

Child wellbeing in the UK

At a time when many political voices suggest we should be more phlegmatic about child poverty, Dragan Nastic highlights the recent findings of a UNICEF study on child wellbeing in economically advanced nations over the first decade of the 2000s. International comparisons show that child poverty in these countries is not inevitable, but is susceptible to policy – and that some countries are doing much better than others at protecting their most vulnerable children.



Philip Wolmuth/Reportdigital

Child wellbeing: the most recent comparative overview

On 10 April this year UNICEF launched a particularly timely new study on child wellbeing in rich countries. Ranking 29 developed countries according to the overall wellbeing of their children, this is the 11th study in the UNICEF Report Card series. Each Report Card includes a league table, ranking the countries of the OECD according to their record on the subject under discussion. Table 1 shows the most recent example.

Report Card 11 builds on Report Card 7, the first UNICEF overview of child wellbeing published in 2007, which placed the UK 21st out of 21 developed countries for overall child wellbeing.¹ As can be seen, in the new UNICEF league table of child wellbeing in the world's rich countries, the UK is placed 16th out of 29 countries.

Changes over the first decade of the 2000s

The first UNICEF overview of child wellbeing drew on internationally comparable data from the years 2001 to 2003; the current overview draws on data from 2009 and 2010. However, changes in measures and methods make it impossible to draw simple comparisons between the two overviews. Instead, overall progress in child wellbeing may be tracked over the decade by constructing a 'limited overview',

Table 1: 29 developed countries ranked according to the overall wellbeing of their children

	Average rank (all 5 dimensions)	Material wellbeing (rank)	Health and safety (rank)	Education (rank)	Behaviours and risks (rank)	Housing and environment (rank)
1 Netherlands	2.4	1	6	1	1	4
2 Norway	4.6	3	7	6	4	3
3 Iceland	5.0	4	1	10	3	7
4 Finland	5.4	2	3	4	12	6
5 Sweden	6.2	5	2	11	5	8
6 Germany	9.0	11	12	3	6	13
7 Luxembourg	9.2	6	4	22	9	5
8 Switzerland	9.6	9	11	16	11	1
9 Belgium	11.2	13	13	2	14	14
10 Ireland	11.6	17	15	17	7	2
11 Denmark	11.8	12	23	7	2	15
12 Slovenia	12.0	8	6	5	21	20
13 France	12.8	10	10	15	13	16
14 Czech Republic	15.2	16	8	12	22	18
15 Portugal	15.6	21	14	18	8	17
16 United Kingdom	15.8	14	16	24	15	10
17 Canada	16.6	15	27	14	16	11
18 Austria	17.0	7	26	23	17	12
19 Spain	17.6	24	9	26	20	9
20 Hungary	18.4	18	20	8	24	22
21 Poland	18.8	22	18	9	19	26
22 Italy	19.2	23	17	25	10	21
23 Estonia	20.8	19	22	13	26	24
24 Slovakia	20.8	25	21	21	18	19
25 Greece	23.4	20	19	28	25	25
26 United States	24.8	26	25	27	23	23
27 Lithuania	25.2	27	24	19	29	27
28 Latvia	28.4	28	28	20	28	28
29 Romania	28.6	29	29	29	27	29

Note: Lack of data on a number of indicators means that the following countries, although OECD and/or EU members, could not be included in the league table of child wellbeing: Australia, Bulgaria, Chile, Cyprus, Israel, Japan, Malta, Mexico, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Turkey.

Table 2: **Progress in child wellbeing, 2001/02 and 2009/10**

Rank	Early 2000s	Rank	Late 2000s	Change in rank
1	Sweden	1	Netherlands	+2
2	Finland	2	Norway	+2
3	Netherlands	3	Finland	-1
4=	Denmark	4	Sweden	-3
4=	Norway	5	Germany	+2
6	France	6	Denmark	-2
7	Germany	7	Belgium	+1
8	Belgium	8=	France	-2
9=	Czech Republic	8=	Ireland	+4
9=	Poland	8=	Switzerland	+3
11	Switzerland	11	Portugal	+5
12	Ireland	12	Poland	-3
13	Spain	13	Czech Republic	-4
14=	Canada	14=	Canada	No change
14=	Italy	14=	Italy	No change
16=	Greece	16	United Kingdom	+4
16=	Portugal	17	Austria	+1
18	Austria	18=	Greece	-2
19	Hungary	18=	Hungary	+1
20=	United Kingdom	18=	Spain	-5
20=	United States	21	United States	-1

using only those measures common to both 2001/02 and 2009/10.

