

Child Well-Being in an Unpredictable World

Innocenti Report Card 19

Growing up in a wealthy country with abundant resources does not guarantee a happy, healthy childhood. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, children in some of the richest countries experienced significant declines in their academic performance, mental well-being and physical health. These troubling trends threaten to undermine the future potential and overall well-being of children.

The latest Innocenti Report Card 19 from UNICEF's Global Office of Research and Foresight answers three core questions:

- How have children fared in the face of a rapidly changing and often unpredictable global environment?
- What are the key factors affecting children's lives?
- What can be done to promote child well-being?

Where do rich countries stand?

Each edition of the Innocenti Report Card series presents a league table that ranks countries on how they are doing on key aspects of child well-being. In this report, 43 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) are ranked on children and adolescents' mental well-being, physical health and skills.

The table presents a diverse range of strengths and weaknesses. There is room for improvement in all countries, even those at the top of the rankings:

- The top three countries are the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Denmark and France and they also lead on mental health, physical health and skills.
- All of the bottom eight countries rank in the bottom third on at least two of the three dimensions.
- Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia rank high for mental health but rank in the lowest third for physical health.
- Japan, the Republic of Korea and Slovenia are in the top third rank for skills, but in the bottom third rank for mental health.
- Czechia and Iceland rank high for physical health but rank low for both mental health and skills.

Table 1: A league table of child well-being

Overall rank	Country	Mental health	Physical health	Skills
1	Netherlands	1	4	11
2	Denmark	3	3	8
3	France	11	2	9
4	Portugal	2	10	22
5	Ireland	24	11	1
6	Switzerland	13	7	6
7	Spain	4	25	16
8	Croatia	9	31	3
9	Italy	8	16	23
10	Sweden	14	13	14
11	Hungary	6	30	13
12	Austria	16	20	7
13	Slovenia	28	18	2
14	Japan	32	1	12
15	Lithuania	20	17	17
16	Romania	5	32	26
17	Finland	21	23	18
18	Czechia	25	5	31
19	Canada	23	24	21
20	Slovakia	12	29	27
21	United Kingdom	27	22	15
22	Iceland	26	6	28
23	Latvia	22	15	32
24	Greece	7	27	35
25	Germany	18	14	34
26	Malta	15	21	36
27	Republic of Korea	34	28	4
28	Bulgaria	10	34	33
29	Poland	30	19	30
30	Estonia	33	26	24
31	Costa Rica	17	36	39
32	New Zealand	36	35	25
33	Colombia	29	39	38
34	Mexico	19	41	41
35	Türkiye	35	37	37
36	Chile	31	40	40
	Australia	n/a	33	20
	Belgium	n/a	8	5
	Israel	n/a	12	19
	Norway	n/a	9	10
	United States	n/a	38	29

Note: Due to lack of availability of data, it was not possible to include two countries in the League Table: Cyprus and Luxembourg. These countries are included in other parts of the report where data are available. Separately, it was not possible to fully rank Australia, Belgium, Israel, Norway and United States because of missing or not comparable data on the life satisfaction component.

Progress at risk

Over the past 25 years notable improvements have been made in child well-being in the OECD/EU group of countries. There has been a steady decline in child mortality, an overall reduction in adolescent suicide and an increase in school completion rates. But in recent years, trends in basic areas of children's well-being have shown warning signs of reversal.

Today's children are growing up in a complex world marked by epidemics, conflict and extreme climate events. They grapple with rapid digital advancements and face threats brought by demographic shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures caused significant learning losses. New risks to children's health continue to emerge: Urban air pollution, synthetics and microplastics in environment can cause significant harm if left unchecked. Toxic materials are present in the toys children play with, the clothes they wear and the homes they live in. And while these issues disproportionately affect poor countries, the world's wealthiest countries are not immune.

The report compares the six markers of child well-being that were first analysed in Report Card 16 published in 2020: life satisfaction, adolescent suicide, child mortality, overweight, academic proficiency and social skills.

