventing unnecessary family separation and providing equal opportunities for all children.

The case for EU-level indicators

The EU has invested millions of Euros in supporting deinstitutionalisation and reform of child protection systems in Member States over several decades. EU funding, for example through the **European Social Fund (ESF)** and **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, has accelerated reforms and national investments. EU policy guidance has created a space for exchange of knowledge and best practice among Member States. However, to date, the EU has not developed a clear accountability and monitoring framework for its Member States including comparable headline and secondary indicators to track progress in policy implementation.

A recent review of data carried out as part of the feasibility study for the European Child Guarantee resulted in only a rough estimate of the total number of children in residential care in EU countries¹. According to the authors, these estimates must be used “with extreme caution” as statistics are “incomplete and unreliable.”

Protection of the rights of the child is among the EU’s objectives² and the EU is committed to reducing child poverty and social exclusion of children, including of children in alternative care. This has been reiterated at the Porto Social Summit in May 2021³. In early 2021, several new EU policy initiatives have brought renewed momentum to delivering on these commitments in the coming years: the EU Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights⁴, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the proposal to establish the European Child Guarantee⁵, and the European Strategy for the Rights of People with Disabilities⁶.

These policy frameworks acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable in society. They emphasise that resilient, sustainable economic recovery will only be achieved by addressing disparities and inequality. The EU’s unprecedented economic stimulus package also prioritises investments that are socially inclusive and support the next generation. Moreover, these policy initiatives foresee the development of frameworks to monitor and evaluate implementation at EU and national level. This opens an important window of opportunity for the DataCare Project to inform these frameworks and to make the case for indicators on children in alternative care to be integrated into EU and national-level statistical frameworks and systems.

The contribution of the DataCare Project

Eurochild and UNICEF came together to map how Member States currently collect data on children in alternative care and what statistics they produce and publish. The aim is to identify and propose EU-wide indicators to measure social inclusion of the most vulnerable and highlight areas in which national data systems could be improved to produce comparable and quality data for these indicators. It also seeks to point out countries that have advanced in this work and may serve as promising practice examples.

Whilst we acknowledge such indicators are far from providing a complete picture of the efficacy of child protection systems, they nonetheless create an important entry point for policy debate and for monitoring of policy implementation and resource allocation. Collecting and reporting data on indicators at EU-level requires national child protection data systems being able to report quality data for these indicators. This can be done by building on work already underway in several countries to strengthen national child protection monitoring and evaluation frameworks and data systems.

The DataCare Project aims to build on work carried out in relation to the revised EU Social Scoreboard indicators⁷ on social protection and inclusion of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. It also builds on Eurochild's 2009 survey of 30 European countries.⁸

The recommendations below are based on the interim findings from the analysis of 14 country reports submitted to the DataCare Project.⁹ The analysis of the data is done using grounded theory to identify new understandings of the concepts underlying national statistics on children in alternative care. By the end of the project (foreseen September 2021) the research team will have assessed data from 28 countries across the EU and the UK and will publish a final report and brief.

Interim findings from 14 surveyed countries

- (1) National officially published data can be mapped onto internationally recognised categories of alternative care

There are variations in some of the concepts, definitions, and other metadata¹⁰ that the surveyed countries use for producing statistics on children in alternative care. Collection and reporting processes for data on children in alternative care have not been harmonised and standardised by the European Statistical System. However, analysis enabled the use of national data available according to national terminology and definitions to broadly match the statistics onto 5 internationally recognised categories¹¹ of alternative care (see Annex below). The mapping is imperfect and some countries have gaps. However, it seems both feasible and valuable to calculate and publish regularly at national and EU level on the following 4 indicators:

- a. The total number of children aged 0-17 in alternative care at a specific point in time (per 100,000)
- b. The total number of children aged 0-17 in residential care at a specific point in time (per 100,000)
- c. The total number of children aged 0-17 in formal family-based care at a specific point in time (per 100,000)
- d. The percentage of children aged 0-17 in residential care of the total number of children in alternative care at a specific point in time.

- (2) There are several important gaps in the published data from surveyed countries.¹² This would be an important area for the EU to support improvements in data collection.