The background paper to Report Card 11 sets out this 'limited overview' in more detail.² Table 2 summarises the results by showing each country's league table ranking at the beginning and end of the decade (the average rank for four available dimensions of child wellbeing – material wellbeing, health, education, and behaviours and risks).

Overall, the results show that the rank order of countries has remained reasonably stable over the decade, but with some significant changes.³

Ten-year record for the UK

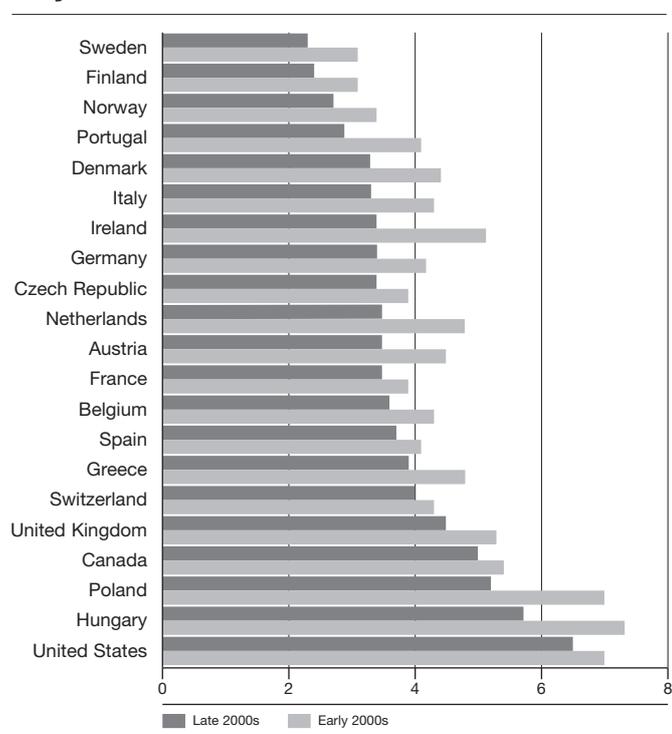
Despite setbacks in some countries on specific indicators, the overall story of the 2000s is one of steady improvement in various dimensions of child wellbeing in the industrialised world. Every country for which data are available saw reductions in infant mortality and 'low family affluence',⁴ while the rate of further education enrolment increased.

How did the UK fare during this period? We already knew from national data that things for children improved between 2004 and 2010 – out of 48 national indicators of child wellbeing covered in *The Well-being of Children in the UK*⁵ only two had got worse and 13 showed no clear trend. But the added value of the UNICEF Report Card series is that it enables us to know how well a country is doing for its children by comparing their outcomes with children in other countries.

Although the UNICEF Office of Research has structured the indicators somewhat differently in Report Card 11 than in Report Card 7, direct comparisons can be made for a number of them. It shows the UK has moved up the league table on a range of key indicators. To begin, material conditions for children improved over the relevant period, with child poverty rates and gaps, child deprivation measures and family affluence all moving in a positive direction. Several key health indicators also showed improvements, including immunisation, eating fruit, eating breakfast, and lower levels of smoking, drinking and cannabis use. At the same time, indicators of children's subjective health also improved. Fewer children reported fighting or being bullied, while their life satisfaction, sense of whether their classmates were kind and helpful, and whether they liked school also improved.