It shows that across the 43 OECD/EU countries, children are becoming less happy with their lives, more likely to be overweight and obese, and not doing well in school. The hard-won progress in child well-being in this group of countries is becoming increasingly vulnerable to global events and shocks.

Table 2 summarizes changes in the six key indicators included in the League Table between 2018 and 2022. An improving rating indicates a proportional improvement of at least 5 per cent, while a deteriorating rating indicates a proportional decline of at least 5 per cent.

The general picture shows:

- Child mortality has decreased in most countries reflecting a longer-term trend in high-income countries.
- Children's social skills are mostly relatively stable, or in some cases increasing.
- In recent years, there is no clear trend in adolescent suicide rates. There is a mix of increases, stability and decreases across different countries.
- The remaining three indicators – life satisfaction, overweight and academic skills – show a deteriorating trend in many countries and an improvement in only a few. As will be seen below these negative trends are considerable in many countries.

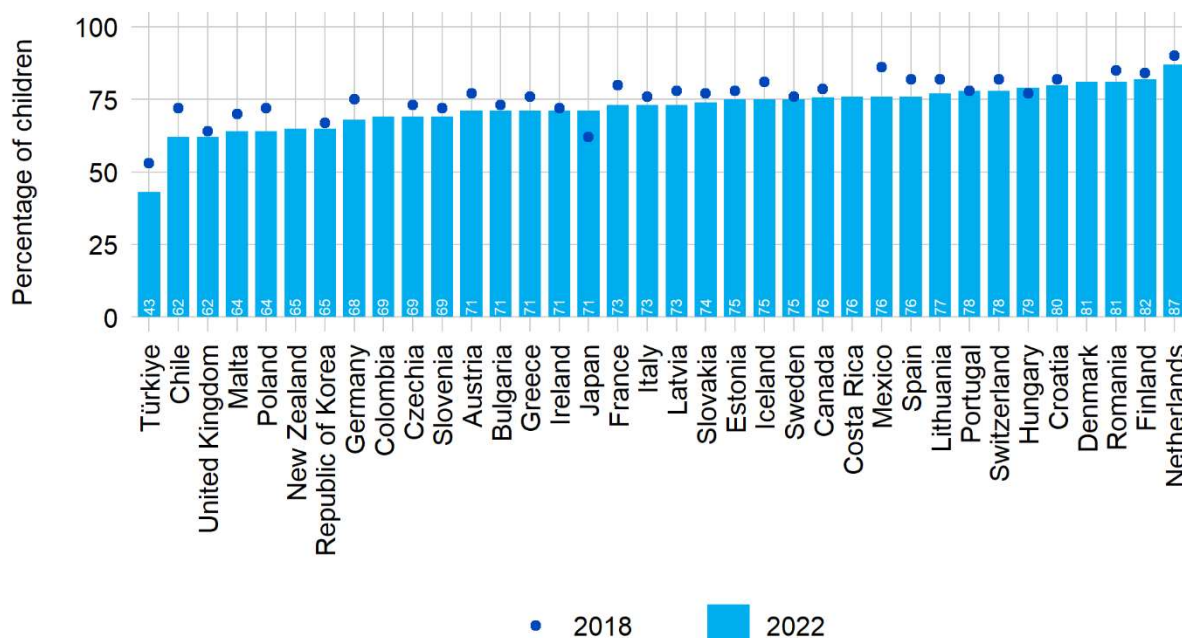
Table 2: Changes in six indicators of child well-being, 2018 to 2022

	Mental health		Physical health		Skills	
	Life satisfaction	Suicide	Mortality	Overweight	Academic	Social
Improving	1	18	33	2	4	7
Stable	17	7	9	27	13	32
Deteriorating	14	17	1	14	21	1
No data	11	1	0	0	5	3

Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction levels fell substantially between 2018 and 2022 among 15-year-old children. While both girls and boys experienced a drop in life satisfaction, the magnitude of this decrease, in nearly all countries, was larger among girls. Japan was the only country where children's life satisfaction substantially increased between 2018 and 2022.

