Nordic Welfare Centre

NORDIC STATUS REPORT:

Children and youth at risk of poverty

Nordic approaches to social mobility and remaining challenges

Contents

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Foreword

At the request of the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Nordic Welfare Centre has prepared this report examining the scope of, and recent developments in, poverty risk among families with children in the Nordic region. The need for a coordinated response has grown in the wake of the pandemic and the subsequent surge in energy and food prices. While the intensified cost-of-living pressures do not automatically translate into a higher risk of income poverty, rising prices do erode purchasing power and intensify financial strain, particularly in low-income families with children across the region. The Nordic region aims to be the world's most sustainable and integrated region by 2030. The vision requires social sustainability, ensuring that all children and young people have real opportunities for a safe upbringing, education, participation, and well-being here and now.

Recent years have seen widening disparities, with more children – both in Nordic-born families and in families with immigrant or refugee backgrounds – growing up in households with persistently low income. This increases the risk of disadvantages in areas such as early childhood education and care, learning opportunities, health, leisure, and social participation. Not only do these disadvantages affect children's well-being and development today, but they can also accumulate over time if left unaddressed. The increased inequality in opportunity contradicts the Nordic commitment to equality and social sustainability and requires coordinated action to ensure that every child has a fair start in life.

This report provides a solid foundation of knowledge for collaborative Nordic initiatives. It combines analyses of risk and scale with examples of promising practices, comparative insights, and crucially, children's own experiences. Children are approached as members of shared social worlds whose well-being is shaped by family, community, and welfare institutions. The report emphasises the importance of safeguarding children's everyday lives while strengthening the social and structural conditions that enable inclusion, learning, and participation across the life course, without reducing childhood to a transitional phase toward adulthood.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the researchers who contributed to this work for their dedicated collaboration and invaluable insights. We hope that this report will inspire cross-border and cross-sector cooperation and support the development of promising research-based approaches to strengthening social sustainability across the Nordic region.

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Introduction

This report examines how growing up in a family with a persistently low income may affect the opportunities of children and young people in the Nordic region, and how this can be mitigated to promote inclusion. The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council commissioned the Nordic Welfare Centre to develop a shared knowledge base for decision-making in policy and practice, combining comparable data, policy and service insights, and children's own perspectives.

The starting point is simple. Although poverty risk is an income-based indicator, low income often translates into limited participation and reduced social inclusion. Poverty risk is not just about money; it is also about participation and inclusion. Economic strain can limit access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), learning support and leisure activities, thereby increasing the risk of social exclusion. Effective responses therefore need to combine income security with inclusive, high-quality services that remove barriers and strengthen children's everyday participation. Support should be provided to all families in need, and particular attention should be given to groups that are more at risk of poverty, such as single-parent households, large families, households with low work intensity, and children with an immigrant or refugee background.

Designed for ministries, agencies, municipalities, and professional communities, the report has three aims:

1. Monitoring and understanding risk

Using harmonised Eurostat data from the last two decades, supplemented by indicators of material and social deprivation, work intensity, and parental education, the report traces trends and highlights the groups and places where risks are most concentrated. This provides a common Nordic basis for tracking developments, identifying high-risk situations (e.g., single-parent families, large families, low work intensity families and families with low parental education) and targeting efforts where they matter most.

2. Identifying solutions

The analysis reviews measures that promote well-being and inclusion, such as high-quality, inclusive ECEC; whole-school approaches that combine pedagogy, structure, and social and emotional support; sustained parenting and family coordination models that reduce the burden and improve system navigation; low-barrier leisure time schemes that eliminate economic barriers to friendship and participation; and area-based initiatives that provide safe meeting places and align services in local 'hotspots'. Across the domains, three principles recur: quality, relational continuity, and proportionate universalism (universal policies scaled in intensity according to need).

3. Bring forward children's voices

Statistics cannot fully capture how scarcity affects everyday life. By including children's own accounts of stigma, withdrawal, and resilience, as well as their practical suggestions for improving participation, the report demonstrates why co-design and child participation enhance the effectiveness and relevance of measures.

The report is grounded in the commitment to social sustainability and the vision for 2030 adopted by the Nordic Council of Ministers. It advocates a policy mix that brings together social investment and income protection. The report identifies shock-responsive buffers when prices rise alongside long-term investments in social mobility and inclusion infrastructures, such as improving ECEC quality, ensuring smooth educational transitions, making leisure time activities accessible, and establishing relational support teams. The result is a pathway that prevents exclusion today and strengthens life chances over time.

The report outlines policies to ensure that every child in the Nordic region can grow up, participate, and belong. It is organised as follows:

Chapter 1: Context, concepts and measurement
Chapter 1 establishes the context for the discussion by situating low income among families with children within the broader Nordic debate on welfare, fairness, and social sustainability. It clarifies the poverty measure used in the report and provides a brief account of how child poverty has emerged as a political issue in the Nordic welfare states, as well as how it is discussed across the Nordic countries. The chapter also synthesises evidence on the consequences of growing up in persistent low income, demonstrating the interaction between economic strain and participation, belonging, and life course opportunities.

Chapter 2: Trends, disparities and dynamics
Chapter 2 analyses two decades of harmonised Eurostat data to track trends in at-risk-of-poverty rates, work-intensity patterns, material and social deprivation, and parental education across the Nordic region. It highlights clear differences between countries and regions, and shows how income, work intensity, family structure, and education interact to shape risk. The chapter also discusses data gaps, sampling uncertainty, and breaks in time series, underscoring the need for transparent communication and improved disaggregation in Nordic monitoring.

Chapter 3: Strategies and interventions that promote inclusion
Chapter 3 provides an overview of the policy measures and practice approaches currently used in the Nordic countries to strengthen social mobility and reduce the disadvantages associated with growing up in a family with persistent low income. The chapter shows how effective responses span several interconnected arenas: early childhood education and care, schooling, parenting and family support, participation in leisure activities, and area-based initiatives. Across these domains, the chapter synthesises evidence demonstrating that high-quality provision, relational continuity, cross-sector coordination and long-term structures are decisive for achieving impact. It highlights how high-quality ECEC can mitigate early inequalities; how whole-school approaches integrate pedagogical, structural, and relational measures; how long-term family coordination models support complex needs; how access to stable, inclusive leisure environments promotes belonging; and how area-based initiatives strengthen local social infrastructure. Taken together, the chapter illustrates that interventions are most effective when they operate coherently across levels and services, and when relationships form a core mechanism for change.

Chapter 4: Children's experiences, strategies and participation
Chapter 4 presents research and qualitative material on children's own experiences of living in families with low income. It documents the ways in which material scarcity, stigma, social comparison, and limited participation shape everyday life, relationships, and self-perception. The chapter also portrays children developing active and reactive strategies to cope with economic strain and examines the gap between formal participation rights and actual influence in welfare services. It concludes that strengthening genuine, accessible, and context-sensitive participation is essential for designing measures that reflect children's lived realities.

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Summary

1. Mission and purpose

This report has been prepared on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council to provide a shared knowledge base on the development, scale, and impact of growing up in a family with persistently low income in the Nordic region. The aim is to improve understanding of the risks and living conditions faced by children and young people in low-income families, thereby building a stronger foundation for Nordic cooperation and policymaking.

The analyses in the report are based on harmonised Eurostat data and also make use of data from other well-established sources. Additionally, they are based on existing research, which highlights the impact on children of growing up in a family with persistently low income. The report uses cross-sectional data to illustrate the scale of the issue and associated risks, supplemented by relevant research and documented experiences from children and young people.

This study was prompted by the growing need for insight into the development of social and economic vulnerability among children and young people in the Nordic region, as well as the effect that differences between countries and regions have on children's everyday lives. Following the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, greater attention has been given to living costs, income insecurity, and social inequality. The pandemic has also highlighted the vulnerability of some families with children when society is under pressure.

The report aims to provide decision-makers and professional communities with a comprehensive understanding of the risks, consequences, and potential solutions. It draws on the Nordic vision of being a socially sustainable and inclusive region that

promotes equal opportunities and genuine participation for children and young people. The ambition is for the Nordic region to be the best place in the world for children to grow up.

2. Why these are important questions

These are important issues because growing up in a family with persistently low income can affect children's everyday lives in many ways. Financial circumstances not only affect access to material goods, but also the opportunity to participate in nursery, school, and leisure activities alongside their peers. When household finances are tight, children's participation in activities that foster social relationships, belonging, and inclusion may be limited. Reduced participation can weaken children's sense of belonging and social citizenship, and research shows that this can have long-term consequences for their development, health, and learning.

Children living in low-income households have fewer financial and social resources with which to cope with changes to their everyday lives, such as increased costs or disruptions to school, leisure, and family life. The report shows that these stresses affect children differently and can deepen existing differences. This is especially the case for children from low-income households, who frequently encounter material and social deprivation, heightened levels of stress at home, and diminished involvement in school and leisure activities. These findings raise important questions about how the Nordic welfare states can best ensure that children have opportunities, security, and a sense of belonging during periods of economic and social unrest, regardless of their parents' social and economic situation.

The topic is therefore not only of socio-political significance, but also important for societal sustainability, which is defined as a process that strengthens community, trust, and positive social structures over time, as is the case with the Nordic welfare model.

3. Main content of the report

The main content of the report is that the Nordic region is often highlighted as an international role model for good living conditions, comprehensive universal welfare systems, and strong ideals of equality. Consequently, it is easy to assume that child poverty primarily affects other countries and social models. Nevertheless, recent decades have shown that a significant proportion of children in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden grow up in families with persistently low incomes, and that this risk is unevenly distributed. As Chapter 1 of the report concludes, this development has led to child poverty being recognised as a political and professional issue throughout the Nordic region. Although the Nordic countries score highly on average on key indicators of living conditions, this does not necessarily translate into equal opportunities for all children. The discrepancy between ambition and reality

forms the basis for the report's overall analysis.

Low income among families with children must be understood as being about more than just income. In line with recognised European research and a long tradition of Nordic living conditions studies, child poverty is discussed in light of the interaction between economic resources, social norms, and children's opportunities to participate in activities perceived as normal parts of childhood. Established indicators, such as 'at risk of poverty' (EU-60) and persistent low income, provide an important but incomplete picture. As Chapter 1 makes clear, income measurements tell us little about children's actual participation, their social relationships, or the strategies families use to make everyday life work. Therefore, the debate about measurement methods is both technical and also has implications for who is recognised, what problems are acknowledged, and what measures appear relevant.

The statistical patterns in Chapter 2 reveal a changing Nordic landscape. While Denmark and Finland have experienced relatively stable and low levels of low income among families with children over time, Sweden has seen a significant increase in the last two decades and Norway has seen a moderate but clear increase until recently. All countries share the fact that the risk is higher in households with a single breadwinner, low work intensity, many children, or an immigrant background. These patterns point to structural factors in the labour market, demographics, and income security. The chapter also illustrates how the cost-of-living crisis since 2021 has particularly affected low-income families. Relative income measures do not capture increased consumption expenditure; in practice, however, many low-income families have experienced weakened purchasing power and greater financial uncertainty. This illustrates the need to combine income-based indicators with knowledge of actual consumption and expenditure, as well as material deprivation.

However, statistical patterns only become meaningful when considered alongside children's experiences. Chapter 4 provides an insight into how children and young people in low-income households experience their lives, including material limitations, social comparison, shame, and strategies for concealing their situation. Children report avoiding inviting friends home, opting out of leisure activities to avoid burdening their families and undercommunicating their own needs to protect parents who are already under pressure. These experiences demonstrate how financial hardship can affect children's self-perception, sense of belonging, and participation in ways that cannot be captured by income statistics alone. The chapter also highlights that the children's right to participation, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is not always fulfilled in practice. Children's perspectives are sought unevenly, and their influence on services and decisions is often limited.

Against this backdrop, measures and policy responses are crucial. Chapter 3 demonstrates the existence of a comprehensive Nordic knowledge base on effective strategies for reducing inequality and strengthening children's opportunities. These strategies include high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), holistic and relationship-oriented schools, long-term and systematic family support, genuine access to leisure activities, and local area initiatives. These measures are most

effective when they combine universal schemes with more intensive efforts for children and young people with the greatest needs, a principle known as 'proportional universalism'. The quality of implementation is equally important: measures must be sustained, predictable, competent, and well-coordinated to be effective. The research in Chapter 3 emphasises relational mechanisms as a core element of all effective preventive work. This involves more than just encounters with individuals; it encompasses the way the entire organisation functions. Relational welfare is based on the key ideals of citizenship, justice, and recognition, and is therefore also a democratic ideal. At the same time, the chapter emphasises the need for knowledge-based practice at all levels, including insight into how stress caused by living conditions can affect the brain and impair cognitive function.

When read together, the chapters tell a coherent story. In the Nordic countries, a childhood marked by persistent low income is only to a limited extent the result of individual family failure, but rather the consequence of structural conditions such as the labour market, housing market, demographics, and political priorities shaping risk and scope for action over time. The Nordic model has many advantages, including universal services, small income differences, and high ambitions and positive experiences with social investment. However, the model is under pressure. When differences between children increase, real incomes weaken at the bottom and certain groups are systematically excluded, the ideal of equality, as well as the conditions for social sustainability and trust, are challenged.

The main message of the report is that growing up in persistent low income is a social challenge that must be closely monitored. It also emphasises the close relationship between this issue and structural factors such as the labour market, housing costs, and income security. These conditions impact children's opportunities, security, and participation in critical aspects of their upbringing. Policies that combine economic protection, robust universal services, relationship-oriented practices, and the systematic involvement of children and young people are required to address the stress related to living conditions and the vulnerability that characterises the everyday lives of children and their families. Only in this way can the Nordic countries ensure that their ambitions for equality are reflected in children's everyday lives.

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Sammendrag

1. Oppdrag og formål

Denne rapporten er utarbeidet på oppdrag fra Nordisk ministerråd og Nordisk råd for å gi et felles og sammenlignbart kunnskapsgrunnlag om utviklingen, omfanget og konsekvensene av å vokse opp i familier med vedvarende lav inntekt i Norden. Formålet er å styrke forståelsen av risiko og levekår blant barn og unge i lavinntektsfamilier, og dermed gi et bedre grunnlag for nordisk samarbeid og politikkutforming.

Analysene i rapporten bygger på harmoniserte data fra Eurostat og andre etablerte datakilder, samt eksisterende forskning som belyser hvordan barn påvirkes av å vokse opp i familier med vedvarende lav inntekt. Rapporten anvender tverrsnittsdata for å beskrive omfang og risiko, og dette suppleres med relevant forskning og dokumenterte erfaringer fra barn og unge.

Bakgrunnen for oppdraget er et økende behov for innsikt i hvordan sosial og økonomisk utsatthet blant barn og unge utvikler seg i Norden, og hvordan forskjeller mellom land og regioner påvirker barns hverdagsliv. I perioden etter COVID-19-pandemien har levekostnader, inntektsusikkerhet og sosial ulikhet fått større oppmerksomhet, og pandemien synliggjorde hvor sårbare enkelte barnefamilier er når samfunnet utsettes for press.

Rapportens formål er derfor å gi beslutningstakere og fagmiljøer en helhetlig forståelse av risiko, konsekvenser og mulige innsatsområder. Arbeidet bygger på Nordens visjon om å være en sosialt bærekraftig og inkluderende region som fremmer likestilte muligheter og reell deltakelse for barn og unge – og på ambisjonen om at Norden skal være verdens beste sted for barn å vokse opp.

2. Hvorfor dette er viktige spørsmål

Å vokse opp i en familie med vedvarende lav inntekt påvirker barns hverdagsliv på flere nivåer. Økonomiske rammer har ikke bare betydning for tilgang til materielle goder, men også for muligheten til å delta i barnehage, skole og på fritiden på lik linje med jevnaldrende. Når husholdningenes økonomi er stram, kan dette begrense barns deltakelse på arenaer som bygger sosiale relasjoner, tilhørighet og inkludering. Slik redusert deltakelse kan svekke barns opplevelse av tilhørighet og sosialt medborgerskap, og forskning viser at dette kan få langsiktige konsekvenser for barns utvikling, helse og læring.

