

POLICY BRIEF 3:

# The environment and child well-being

The State of Children in the European Union 2024

## The issue

- Children's current and future well-being is fundamentally shaped by the environment in which they grow up. This includes a range of factors in the natural environment including homes, schools and local areas, green spaces, as well as broader issues such as the impacts of climate change.
- This policy brief focuses primarily on issues relating to the natural environment and considers several topics that are important to consider at cross-European Union (EU) level as well as at national level. The key underlying issue for this brief is climate change and its potential impacts on children's lives now and in the future, as well as on future generations.
- While environmental factors affect the whole population, children are often vulnerable to their impacts in specific ways as their bodies are still developing. In fact, children may already be affected by environmental factors even before they are born, as chemicals can affect development in the womb.



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- The Convention on the Rights of the Child contains several references to environmental issues, including “taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution” (art. 24), the development of respect for the natural environment (art. 29). This issue was recently further recognized by General Comment 26<sup>1</sup> of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. This document notes that “Children identify environmental issues as being highly important to their lives ... [their] voices are a powerful global force for environmental protection.” The General Comment emphasizes the fundamental and urgent need for all countries and other key stakeholders to take action to protect the environment and children’s rights.

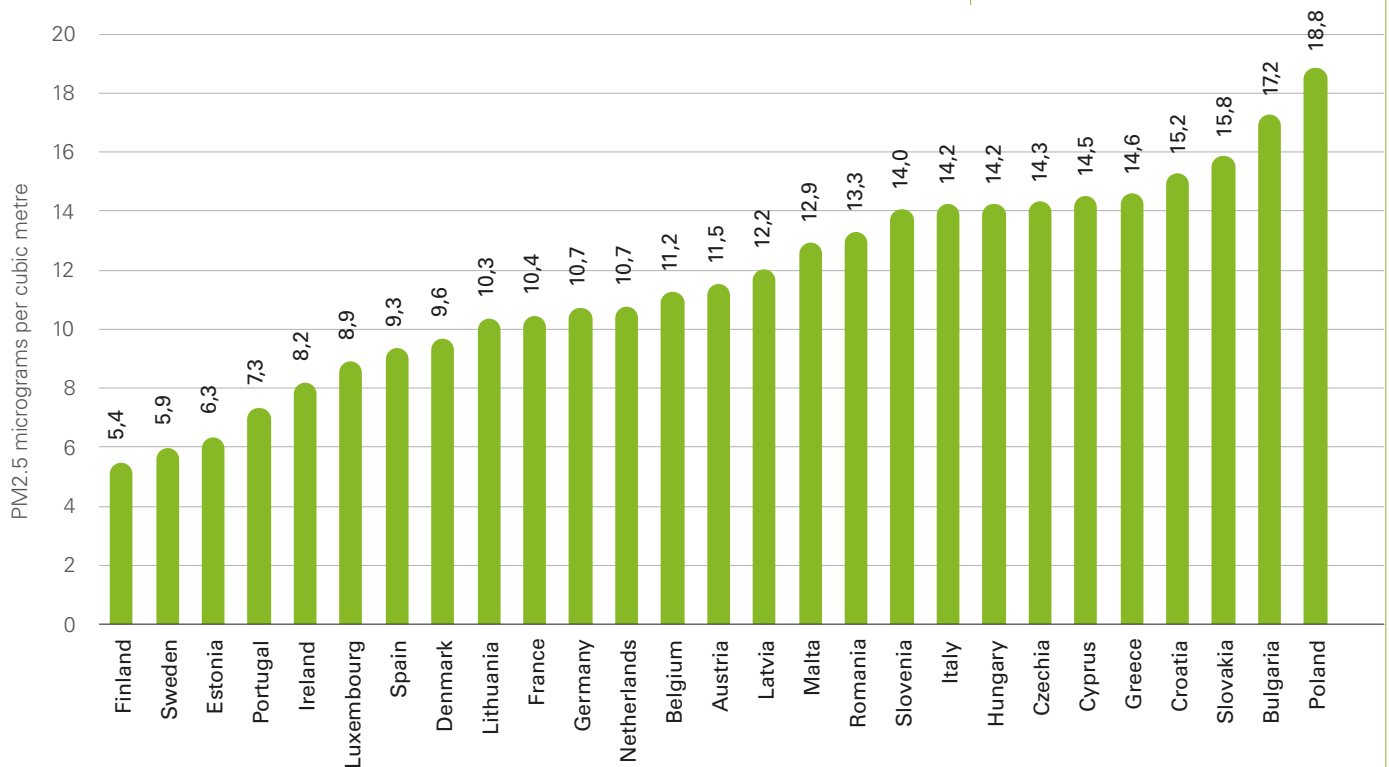
## The picture in the EU

In this brief we focus on the following key factors, which are particularly relevant at EU level:

- Air quality and pollution
- Hazardous chemicals
- Green space
- Extreme weather events