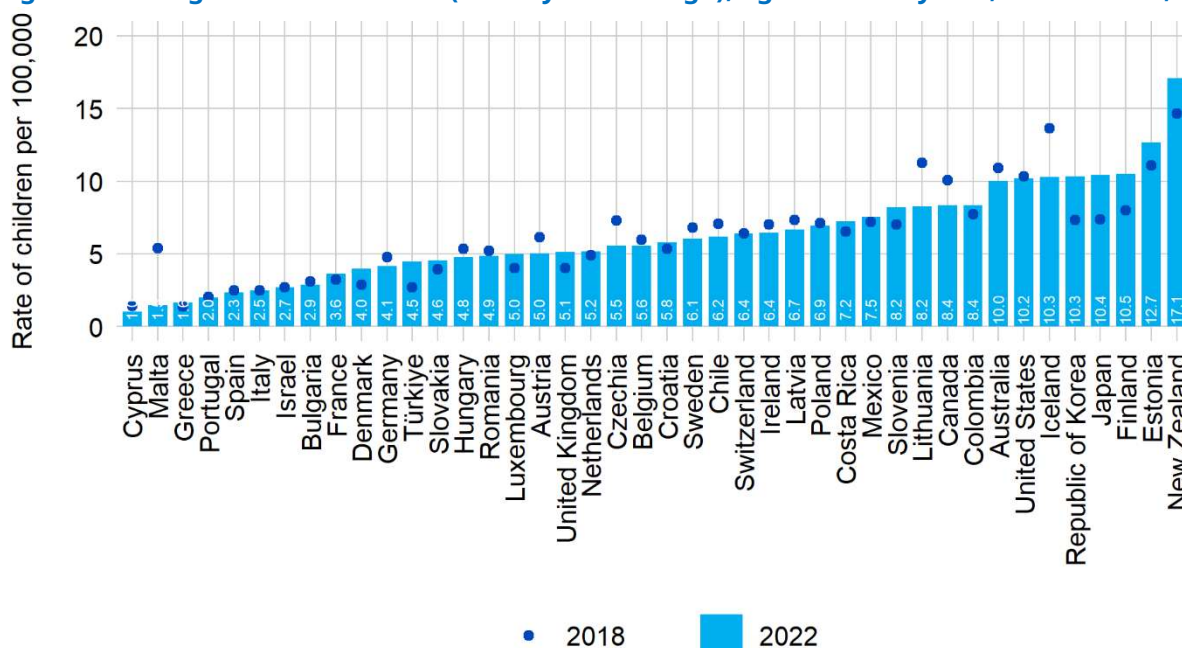
Figure 1: Changes in high life satisfaction in 15-year-olds, 2018 to 2022



Adolescent suicide

Between 2018 and 2022, suicide rates among adolescents fell in 18 countries but increased in 17 countries. Overall, across this group of countries, the picture was stable during this period. Suicide rates in this age group are substantially higher among males than females, although this gap appears to be narrowing.