Although Report Card 11 shows a significant rise up the rankings since the first UNICEF

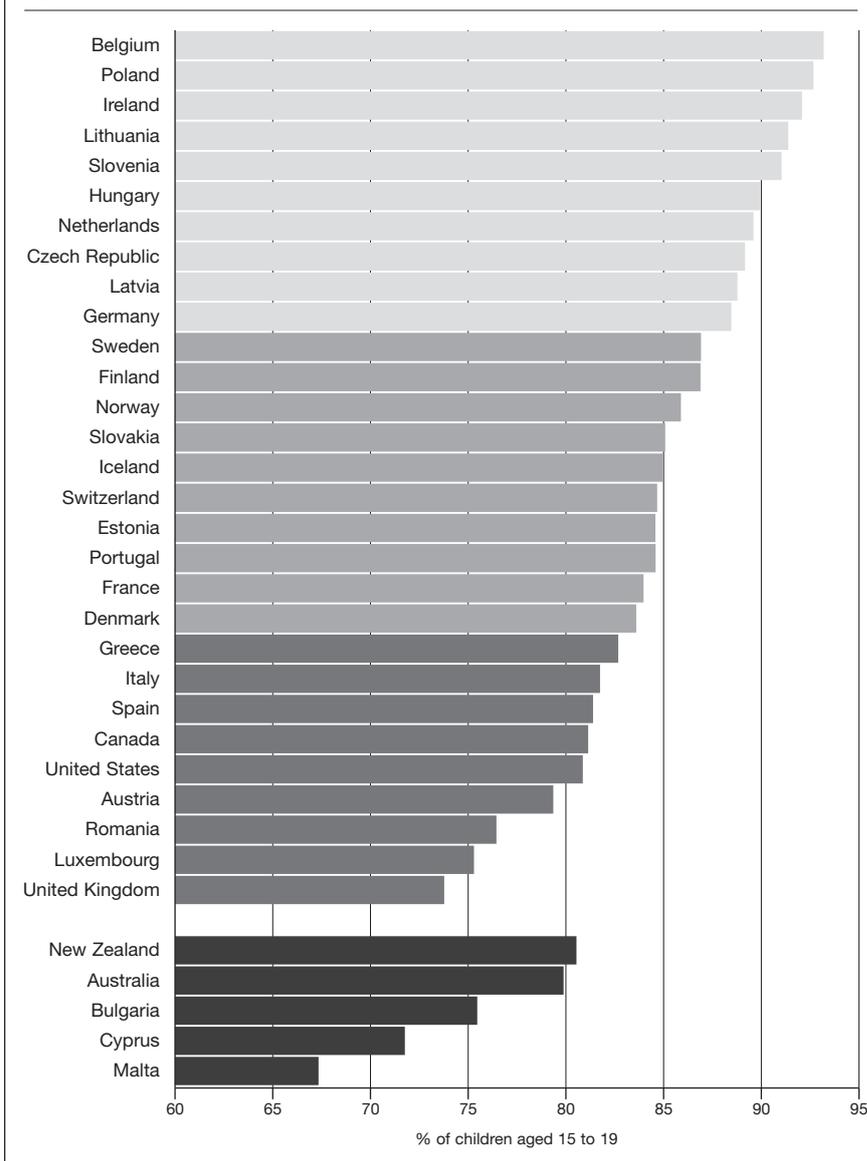
Figure 1: **Changes in infant mortality rates between the early 2000s and the late 2000s**



overview in 2007, it is clear that there is a long way to go.

- The UK is still placed in the bottom third of the infant mortality league table. The UK's infant mortality rate of 4.4 per 1,000 live births is approximately double the rate of Sweden or Finland. See Figure 1.
- The UK has the lowest further education rate in the developed world. The proportion of young people (aged 15 to 19) enrolled in schools and colleges exceeds 80 per cent in all major developed nations except in the UK, where the rate is 75 per cent. Report Card 11 provides no explanation for this and says it 'may be the result of an emphasis on academic qualifications combined with a diverse system of vocational qualifications which have not yet succeeded in achieving either 'parity of esteem' or an established value in employment markets.'¹⁶ See Figure 2.
- The UK is one of only three OECD countries with a teenage fertility rate of more than 30 per 1,000. It is also one of only three countries in which the rate of teenage births has not fallen over the first decade of the 2000s. 'This finding is particularly significant for the United Kingdom...', says Report Card 11, '... because its teenage fertility rate at the beginning of the decade was already the highest in Europe.'¹⁷ See Figure 3.
- The UK still has one of the highest alcohol abuse rates by young people. Approximately 20 per cent of children in the UK (aged 11 to 15) report having been drunk on at least two occasions. This is despite the fact that the UK also recorded the biggest fall in alcohol abuse by young people over the first decade of the 2000s (down from 30 per cent in 2001/02). See Figure 4.