Barn som lever i lavinntektshusholdninger har dokumentert færre økonomiske og sosiale buffere når hverdagen endres, kostnader øker, eller når strukturer i skole-, fritids- og familieliv forstyrres. Rapporten viser at slike belastninger rammer barn ulikt og kan forsterke eksisterende forskjeller. Dette gjelder særlig fordi barn i lavinntektshusholdninger oftere opplever materiell og sosial deprivasjon, høyere stressnivå i hjemmet og redusert tilgang til deltakelse i skole- og fritidsarenaer. Dette reiser viktige spørsmål om hvordan de nordiske velferdsstatene best kan sikre barns muligheter, trygghet og tilhørighet uavhengig av foreldrenes sosiale og økonomiske situasjon, i perioder preget av økonomisk og sosial uro.

Temaet er derfor ikke bare av sosialpolitisk betydning, men også viktig for den samfunnsmessige bærekraften – forstått som en utvikling som over tid styrker fellesskap, tillit og gode sosiale rammer, slik den nordisk velferdsmodell bygger på.

3. Hovedinnholdet i rapporten

Norden fremheves ofte som et internasjonalt forbilde for gode levekår, omfattende universelle velferdsordninger og sterke likhetsidealer. Det er derfor lett å tenke at barnefattigdom først og fremst er et problem som berører andre land og andre samfunnsmodeller. Likevel viser de siste tiårene at en betydelig andel barn i Danmark, Finland, Island, Norge og Sverige vokser opp i familier med vedvarende lav inntekt – og at risikoen er tydelig skjevt fordelt. Som kapittel 1 i rapporten viser, har denne utviklingen bidratt til at barnefattigdom har etablert seg som et politisk og faglig tema i hele Norden. På sentrale levekårsindikatorer scorer de nordiske landene høyt i gjennomsnitt, men dette innebærer ikke nødvendigvis like muligheter for alle barn. Dette spennet mellom ambisjon og realitet danner utgangspunktet for rapportens samlede analyse.

Lavinntekt blant barnefamilier må forstås som mer enn et tallfestet inntektsproblem. I tråd med anerkjent europeisk forskning og lang tradisjon i nordiske levekårsstudier drøftes barnefattigdom i lys av samspillet mellom økonomiske ressurser, sosiale normer og barns muligheter til å delta i aktiviteter som oppfattes som en normal del av barndommen. De etablerte indikatorene – som «at-risk-of-poverty» (EU-60) og vedvarende lavinntekt – gir et viktig, men ufullstendig bilde. Som kapittel 1 tydeliggjør, sier inntektsmålingene lite om barns faktiske deltakelse, deres sosiale relasjoner, eller

hvilke strategier familier tar i bruk for å få hverdagen til å gå rundt. Debatten om målemetoder er derfor ikke bare teknisk; den har også implikasjoner for hvem som sees, hvilke problemer som anerkjennes, og hvilke tiltak som fremstår relevante.

De statistiske mønstrene i kapittel 2 avdekker et nordisk landskap i endring. Mens Danmark og Finland over tid har hatt relativt stabile og lave nivåer av lavinntekt blant barnefamilier, viser Sverige en markant økning de siste to tiårene, og Norge en moderat, men tydelig vekst frem til nylig. Felles for landene er at risikoen er høyere i husholdninger med én forsørger, lav arbeidsintensitet, mange barn eller innvandrerbakgrunn – mønstre som peker mot strukturelle faktorer i arbeidsmarkedet, demografi og inntektssikring. Kapittelet viser også hvordan kostnadskrisen siden 2021 har vært særlig krevende for lavinntektsfamilier. Relative inntektsmål fanger ikke opp økte forbruksutgifter, men mange lavinntektsfamilier har i praksis fått svekket kjøpekraft og mer usikker økonomi. Dette illustrerer behovet for å kombinere inntektsbaserte indikatorer med kunnskap om faktisk konsum, utgifter og materiell deprivasjon.

Men de statistiske mønstrene får først fullt innhold når de settes i sammenheng med barns egne erfaringer. Kapittel 4 gir et nærgående innblikk i hvordan barn og unge i lavinntektshusholdninger beskriver sine liv: om materielle begrensninger, sosial sammenligning, skam og strategier for å skjule egen situasjon. Barn forteller at de unngår å invitere venner hjem, at de velger bort fritidsaktiviteter for ikke å belaste familien, og at de underkommuniserer egne behov for å beskytte foreldre som allerede er under press. Disse erfaringene viser hvordan økonomisk knapphet griper inn i barns selvforståelse, tilhørighet og deltakelse på en måte som ikke lar seg fange av inntektsstatistikk alene. Kapittelet synliggjør også at barns rett til medvirkning – slik den følger av FNs barnekonvensjon – langt fra alltid innfris i praksis. Barns perspektiver etterspørres ujevnt, og deres innflytelse på tjenester og beslutninger er ofte begrenset.

Mot dette bakteppet blir tiltak og politiske svar avgjørende. Kapittel 3 viser at det finnes en omfattende nordisk kunnskapsbase om hva som faktisk kan redusere ulikhet og styrke barns muligheter, slik som høy kvalitet i barnehage (ECEC), helhetlige og relasjonsorienterte skoler, langvarig og systematisk familieoppfølging, reell tilgang til fritidsaktiviteter, og lokalt forankrede områdesatsinger. Felles for tiltakene er at de virker best når de kombinerer universelle ordninger med mer intensiv innsats til barn og unge med størst behov – et prinsipp kjent som 'proporsjonal universalisme'. Like viktig er implementeringskvalitet: tiltak må ha varighet, forutsigbarhet, kompetanse og god koordinering for å gi effekt. Forskningen i kapittel 3 understreker relasjonelle mekanismer som en kjerne i alt godt forebyggende arbeid. Dette handler ikke bare om møte med enkeltpersoner, men om hvordan hele organisasjonen jobber. Relasjonell velferd bygger på sentrale idealer om medborgerskap, rettferdighet og anerkjennelse, og er derfor også et demokratisk ideal. Kapittelet understreker samtidig behovet for kunnskapsbasert praksis i alle ledd – og at innsikt i hvordan levekårsstress kan påvirke hjernen og svekke kapasiteten, må inngå som grunnleggende kompetanse.

Når kapitlene leses samlet, trer en sammenhengende historie fram. En oppvekst preget av vedvarende lavinntekt i Norden handler i liten grad om svikt hos enkeltfamilier, men om hvordan strukturelle forhold – arbeidsmarked, boligmarked, demografi og politiske prioriteringer – former risiko og handlingsrom over tid. Den nordiske modellen har sterke fortrinn: universelle tjenester, små inntektsforskjeller, høye ambisjoner og gode erfaringer med sosial investering. Men modellen er også under press. Når forskjellene mellom barn øker, når realinntekter svekkes i bunn, og når enkelte grupper faller systematisk utenfor, utfordres både likhetsidealet og forutsetningene for sosial bærekraft og tillit.

Rapportens hovedbudskap er derfor ikke bare at en oppvekst preget av vedvarende lavinntekt er en sosial utfordring som må følges og overvåkes nøye. Det handler også om at utviklingen henger tett sammen med strukturelle forhold som arbeidsmarked, boligkostnader og inntektssikring, som igjen påvirker barns muligheter, trygghet og deltakelse på sentrale arenaer i oppveksten. Å motvirke dette levekårsrelaterte stresset og den utsattheten som preger hverdagen til barn og deres familier, krever en politikk som kombinerer økonomisk beskyttelse, sterke universelle tjenester, relasjonsorientert praksis og systematisk involvering av barn og unge. Bare slik kan de nordiske landene sikre at likhetsambisjonene som preger regionens selvforståelse faktisk gjenspeiles i barnas hverdagsliv – i deres deltakelse, læring, utvikling og tilhørighet.

Model photo: Yadid Levy / norden.org

1. Setting the scene: Low income and childhood in the Nordic welfare states

TONE FLØTTEN

1.1 Introduction

International comparisons show that most children and young people in the Nordic region enjoy good living conditions. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are all among the twelve highest ranked countries on the UN Human Development Index (UNDP, 2025). In its 2024 analysis, the OECD also points out that the Nordic population generally enjoys a high level of prosperity and good living conditions (OECD, 2024). In terms of specific indicators of economic vulnerability in 2024, Denmark, Finland and Norway had a lower proportion of children in households with income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (i.e. relative poverty) than almost all other European countries, while Sweden was close to the European average (Eurostat, table ilc_peps01n). The proportion of children experiencing severe material or social deprivation – defined as lacking at least seven of thirteen necessities of life for economic reasons – is also significantly lower in the Nordic countries than in Europe as a whole (Eurostat, table ilc_mdsd11).

However, developments over time show that not all children are sharing in the general growth in prosperity. The proportion of children living in low-income families has risen over the past two decades, which has contributed to growing political and societal attention. Governments, research communities, and voluntary organisations have placed child poverty high on the agenda, both because of its extent and because

persistent low income can have serious consequences for children's everyday lives, opportunities, and future prospects.

These developments are also relevant beyond the Nordic region. The Nordic countries are often seen as an important best case for child well-being, given their high levels of prosperity and extensive welfare provision. That child poverty, measured as low income, can nevertheless increase and persist makes the region a useful case for understanding how economic hardship can emerge despite strong social protection, and what it takes to prevent it. The Nordic case further demonstrates that child poverty encompasses more than unmet basic needs; it also involves constraints on participation and social inclusion. In affluent societies, limited resources can restrict children's opportunities to take part in activities that are widely seen as normal, with potential consequences for well-being, learning, and a sense of belonging. Recent trends also suggest that global economic pressures, such as rising living costs, housing market dynamics, and labour market changes, can translate into increased vulnerability even in countries with extensive welfare provision. The Nordic experience therefore speaks to a broader international question: how resilient are welfare systems to shocks and structural change, and which policy mixes best protect families with children over time?

This first chapter provides a brief contemporary analysis of child poverty in the Nordic countries, based on existing research and policy literature. Rather than providing a systematic literature review, the aim is to synthesise key insights from relevant studies and policy documents in order to contextualise current discussions on children growing up in households with low incomes. In this context, child poverty is discussed as a multidimensional societal issue with implications for children's living conditions, family well-being, and broader welfare state dynamics. Consequently, the chapter draws on research linking child poverty to children's rights frameworks, distributive justice perspectives and analyses of the long-term social and economic sustainability of the Nordic model. Three themes are addressed. First, what were the driving forces behind the emergence of the Nordic focus on poverty in the 1990s? Second, how has the Nordic debate on child poverty been shaped over time by different problem framings and key thematic strands? And third, why the extent and development of children living in low-income families continues to be monitored, even though the Nordic countries are internationally distinguished by good living conditions?

In this chapter, we use the term child poverty as a descriptive label for children living in families with a low income. None of the Nordic countries has an official definition of poverty, nor an official poverty measure or a nationally defined poverty line. In statistics and research, poverty is primarily understood as a relative phenomenon, and levels and trends are therefore typically described using international measurement practice, most notably the EU's 'at risk of poverty' indicator (Fløtten, 2022). This is a relative measure based on household income. According to this indicator, individuals with an equivalised disposable income below 60 per cent of the national median (EU60), are classified as being at risk of poverty. In Nordic research, this situation is often discussed using the terms 'child poverty' or 'children growing up in poor families'.

In official contexts both the term 'poverty' and the term 'low income' are used to describe low-income conditions. In this chapter, we use the term 'child poverty' to refer to the broader public and policy debate, while 'low income' denotes the income-based indicator commonly used in Nordic statistics.

1.2 A Nordic debate on child poverty

Today, child poverty is a recurring theme in public debate in all the Nordic countries. The term is frequently used in policy documents, media coverage, and research literature, and the issue is highlighted as a key challenge in the Nordic welfare states. This has not always been the case. Three decades ago, child poverty was rarely discussed as a distinct policy issue. Few policy initiatives took children's economic vulnerability as their point of departure, and the concept had a limited place in public discourse.

One important explanation for this historical lack of attention is the strong and broadly shared prosperity that characterised the Nordic countries throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The period combined high economic growth with low unemployment and a major expansion of the welfare state, in which equality in living conditions was a central political objective. While the origins of Nordic welfare arrangements lie in pre-war reforms and post-war institution-building, the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s were marked by consolidation and scaling-up. It was during this period that the Nordic approach became more firmly established as a recognisable model, combining universal social rights, a broad public service sector, and labour-market institutions designed to sustain high employment and limit inequality (Dølvik et al., 2015).

A key pillar was the primacy of work. Policies aimed to secure near-full employment through macroeconomic steering and active labour-market measures, while public services, most notably childcare and education, supported parents' labour-force participation and, over time, the development of the dual-earner family model. At the same time, coordinated wage bargaining and relatively strong unions contributed to wage compression and reduced earnings dispersion. Redistribution was further strengthened through progressive taxation and a benefit structure that relied heavily on universal schemes, also in areas central to families with children, supplemented by means-tested support when needed (Dølvik et al., 2015).

Crucially, the Nordic welfare state not only redistributed income, but it also redistributed costs and risks through comprehensive public provision. Subsidised early childhood education and care, free or low-cost schooling, accessible health services, and a broad range of social services reduced households' out-of-pocket expenses and helped equalise children's everyday living conditions across social groups. These arrangements were intended to promote both material security and equal opportunities, and they were underpinned by high levels of trust and relatively broad political support for social investment and redistribution.

In societies marked by rising prosperity, consistently low unemployment, and comparatively low economic inequality, poverty was therefore not seen as a pressing social problem. It was widely assumed that most families with children had sufficient resources, and that remaining economic differences would be contained, or corrected, through the established mix of high employment, compressed wage structures, universal transfers, and comprehensive public services. Within this frame, poverty tended to be associated with marginalised groups or exceptional circumstances rather than as a risk affecting children (Fløtten et al., 2009; Galloway et al., 2010; Karlsson & Svedberg, 2022; Fløtten, 2023).

The societal changes that gained momentum in the 1990s – rising income inequality, changing family forms, increased immigration, and greater international attention to relative poverty – helped to understand that children could also be e economically marginalised within the framework of the Nordic welfare states. As research and statistics provided a clearer and more extensive knowledge of the extent and trends of low income among families with children, child poverty moved onto the political agenda and became an well-established area of research.

Key drivers of the debate

As argued by Fløtten et al. (2009), there were four main drivers behind the growing attention to poverty: civil society mobilisation, research and knowledge production, European-level impulses, and party-political dynamics. While first developed for Norway, this framework is relevant for understanding why child poverty has gained prominence across the Nordic countries. We begin with civil society mobilisation, which has been central in problematising child poverty and sustaining public attention over time.

Civil society organisations have played a particularly important role in raising awareness of the issue in the public debate. In the 1990s and early 2000s, organisations such as Save the Children, Mødrehjelpen, the Salvation Army, UNICEF, and the Church City Mission began to document children's living conditions, produce reports and field-based accounts, and challenge the authorities. Save the Children Sweden, for example, has been an active driving force in bringing child poverty onto the public agenda in Sweden. Since the early 2000s, the organisation has regularly conducted studies of children's living conditions in Sweden, most recently in 2025 (Salonen & Rosenlundh, 2025). Through campaigns, alternative budgets, consultation responses, and systematic media engagement, civil society organisations have framed child poverty as a social policy problem that requires sustained political attention.

A clear research interest has also emerged related to children's living conditions, economic vulnerability, and the consequences of growing income inequality. More systematic analyses of child poverty were established in the 2000s, based on register data and studies of living conditions. This research has problematised definitions and measurement methods and has highlighted the extent and consequences of poverty for children and young people (see, for instance, Korpi & Palme, 1998; Forssén, 1998; Fløtten, 1999; Bonke, 2003; Ottosen & Skov, 2013; Kuivalainen & Nelson, 2012; Eydal &

Ólafsson, 2012). In turn, this body of research has provided civil society organisations and politicians with a knowledge base that has helped to elevate the discussion about the phenomenon.

The increased political attention must also be seen in light of *European influences*. At the EU summit in Lisbon in 2000, social inclusion and the fight against poverty were defined as an explicit political goal within the Union's open method of coordination (Fløtten et al., 2009). This placed pressure on EU member states and EEA countries to report on social policy efforts and results, and helped to make the problem of relative poverty, including child poverty, more prominent on national agendas. Additional attention was also paid to child poverty in connection with the European Year of Poverty in 2010 (Karlsson et al., 2015).

Additionally, party political driving forces have been central. On the one hand, social democratic and left-wing parties in the Nordic region have used child poverty as an argument to strengthen universal benefits, reduce economic disparities, and ensure better living conditions for families with children. On the other hand, centre-right parties have also helped to place the issue on the agenda, but occasionally through a different framework for understanding the problem. These discussions have often been linked to the incentive effects within the work-oriented approach, the design of integration policy, or the balance between universalism and targeted measures aimed at vulnerable groups.