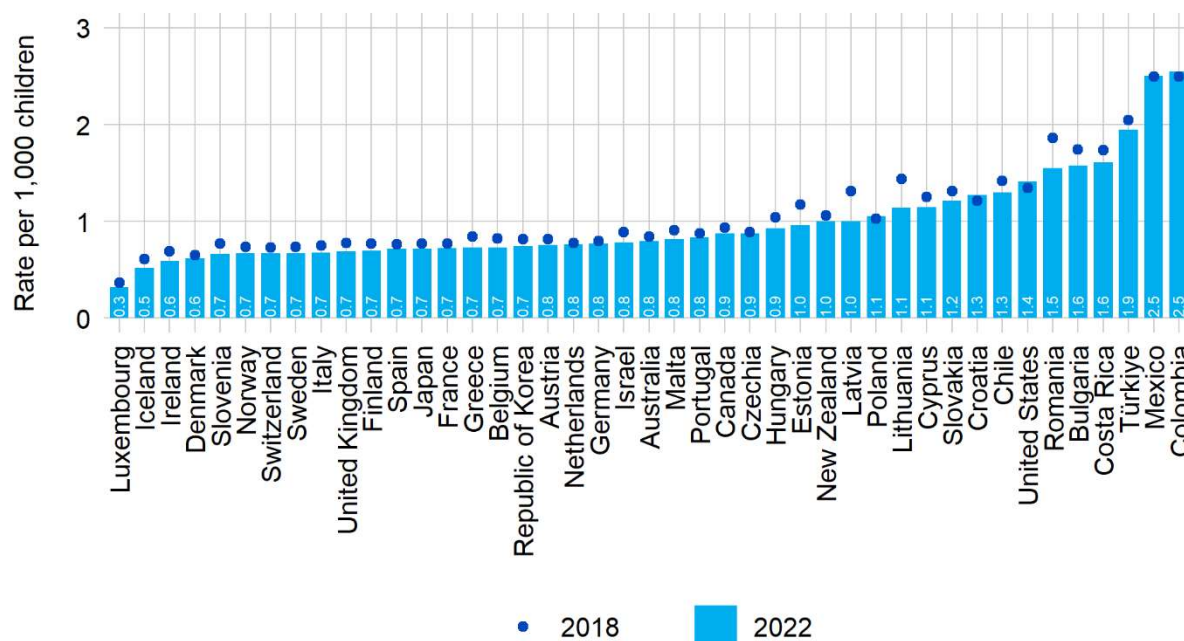
Figure 2: Changes in suicide rates (three-year average), ages 15 to 19 years, 2018 to 2022,



Child mortality

On average, across report card countries, fewer than one in 1,000 children dies in the decade between their 5th and 15th birthday. Despite the sustained progress, the risk of child mortality is still higher for children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

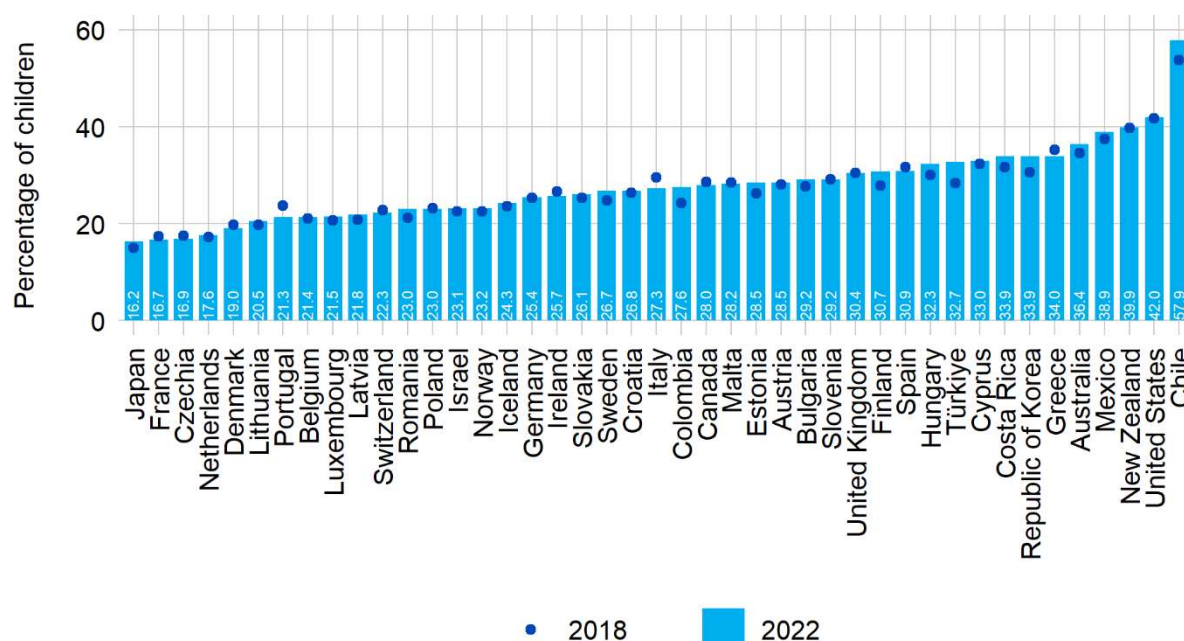
Figure 3: Changes in child mortality, ages 5 to 14 years, 2018 to 2022



Overweight and obesity in children

In recent decades, there has been a persistent rise in the rate of overweight in children: from around 17 per cent in 1990 to around 28 per cent in 2022. Between 2018 and 2022, this rate has continued to increase in a third of countries covered in Report Card 19 and only improved substantially in two – Italy and Portugal.