The research team has identified the following key areas of concern regarding the coverage of countries data collection systems.

- Whether care is ‘genuinely necessary and suitable’: 4 of the 14 countries surveyed do not collect any data on why a child has entered alternative care.
- Whether institutional/residential care is progressively replaced by other forms of residential and family-based care: 7 of the 14 countries surveyed lack any definitions of institutions and small group homes.¹³ 2 have official definitions of the maximum size of small group homes and 5 have unofficial definitions of size.
- Whether alternative care prioritises safe child reintegration and reunification of the family. Only 4 of the 14 countries surveyed collect information on where children go after leaving care.
- How many children leaving the alternative care system are safely reintegrated with their families (if in the best interest of the child) and how many young people are supported to transition to adulthood: 8 of the 14 countries surveyed do not collect data on quality of care or outcomes.
- How effective prevention, family support and gatekeeping systems and services are in preventing unnecessary family separation and providing timely and effective support for family reintegration at any phase of the child care pathway.

(3) Many countries are in the process of reforming their child protection data systems, suggesting a potential demand for mutual learning and support throughout the EU.

The interim findings show that 9 of the 14 countries surveyed have reformed or are in the process of reforming their child protection data systems with a view to improving data quality. A momentum and an appetite to improve data collection exists.

(4) Countries show promising practices on aggregation of data from sub-national to national level

The 14 countries surveyed include both countries with decentralised and more centralised governance systems. Among them, practices could be identified of data aggregation and dissemination at national level that may serve as examples of promising practice to other countries¹⁴. There are examples of federalised states, with very divergent systems of care in the autonomous regions that regularly publish aggregate data at the national level.

Preliminary policy recommendations

1. We recommend that the European Commission seizes the opportunities provided by its new policy initiatives, particularly the EU Child Guarantee, to work with the Social Protection Committee and its Indicators’ subgroup (ISG)¹⁵ on developing and defining EU indicators for social inclusion of children in alternative care. And that the European Commission provides the guidance and support needed to EU Member States through its European Statistical System¹⁶. This with the aim to integrate the indicators into national statistical frameworks, programmes, and systems. And to produce comparable, reliable, and relevant statistics on children in alternative care in line with the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice. We recommend that this process is informed by and builds on the work done, and in progress, at EU and global level including the findings of the DataCare Project and the list of proposed indicators.
2. We recommend that the European Commission provides space for mutual learning and exchange among EU Member States on strengthening child protection data systems and closing gaps in data on children in alternative care, for instance through the European Social Policy Network, the ISG, and/or the framework of a Peer Review on Social Inclusion of Children.

Background to the DataCare Project

The DataCare Project is a joint initiative of Eurochild and UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office. The project maps alternative care data systems across the 27 Member States of the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) with the aim of moving towards a more transparent, common approach to data collection and reporting across Europe.

The project has produced a DataCare research protocol, national template and glossary that have been applied by National Correspondents to provide national reports. These are analysed by a research team. The full report, together with country profiles will be published before end 2021.

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Annex: Comparative International Glossary of Alternative Care Categories¹⁷