In Denmark, for example, the introduction of what are known as the poverty benefits (kontanthjælpsloft [cap on social assistance], the 225-hour rule (a person on cash social assistance could have their benefit reduced if they could not document at least 225 hours of regular, unsubsidized work within the past 12 months), and integration benefit) triggered clear political divides. Governments led by left-wing parties and their supporting parties have justified the reforms on the grounds that 'it must pay to work' and presented the kontanthjælpsloft as a reasonable work incentive. On the left, the Green Left (SF) and the Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten), in particular, supported by analyses from the Economic Council of the Labour Movement, have referred to these reforms as poverty benefits that would almost double the number of poor children and drive thousands of children into poverty – and therefore proposed abolishing them as part of an offensive against child poverty (Danish Ministry of Employment, 2015; Danish Parliament, 2016; Juul et al., 2016). Both the benefit cap (kontanthjælpsloftet) and the 225-hour rule were, however, abolished as of 1 July 2025 (Folketinget, 2024).

Despite party political differences, poverty reduction has long been recognised as an important policy objective across much of the Nordic political spectrum. In Finland, for example, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health published an action plan during Sanna Marin's five-party coalition government to reduce poverty and social exclusion by 2030 (Social- och hälsovårdsministeriet, 2022). In Norway, child poverty has likewise been highlighted as a distinct policy area across governments. Centrist parties such as the Christian Democratic Party (KrF) and the Liberal Party (Venstre) have been among the actors promoting child poverty as a policy concern of its own.

Norway's first action plan against poverty was presented by a centre-right government (Sosialdepartementet, 2002). The issue has since been followed up through strategies and new action plans both by left-wing and right-wing governments (Arbeids- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2007; Departementene, 2023). There is also broad agreement that employment-oriented policies are central to lifting families out of poverty. Political disagreements have mainly concerned the strength and design of the policy instruments used to realise the goals of the work-oriented approach (i.e., the work-first principle: prioritising paid employment as the primary route to welfare and social inclusion, and using benefits, services, and obligations to encourage labour-market participation) (Dølvik et al., 2015).

Collectively, these actors – civil society, research communities, the EU level, and political parties – have created considerable momentum around child poverty as a social policy issue and have contributed to making it a key challenge in the Nordic welfare states.

Central issues in the child poverty debate

Although the public debates on child poverty in the Nordic countries have developed within different national contexts, similar themes and problem framings appear to recur over time. The sections below outline a set of recurring themes in Nordic discussions. This overview is not based on a systematic or exhaustive analysis of public discourse in each country. Rather, it highlights themes that have been prominent in policy and public debate. The emphasis on these themes may vary across countries, and while additional themes may also be relevant, they are not covered here. Our focus is on six themes that recur across these debates:

1. How should child poverty be understood and measured?
2. Which groups are particularly at risk of experiencing relative income poverty, and why?
3. Why is relative income poverty increasing (or not decreasing)?
4. How is income poverty linked to disadvantage among children?
5. What measures are effective in reducing and 'alleviating' the consequences of low income?
6. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children in low-income families.

How should child poverty be understood and measured?

Against the backdrop of reports indicating that the Nordic countries face a child poverty problem, and that the problem has increased significantly at certain points, a frequent theme in the child poverty debate has been how poverty should be defined and measured. In line with common practice in other Western countries, the Nordic countries have relied on a relative definition of poverty. In other words, poverty has not been understood as the absence of the bare necessities of life, as implied by an absolute definition (Rowntree, 1901). Rather, poverty is seen in relative terms as a

situation in which people lack the resources to maintain an ordinary material standard of living or to participate in social life on an equal footing with others (Townsend, 1979).

While there is broad agreement that poverty should be understood as a relative phenomenon, there is ongoing debate about how it should be measured in practice. Should assessments be based on income, living conditions, or a combination of the two? And where should the threshold between the poor and the non-poor be drawn? Across the Nordic countries, measurement has largely followed the European indicators for relative income poverty, notably the at-risk-of-poverty threshold set at 60% of equivalised median income. In addition, measures of persistent low income are often used as an important reference point.

The relative poverty measure is problematised partly because it does not always adequately describe children's actual living conditions and opportunities for social participation. Research has shown that there is relatively limited overlap between an income-based poverty measure and measures of the material or social standard of living (Fløtten & Pedersen, 2009; Mood & Jonsson, 2016). The discussion of measurement problems and the limitations of relative poverty measures has, in turn, led to different national initiatives to develop alternative measures of children's economic vulnerability also in the Nordic countries:

- Save the Children Sweden developed its own measures for 'economic vulnerability' that combined low income standards and income support (social assistance) (Salonen, 2002). The first reports attracted a great deal of attention, precisely because many people did not associate Sweden with child poverty, and the estimate of almost 300,000 children living in poverty was met with both surprise and scepticism. Over time, the measure has been at the centre of the Swedish child poverty debate; but it has also been criticised, particularly in a *Dagens Nyheter* column in 2021 in which Carina Mood and Jan O. Jonsson claimed that Save the Children Sweden 'inflates' poverty figures and erodes the concept of poverty by defining all children in households with income support as poor (Mood & Jonsson, 2021). In a response article, Tapio Salonen and Anna Angelin emphasised that the measure was deliberately stringent and rooted in children's rights, and that in practice, income support often did not ensure a reasonable standard of living for families with children receiving long-term benefits (Salonen & Angelin, 2021). In its 2025 report, Save the Children Sweden launched a revised poverty measure, arguing that the old measure had underestimated economic vulnerability (Salonen & Rosenlundh, 2025).

- In Denmark, the Thorning-Schmidt government appointed an independent expert committee in 2012 to examine methods for measuring poverty and propose an official Danish poverty threshold. The 2013 report by the Ekspertudvalg om fattigdom [Expert committee on poverty] recommended a relative poverty threshold (50% of median income combined with duration and wealth criteria), which formed the basis for an official Danish definition of poverty (Ekspertudvalg om fattigdom, 2013). However, this threshold was disputed by the centre-right for exaggerating poverty (Bostrup, 2023), while researchers and organisations believed that the measurement was, on the contrary, too narrow (Erjnæs & Larsen, 2013). A change of government in 2015 led to the new government abolishing the official poverty threshold.
- In Norway, there have also been discussions about how effective the relative poverty measure is in affluent countries. In 2006, researchers argued that Norway needed a revised definition of poverty, because the established measures gave unclear signals about both the level and the trend in poverty (Pedersen et al., 2006). In 2008, the philosopher Lars Fr. H. Svendsen published an article criticising the relative poverty measure for encompassing 'too many people' and thus producing unreasonably high poverty figures (Svendsen, 2008). In 2009, the opposition parties in the Storting, the Norwegian parliament, asked the government to present a 'supplementary measure of poverty, an absolute measure based on Norwegian conditions' (NTB,2009). In 2013, a new round followed when the Minister of Labour, Anniken Huitfeldt, problematised the EU's relative poverty measure and argued for a poverty definition 'that everyone could agree on' (Ruud, 2013). It was not until a decade later, in 2022, that the authorities commissioned a study of poverty measures that could supplement the 'persistent low income' indicator. The report from Statistics Norway was published in 2024 (Langørgen et al., 2024), and the Government's Status Document on the continuation of equal opportunities in childhood states that the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (BFD), together with the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs (Bufdir) and other ministries, is to further consider the recommendations on supplementary indicators (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2024).

Taken together, these examples show that the choice of poverty measure has been highly contested and, in part, politicised across the Nordic region. Also internationally, not least in the Innocenti reports by UNICEF on child poverty in affluent countries, the Nordic countries are highlighted both as relatively equality-oriented societies where the choice of indicators has a significant impact on how much poverty is 'seen' – particularly when comparing income measures, material deprivation, and subjective measures of deprivation (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023). Therefore, the debate on measurement has both a technical and a political side: what is defined and measured as poverty determines how extensive the problem appears to be and which groups are particularly vulnerable, and thus which political solutions are relevant.

Groups at particularly high risk of low-income

Another theme in the Nordic poverty debates considers who is affected. Low-income is unevenly distributed, and both research and reports from civil society show a fairly similar risk profile throughout the Nordic region. Children living in households with a single parent, a weak or unstable connection to the labour market, an immigrant or refugee background, and often with many children face a significantly higher risk of low-income than others.

The discussions typically emphasise that many of the children in the high-risk groups also face challenges in other areas. This leads to an accumulation of problems in certain groups, which makes developing useful and effective measures particularly challenging. A more detailed description of the distribution of low-income in the Nordic countries is presented in chapter 2.

Explanations for trends in low-income figures

The third main theme concerns why poverty is increasing or not declining. Nordic research and policy often emphasise how demographic change, labour-market developments, and welfare-policy reforms interact to shape low-income trends. Macroeconomic conditions, such as recessions or periods of high inflation, can further have a bearing on poverty by affecting employment and household purchasing power.

Poverty trends, in turn, are closely linked to explanations of why some groups are at greater risk of low income than others. Some demographic groups, for example, have unstable employment and low earned incomes, which has an impact on low-income trends, if the share of these groups in the population increases. Similarly, if there are more people in groups with a high risk of being dependent on public benefits, this will also show in the low-income figures.

The interplay between demographics and the development of income security schemes is evident in recent Norwegian research. Statistics Norway has shown that around half of the increase in the proportion of children in poor families between 2010 and 2022 in Norway can be explained by changes in the composition of the population (increase in children from Eastern Europe, Africa, and West Asia). The rest of the increase reflects the fact that there are more poor people within each group. The report does not link the growth in child poverty to low labour market participation (there has been increased labour market participation in many groups during the period); but those households that are dependent on income transfers, including some immigrant groups, have been left behind because the transfers, on average, have developed less strongly than other incomes (Eika & Langørgen, 2025).

In a comparative analysis of explanations for the growth in numbers of children in low-income families within the Nordic region, Statistics Norway points to both demographic and economic changes. In around 2005, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden had about the same proportion of children in low-income families (between 8

and 10%). By 2020, the share had increased to around 20% in Sweden and around 14% in Norway, while it was around 10% in Finland and Denmark (Epland & Hattrem, 2023, Fig. 3.3).

One explanation for this is the weaker income growth among families with children at the bottom of the income distribution in Norway and Sweden compared with Denmark and Finland. This, in turn, is related to the fact that the number of working parents at the bottom of the income distribution increased in Denmark and Finland and decreased in Norway and Sweden. As a result, earned income accounted for a declining share of household income at the bottom of the wage distribution in Norway and Sweden, while the opposite happened in Denmark and Finland. Another explanation is the demographic development. There was a clear increase in immigration in Norway and Sweden, and children with immigrant backgrounds accounted for an increasing proportion of the lower income groups in these two countries. Similar developments have not taken place in Denmark and Finland.

In terms of the importance of income transfers, the recent rise in child poverty in Denmark has been linked to how social assistance and child-related benefits are designed. The Economic Council of the Labour Movement (Caspersen, 2024) points out that the number of children below the poverty threshold rose again in 2023 after having fallen since 2017, and that this trend must be considered alongside the fact that the temporary child allowance for recipients of social assistance ended in 2023. However, in an analysis from December 2025, Caspersen and Kongstad (2025) note that the number of children growing up in families with an income below the poverty threshold declined in 2024, meaning that the situation in 2024 was the same as in 2022. According to Caspersen and Kongstad, this decline should be viewed alongside decrease in the number of children with one or more parents receiving cash assistance. This includes a fall in the number of Ukrainian children with parents receiving cash assistance from 2023 to 2024, as well as a continued decline among other children with parents receiving cash assistance between 2023–2024 and mid-2025.

In Norway, the under-indexation of the universal child benefit has gradually weakened its income poverty-reducing effect. Between 1996 and 2019, the benefit was not adjusted in line with prices, resulting in a steady erosion of its real value. Researchers at Statistics Norway have argued that weak growth in cash transfers, child benefit included, has contributed to rising poverty rates, particularly among single-parent households (Eika & Langørgen, 2025).

Bucelli and McKnight (2023) show that child poverty risk in Finland is low on average, but considerably higher among children in single-parent households, large families (three or more children), and immigrant families. They associate these disparities with a more precarious labour market, characterised by temporary contracts, low work intensity, and pressure towards part-time work. In a labour market like this, single parents and immigrants are more likely to end up in low-paid or unstable employment. Larger families' higher consumption needs are also highlighted as a factor that increases vulnerability to external shocks, including sharp price increases.

Analyses by Save the Children Sweden (Salonen & Rosenlundh, 2025) show that children in single-parent households and children with a foreign background face a markedly higher risk of poverty. The report highlights that up to half of children living with a single, foreign-born mother are economically vulnerable. These patterns are linked to lower employment rates and weaker income conditions among foreign-born parents compared with Swedish-born parents, and to the fact that gaps between native-born and foreign-born adults are larger in Sweden than in many comparable countries (Salonen & Rosenlundh, 2025).

These examples illustrate that several explanations for low-income trends recur across Nordic research. Changes in poverty rates are best understood as the outcome of interactions between demographic developments, labour-market change, and welfare policy. Shifts in population composition and labour-market structures shape which groups face the highest risks, while the level, design, and regulation of income-security schemes influence the extent to which these risks translate into incomes falling below the poverty threshold. Overall, research suggests that low-income trends cannot be attributed to a single driver; rather, they reflect the combined effects of multiple, interrelated structural changes.

Child poverty and disadvantage – increased risk, varied outcomes

Research from the Nordic countries on the consequences of income poverty conveys a twofold message. On the one hand, studies consistently show that children growing up in low-income families face a higher risk of disadvantage in a range of living-condition domains compared with their peers. Some differences emerge early in childhood, while others become more visible in adolescence or later in adulthood. On the other hand, an increased risk does not imply that all children in low-income families experience such disadvantages; in many studies, the disadvantages affect only a minority.

This is illustrated by the Danish study Børn og unge i Danmark [Children and young people in Denmark] (Ottosen et al., 2022), which examines children's material well-being. The study finds that 7% of children and young people aged 3–19 live in families with low material affluence, whereas 34% live in families with incomes below the 50% poverty threshold (Ottosen et al., 2022, Figure 1.3.1). The comparison suggests that low income is associated with a substantially higher risk of low material affluence. At the same time, it also implies that 66% of children in income-poor families do not fall into the category of low material affluence. Similar patterns are reported in other studies linking poverty to different aspects of living conditions. Keeping this duality in mind is important when discussing the consequences of poverty: low-income increases the probability of disadvantage, but it does not determine outcomes for all children.

The relationship between family income and living conditions is extensively documented and summarised in recent Nordic reviews, including Ekonomisk utsatthet i alla åldrar [Economic vulnerability at all ages] (Håkansson, 2024), En barndom for livet [A childhood for life] (Ekspertgruppen om barn i fattige familier, 2024) and Muligheter og hindringer for barn i lavinntektsfamilier [Opportunities and obstacles for children in

low-income families] (Hyggen et al., 2018). Since these works provide broad and systematic overviews, the literature is not reviewed in detail here.

Overall, research indicates that low family income in childhood is associated with a wide range of outcomes. These include lower participation in early childhood education, weaker school performance, a higher risk of dropping out of upper secondary education, and more constrained educational choices. Low childhood income is also linked to a higher risk of exposure to violence, poorer housing conditions and more frequent residential moves, poorer physical and mental health, and higher mortality. In addition, it is associated with lower participation in organised leisure activities and stronger experiences of social exclusion and a higher likelihood of offending and contact with the criminal justice system in adolescence and young adulthood (Galloway & Skardhamar, 2010; Ejlskov et al., 2022; Brå, 2023). Finally, low income during childhood is associated with weaker attachment to the labour market and lower earnings in adulthood, as well as a higher risk of persistent low income later in life.

There is little disagreement that children in low-income families face a higher risk of disadvantages in living conditions. The debate increasingly concerns whether these associations are causal – low income itself contributing to poorer outcomes – or whether they primarily reflect correlated characteristics of the family and the wider upbringing environment. Much of the available evidence is based on study designs that can identify robust associations, but they do not allow unambiguous conclusions about causal mechanisms. This is particularly relevant for outcomes such as criminal behaviour, where family income co-varies with a range of other factors that shape risk, including parental education, employment and health, family instability, neighbourhood conditions, and prior adversities. Studies that apply more demanding designs to account for unobserved family-level characteristics, such as sibling comparisons, often find that associations are substantially attenuated or no longer statistically clear once shared family factors are controlled for (Sariaslan et al., 2021). As a result, it is often difficult to determine whether observed disadvantages are attributable to low income per se or to underlying and co-varying factors.