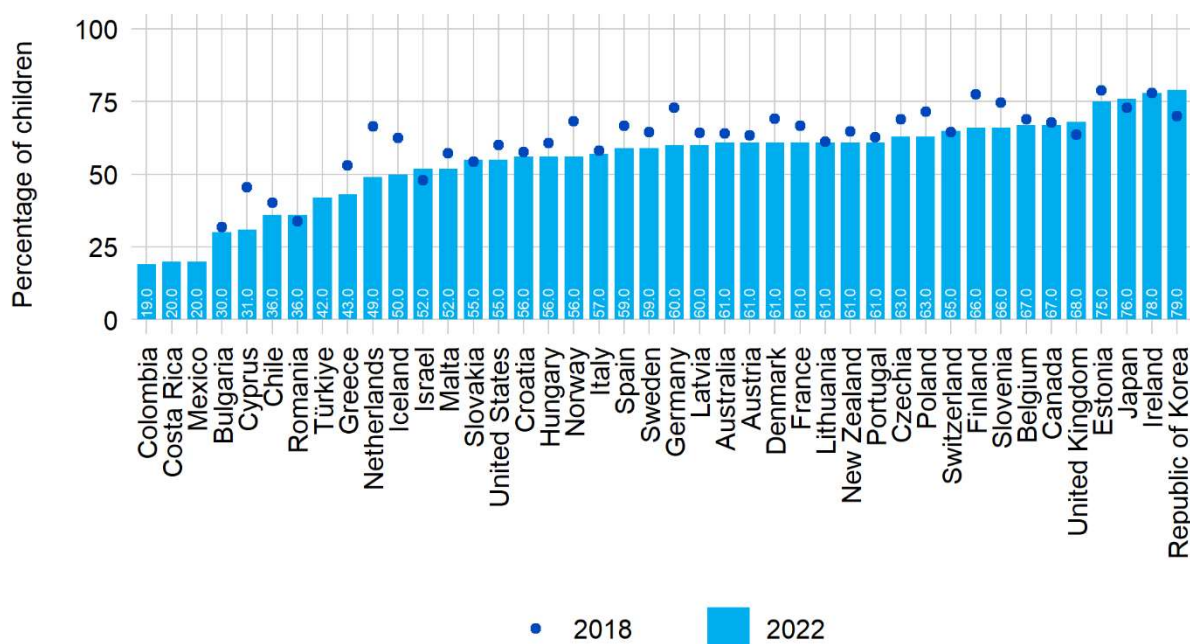
Figure 4: Changes in overweight, ages 5 to 19 years, 2018 to 2022



Academic skills

School closures triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on children's academic skills. Mathematics scores declined by an average of 12 points – equivalent to a learning loss of 7 months – across 38 countries. The proportions of children with basic proficiency in reading and maths declined by more than 5 per cent in 21 countries and only increased substantially in 4. Across 42 countries, over 8.4 million 15-year-olds were assessed as not functionally literate or numerate.