## Air quality and pollution

- The quality of the air children breathe, both indoors and outdoors, has important implications for their health. Air pollution is recognized as a risk factor for heart disease, asthma, lung disease and cancer.<sup>2</sup>
- It is estimated that from 2010 to 2019, 5,839 infants under the age of one year died due to causes attributable to air pollution in EU countries. And of the 472 deaths of children and young people under the age of 20 in the EU who died in 2019 due to air pollution, the large majority were under the age of one year (437 or 93 per cent). Boys were more likely (0.59 per 100,000) to die of air pollution than girls (0.49 per 100,000) in 2019.
- There has been a major decrease in this cause of death in children in the EU over the past 30 years. The number of deaths in 1990 was 3,273 – almost seven times higher than the number in 2019. The sharpest reduction was from 1990 to 2000 when the number had fallen to 1,392.
- Outdoor air quality (measured by the presence of fine particulate matter - PM<sub>2.5</sub>) has been improving in the EU in general since 1990, contributing to the above benefits.



**Figure 1. Levels of air pollution in EU, 2019**

Source: World Health Organization, 'Global Health Observatory Database: SDG Indicator 11.6.2 Concentrations of fine particulate matter (PM2.5)', [https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/concentrations-of-fine-particulate-matter-\(pm2-5\)](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/concentrations-of-fine-particulate-matter-(pm2-5)), accessed 11 January 2024

- However, progress in some countries has been slow in recent years. Ongoing action and attention is therefore required to maintain historic progress and continue to reduce this form of pollution so that all children can grow up breathing healthy air.

## Hazardous chemicals

- Hazardous chemicals in the environment can be particularly harmful to children as their bodies develop. In fact, this can even be the case before a child is born. An analysis of data in Norway shows that children's brain development in the fetus can be sensitive to environmental chemicals, which can affect later risks of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autistic spectrum disorder and cognitive functioning.<sup>3</sup>
- Exposure to pesticides is another environmental risk that can be particularly damaging to children. It has been linked to a wide range of detrimental health effects from damage to nervous and digestive systems to developmental delays. While some countries have very low levels of pesticide pollution, it is estimated<sup>4</sup> that still almost one in 20 children in the EU are exposed to high levels of pesticide pollution, amounting to over 380,000 children.

## Green space

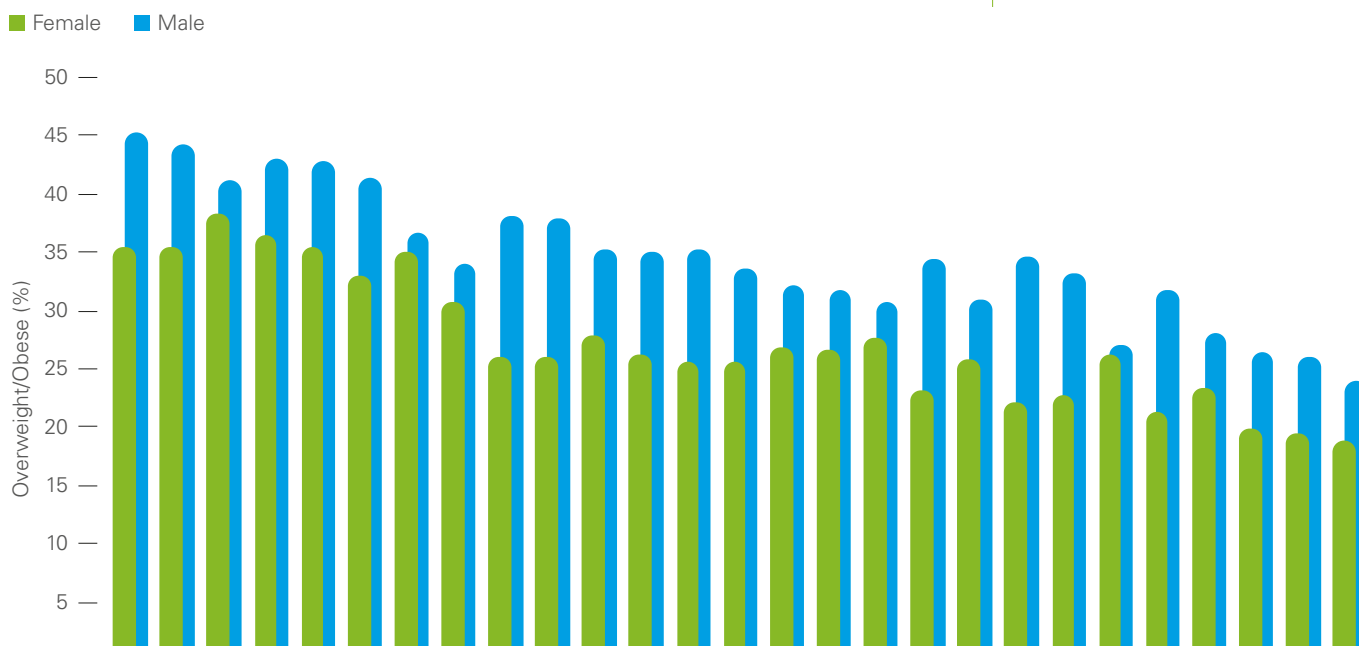
- Access to green space is an important resource for children's development, providing them with opportunities to play, have freedom and connect with nature. It can also be a valuable asset for parents of younger children.



