

International Day of Families: Majority of children under-three in EU still lacking formal child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Just in time before the International Day of Families was celebrated yesterday (15 May), EU's statistics office, Eurostat, published new figures on arrangements for early child care in EU member states.

The International Day of Families is observed on the 15th of May every year. The day was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1993 and reflects the importance the international community attaches to families. It provides an opportunity to promote awareness of issues relating to families.

Eurostat writes that families make use of different arrangements to care for their children under the age of three (under-threes).

Some parents care for their children themselves. Other parents make use of day-care centres (formal childcare), childminders, grandparents, other household members, relatives, friends or neighbours (informal childcare) or a combination of formal and informal childcare.

In 2014, the European Union (EU) totalled almost 15.5 million children under the age of three. Half (50%) of them were cared for by their parents only, while 28% attended at least partially formal care, meaning that the Barcelona target of 33% of under-threes in formal childcare was still not reached.

In fact, the average formal child care coverage for EU member states has been the same since 2012.

In 2002 at the Barcelona summit it was decided that member states should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive to provide childcare to at least 33% of under-threes. The target for all children between 3 and the mandatory school age is more ambitious and was set at 90%.

In 2014 this target of 33% of formal childcare, whether exclusively or partially, was reached only in 10 Member States: Denmark (70%), Sweden (56%), Belgium and Luxembourg (both 49%), the Netherlands and Portugal (both 45%), France (40%), Slovenia and Spain (both 37%) and Finland (34%).

Overall in the EU, fewer than a third (28%) of children under the age of three attended formal childcare. The average formal child care coverage for EU member states has been the same since 2012.

The biggest deficiencies are found for the youngest age group in the member states with the highest rates of child poverty.

Care by the parents only was the main childcare arrangement for under-threes in a majority of EU Member States. The highest proportions were registered in Bulgaria (73%), Latvia (70%), Hungary and Slovakia (68% each).

In 2013, the European Commission adopted a recommendation on "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage". This recommendation has been unanimously approved by the Council which means that every member state has voluntarily taken on a moral obligation to implement its contents.

"The arguments for investing more public funds into the upbringing of very young children are overwhelming," wrote Julius op de Beke in an op-ed in The Brussels Times (here). He is a socio-economic policy expert in DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission.

"Intervening during the early years, in particular in the case when children come from a disadvantaged background, can prevent a lot of social misery later on in a child's life. Then problems can only be set right at a very high cost."

"This is because the brain continues developing till a child is around 5 years old. What you learn at the start of your life you will remember for the rest of your life. In particular early childhood education and care (ECEC) turns out to be very effective."

-reprinted from The Brussels Times

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