This distinction matters directly for policy (Mayer, 1998). If inadequate economic resources constitute the primary mechanism, income-enhancing measures are likely to be most effective. If other factors are more decisive, effective responses will need to be broader, targeting the family situation and the child's upbringing environment in addition to, or instead of, household income.

Which measures are effective?

A fourth key theme is which measures actually work against poverty. Discussions about political measures are closely linked to what are considered to be the main causes of poverty and what negative consequences we wish to counteract.

Preventing poverty

Firstly, measures are discussed that can prevent families from falling into income poverty, or that can help them get out of it. There is widespread agreement that work is the most important safeguard against poverty, and so labour market policy is the government's key instrument in all the Nordic countries. This is evident in government programmes, public reports, action plans, and budget work. For instance, the current Swedish and Danish government programmes emphasise the importance of a work-oriented approach (Government of Denmark, 2022; Government of Sweden, 2022b), as do the Norwegian authorities in their national budget (Ministry of Finance, 2023). Icelandic authorities similarly highlight labour market participation as a key measure against poverty, stating in an official presentation of labour market equality policy that active participation in the labour market is "considered one of the most important ways to prevent social isolation and poverty'.

At the same time, it is recognised that the breadwinners in some of the families at high risk of low-income struggle to enter the labour market due to problems with health, skills, or language, for example. The road to increased income through work is long for many. This leads to debates about trade-offs between benefit levels and work incentives. Transfers to those outside the labour market must be sufficiently generous to enable families to maintain a reasonable standard of living, but it must always pay to work. Balancing these two considerations involves difficult trade-offs.

There are many examples of this dilemma taking centre stage in all the Nordic countries. In Denmark, the discussion on the poverty threshold and cap on social assistance [kontanthjælpsloft] has clearly shown the tension between the desire for a work-oriented approach and the need to ensure that children in households on long-term benefits do not fall too far behind the standard of other children (Andersen et al., 2019). Similar issues can be found in the report of Ekspertgruppen om barn i fattige familier [the Norwegian expert committee on children in poor families] (2023), in a Swedish public report on social insurance and the welfare system (Berg & Kruse, 2022), and in the interim report of the Finnish Social Security Committee (Government of Finland, 2023).

A further issue in debates on effective anti-poverty policy is the balance between cash transfers and services for families with children. Research and expert input highlight that increasing universal child and family benefits can be among the most effective instruments for reducing child poverty, particularly when benefits are not means-tested and therefore also reach families with weak or unstable attachment to paid work (Ekspertgruppen om barn i fattige familier, 2023; Skalická & Eikemo, 2025). Because cash benefits directly raise disposable income, they can move households

above relative poverty thresholds in the short term and provide families with flexibility to prioritise spending according to their needs.

At the same time, many argue that service-based measures, such as free core hours in early childhood education, reduced fees in after-school programmes, and support for children's leisure activities, are crucial for promoting participation and counteracting social exclusion even when income remains low (Bråten et al., 2014; OECD, 2024). Such measures may also alleviate economic strain by reducing necessary expenditures and can be understood as a form of in-kind support. Even so, service provision is often framed as a complementary strategy with effects that materialise over a longer horizon. By improving children's access to developmental arenas, strengthening parental employment opportunities, and reducing barriers to participation, it may help prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty and disadvantage. In this sense, services can mitigate the consequences of low income and promote equal opportunities, but they may be less likely than cash transfers to reduce measured income poverty in the short term.

Preventing the intergenerational transmission of poverty

Secondly, policy discussions also focus on measures to prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty. A central approach in this regard is social investment policy which emphasises early and sustained investments in children's capabilities and families' opportunities. One distinctive feature of the Nordic model is the scale of public investment in children and families through universal services and equalising institutions (Dølvik et al., 2015; Mogstad et al., 2025). Across the Nordic countries, children have access to healthcare with very low or no user charges, early childhood education and care is heavily subsidised, and education is publicly funded from primary school through higher education. Beyond general subsidies, participation in early childhood education is also supported through measures such as free core hours and targeted outreach efforts aimed at groups with traditionally lower enrolment. In addition, all countries have initiatives designed to help children with different needs succeed in the education system, for example through early identification, special needs support, and programmes to strengthen learning outcomes and completion rates.

Social investments through childhood and education policy form a foundation for enabling broad participation in the labour market. Even so, young people enter working life with different skills, qualifications, and resources. In the youth policy area, the social investment logic is therefore extended to measures aimed at preventing early detachment from education and employment. A prominent example is Finland's Youth Guarantee (introduced in 2013), which aims to ensure that all young people are offered employment, education, activation measures, or rehabilitation within a short period after becoming unemployed to prevent prolonged exclusion and the accumulation of problems. More broadly, the Nordic countries have a long tradition of lifelong learning policies, skills reforms, and active labour-market measures, often highlighted in Nordic and international analyses as core building blocks of the Nordic version of social investment policy (de la Porte & Larsen, 2023).

Social investment policy generally enjoys broad support, yet it is also subject to debate. One line of critique is that social investment initiatives may have a Matthew effect, disproportionately benefiting those who are already relatively well-positioned to take advantage of education, training, and activation measures (Colombarolli & De Luigi, 2025). Another concern is that an increased emphasis on early childhood education, education more broadly, and activation may come at the expense of more traditional redistributive and protective schemes, such as unemployment benefits, social assistance, and disability benefits. Morel et al. (2012) argue that social investment can become a 'modernisation project' that prioritises human capital formation and a work-oriented approach, while compensatory protection is weakened, particularly for groups that are 'expensive' or difficult to invest in. Finally, sustaining high levels of social investment may become more challenging in the context of an ageing population and the resulting pressure on public budgets (de la Porte & Larsen, 2023).

Alleviating the effects of poverty

Thirdly, policy debates also address measures aimed at alleviating the potential consequences of poverty. Many children will live in families with persistently low incomes for all or part of their childhood. Policy discussions emphasise measures that seek to safeguard children's current living conditions and participation in society, even when household income remains low. A recurring concern is how to support children in low-income families to ensure that economic constraints do not hinder their everyday participation, well-being, or educational progression. While the social investment measures discussed above are primarily intended to support learning, completion, and later labour-market participation – and will not be discussed further here – this strand of policy focuses more directly on children's current quality of life.

In this context, participation in organised leisure activities is often highlighted as particularly important. Access to sports, cultural activities, and other social arenas can strengthen children's well-being, provide supportive peer networks and adult contacts, and reduce experiences of stigma and exclusion. Measures such as activity cards, subsidies for membership fees and equipment, free or low-cost holiday activities, and cooperation with voluntary organisations and municipalities are therefore frequently presented as key instruments for improving living conditions in the short term for children in low-income families. Participation is supported through a mix of general public subsidies to organisations that provide activities, targeted public support schemes, and contributions from the private sector and voluntary organisations. Research suggests that such support can increase the extent to which children and young people participate in activities together with their peers (Fløtten & Hansen, 2018; Arnesen & Hansen, 2024; Högman et al., 2024; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024; Marttinen & Anttila, 2025).

Although there is broad agreement that children should be able to participate in leisure activities, and that participation is recognised as a right under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, there have also been warnings against placing too much weight on such measures in poverty policy. One concern is that targeted

schemes aimed specifically at low-income families, such as Sweden's *fritidskort* [leisure card], may have stigmatising effects. Another concern is that narrowly targeted poverty measures can entail high administrative costs (Amnér, 2025). Moreover, several contributions point out that these initiatives are primarily compensatory: they mitigate some of the consequences of poverty, but do not reduce income poverty as such (Bekken et al., 2018; Rogaland revisjon, 2024). While free or subsidised leisure activities can produce quick and visible results, there is also a risk that a focus on discrete measures diverts attention from the need for more far-reaching, structural change. Related concerns are raised in the international social investment literature, which warns that investments in services and human capital may, in some contexts, displace attention from income protection for the most vulnerable (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013; Noël, 2018).

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children in low-income families

In recent years, the cost-of-living crisis and the surge in inflation have become more prominent in Nordic debates on child poverty. Although low-income rates have levelled off or even declined slightly in some countries (see Chapter 2), recent studies suggest that many low-income families nonetheless experience an unchanged or worsening financial situation in practice. Sharp increases in the prices of food, electricity, and housing have eroded purchasing power, particularly among households already facing tight financial constraints.

Save the Children Sweden's most recent child poverty report argues that the cost-of-living crisis, especially rising food and housing costs, has been a key driver of increasingly difficult living conditions for children in economically disadvantaged families, and that standard poverty indicators do not fully capture this development. The report introduces a revised measurement approach and estimates that around 276,000 children live in economic vulnerability in Sweden. This is roughly 100,000 more than cited in previous estimates, highlighting the recent cost-of-living pressures as an important part of the explanation (Salonen & Rosenlundh, 2025). This knowledge has been actively mobilised in public debates about the Government's benefit reforms and proposed benefit ceilings [bidragstak]. As a response, civil society actors warn that stricter eligibility requirements and caps may further increase child poverty (Widerberg, 2025; Stenquist, 2025).

In Denmark, analyses by the Economic Council of the Labour Movement show that the number of children living below the poverty threshold rose in most municipalities in 2023, before declining again in 2024 (Caspersen, 2024; Caspersen & Kongstad, 2025). The increase in 2023 was not primarily attributed to the cost-of-living crisis, but rather to policy-driven factors, especially changes to the benefit system, including the withdrawal of child-related benefits and the under-indexation of transfers relative to wage increases. Under Denmark's Act on a Rate Regulation Percentage (Lov om en satsreguleringsprocent), a range of social benefits are annually uprated using a rate derived from wage growth in the 'wage year', defined as the year two years prior to

the fiscal year**.** In periods of high inflation and rapid wage growth, this mechanism can contribute to a lag in benefit adjustment, amplifying the erosion of purchasing power among families with children who rely on public transfers (Caspersen, 2025).

For Finland, Eurochild (2025) shows that the proportion of children experiencing material deprivation has risen sharply in recent years, from 3.7% in 2021 to around 10% in 2024. Eurochild links this development to changes in the benefit system, not to inflation or increased living costs. On the other hand, Smith et al. (2024) show that the situation for families with children worsened in 2022 due to inflation and increased energy and living costs. The authors refer to an estimate by Kela (the Finnish social security institution) and the ITLA Children's Foundation that around 30,000 children would fall below the poverty threshold in 2022 because of increased costs. An ITLA report also indicates that low-income families, particularly large families, have been especially hard hit by rapidly rising prices linked to the war in Ukraine, including necessities such as food and energy (Bucelli & McKnight, 2023).

In Norway, the number of people receiving social assistance is rising sharply (Lima, 2025), with much of the increase linked to Ukrainian refugees' need for temporary income support during settlement and labour-market entry. In parallel, studies document that many families have become significantly worse off financially in recent years, and that those who were already struggling are facing even greater hardship (Poppe & Kempson, 2023; Gyüre & Lynum, 2024).

In all the Nordic countries, there are also reports of an increased need for food aid:

- According to SIFO, half of all single parents in Norway struggle to afford enough healthy food for their children, and many report that they have to skip meals or forgo necessary food items (Skuland et al., 2025). Fafo has pointed to an increase in the need for food assistance and that half of those who collect food parcels from food distribution centres in Norway have children under the age of 18 living at home (Fløtten et al., 2023).
- Sveriges Stadsmissionen's poverty reports show that families with children are a core group among people in need of food assistance, and that food distribution has become increasingly central to their work, over time (Stadsmissionen, 2019; Stadsmissionen, 2025).
- The Danish Food Bank reports distributing increasing amounts of surplus food alongside growing needs among children and young people (Danish Food Bank, 2023).
- A study by Rambøll (2024) among financially vulnerable families with children in Denmark concludes that many families are under severe financial pressure and that children in these families lack necessities.
- Finland's poverty report for 2024 (EAPN-Fin, 2024) and a news article on All Things Nordic (2025) conclude that the need for food aid has increased here, too.

- Family Aid Iceland (Fjölskylduhjálp Íslands) has warned it may have to cease operations without increased funding and has reported that the number of volunteers is declining (Bjarnadóttir, 2024).

Considering developments in recent years, several authors have argued that purely income-based poverty measures, such as the EU-60 indicator, do not fully capture the effects of rapid inflation. As a result, many low-income families may have experienced a substantial deterioration in their financial room for manoeuvre even in periods when measured child poverty rates have remained stable (Fløtten et al., 2023; Salonen & Rosenlundh, 2025; Lima, 2025). Save the Children Norway has similarly emphasised in public statements that some families must choose between electricity and food' and has used the cost-of-living crisis as justification when calling for a more generous child benefit and other income support measures (Save the Children, 2022).

The cost-of-living debate has thus incorporated several of the themes already discussed in the Nordic countries. It has intensified the measurement debate (income versus actual purchasing power and material deprivation) and renewed discussions about the most appropriate policy mix. The key question is whether price-regulating measures, increased child benefit, means-tested support schemes, or strengthened services best protect children against the most immediate consequences of the rising living costs and the economic pressure facing families with children.

1.3 Continued focus on child poverty

The Nordic countries seek to promote high employment, universal welfare schemes, and relatively low income inequality. Consequently, they have a comparatively low share of children living in low-income households, but some groups of children still grow up in families with persistent low income. Child poverty continues to be a topic of political and scholarly attention, not least because it is often seen as challenging the egalitarian ideals of Nordic societies. Evidence and monitoring practices in the Nordic countries highlight how the issue is tracked and assessed over time.

Research shows that growing up with persistently limited economic resources can be associated with differences in children's rights fulfilment, life chances, and future opportunities. Childhood income levels are also used in international research as an indicator of how welfare-state mechanisms operate in practice. Studies further identify childhood as a sensitive period in the life course and document that disadvantages emerging early may accumulate over time (Heckman, 2006; Duncan et al., 2010). On this basis, policy-oriented research examines how measures targeting families with persistently low income are associated with both children's immediate living conditions and their long-term development.

Violation of children's rights

Child poverty is frequently discussed in relation to children's rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Children have the right to adequate food, clothing, and a safe place to live (Article 27). These are conditions intended to ensure that children can develop in the best possible way. They also have the right to rest, play, and participate in cultural and creative activities (Article 31). When families lack resources, children are at risk of being left without these basic needs and participation opportunities; and when children are not allowed to participate in social activities or lack the necessary material resources, this can inhibit both well-being and development.

The research reviewed above shows that children in low-income families are more likely than their peers to experience unstable housing and poorer living conditions and are less likely to participate in organised leisure activities. While the Nordic welfare states generally protect families from absolute poverty, recent reports indicate that increasing numbers of families with children struggle to meet basic needs, including access to sufficient and nutritious food. Children growing up in low-income households are also more likely to report lower quality of life, loneliness, feelings of shame, social withdrawal, and mental health problems.

Parents are primarily responsible for meeting their children's needs and protecting them from poor living conditions. However, the Convention on the Rights of the Child also stipulates that public authorities have a duty to support families that lack sufficient resources (Article 27). Child poverty, both absolute and relative, can therefore be understood as an expression of shortcomings in societal arrangements, rather than as the responsibility of individual parents. This can be interpreted as indicating gaps between formal rights and observed living conditions (Sandbæk, 2017; Fløtten, 2019; Näsman & Fernquist, 2022; Holappa & Leviner, 2024).

Breaking with Nordic ideals of equality

The Nordic social model is historically rooted in egalitarian ideals of equality, solidarity, and mutual responsibility, often framed as a commitment to universal social rights, broad-based risk sharing, and the view that welfare is a collective good rather than a private matter. In his famous *Folkhem* speech of 1928, Per Albin Hansson described 'the good home' as a society characterised by equality, care, and cooperation; a community in which no one should be left behind (Hansson, 1928). The same normative orientation can be found in Erik Allardt's classic book *Att ha, att älska, att vara* [*To have, to love, to be*] (1975). Allardt emphasises that any assessment of welfare must be grounded in an idea of what constitutes a good society and must consider what should be valued, protected, and fairly distributed. He also stresses that welfare should not be assessed solely in terms of income, but should include belonging, participation, and the ability to live a dignified life. In a Nordic context, this understanding has long been closely linked to ideals of small economic disparities and equal opportunities, supported by high employment, coordinated labour-market

institutions, and extensive public services that seek to reduce class-based differences in life chances. In this tradition, a good society is one where inequalities are not too great and where everyone has genuine opportunities to participate in working and social life (Dølvik et al., 2015). At the same time, income disparities have increased in parts of the Nordic region in recent decades, most clearly in Sweden, and also in Finland and Denmark, even though the Nordic countries remain comparatively egalitarian in international perspective (Aaberge et al., 2018; SCB, 2025; Paukkeri et al., 2023).