Figure 2: **Participation in further education**



Conclusions and lessons for the UK: policy works!

The UNICEF league table of child wellbeing is designed to measure and compare progress for children across the developed world. Its purpose is to record the standards achieved by the most advanced nations and to contribute to debate in all countries about how such standards might be achieved. It remains a work in progress and has a number of limitations, chiefly the fact that internationally comparable data on children's lives are not sufficiently timely. Between the collection of data in a wide variety of different settings and their publication in quality-controlled, internationally comparable form, the time lag is typically two or three years.

Figure 3: **Changes in adolescent fertility rates between 2003 and 2009**

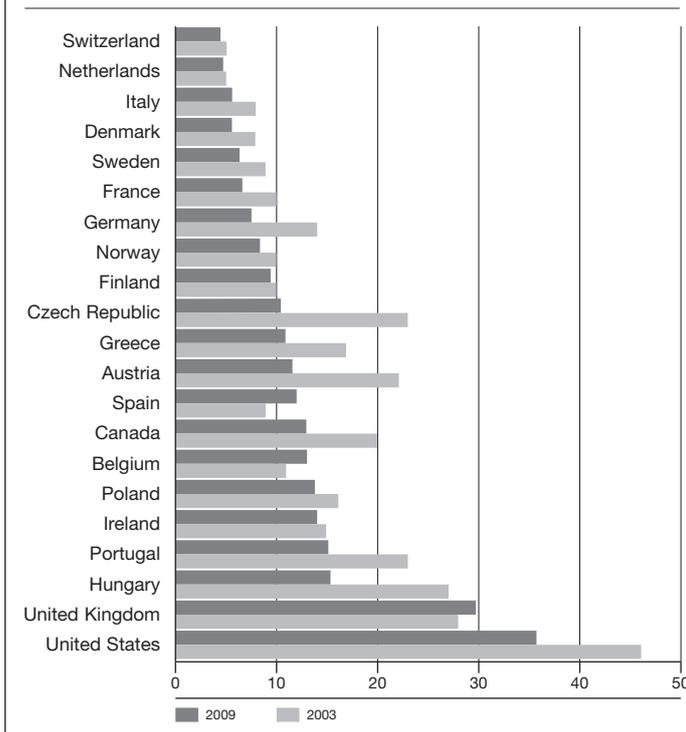
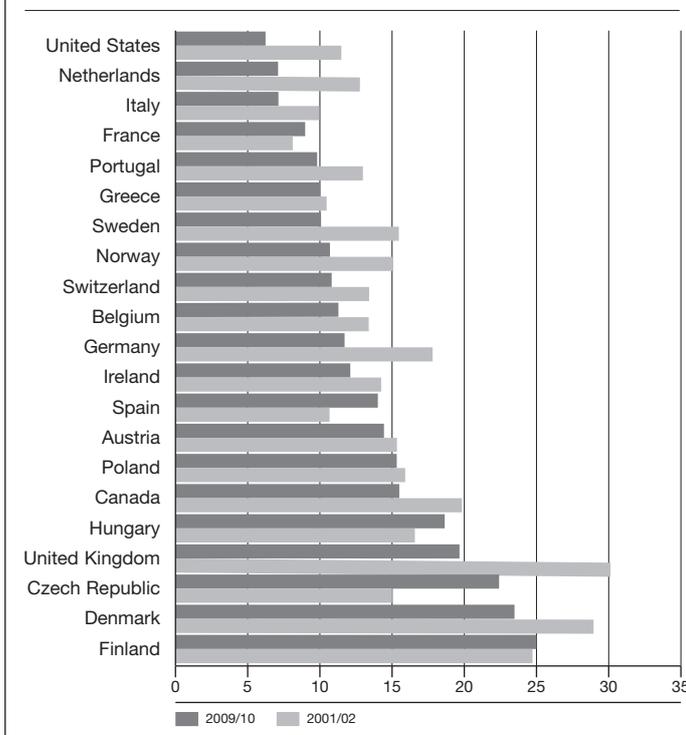