Nation	Alternative Care	Formal Family-Based Care	Foster Care	Formal Kinship Care	Residential Care
Definitions	Authorised care away from the child's parents, incl. all residential care	Authorised care away from the child's parents, in a family	Authorised care with person/family unknown to the child	Authorised care with family members/friends	Collective non-family setting with children cared for by paid adults
Belgium: Wallonia-Brussels	Du placement d'enfants; Mesure d'éloignement du milieu de vie	Accueil familial	Accueil familial	Accueillant familial-famille ou familial (famille élargie)	De prise en charge résidentielle ou hébergement
Bulgaria	Настапяване извън семейството		приемна грижа	Настапяване при близки и роднини	Резидентна грижа
Cyprus		ίδρυμα παιδικής / εφηβικής προστασίας	Ανάδοχος Οικογένειες		ίδρυμα παιδικής προστασίας
Denmark	Anbringelse af børn og unge uden for hjemmet	Familiepleje	Almene plejefamilie	Netvaerksplejefamilier	Døgninstitution; socialpædagogisk opholdssted
France			Famille d'accueil	X*	Maisons d'enfants à caractère social; Hébergement éclaté
Greece		X*	X*		ιδρύματα παιδικής προστασίας
Hungary	Szakellátás			Helyettes szülő (only temporary)	Gyermekotthon
Ireland	Children in care		Foster care general	Foster care with relatives	Children's Residential Centres
Portugal	Cuidado alternativo	Acolhimento Familiar	Acolhimento Familiar		Acolhimento Residencial Generalista
Romania	Protecția specială a copilului	Servicii de tip familial	Plasament la o familie au persoană	Plasament familial la rude pana la gradul IV	Instituțiile rezidențiale
Spain	Medidas de protección con separación familiar	Acogimiento familiar	Acogimiento en familia ajena	Acogimiento en familia extensa	Acogimiento residencial
Sweden	Placering utanför det egna hemmet	Familjehem	Familjehem	Nätverkshem	Institutionsvård
UK: England	Looked after children		Placement with approved foster carers not family or friends	Placement foster carers who are a relative or a family friend	Children's homes
UK: Scotland	Looked after away from home		Looked after with foster carers	Looked after away from home with friends/relatives	Looked after in residential accommodation

* An English term or definition was provided that fits with the international definition, but no term in the national language was given.

¹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f8373a0f-c7dd-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-207791077>.

² Lisbon Treaty 2007, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12007L%2FTXT>.

³ <https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/porto-social-summit/>.

⁴ [The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan | European Commission](#).

⁵ [The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee | European Commission](#).

⁶ [Union of equality: Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030 | European Commission](#).

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-pillar-of-social-rights/indicators/social-scoreboard-indicators>.

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https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05_Library/Thematic_priorities/06_Children_in_Alternative_Care/Eurochild/FINAL_EXEC_SUMMARY.pdf.

⁹ Belgium – the Wallonia-Brussels region, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland (still requires verification at time of publication), Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and UK – England & Scotland.

¹⁰ Concepts and definitions refer here, e.g., to which types of care arrangements countries subsume under alternative care and how countries define the different types of residential and family-based care arrangements. In line with Eurostat's Glossary: 'metadata can be defined as information that is needed to be able to use and interpret statistics. Metadata describe data by giving definitions of populations, objects, variables, the methodology and quality' (accessed on 12/05/2021 at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Metadata#:~:text=Metadata%20can%20be%20defined%20as,between%20structural%20and%20reference%20metadata>).

¹¹ The 5 categories are: Alternative care, Formal family-based care, Residential care, Foster care, and Formal kinship care. In compiling the headline indicators, foster care and formal kinship care taken together as the aggregate formal family-based care was found to be the more effective way to obtain comparable data.

Informal family-based care, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives or friends (informal kinship care) or by others in their individual capacity, at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body, is not covered within this study.

¹² This has been identified in the 2019 Resolution of the UN General Assembly (focused on children without parental care), which specifically stated that States should improve "data collection, information management and reporting systems related to children without parental care in order to close existing data gaps, develop global and national baselines and invest in quality, accessible, timely and reliable **disaggregated data**." To read the resolution, see here: https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/A_RES_74_133_E.pdf.

¹³ For more information on small group homes care for children in alternative care, see UNICEF's (2020) *White Paper: The role of small-scale residential care for children in the transition from institutional to community-based care and in the continuum of care in the Europe and Central Asia Region*: <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/13261/file>.

¹⁴ For example, in Spain the annual publication of the "Boletín de datos estadísticos, de medidas de protección a la infancia" has been playing a major role in sustaining clarity and visibility of data on alternative care for the last 21 years: https://observatoriodelainfancia.vpsocial.gob.es/productos/pdf/Boletin_Proteccion_21_Accesible.pdf.

¹⁵ For more information on the Indicators' Sub-Group (ISG) of the Social Protection Committee (SPC), see here: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=830&langId=en>.

¹⁶ The ESS is the partnership between Eurostat and the national statistical institutes and other national authorities responsible in each EU Member State for the development, production, and dissemination of European statistics (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/ess>).