The ideals of equality are strong. A review of recent government programmes and accession speeches from the Nordic countries shows that combating inequality and social vulnerability is a core message:

'The government will (...) ensure that economic disparities do not become too large' Denmark's government policy statement (Government of Denmark, 2022).

'General welfare must be strengthened. It is the strongest redistributive force that exists' Swedish government policy statement (Government of Sweden, 2022).

'Action will be taken to eliminate poverty' *(Government of Iceland, 2024).*

'We will fight inequality and injustice' *(Government of Norway, 2021).*

'The first Government for the new decade will reduce inequality and improve the position of low-income earners' (Government Communications Department, 2019).

When children grow up with poorer material living conditions, poorer health, fewer educational opportunities, and less social participation than others, this is not just a social problem that needs to be addressed. The existence of child poverty is frequently portrayed in research and public debate as being at odds with Nordic ideals of equality. Child poverty highlights vulnerabilities in the welfare model and acts as a prism for broader societal changes. Changes in family patterns, the labour market, migration, the housing sector, and social policy are all evident in children's living conditions. In the research literature, persistent or rising child poverty is often analysed as an indicator of pressure on the core mechanisms of the Nordic model, and of the extent to which existing policies can secure adequate living conditions for all children.

Child poverty can also have an impact on trust, which is a key resource in Nordic societies. Research shows that increasing inequality and social polarisation can undermine the population's trust when there are major differences in children's opportunities and living conditions, for example (Putnam, 2000; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Thus, child poverty can contribute to undermining the broad foundation of trust on which the Nordic model is built. In this sense, it not only runs counter to ideals of equality, but also shakes one of its most central pillars.

Consequences for the child – consequences for society

That child poverty has negative consequences for children's living conditions here and now has been amply documented. Children growing up in families with persistent low income are at greater risk of material deprivation, poorer housing conditions, less participation in leisure and learning activities, and higher incidence of stress and social exclusion. Research shows that economic deprivation during childhood affects children's mental and physical health, cognitive development, and their experiences of coping and well-being in everyday life. These are not just indirect correlations; several studies document direct causal effects of increased family income on children's health, school performance, and social functioning (Akee et al., 2010; Dahl & Lochner, 2012).

The consequences extend far into adulthood. On average, children who grow up in low-income families have weaker school performance, a lower likelihood of completing their education, a higher risk of health challenges, and a weaker foothold in the labour market in adulthood (Havnes & Mogstad, 2011; Ekspertgruppe om barn i fattige familier, 2023). This results in lower life chances across generations. As James Heckman and other life course researchers have shown, investments in children's early living conditions are among the interventions that yield the greatest returns – both for the child and for society as a whole – because early experiences shape later learning opportunities, health, and economic independence (Heckman, 2006).

There are significant consequences for society when childhood poverty prevents children from developing their skills and realising their potential. Lower levels of education and weaker attachment to the labour market in adulthood mean a loss of future labour and productivity that the economy needs to maintain growth, innovation, and competitiveness (OECD, 2018). A higher risk of marginalisation and health problems also places increased pressure on health and welfare services and reduces the number of people contributing tax revenues to collectively financed schemes.

A number of analyses show that child poverty imposes significant socioeconomic costs on society over the course of a lifetime in the form of lower labour market participation, weaker tax revenues, and higher use of social security and health services (NOU 2009:10; Chetty et al., 2014). Several studies suggest that long-term labour market exclusion entails higher public costs than early interventions in childhood. . Economists often refer to this as a 'double dividend': measures to combat child poverty both improve childhood conditions and strengthen the basis for future value creation. Thus, the fight against child poverty is not only a question of children's rights and social justice, but also of the sustainability of society and the economic viability of the welfare state.

Social investments that benefit everyone

The Nordic region has traditionally invested heavily in universal schemes for children and families: financial transfers, subsidised early childhood education, good schools, and various services aimed at improving children's upbringing environments. OECD figures on total child-related expenditure show that the Nordic countries rank highly in an international comparison (OECD Family Database, Table PF1.6). The social investment policy is given much of the credit for the fact that there are fewer children in low-income families in the Nordic countries and that children's living conditions are generally good (Hemerijck et al., 2023). Even during periods of crisis, the Nordic countries have largely managed to maintain investments in children and young people (de la Porte & Larsen, 2023).

As noted above, however, questions have been raised as to whether policy succeeds in improving outcomes for all children. Many point out that the social investments improve outcomes for the average child but do not sufficiently safeguard vulnerable children, particularly those with multiple risk factors in their lives (Hakovirta & Nygård, 2021; Skalická & Eikemo, 2025; Colombarolli & De Luigi, 2025). In a comparison of poverty trends in affluent countries during the period 2008–2020, UNICEF shows that the Nordic countries do not perform well. They rank low on the list of countries that have succeeded in reducing family poverty during this period (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023). Hakovirta and Nygård (2021) present a possible explanation for this, namely that social investment policy has gradually shifted from emphasising transfers to families towards a more service-oriented approach in which poverty is to be addressed through labour-market participation. As noted above, work-oriented policy is the most important element of poverty policy in all the Nordic countries. This policy is intended to yield the greatest returns in the long term, but the question is how it affects the family's financial situation, and thus children's living conditions, in the here and now.

The literature generally finds strong grounds for continuing social investment approaches. Heavy investments in children and young people are cost-effective. Early investments have a particularly high socioeconomic rate of return (Heckman, 2006), and numerous studies from the Nordic countries show that children who receive early support perform better at school, complete their education, and participate more strongly in the labour market (Havnes et al., 2011; Gupta & Simonsen, 2016).

However, social investment policy must be balanced against other policy measures. Even in the pioneering Nordic countries, there are signs of dual labour markets (Berglund et al., 2021) and of some households experiencing severe financial difficulties, particularly those with low levels of education, single parents and certain immigrant groups (see Chapter 2). Eichhorst et al. (2020) caution against assuming that social investments can replace traditional social protection. The key point is complementarity between investment and protection, whereby social investments are combined with robust, universal income buffers (Hemerijck, 2017).

Continuous monitoring of the situation of children in low-income families, provides a basis for assessing whether social investment measures operate as intended and

reach their target groups. Such monitoring is presented in the literature as a way to promote equitable living conditions for all, and to support the legitimacy of the policy.

Foundation for evidence-based policy

Evidence-based policy means that political programmes and measures should, as far as possible, be based on the best available knowledge about what works, for whom, and under what conditions. The ideal is deeply entrenched in the Nordic countries and is reflected in a wide range of policy documents, not least in politicians' own statements. The concept is used so frequently that it has been argued to function as a mantra in Nordic policymaking, and there is debate as to how deep the commitment to evidence-based policy runs (Holst, 2016).

We do not engage with this debate here but instead emphasise a more fundamental point: the challenges associated with child poverty call for sound, up-to-date, and broad-based knowledge to address the challenges associated with child poverty. Child poverty is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by the labour market, integration policy, education policy, family and housing policy, the welfare state's income security and service provision, as well as tax and wage policy – in short, a wide range of policy areas that interact.

Developments are therefore closely monitored in order to assess whether measures reach their intended target groups and that all children are given opportunities to realise their potential. Without continuous and reliable measures of child poverty, it becomes challenging to assess whether policies are effective, or whether the situation is deteriorating despite good intentions. Systematic monitoring makes it possible to detect negative trends at an early stage. Child poverty can increase rapidly during economic downturns or changes in the labour market; with effective monitoring, policies can be adjusted before problems escalate and become more difficult to tackle.

A solid knowledge base also makes it possible to prioritise resources appropriately. Knowing where child poverty is most prevalent, geographically, by family type or other characteristics, allows targeted efforts where the need is greatest, with greater impact per unit of spending. Over time, high-quality register data and analyses also make it possible to evaluate whether specific measures, such as support schemes, tax reductions, or services, help to reduce child poverty. Without such knowledge, there is a risk of continuing measures that are ineffective.

Knowledge also provides a basis for preventing future societal costs. Child poverty is associated with an increased risk of poorer health, lower educational attainment, weaker labour market participation, and higher reliance on social benefits in adulthood. By monitoring developments, it becomes possible both to estimate the gains from interventions and the costs of inaction, thereby strengthening the case for early and well-targeted measures.

A strong knowledge base in this field therefore requires analyses at several levels: monitoring the extent and development of child poverty, studies of how different policy instruments operate in practice; comparative analyses between the Nordic

countries and also from a broader international perspective; and research that highlights children's and young people's own experiences. Collectively, these are important building blocks for policies that help to reduce child poverty. Child poverty in the Nordic region is a complex societal problem affecting individual children, their families, and the sustainability of the Nordic model. It is a matter of children's rights, a question of distributive justice, and an issue concerning the future development of society. Attention to child poverty is often framed not only as a moral and rights-based concern, but also as relevant to discussions about the sustainability of the Nordic equality model.

1.4 A joint Nordic project

Child poverty in the Nordic region is not a marginal phenomenon, but an expression of structural challenges in otherwise strong welfare states. Because child poverty violates children's fundamental rights and runs counter to the ideals on which the Nordic model is built, the problem is frequently framed as warranting sustained political and professional attention. Investments in children are investments in future generations – and in the continuation of societies characterised by equality, trust, and social sustainability. From this perspective, there are several arguments for close Nordic cooperation to target child poverty.

Firstly, the Nordic countries share a fundamental social model. Despite national variations, the countries exhibit substantial structural similarities: a large and universal welfare state, high employment, strong and organised labour markets, relatively small economic disparities, and close tripartite cooperation. The combination of broad, taxpayer-funded welfare schemes and a regulated but flexible labour market make it possible to combine economic efficiency with social equality. The model is also distinguished by high levels of trust and a strong tradition of evidence-based and consensus-oriented policymaking (Dølvik et al., 2015). It is precisely these shared features, comprehensive welfare systems, high ambitions for equality, and a political culture grounded in knowledge, that provide a solid foundation for a joint Nordic project to counter child poverty.

Secondly, the Nordic countries share fundamental values such as equality, universalism, social mobility, and children's right to good and secure living conditions. These values contribute to child poverty being framed as a legitimate and high-priority goal in all countries and create a normative community that strengthens the potential for joint strategies.

Thirdly, all the Nordic countries have clear political ambitions to reduce child poverty, often articulated in strategies, action plans, or sectoral policy objectives. Although the content of these plans varies, they all point in the same direction: increased efforts for children in low-income families, improved services, and closer follow-up. Nordic cooperation can provide opportunities to compare policy effects, learn from different approaches, and avoid the development of parallel but poorly coordinated policy trajectories.

Fourthly, the countries face several shared challenges. Rising economic inequality, integration challenges, a strained housing market, and an ageing population that places pressure on welfare budgets directly and indirectly affect the risk of child poverty. When the challenges are similar, it is also likely that policy instruments may be transferable across national borders.

Fifthly, the Nordic countries have a long tradition of cooperation on welfare issues through the Nordic Council of Ministers, research networks, and professional development processes. This infrastructure makes it easy to share data, compare experiences, and develop a common knowledge base. Strengthened cooperation on child poverty will not start from scratch but build on established institutions and a culture characterised by trust and collective problem solving.

The combination of shared values, structural similarities, similar challenges, and well-established arenas for cooperation provides a foundation for discussions about more coordinated Nordic approaches to combat child poverty – for the benefit of children, families, and future Nordic societies.

Model photo: Mads Schmidt Rasmussen / norden.org

2. Child poverty trends in the Nordic countries: A two-decade review

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2.1 Introduction

While the Nordic countries consistently rank among the world's most prosperous and egalitarian countries, rising economic inequalities and shifting socioeconomic dynamics have exposed vulnerabilities within their societies (Aaberge et al., 2018; Kamande et al., 2024; Lundgren et al., 2020; Young Håkansson, 2024b).[1] Economic vulnerability has become more prevalent over the past decade, and income inequality has widened in several Nordic nations (Epland & Hattrem, 2023; Pareliussen et al., 2018; Tapia et al., 2024; Young Håkansson, 2024a). As a result, poverty has become a growing concern within Nordic countries and their welfare systems. Child poverty is a critical social issue, shaping the current and long-term well-being and life outcomes of individuals (Hjalmarsson & Mood, 2015; Skalická & Eikemo, 2025; Young Håkansson, 2024a). A growing body of evidence indicates that child poverty has recently increased in several Nordic countries (Epland & Hattrem, 2023; Gustafsson & Österberg, 2016; Normann & Epland, 2023; Skalická & Eikemo, 2025). Child poverty represents a paradoxical

1. Norway (1), Finland (5) and Denmark (6) are ranked among the 10 most committed countries and regions to reducing inequality by the Reducing Inequality Index 2024 (Kamande et al., 2024).

challenge in the Nordics, which have long been regarded as benchmarks for social equality and welfare.

Over the past two decades, significant labour-market transformations, demographic trends, and policy frameworks have been noted as factors that may have influenced the prevalence and depth of child poverty (Epland & Hattrem, 2023; Normann & Epland, 2023; Statistics Sweden, 2020). These changes have brought increased attention to disparities across specific groups, including children in single-parent households and migrant families (Epland & Hattrem, 2023; Statistics Sweden, 2020; Young Håkansson, 2024b).[2] The issue of child poverty, while quantitatively smaller than in many other countries (Gornick & Jäntti, 2011), carries profound implications for the Nordic welfare model's future and its promise of universal opportunity. This has given rise to concerns that the growing inequalities could pose a threat to social sustainability and trust within the countries and in the region. The Nordic population has historically been the beneficiary of an expectation of a high standard of living and a high level of trust in society's institutions. Furthermore, the Nordic Council of Ministers has identified the promotion of social sustainability and competitiveness in the region as a key objective for the future (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020).

This chapter examines the patterns and trends in child poverty across the Nordic region from 2003 to 2023. The primary objective is to shed light on long-term changes in child poverty while highlighting heterogeneity across different dimensions, such as geographical location, household characteristics, and migration background. The chapter does not utilise individual-level microdata but instead relies on aggregated Eurostat data to analyse trends in poverty indicators. Because Eurostat indicators are harmonised across countries, this analysis uses relative income measures that do not depend on national poverty definitions. This ensures full comparability, also for countries without an official poverty line, such as Denmark. While microdata enables the examination of specific population subgroups, aggregated data provides a clearer view of broader societal trends and developments. Therefore, rather than establishing cause-and-effect relationships, the chapter offers an overview of how the situation has evolved, inviting further reflection on child poverty in these countries. The findings emphasise the need for a more nuanced discussion on this issue and call for deeper analysis to understand how growing inequalities impact the most vulnerable members of Nordic societies.

2. It should be noted that, at least in Sweden, the level of media attention given to the issue of child poverty has often not correlated with the actual extent of poverty, particularly when measured by absolute poverty (Jonsson & Mood, 2017).

2.2 Measuring child poverty

Poverty research largely agrees that the definitions and measurements of poverty should be adapted to the welfare and development level of the countries being studied. To address this, the distinction between absolute and relative poverty is commonly used (Schweiger & Graf, 2015). In this chapter, the term 'child poverty' refers exclusively to Eurostat's at-risk-of-poverty- (AROP) indicators, which measure relative low income. No national poverty definitions are applied. **Absolute poverty** refers to the condition where individuals lack the bare minimum required for survival or a life severely hindered by deprivation, while **relative poverty** considers the resources necessary to maintain a standard of living deemed acceptable within a specific society (Alcock, 2006; Foster, 1998). In practical terms, **absolute poverty** refers to a fixed threshold of income or resources necessary to meet basic survival needs, typically determined by a specific poverty line. In Europe, various absolute poverty measures have been suggested, including national poverty lines and international standards such as those defined by the World Bank (Bradshaw & Movshuk, 2019). Measuring absolute poverty across countries is challenging due to variations in local prices, living costs, and definitions of basic needs.