Figure 4: **Changes in the percentage of young people having been drunk on more than two occasions between 2001/02 and 2009/10**



Such a delay would be frustrating at the best of times, but the last three years have been of particular significance. Beginning in late 2008, the economic downturn in many developed nations has seen rising unemployment and falls in government expenditure that cannot but affect the lives of many millions of children. Data from 2009 and 2010 capture only the beginning of this period of turbulence. Nonetheless, for the most part, the data used in the UNICEF overview track long-term trends and reflect the results of long-term investment in children's lives.

It must be accepted that data-lag is part of the entry price for international comparisons of child wellbeing. And although national-level monitoring of children's lives is the more important task, UNICEF believes that international comparison has a part to play in policy development. It is international comparison that can show what is achievable in the real world, highlight strengths and weaknesses in individual countries, and demonstrate that child wellbeing is policy-susceptible. And it is international comparison that can say to politicians, press and public everywhere: 'This is how your performance in protecting children compares with the record of other nations at a similar level of development.' The political and public responses to the Report Card series prove this point.

When UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre published Report Card 7 in 2007, showing that at the beginning of the century (2001/02) the UK was at the bottom of the international league table of child wellbeing, UNICEF UK called a conference at Ditchley Park to discuss the findings. This resulted in the Ditchley Declaration, which was supported by all the political parties.⁸ Report Card 7 galvanised a joint effort, involving statutory and voluntary sector advocates for children, which led to the creation of the Department of Children, Families and Schools, and kickstarted many different initiatives. A published Children's Plan, more resources for childcare, schools and child health, the child poverty strategy and all-party support for the Child Poverty Act in 2010 all followed. The child deprivation rates in Figure 5 show the progress.⁹

Another example is the significant investment in social and private housing that has resulted in the UK being among the best in terms of the number of rooms per person up to 2009/10.¹⁰

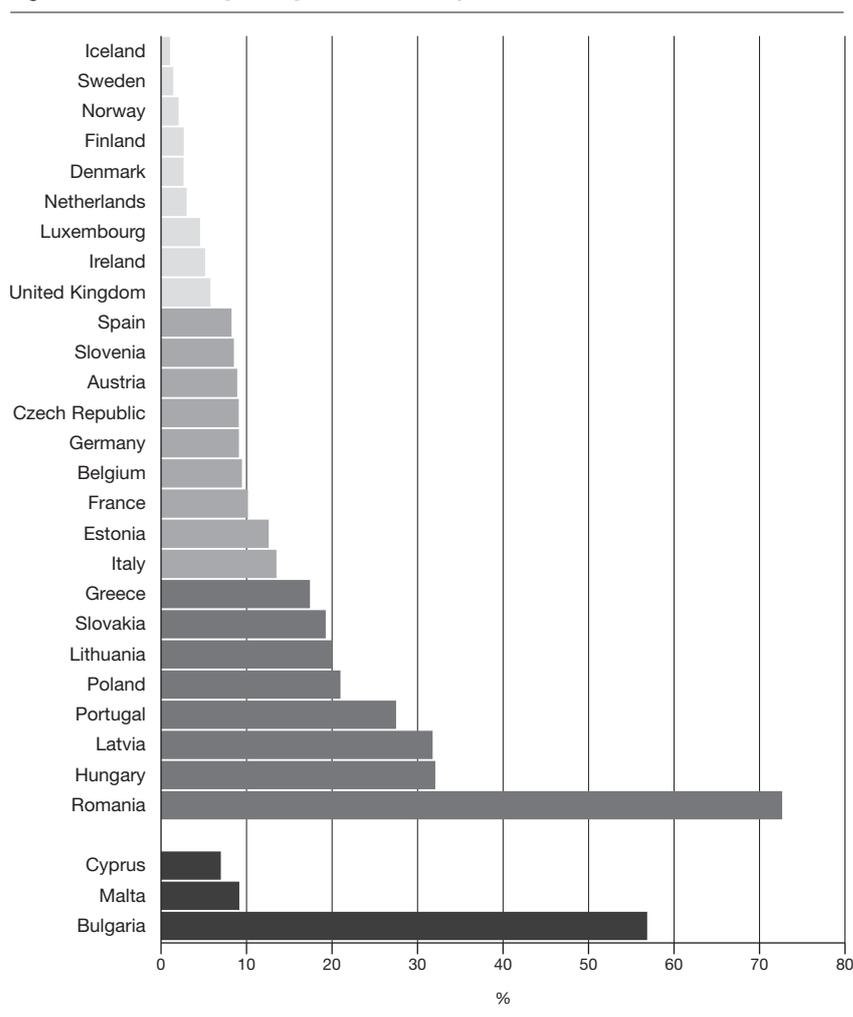
But the recent *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK* report shows that the progress in some areas has stalled or is already being reversed.¹¹