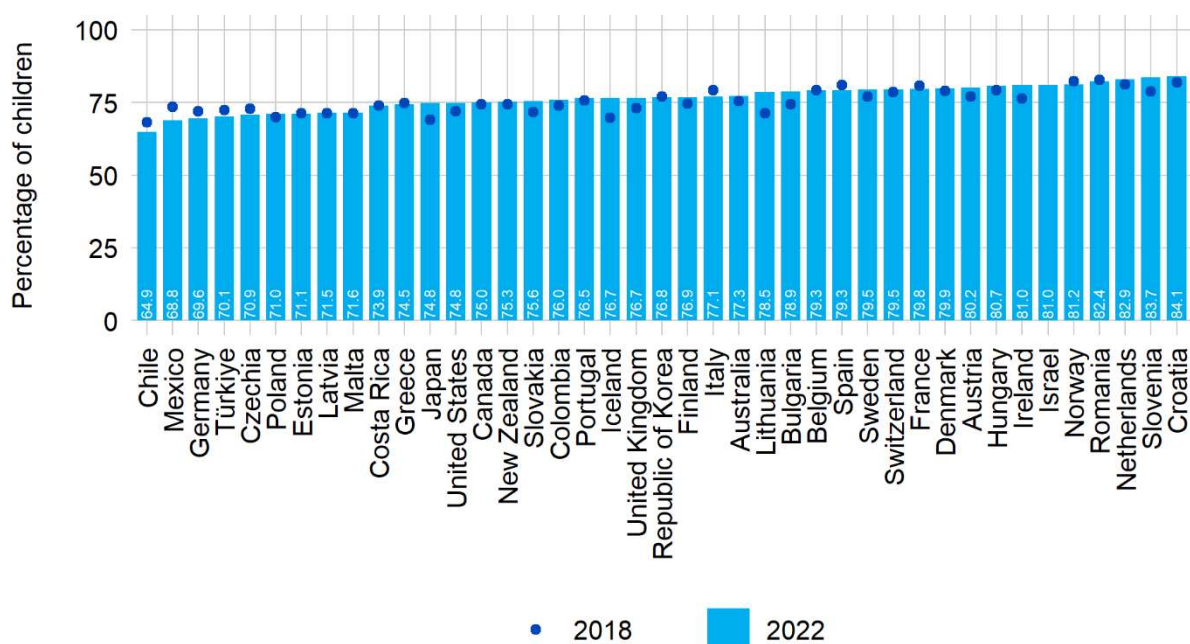
Figure 5: Changes in academic proficiency, 15-year-olds, 2018 to 2022



Social and emotional skills

Social and emotional skills changed relatively little between 2018 and 2022. This is a positive sign given the concerns about the potential impacts of school closures on social and emotional skills.

Figure 6: Children who made friends easily at school, 15 years old, 2018 to 2022



Solutions for sustaining child well-being in an unpredictable world

Policy solutions need to have a targeted whole-childhood approach that will require a shift in accepted thinking and in priorities for policies and interventions. The following actions are recommended to course correct and prevent further deterioration in children's well-being.

Improve children's mental well-being

Specialist services are needed to boost children's mental well-being. Tap into parenting programmes that promote parents' and carers' mental health and parenting skills. Promote social and emotional learning at school and prevent violence, bullying and discrimination in schools, communities and online.

Improve children's physical health

Create healthier food environments and promote physical activity. Promotion and marketing of unhealthy foods should be regulated. Separately, children's health is also at risk from pollutants in the environment. Reducing environmental pollution requires immediate attention, monitoring, research and policy action.

Support the development of a range of skills

Targeted actions are needed to ensure that children can catch up on missed learning. A well-resourced and enabling environment is needed to promote children's digital skills, which are becoming essential for their well-being and safety.

Recognize the connections between issues

Mental health, physical health and skills development are interconnected as children move through childhood. For example, poor physical health can lead to social exclusion, feelings of isolation and anxiety. Conversely stress and depression can also negatively influence sleep patterns and eating habits. Issues in one area can affect others, either positively or negatively.

Prepare for an uncertain future

In the current global context, the pandemic should not be seen as an isolated event of the past. It is not difficult to anticipate similar impacts from climate change and conflict in the future. Use foresight to develop anticipatory measures and mitigate the impact of shocks on children's well-being.

Tackle inequalities

The report noted variations in children's well-being based on gender and family socioeconomic status. Comparative international data on such inequalities is scarce, although there is data for individual countries on some topics. The next Innocenti Report Card will address inequalities in children's well-being in OECD and EU countries more fully.

Engage children and young people

Children can and want to be involved in decisions that affect their lives and their futures. Understanding children's experiences, listening to their views and ideas and working with them are essential steps to finding solutions that will promote child well-being.