Balancing cross-country comparability with local relevance requires integrating a common European living standard with country-specific minimum needs and detailed cost assessments (Menyhert et al., 2021). Differences in expenses, such as housing, food, and healthcare, can significantly affect whether individuals meet the poverty threshold, making direct comparisons difficult (Schweiger & Graf, 2015). Therefore, the EU does not provide an official measure of absolute poverty, while the World Bank offers three thresholds, which are significantly lower than the standards of all Nordic countries and are therefore considered irrelevant in our case (World Bank, 2024).[3] Appendix 1 presents a brief overview of the availability of absolute poverty indicators in the Nordic countries.

Relative poverty, on the other hand, is measured in relation to a society's economic conditions. People are considered relatively poor if their income or standard of living falls significantly below the national median. The EU defines relative poverty using the 'at-risk-of-poverty' (AROP) rate, which identifies individuals with an income below 60% of the national median. The OECD applies a slightly lower threshold of 50% (Schweiger & Graf, 2015). Although the 50% threshold is employed in certain academic studies and by the OECD, it is not an official EU poverty threshold, and it is not considered a distinct EU-defined category. In this report, we use the Eurostat at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) indicator, which is based on 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income. This ensures full comparability across the Nordic countries and with the EU. Although alternative thresholds, such as 50% of median

3. The World Bank employs three absolute poverty lines based on the level of development of the countries examined. These thresholds are set at $2.15 per person per day, representing extreme poverty, $3.65 per person per day, reflecting the national poverty lines commonly used in lower-middle-income countries, and $6.85 per person per day, which is more representative of upper-middle-income countries (World Bank, 2024)

income, feature in national debates, particularly in Denmark, these do not constitute the official EU definition and are consequently not used as the primary indicator in this chapter. It should be noted that the AROP indicator is treated as a measure of relative low income among children, and not as a normative poverty definition. This approach recognises that poverty is not merely about meeting basic survival needs but also about maintaining a standard of living that allows for full participation in society. Beyond income, **material deprivation** is an important aspect of relative poverty, as it highlights the inability to afford essential goods and services necessary for an adequate standard of living. The EU measures material deprivation through indicators such as the inability to afford heating, a telephone, a car, or unexpected expenses. Material deprivation is particularly useful in assessing poverty in high-income countries, where income-based measures alone may not fully capture economic hardship. Furthermore, the EU uses the 'at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion' (AROPE) indicator, which combines income poverty, severe material deprivation, and low work intensity (Eurostat, n.d.-a). This composite measure provides a more comprehensive understanding of poverty by accounting for both financial constraints and broader socioeconomic exclusion (Schweiger & Graf, 2015).

Discussions on child poverty often lead to questions regarding the relevance of these indicators, particularly in Western welfare states. A key challenge in poverty research within modern welfare states is determining whether poverty thresholds should be based on absolute income levels of the families or on deprivation standards relative to societal norms. A common criticism directed towards relative measures of poverty is that these measures conflate poverty with general inequality, making it difficult to define true poverty. This has led to debates over whether relative poverty should be considered 'real' poverty. In wealthy societies, deeper income poverty – where families lack necessities such as shelter, healthcare, and nutrition – is relatively rare. Moreover, public perception often aligns with the idea that relative poverty does not constitute true poverty, further complicating discussions on poverty measurement (Schweiger & Graf, 2015).

However, it is important to recognise that relative poverty measures are shaped by normative perspectives on what constitutes a basic or decent life. While absolute poverty indicators focus on survival, relative poverty reflects societal expectations and prevailing living standards within the society the child is growing up in. Addressing relative poverty does not diminish the significance of absolute poverty, nor does concern for absolute poverty negate the struggles faced by those experiencing relative hardship. In high-income countries, this underscores the need for a multidimensional understanding of poverty that encompasses income, material deprivation, and social exclusion. This approach is also aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1, which aims to eradicate poverty in all its forms everywhere. Adopted in 2015, the SDGs emphasise that the definition and measurement of poverty should be context-specific, reflecting the economic, social, and environmental realities of different countries (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). Despite its limitations, relative income poverty has

remained the primary indicator used within the EU and by Eurostat (Bradshaw & Movshuk, 2019), and is also employed in the Nordic Statistics Database (Nordic Statistics Database, 2025).

When focusing on children, it is important to note that since children generally do not earn income, poverty is measured at the household level rather than the individual level. For example, Eurostat measures poverty risk using data from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), relying on household income and adjusting it through equivalised disposable income to account for differences in household size and composition. The AROP indicator is based on equivalised disposable income, that is, household income after taxes and social transfers. Under this framework, children are considered at risk of poverty if they live in a household with an equivalised disposable income below 60% of the national median (Eurostat, n.d.-b, 2024c). Equivalised income is a measure of household income that accounts for differences in household size and composition, allowing for a more accurate comparison of living standards across different households (see also Eurostat, n.d.-d). Disposable income, as defined by Eurostat, is the net income available to households for spending or saving after deducting direct taxes and social security contributions and including government transfers and benefits. However, it is essential to recognise that children are not merely passive members of a household economy; they are individuals with unique needs and vulnerabilities shaped by their family environment and broader social context (Main & Bradshaw, 2012). Taking into account these considerations, this chapter will primarily rely on relative income poverty for families as its main measure of child poverty, but additional information on material deprivation will be added when possible.

2.3 Sources of heterogeneity in child poverty in the Nordic countries

Understanding relative child poverty in the Nordic countries requires careful consideration of its underlying heterogeneity. While these nations are often treated as a unified bloc due to their shared commitment to social welfare and egalitarian principles (Gornick & Jäntti, 2011), significant variations exist both within and between countries (Eklund Karlsson et al., 2022; Povlsen et al., 2018). This section outlines the key sources of heterogeneity that must be considered when analysing child poverty in the Nordic context.

Household composition

Household structure plays a pivotal role in shaping the risk of child poverty. Children in single-parent households face a substantially higher risk of poverty compared to those in two-parent families (Bostic, 2023; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Young Håkansson, 2024a). This disparity is often driven by lower household income, reliance of fewer income sources due to reduced access to dual earners, and limited financial buffers in single-parent households. Families with a large number of children also tend to experience increased financial strain, as the cost of living rises with family size (Gornick & Jäntti, 2011).

Migrant and refugee status

Children from migrant or refugee backgrounds constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in the Nordic countries. These families often face linguistic and cultural barriers, limited access to labour markets, and, in some cases, restrictions on social benefits. Migrants are also more vulnerable to economic downturns, as limited language proficiency and educational gaps can delay labour market entry, even in periods of economic growth. Consequently, a larger share of the migrant population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE). As a result, migrant children experience significantly higher poverty rates compared to their native-born peers (Epland & Hattrem, 2023; Galloway et al., 2015; Gustafsson & Österberg, 2016; Obućina & Ilmakunnas, 2020; Salonen et al., 2021). The heterogeneity within migrant groups – based on factors such as country of origin, duration of residence, and migration type – further complicates the picture (Gustafsson & Österberg, 2016; Obućina & Ilmakunnas, 2020).

Gender dynamics

Gender plays a subtle yet critical role in the analysis of child poverty. Single mothers are disproportionately represented among low-income households, affecting the well-being of children in such settings (Bostic, 2023; Gornick & Jäntti, 2011). In Nordic countries, the vulnerability of single-income households is particularly pronounced, as these welfare states are largely structured around a dual-earner model, where both parents are expected to participate in the labour market (Kasearu et al., 2017). A recent report by Save the Children Sweden (Salonen et al., 2021) highlights the precarious situation of children raised by single mothers, revealing a poverty rate of 9.4%, compared to only 1.2% among children of cohabiting Swedish-born parents. Even more concerning is the intersectional impact of migration and single parenthood: the poverty rate rises to 49.5% among single mothers with a migration background.

Geographical disparities

While the Nordic countries have regional disparities in the level of inequality (Grunfelder, 2020; Tapia et al., 2024) and poverty (Broström & Rauhut, 2017; Lundgren et al., 2020), regional disparities in child poverty are less well documented (see, however, Rauhut & Lingärde (2014) for the case of Sweden). Urban–rural divides may be particularly relevant, as households in rural areas have fewer labour market opportunities, lower household incomes than urban households, and higher commuting costs. Such factors can shape household income (Dzhavatova et al., 2025; Slätmo et al., 2024). In contrast, urban centres tend to have higher housing costs, which can contribute to financial strain for families with low incomes. Regional economic structures – such as dependence on specific industries – may further shape the distribution of poverty.

Economic and labour market factors

Shifts in labour markets, such as the rise of precarious employment, wage stagnation, and the decline of traditional industries, have unevenly affected different groups of children. Households reliant on low-skilled or part-time employment are particularly vulnerable (Epland & Hattrem, 2023). Furthermore, the type of labour market activity such as self-employment can also shape the extent of risk of poverty (Horemans & Marx, 2024; Sevä & Larsson, 2015). A recent study in Norway shows that self-employment in certain industries carries a particularly high risk of poverty (Brovold, 2025). Educational attainment of the households' earners has been found to play a more substantial role in shaping child poverty in Sweden and Norway than in the other Nordic countries (Epland & Hattrem, 2023). In addition, economic shocks, such as the 2008 financial crisis (Chzhen, 2017) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020), further exposed these vulnerabilities, exacerbating inequalities among specific groups.

Policy variation across the Nordic countries

The Nordic countries share a commitment to comprehensive welfare systems including free education and healthcare, generous parental leave, progressive taxation, and inclusive labour market policies. Such factors contribute to reducing poverty levels (Dalen et al., 2022), but differences in policy design and implementation may contribute to heterogeneity in child poverty rates. For example, variations in unemployment benefits, child allowances, housing subsidies, and tax policies can lead to differences in how effectively each country mitigates child poverty (Eklund Karlsson et al., 2022; Povlsen et al., 2018). Eklund Karlsson et al. (2022) argue that all five Nordic countries implement universal family support policies, including parental leave, child allowances, daycare, and free paediatric healthcare. However, despite these national strategies to reduce child poverty and inequality, challenges such as high housing costs and income disparities persist (Eklund Karlsson et al., 2022). In addition, while all three

Scandinavian countries follow national guidelines for regulating the means-tested social assistance schemes, benefit levels in Norway and Sweden can vary based on personal and family circumstances, with Norwegian municipalities granting discretion to set local rates (Dalen et al., 2022). Additionally, the timing and extent of policy changes over the past two decades have created divergent trajectories in poverty trends across the region with higher levels of child poverty emerging in Norway and Sweden (Epland & Hattrem, 2023). Eklund Karlsson et al. (2022) conclude that in some Nordic countries, inequality is rising, likely due to insufficient proportional universalism – where policies exist but lack the necessary scale for vulnerable families. Strengthening local efforts to tackle social disparities is essential for improving policy effectiveness and addressing child poverty (Eklund Karlsson et al., 2022).

2.4 Data and methodology

Comparing household income across countries is a complex task due to variations in data collection practices, income definitions, and units of analysis. However, over the past two decades, efforts toward standardisation have significantly improved the comparability of such data across countries. International guidelines have been established to define the components that should be included in income measurements and to determine the preferred unit of analysis. These guidelines are now widely adopted by national statistical agencies in OECD countries and have also been implemented by international organisations that collect income data from multiple countries, such as the OECD and Eurostat.

This chapter is mostly based on data from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, which provides official indicators of poverty, drawn from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey. EU-SILC provides a harmonised framework for cross-national data collection on income, poverty, social exclusion, and living conditions, offering a robust foundation for analysing child poverty. Conducted annually, the survey serves as a key instrument for measuring poverty and inequality across Europe and over time. It gathers detailed household-level information on income, composition, and material deprivation while ensuring comparability through standardised definitions and methodologies across participating countries, including Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. It should be noted that the EU-SILC data is based on representative sample surveys rather than population-wide registry data, which means all estimates are subject to sampling error and statistical uncertainty. Eurostat does not routinely publish confidence intervals for all published indicators. Readers should therefore be aware that differences between countries, subgroups, or time periods – particularly smaller differences – may not be statistically significant. Where possible, we focus on substantive differences that are likely to exceed typical margins of error, but a degree of caution is warranted when interpreting fine-grained comparisons. [4] In addition, for providing an overview at a regional and municipal level we use data on poverty and

child poverty from the National Statistical Institutes (NSI's) of each of the Nordic countries.

The data analysed in this chapter covers the period from 2003 to 2023, enabling an examination of trends over two decades. This time frame includes major economic and social events, such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which may have had significant impacts on child poverty. The use of EU-SILC data offers several advantages, particularly in terms of comparability and the scope of available variables.

Nonetheless, while data from Eurostat based on EU-SILC is a valuable and robust resource, it is not without limitations. First, although the survey has a longitudinal component, tracking the same households for four years and thereby enabling insights into poverty persistence, the data available through Eurostat does not allow the user to identify households with children. Therefore, it is not possible to examine the persistence of poverty among children in this chapter. Second, while some figures on material deprivation are presented, the chapter primarily focuses on monetary poverty. As a result, it may not fully capture the multidimensional nature of child poverty. Finally, a key data limitation is the absence of data for Iceland from 2019 onward. Consequently, for all figures based on the most recent data, the value used for Iceland is 2019, while 2023 data is applied for the remaining Nordic countries.

When considering the Nordic region, however, EU-SILC data from Eurostat remains the best available source of information to examine and discuss child poverty. These data are reliable and complete, available at the national level, and comparable across the Nordic countries. Therefore, in our project, we have used aggregated data from Eurostat and focus on the following key indicators:

- **At-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP) 60%**: The proportion of individuals residing in households with an equivalised disposable income below 60% of the national median income after social transfers serves as a key measure of poverty (Eurostat, n.d.-b). In the context of child poverty, this indicator reflects the percentage of children experiencing such economic conditions relative to the total population of children. It is the most widely used and standardised metric in the literature for assessing relative poverty.
- **At-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers**: This indicator is defined as the proportion of individuals residing in households with an equivalised disposable income below 60% of the national median, calculated prior to the inclusion of social transfers. In essence, this indicator estimates what household income levels would be in the absence of governmental support through social transfers. It should also be noted that pensions, such as old-age and survivors' (widows' and widowers') pensions are counted as income (before social transfers) and not as social transfers.

- **At-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP) 50%**: The proportion of individuals residing in households with an equivalised disposable income below 50% of the national median serves as an indicator of deeper income poverty. This indicator applies a stricter relative income threshold (50 % of median). It is *not* an official EU category, but is used in research to identify a subgroup with deeper income poverty relative to the standard EU 60 % threshold
- **Material deprivation rate**: The material deprivation rate, as defined by the EU-SILC, measures the extent to which individuals lack the financial means to obtain goods and services generally regarded as essential for a decent standard of living. This indicator differentiates between those who are unable to afford specific items and those who do not possess them for other reasons, such as personal preference or lack of necessity. In this chapter it refers to the percentage of children growing in an household which is experiencing a lack of essential items and services (Eurostat, n.d.-e). It should be noted that Eurostat provides information on the child-specific deprivation rate, but the information is available just for 2021 and 2024. Therefore, we have opted to use the social and material variable which is defined by the information on parents (see also *Glossary:* Material deprivation (Eurostat, n.d.-e) and Glossary: Child deprivation (Eurostat, n.d.-c)).