- There is ample evidence that access to green space is good for health and well-being at all ages. For children, this includes benefits in terms of physical health, mental health and behavioural development. This is an aspect of the environment that can be further developed in all countries to promote and improve child well-being.

Figure 2 shows an index of the amount of urban green space per person in EU countries in 2018.

**Figure 2. Urban green space available per person**



Source: Kwon, Oh-Yhun et al., 'Urban green space and happiness in developed countries', *EPJ Data Science*, vol 10, issue 1, Supplementary Information, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-021-00278-7>, accessed 21 January 2024.

## Extreme weather events

- Recent years have seen an increase in the number of extreme weather events globally, and this is attributed to the effects of climate change. EU countries have not escaped these events, with recent serious incidents of flooding, forest fires and extended heat waves in many countries.
- In 2022, 85,000 people across 16 EU countries were displaced from their homes due to weather-related disasters.<sup>5</sup> This figure will include many thousands of children in the EU. While this scale of displacement is relatively small compared to an average (2016-21) of over 7 million children displaced annually across the globe<sup>6</sup>, the risk of such events and extended impacts in Europe is increasing.

The EU needs to champion the Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action, signed by 40 countries to date, including 10 EU member States.

- Recent estimates<sup>7</sup> suggest that over 37 million children in 24 EU countries for which data are available experienced high heatwave frequency<sup>8</sup> in 2020.
- Infrastructure within the EU is not prepared for potential future extreme weather events. It is estimated<sup>9</sup> that almost half of schools in cities in the EU are in strong 'heat island' areas, thus putting children's well-being at risk, while around one in ten schools are located in potential flood-prone areas.

## What can the EU do to tackle environmental impacts on child well-being?

The EU has already made substantial progress on environmental policies, but much more can be done – both at EU and national level:

1. **Ensure that children stay high on the political agenda 2024-29 regarding the impacts of a changing environment on their wellbeing and health**, as well as their need for special protection and investment, particularly with respect to adaptation and climate finance.
2. **The EU should carry out an impact assessment of the Green New Deal on children and future generations** and adjust policy actions accordingly to ensure that all EU-climate policy serves children and young people today and in the future.
3. **The EU needs to champion the Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action<sup>10</sup>**: Signed by 40 countries to date, including 10 EU member States, Declaration signatories have committed to accelerate inclusive, child- and youth-centered climate policies and action. The Declaration serves as a framework for national dialogue and action, as well as a convening mechanism for supportive Parties within the UNFCCC process.
4. **The EU must support the design of environmental legislation and policies which protect the health and well-being of children**, including ambitious international sustainability and climate change agreements.
5. **The EU should support efforts to make COP30 a children's COP**, where parties not only commit to the 1.5 degrees Celsius temperature limit that the next generation needs, but where all climate mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage and finance plans have children at their heart.
6. **The EU must encourage its member States to ensure that their revised Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) – both in conception and implementation – take children into account**. This is because parties to the Paris Agreement committed that States should respect, promote and consider the rights of children, as well as intergenerational equity, when taking climate action.
7. **The EU should support efforts to empower every child and young person with education and skills to be champions for the environment**. This includes incentivizing actions by EU member States to invest in climate education, including in curricula and the training of teachers.

## Endnotes

1. United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change', <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/crccgc26-general-comment-no-26-2023-childrens-rights>, accessed 21 January 2024.
2. World Health Organization, 'WHO global air quality guidelines. Particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide', Geneva: World Health Organization, 2021, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240034228>, accessed 21 January 2024.
3. UNICEF Office of Research, 'Places and Spaces: Environments and children's well-being, Innocenti Report Card 17', UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, 2022, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1417>, accessed 8 November 2023.
4. Calculations based on data presented in Ibid., originally sourced from the Children's Climate Risk Index, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis> and EU population data.
5. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre: 'Global Internal Displacement Database', "<https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/>" accessed 9 February 2024.
6. Children's Climate Risk Index.
7. UNICEF, 'The coldest year of the rest of their lives: Protecting children from the escalating impacts of heatwaves', UNICEF, New York, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/media/129506/file/UNICEF-coldest-year-heatwaves-and-children-EN.pdf>, accessed 3 December 2023.
8. A heatwave was defined as any period of three days or more when the maximum temperature each day is in the top 10 per cent of the local 15-day average. High heatwave frequency was defined as an average of 4.5 or more such heatwaves per year.
9. European Environment Agency, 'Towards 'just resilience': leaving no one behind when adapting to climate change', European Environment Agency, Copenhagen, 2022, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/just-resilience-leaving-no-one-behind>, accessed 5 December 2023.
10. UNICEF, 'Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action: A pledge by champion governments to uphold priorities identified by children and youth across the world', UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/environment-and-climate-change/climate-declaration#declaration>, accessed 21 January 2024.



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