Over the last three years, like many developed

nations, the UK has witnessed falling real incomes (especially for the already low paid), cuts to public expenditure and reductions in the availability of a range of public services on which disadvantaged families depend most heavily. UNICEF argues for 'adjustment with a human face' – urging the UK government to do everything within its power to prevent the heaviest burden of economic recession falling on those least able to sustain it. Childhood is a period of special susceptibility – a time when skill should be building on skill as part of broader development, but a time when disadvantage can also build on disadvantage; a time in which future patterns and pathways of health and wellbeing are being laid and in which disruption can have lifelong consequences. Protecting the years of childhood is therefore essential, both for the wellbeing of those who are children today and of the UK society of tomorrow. The commitment in the coalition government's programme to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and to introduce various measures to support families¹² should not be set aside, even temporarily, because other problems appear more pressing. This commitment should have first call on the UK's capacities; it is a commitment to be maintained in good times and bad. There will always be something more immediate than protecting the wellbeing of children. There will never be anything more important. ■

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Figure 5: **Child multiple deprivation rates, 2009**



1 *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*, Innocenti Report Card 7, www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf

2 *Child Well-being in Economically Rich Countries: changes in the first decade of the 21st century*, Innocenti Working Papers 2013-02, www.unicefirc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2013_2.pdf

3 *Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries: a comparative overview*, Innocenti Report Card 11, 2013, p44

4 This indicator is based on written questionnaires completed by representative samples of children aged 11, 13, and 15 in each country. The relevant part of the questionnaire asks: Does your family own a car, van or truck? During the past 12 months, how many times did you travel away on holiday with your family? How many computers does your family own? Do you have your own bedroom for yourself?

5 J Bradshaw, *The Well-being of Children in the UK*, Policy Press, 2011

6 Report Card 11, Figure 3.1b, p18

7 The data in this table are estimates.

8 *The Declaration on Child Well-being*, produced on 8 June 2007 at the Child Well-being in the UK Conference, hosted by UNICEF UK

9 Dr Dave Gordon, University of Bristol, presentation at the Report Card 11 event on 16 April 2013

10 Dr Dave Gordon, University of Bristol, presentation at the Report Card 11 event on 16 April 2013

11 *The Impoverishment of the UK: PSE UK first results: living standards*, 2013 www.poverty.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/The_Impoverishment_of_the_UK_PSE_UK_first_results_summary_report_March_28.pdf#overlay-context=pse-research/pse-uk-reports

12 *The Coalition: our programme for government*, 2010, www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_187876.pdf