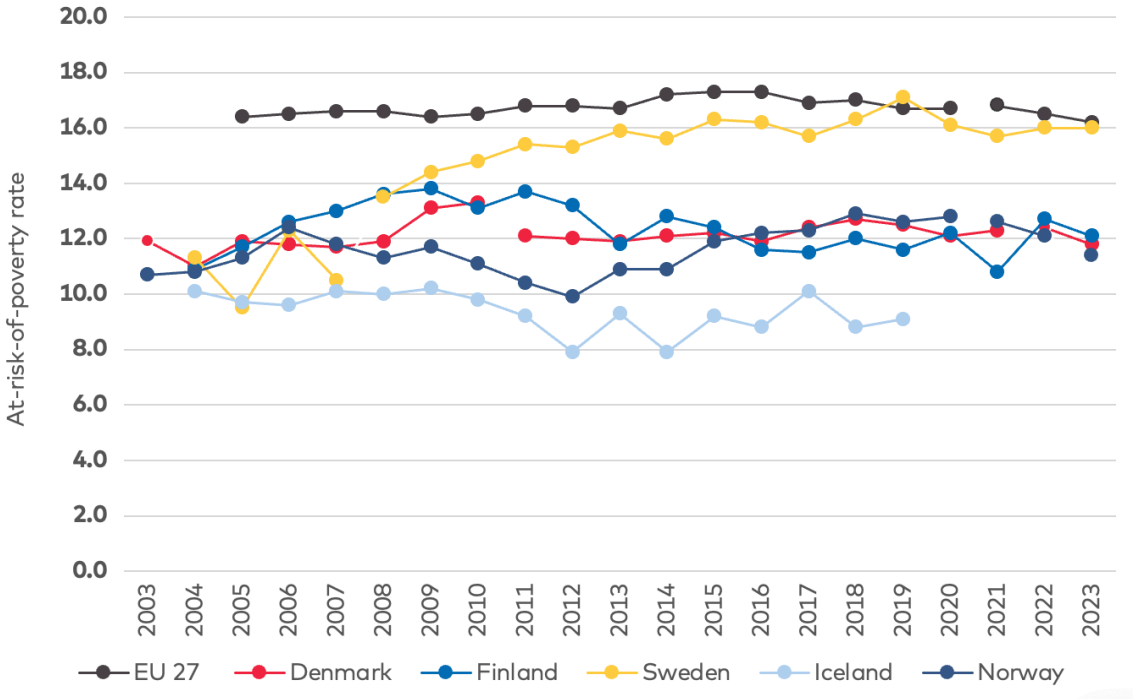
2.5 Results

Poverty and child poverty in the Nordics: Indicators and overtime trends

Figure 1 illustrates the at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rates for the full population, measured as a percentage of households falling below 60% of the median equivalised income after social transfers across the EU (from 2020 the EU-27 value excludes the UK), and Nordic countries from 2003 to 2023. The EU consistently shows higher poverty rates compared to the Nordic countries, with levels hovering around 16% to 17% throughout the observed period. In contrast, the Nordic countries exhibit notably lower AROP, which may be related to their social welfare systems, and lower level of economic inequality. The Nordic countries provide more extensive cash transfers and a higher level of social security, which increases the disposable income of those at risk of poverty to a greater extent. Among the Nordics, Denmark, Finland, and Norway maintained relatively stable and low poverty rates, generally ranging between 10% and 13%, but with somewhat higher levels of poverty in Finland during the economic crisis of 2008. Iceland had the lowest poverty rates in the group, remaining below 10% for most of the time frame. Sweden stands out with rising AROP rates during the period, at around 10–12% in the early 2000s, surpassing the EU levels in 2017, reaching 17%, and then stabilising at about 16%. The deviation of Sweden from the rest of the Nordics in recent years alongside the situation of Finland around the crises highlights the importance of looking at long time trends. At the same time, the clear gap

between most Nordic countries and the EU average may underscore the role of comprehensive social policies in reducing poverty, making the Nordics a compelling model in discussions on addressing poverty in general and child poverty specifically. Figure A in the Appendix shows the same results using the 50% of the median equivalised income threshold. This figure mirrors to a large extent the results shown in figure 1 for the case of deeper poverty.

Figure 1: Risk of poverty (% of households) by country and time: 60% of median equivalised income

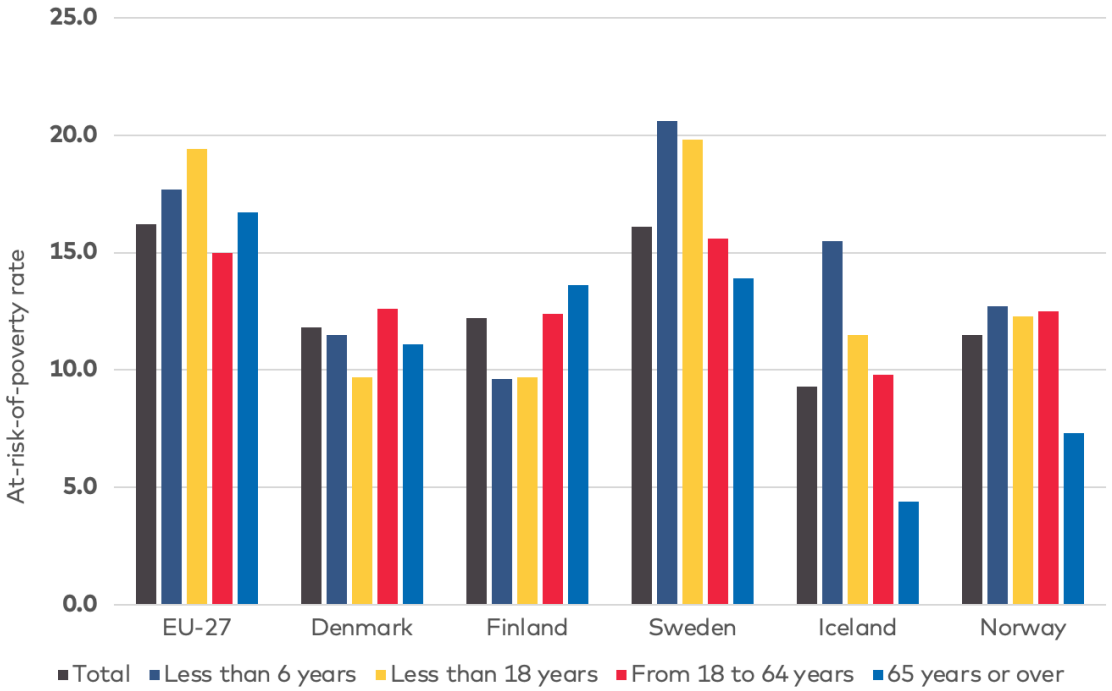


Source: ***Eurostat (2024b)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold and household type (ILC_LI03) . Note: Data points that appear unconnected by lines indicate a break in the time series.*

While Figure 1 illustrates trends in poverty risk over time, it is also important to consider how these risks vary across different age groups. Figure 2 presents the at-risk-of-poverty rates in 2023 for various age groups in the EU and in the Nordics, using the 60% threshold previously discussed. The data highlight variations across countries to the extent to which poverty risks differ by age group. In Denmark, Finland, and Norway, poverty rates are relatively evenly distributed across age groups, with only minor differences between children, working-age adults, and the elderly. In Finland, and to some extent also in Denmark, the level of child poverty is slightly lower than the overall poverty rate. Previous research has suggested that Finland is among the few countries in the OECD exhibiting this pattern (Adamson, 2012), partially due to the implementation of universal child benefits and other family support programmes (Obućina & Ilmakunnas, 2020).

By contrast, Sweden exhibits a markedly different pattern, with children under six years old and those under 18 facing a markedly higher risk of poverty than other age groups. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for young children exceeds 20%, surpassing that of both working-age adults and the elderly. This trend is consistent with broader patterns observed in the EU. A somewhat similar pattern is evident in Iceland, where young children (under six years old) experience the highest poverty rates, followed by children under 18. In Iceland, both of these categories exceed the poverty levels of the total population. Notably, in both Iceland and Norway, individuals aged 65 and over experience substantially lower poverty rates compared to the total population.

Figure 2: At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age group, 2023. 60% of median equivalised income

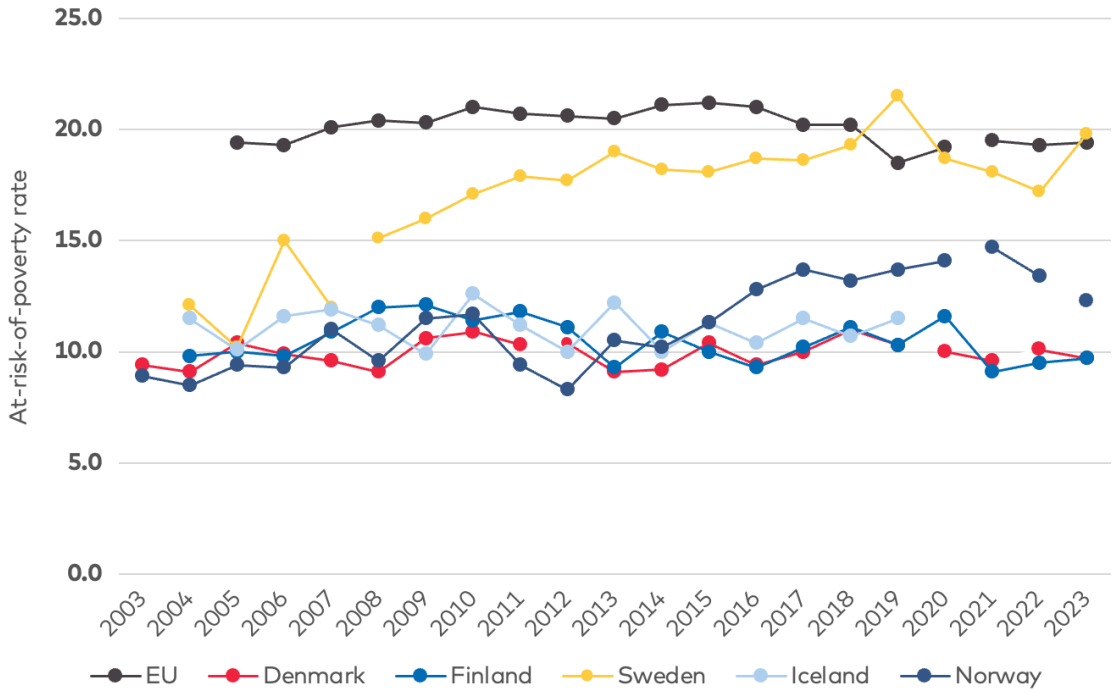


Source: ***Eurostat (2024a)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI02).*
Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.

Figures 3 and 4 depict how the at risk of poverty for children (i.e., individuals less than 18 years old) has developed over time, using both the 50% and 60% threshold of median equivalised income. Figure 3 applies a threshold of 60% of median equivalised income after social transfers, which is the standard measurement used by Eurostat. This indicator captures a broader group of individuals at risk of poverty and offers a more comprehensive assessment of economic vulnerability. In contrast, Figure 4 adopts a stricter threshold of 50% of median equivalised income after social transfers, identifying individuals who experience severe financial hardship (which is also the indicator used by The OECD in their reports on poverty (OECD, 2024)). The implications of these calculations are meaningful: while the 50% threshold emphasises deeper income poverty and helps identify those in urgent need of support, the 60% threshold provides a broader perspective on financial insecurity within society.

Figure 3 shows that the EU maintains higher poverty rates among children – consistently around 20% – compared to the Nordic countries. Among the Nordic nations, Sweden demonstrates an upward trend, starting at levels similar to the rest of the region (approximately 10–12%) but peaking at 22% in 2021, indicating a notable increase of children's at-risk-of-poverty over time. This implies that one in five children in Sweden lived in households at risk of poverty in 2023. Norway also exhibits a gradual rise from 2014 onward, stabilising at around 14% in 2019 before experiencing a slight decline between 2021 and 2023, yet remaining at higher levels than Denmark and Finland. Meanwhile, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland demonstrate more stable and lower child AROP rates ranging between 9% and 12% for most of the period.

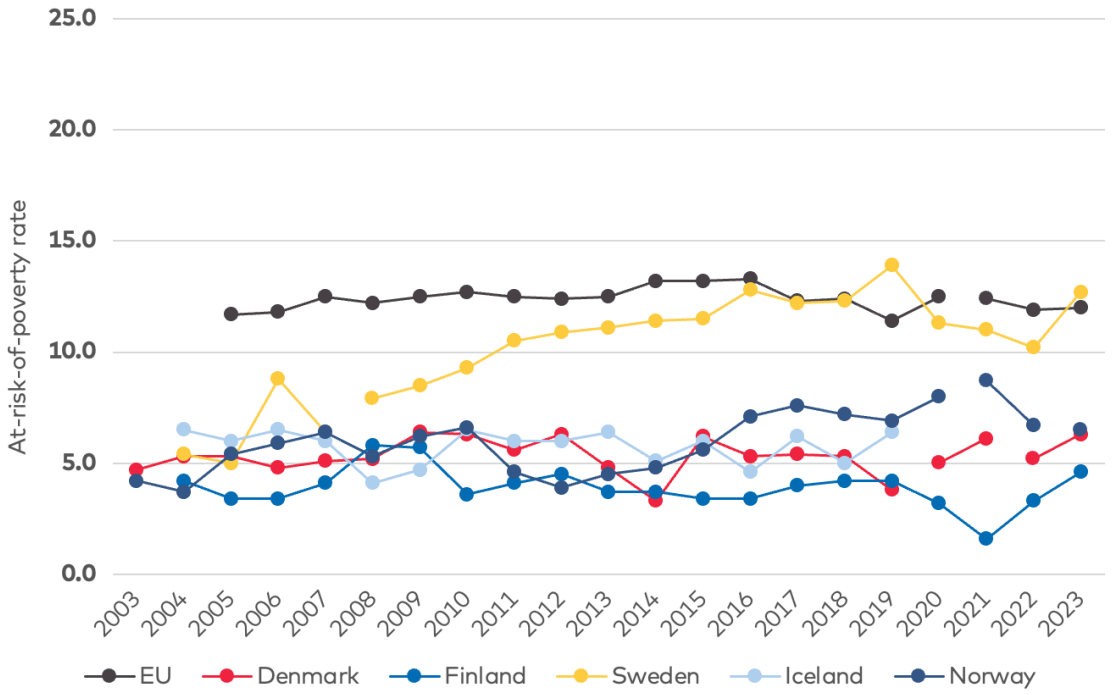
Figure 3: At-risk-of-poverty rate by reporting country and year: Less than 18 years cut-off point: **60%** of median equivalised income after social transfers



Source: ***Eurostat (2024b)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI02).*
Note: Data points that appear unconnected by lines indicate a break in the time series.

Figure 4 illustrates the at-risk-of-poverty indicator for children, using a threshold defined as 50% of the median equivalised income. This indicator captures deeper relative income poverty. The 50 % threshold is included here as a stricter relative income threshold, commonly used in poverty research to highlight deeper income disadvantages. It is not an official EU category but serves as an analytical tool to complement the standard EU 60 % measure. The EU exhibits higher AROP levels than the Nordic countries, generally ranging between 12% and 14%, with slightly elevated levels between 2014 and 2016. Similar to the previous indicator, most Nordic countries report a lower share of children at risk of poverty compared to the EU, with figures ranging between 3.5% and 8.7%. Sweden stands out with a higher rate throughout most of the period, reaching levels comparable to the EU in more recent years. Norway also experienced an increase in severe child poverty risk between 2012 and 2021, rising from 3.9% – the lowest level among the Nordic countries in 2012 – to 8.7% in 2021, followed by a decline to 6.5% in 2023. In contrast, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland remain below 6.5%, displaying a relatively stable trend over the observed period. A comparison of the two figures reveals similar trends over time across both indicators, suggesting lower AROP levels for children in most Nordic countries relative to the EU. However, Sweden's upward trajectory highlights emerging disparities between the Nordic countries, indicating potential challenges in sustaining historically low poverty rates – particularly when considering that this figure focuses on the at risk of poverty rate after transfer payments.

Figure 4: At-risk-of-poverty rate by reporting country and year: Less than 18 years cut-off point: **50%** of median equivalised income after social transfers



Source: ***Eurostat (2024a)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI02).*
Note: Data points that appear unconnected by lines indicate a break in the time series.

