

Child well-being in Spain: the impact of the crisis

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Children are the last people responsible for Spain's crisis in all its many dimensions, but they are suffering the consequences to an equal or greater extent than other collectives, although this is not as visible as it is for other groups and is mainly confined to dramatic images in the media.



The study, **Child Well-Being in Rich Countries**, published this month by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), ranks Spain 19th out of 29 countries in its latest league table based on five dimensions (see Figure 1). In the early 2000s, Spain was in 13th place out of 21 countries. Its fall between the beginning and end of the decade based on a common set of indicators for the 21 countries is the largest (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. League table of child well-being (1), selected countries

Overall rank	Material well-being rank	Health and safety rank	Education rank	Behaviours and risks rank	Housing and environment rank
1. Netherlands	1	5	1	1	4
2. Norway	3	7	6	4	3
6. Germany	11	12	3	6	13
13. France	10	10	15	13	16
16. UK	14	16	24	15	10
19. Spain	24	9	26	20	9
26. US	26	25	27	23	23
29. Romania	29	29	29	27	29

(1) Out of 29 countries.

Source: UNICEF.

Figure 2. Country rankings at beginning and end of the decade (1)

Rank	Early 2000s	Rank	Late 2000s	Change in rank
1.	Sweden	1.	Netherlands	+2
2.	Finland	2.	Norway	+2
6.	France	6.	Denmark	-2
7.	Germany	7.	Belgium	+1
13.	Spain	13.	Czech Republic	-4
14.	Italy	14.	Italy	No change
20.	UK	18=	Spain	-5
21.	US	21.	US	-1

(1) The tables are ranked by each country's average rank in four dimensions of child well-being –material well-being, health, education, and behaviours and risks– for which comparable data are available towards the beginning and end of the first decade of the 2000s.

Source: UNICEF.

The Spanish branch of UNICEF estimated in a **report** published a year ago on the impact of the crisis that more than 2.2 million children were living below the poverty line in 2011 (latest figure), 80,000 more than in 2010 and 26% of those under the age of 18. The report said there were over 760,000 households with children where no adult was working, 46,000



more. In extreme cases, parents, particularly if both of them have lost their jobs, have taken their children out of school.

The Red Cross in Catalonia, one of Spain's richest and economically most dynamic regions, reported earlier this year that seven out of every 10 families tended to by its poverty programmes could not guarantee healthy food for their children (between the ages of three and 12) and 63% of them lived in conditions of misery and with household income of less than €566 a month.

The children of an increasing number of families in Spain, who cannot pay for school meals (they are not free in all state schools), are taking their lunch in Tupperware. The leftist regional government of Andalusia, where the unemployment rate is 35%, announced in April that the poorest children will have three free meals a day.

The austerity measures taken since the onset of the crisis in 2009 by the previous Socialist government and the current Popular Party, in power since the end of 2011, directly affect crucial items for children in Spain, such as social services, education and health. According to UNICEF, the government allocates 0.7% of GDP to supporting families compared with an EU average of 3%.

Child poverty rates have been persistently high in Spain, despite and because of significant demographic changes over the last 25 years. On the one hand there has been a sharp drop in the fertility rate and, on the other, the influx of more than 4.5 million foreigners since 1995 (mainly non-EU immigrants from Morocco and Latin America and more recently Romania, an EU member since 2004). Spanish women averaged almost three children in 1978 and only 1.2 in the mid 1990s (1.3 today). Female immigrants, however, tend to have more children than Spanish women, at least the first-generation ones.

The impact of Spain's crisis has been particularly acute among immigrants: their unemployment rate is more than 30% compared with the national average of 26% and more than 200,000 of them returned home in 2012, causing Spain's population to fall for the first time since the regular census began in 1996. Many immigrants worked in the construction sector, which collapsed as of 2008 when the property bubble burst, and were the first to lose their jobs as they were employed on temporary contracts.

Spain's relative child poverty rate is almost 20%, only surpassed by Latvia, the US and Romania. This rate gives the proportion of a country's children living in households where disposable income is less than 50% of the national median (after taking into account taxes and benefits and adjusting for family size and composition). The rate, however, reveals nothing about how far below each country's relative poverty line those children are being allowed to fall. The best gauge of the depth of relative child poverty is the child poverty gap –the gap between the poverty line and the median income of those below the line–. Spain's child poverty gap is the largest among the 29 countries in the UNICEF ranking at close to 40% of the poverty line (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Child poverty gaps –gap between the poverty line and the median income of those below the poverty line– (as a % of the poverty line)

	Child poverty gap
Spain	39.0
US	37.5
Italy	31.0
UK	23.0
Germany	19.4
France	18.2
Luxembourg	11.3

Source: UNICEF.

The UNICEF report assesses children's well-being not just in terms of material conditions but also health and safety, education, risky behaviour (such as excessive alcohol consumption) and physical environment, including housing conditions.

Spain has the fifth-lowest child mortality rate and the third-highest pre-school enrolment rate, but it is in the bottom third for participation in further education (the percentage of those aged 15 to 19 in education), last in the NEET ranking (the percentage of those aged 15 to 19 not in education, employment or training) and 25th in the PISA test scores for reading, maths and science for 15-year-olds.

Finland tops the PISA league and yet is bottom in the ranking for pre-school enrolment, which suggests that starting school early, as in Spain, does not guarantee educational achievement.

Spain has slipped considerably in child well-being, but it is still well ahead of the US, the richest large economy in the world, in all categories (see Figure 1). Its individualist, free-market ideology, in the **words** of Jeffrey D. Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, means there is little cash support for families and its social safety net is far from the social democracies of Western Europe who top the UNICEF ranking.

The UNICEF study also makes use of what is called 'subjective well-being', which means asking a person directly about their life satisfaction on a scale of 0 to 10 (where 0 represents 'the worst possible life for me' and 10 'the best possible life for me'). The Netherlands tops this league table with 95% of its children reporting a high level of life satisfaction in 2009/2010 and Spain is in third position with 90%.

While the Netherlands tops both the UNICEF league table (based on objective criteria) and the children's life satisfaction table, Spain is 19th in the former and third in the latter, the largest and most positively striking difference among the 29 countries along with Germany (6th in the former but 22nd in the latter).

UNICEF notes that a child's sense of subjective well-being is intimately bound up with relationships, and particularly with parents and peers. Family relationships play a vital role in children's subjective well-being, and this is particularly so in Spain where the extended family network has helped to hold the country together during its long crisis.