

Fairness for children: A league table of inequality in child well-being in rich countries ^[1]

Innocenti Report Card 13

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AVAILABILITY

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Overview

This Report Card presents an overview of inequalities in child well-being in 41 countries of the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It focuses on ‘bottom-end inequality’ – the gap between children at the bottom and those in the middle – and addresses the question ‘how far behind are children being allowed to fall?’ in income, education, health and life satisfaction.

Why inequality?

With the gap between rich and poor at its highest level for some three decades in most OECD countries, there is now a renewed focus on questions surrounding inequality.

While much political debate has centred on the growing income of the top 1 per cent, in many rich countries incomes below the median have grown less quickly than have those above the median.

Across the OECD, the risks of poverty have been shifting from the elderly towards youth since the 1980s. These developments accentuate the need to monitor the well-being of the most disadvantaged children, but income inequality also has far-reaching consequences for society, harming educational attainment, key health outcomes and even economic growth.

A concern with fairness and social justice requires us to consider whether some members of society are being left so far behind that it unfairly affects their lives both now and in the future. This Report Card asks the same underlying question as Report Card 9, which focused on inequality in child well-being, but uses the most recent data available and includes more countries.

Inequality, fairness and children

Questions of fairness and social justice have a special resonance when inequalities among children, rather than adults, are the focus of attention.

Social inequalities among adults may be justifiable if they have arisen through fair competition and under conditions of equality of opportunity. But when it comes to children, the social and economic circumstances they face are beyond their control, and so differences in merit cannot reasonably be advanced as justification for inequalities among them.

In addition, few dispute that childhood experiences have a profound effect not only on children’s current lives, but also on their future opportunities and prospects. Likewise, social and economic disadvantages in early life increase the risk of having lower earnings, lower standards of health and lower skills in adulthood. This in turn can perpetuate disadvantage across generations. None of this is the fault of the child.

Comparing bottom-end inequality across rich countries

The league tables in this Report Card rank countries according to how far children at the bottom are allowed to fall behind their peers in income, education, health and life satisfaction. We also provide an overall league table of inequality in child well-being that summarizes performance across all four of these dimensions.

The measures of inequality in the league tables are put into context through the use of indicators that capture how many children in each country have low income, low educational achievement, poor health or low levels of life satisfaction. This offers a wider picture of how far children’s rights are being upheld in rich countries.

The league tables presented in Section 2 compare countries on the basis of how far children are being allowed to fall behind. Sections 3, 4,

5 and 6 offer a more detailed exploration of trends in inequality affecting income, education, health and life satisfaction, respectively. Each of these sections also considers the impacts of inequality on child well-being. Section 7 returns to the general question of fairness and inequality, considering the extent to which child well-being in rich countries is shaped by deeply rooted social and economic inequalities over which children have no control. Section 8 presents conclusions and recommendations.

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