The role of social transfers

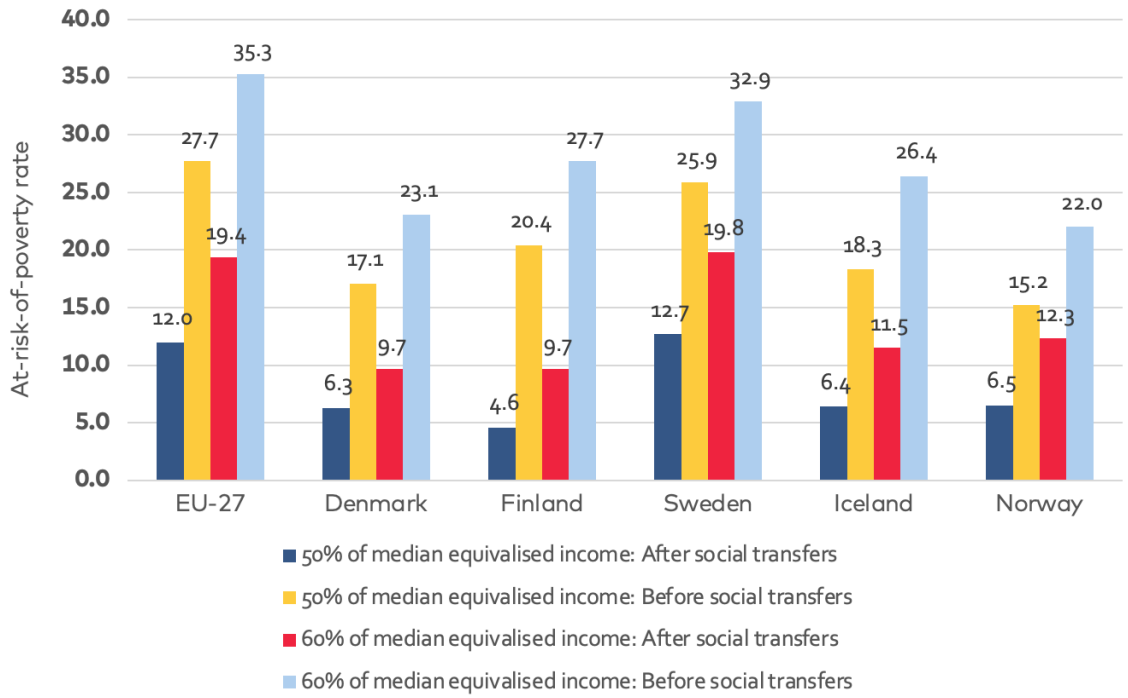
Figure 5 compares child poverty rates before and after social transfers in 2023 across the EU and the Nordic countries. It presents at-risk-of-poverty rates both before and after social transfers, using two different poverty thresholds: 50% of median equivalised income (deeper income poverty) and 60% of median equivalised income (poverty). This comparison highlights the role of welfare policies in poverty reduction by contrasting a hypothetical scenario in which the state does not intervene – allowing market forces to determine children's (and households') economic conditions – with the actual situation, where children and families receive transfer payments.

Using the 60% threshold, which captures overall poverty, and comparing values before and after social transfers, child poverty rates are significantly higher across all countries before social transfers. Among the Nordic countries, Sweden (32.9%) and Finland (27.7%) record the highest pre-transfer child poverty rates, with Sweden reaching levels that nearly align with the EU average. The impact of social transfers on poverty reduction is most pronounced in Finland, Iceland, and Denmark, where at-risk-of-poverty rates decline by 18, 14.9, and 13.4 percentage points, respectively. While social transfers substantially reduce poverty rates in all countries, Sweden continues to

report a relatively high post-transfer poverty rate (19.8%), exceeding the EU average in 2023. Norway exhibits the second-lowest pre-transfer child poverty rate (22.0%); however, following social transfers, it has the second highest at-risk-of-poverty rate among children. This outcome reflects a relatively modest reduction in child poverty as a result of transfer payments compared to Denmark, Finland, and Iceland.

Focusing on the 50% threshold, it is evident that before social transfers, severe child poverty rates are substantially higher compared to post-transfer levels, underscoring the role of social transfers. In particular, Sweden (25.9%), Finland (20.4%), Iceland (18.3%), and Denmark (17.1%) exhibit notably high pre-transfer poverty rates under this threshold. After social transfers, the AROP rate declines substantially, with Finland experiencing a reduction of nearly 16% points. However, Sweden shows a different pattern in the Nordic context under this threshold, with post-transfer poverty rates of 12.7% – the highest among the Nordic countries – despite a 13.2%-point reduction due to social transfers. Sweden's persistently high post-transfer poverty rate may be attributable to its exceptionally high pre-transfer level (25.9%). As a result, Sweden's AROP rate closely aligns with the EU average (12.0%), diverging from the rest of the Nordic countries, all of which hold deeper income poverty rates below 7%.

Figure 5: At-risk-of-poverty rate before and after social transfers by country, 2023: Individuals under 18 years, 50% and 60% median equivalised income treshold



Source: ***Eurostat (2024b)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers (pensions included in social transfers) by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI09) and* ***Eurostat (2024a)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI02). Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.*

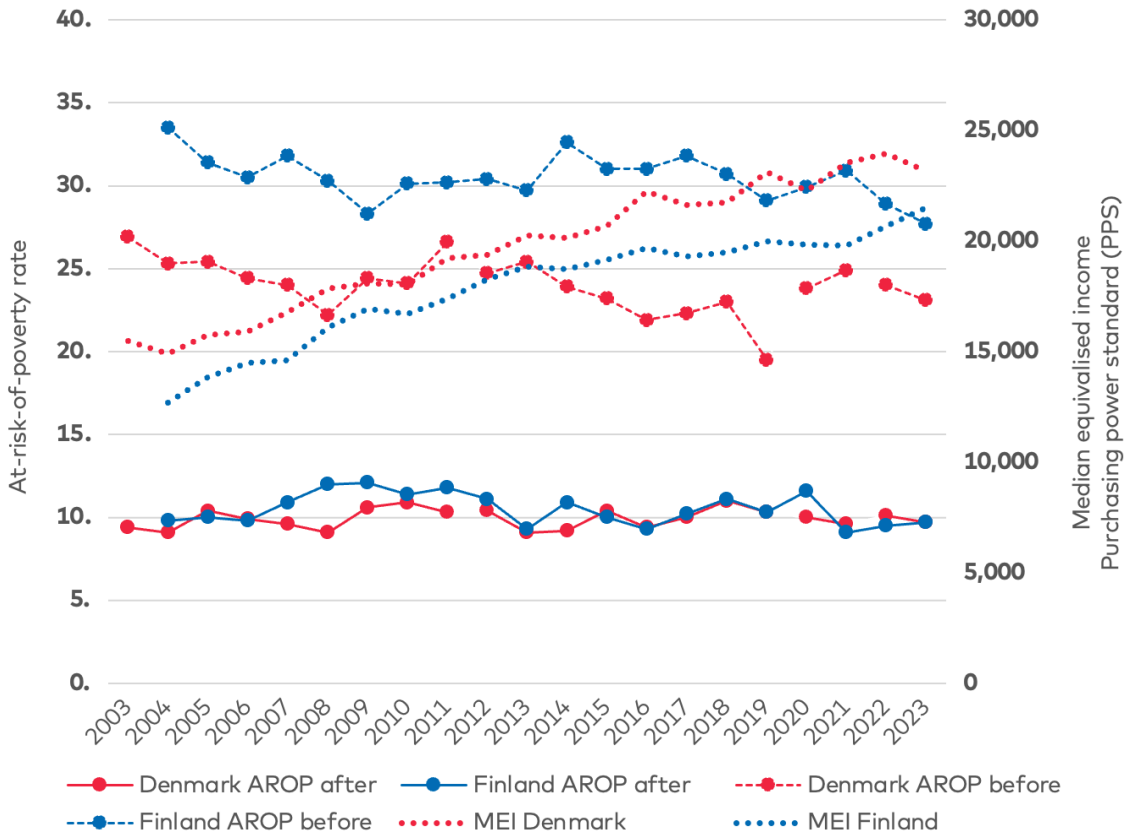
Figure 5 clearly highlights the difference between Sweden, and to some extent Norway, and the other Nordic countries in reducing child poverty by social transfers. This raises critical questions on the temporal aspects of this divergence: at what point did the gap between Sweden and the other Nordic countries emerge, and when did a similar shift occur in Norway? Furthermore, it remains uncertain whether Sweden's widening disparity is driven by an increase in poverty levels before the redistribution of social transfers or by a rise in median income, which may result in a greater proportion of children falling below the poverty threshold.

Figures 6A and 6B seek to shed some light into these dynamics by presenting poverty rates between 2003 and 2023 before and after social transfers, using 60% of the median income as the threshold, alongside the median equivalised income (MEI). Figure 6A focuses on Denmark and Finland, while Figure 6B examines Norway and Sweden. Iceland is not included in the figures due to the unavailability of data since 2019.

The figure of Denmark and Finland indicates that, over time, child poverty rates after social transfers have remained relatively stable, at 10–12%. However, there is variation

in pre-transfer poverty rates in each country. Notably, Finland progressively reduced the gap created by market-driven inequalities, achieving comparable post-transfer child poverty rates to those in Denmark despite initially higher levels of market-driven poverty. Moreover, the data indicates that despite rising median wages in both countries, the proportion of children living below the poverty line remained constant. This stability may be explained by two factors: either income growth among lower-income households has kept pace with broader income increases, thereby mitigating income disparities, or social transfers are indexed to income growth, ensuring that lower-income children maintain a relatively stable position within the income distribution.

Figure 6A: Median equivalised income and at-risk-of-poverty rate before and after transfer payment, 60% of median equivalised income. Individuals under 18, Denmark, Finland, and EU



Source: ***Eurostat (2024b)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers (pensions included in social transfers) by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI09) and* ***Eurostat (2024a)*** *At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI02). Note: Data points that appear unconnected by lines indicate a break in the time series.*

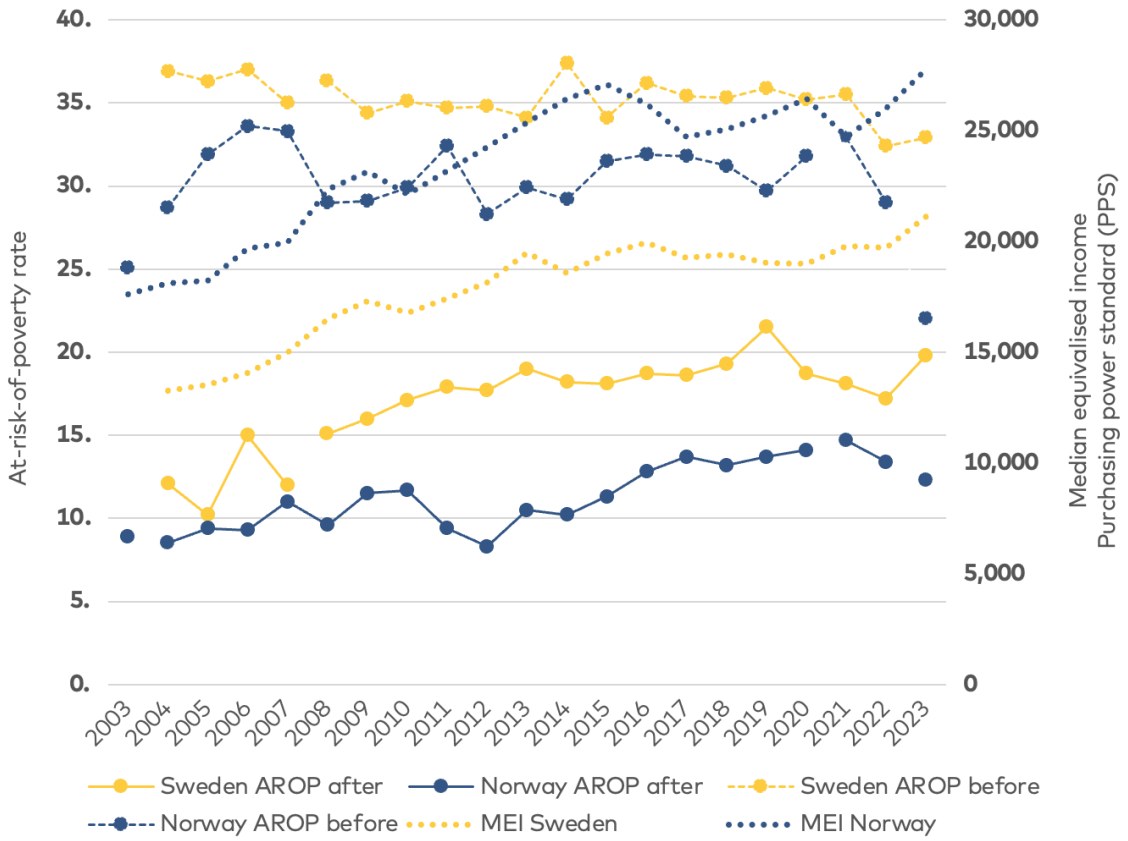
Figure 6B presents comparable findings for Norway and Sweden, highlighting key differences between Sweden and the other Nordic countries while also indicating that, to some extent, Norway follows a similar trajectory as Sweden. In Sweden, the at risk of poverty before social transfer has remained at or above 35% during most of the time period covered here. However, pre-transfer poverty levels show no clear upward trajectory. The at-risk-of-poverty rate after social transfers, on the other hand, exhibits an upward trend that has not kept pace with the growth in median equivalised income. This suggests that while median income has increased, a larger proportion of children remains at-risk-of-poverty after social transfers, indicating that the benefits of economic growth may not have been evenly distributed.

Furthermore, the divergence between rising median income and increasing poverty rates after social transfers may reflect changes in how social transfers address the needs of vulnerable children. It is important to note that families can fall below the poverty threshold without an actual decline in household income, as the relative poverty measure is tied to median income. As median income rises, the poverty threshold increases accordingly, which can result in more children being classified as at risk of poverty even if their household income remains stable. At the same time, this pattern suggests that income growth has been uneven, with more families with children below the poverty line, who may now experience a greater economic disparity relative to their peers, exacerbating social inequality.

In Norway, the poverty threshold before social transfers has remained below the EU average over time and has exhibited greater volatility than in Sweden. While Norway has also experienced an upward trend in child poverty after social transfers, the increase has been less pronounced than in Sweden but should not be neglected. Additionally, poverty rates after social transfers in Norway appear to follow pre-transfer poverty levels more closely than median income. This pattern suggests different relationships between social transfers and child poverty outcomes in the two countries. Norway's income growth may have been accompanied by gains across a wider range of households, including those in the lower part of the income distribution, which could contribute to lower relative poverty rates for children.

It is essential to recognise that this assessment adopts a broad perspective, and comparing Nordic countries solely based on the impact of social transfers provides only a partial understanding. This limitation arises because social transfers do not account for variations in non-monetary support that children receive across different countries. A notable example includes differences in school-provided nutritional programmes, and other essential welfare provisions (Eklund Karlsson et al., 2022). In addition, this chapter primarily focuses on relative poverty, rather than absolute poverty, which may present a different pattern. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the overall picture regarding the trends in AROP over time remains relatively clear.

Figure 6B: Median equivalised income and at-risk-of-poverty rate before and after transfer payments, 60% of median equivalised income. Individuals under 18, Sweden, Norway, and EU



Source: ***Eurostat (2024b)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers (pensions included in social transfers) by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI09) and* ***Eurostat (2024a)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age, and sex (ILC_LI02). Note: Data points that appear unconnected by lines indicate a break in the time series.*

The previous section analysed long-term trends and indicated a stable AROP rate in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland for both the overall population and for children. However, in Sweden and, to some extent, Norway, an upward trend in the AROP rate was observed. The following section examines which groups of children are most vulnerable to poverty, their geographical distribution, and the characteristics of their households.

Regional differences in at-risk-of-poverty rate

Map 1 presents child AROP levels for Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, from which several key findings emerge. In Denmark, the 50% threshold indicator is the only available measure of AROP at the municipal level for children, which differs from the other Nordic countries. We therefore decided to omit Denmark from the map.
Examining intra-country variations, we found that Finland had the lowest levels of

child AROP in 2023, recorded at 9.7% at the national level. However, the mean across municipalities stood at 13.5%, highlighting the geographic concentration of poverty in specific areas. Several municipalities in Finland had high child AROP s, exceeding 25% among children aged 0–17 years. These municipalities include Merijärvi (29.1%), Sievi (26.3%), Miehikkälä (26.1%), Perho (25.6%), and Utsjoki (25.0%). All of these municipalities are classified as rural areas with over 30% of the working-age population having low levels of education.[4] Additionally, many of these municipalities have a high proportion of children under the age of 14. Furthermore, an additional 15 municipalities in Finland report child poverty rates above 20%, all of which are rural municipalities with a significant proportion of individuals with low educational attainment. Despite the prevalence of low educational levels and high proportions of children, these municipalities do not exhibit a high percentage of migrants. In contrast, urban areas in Finland have relatively lower AROP rates for children, ranging between 10% and 15%.

In 2023, Iceland recorded the second-lowest level of child poverty among the Nordic countries, with a national at-risk-of-poverty rate of 11.5%. However, due to data limitations, it is not possible to assess variation at the municipal level, as Iceland reports child poverty rates only for the capital region and the rest of the country.

In Norway, the national rate of children at risk of poverty stood at 12.3%, while the mean across municipalities was 13.1%. Several municipalities exhibited a significantly higher AROP rate among children, exceeding 25%, including Våler (Innlandet) (30.3%), Beiarn (29.4%), Rendalen (28.2%), Hjartdal (26.1%), Loabák – Lavangen (25.1%), Nore og Uvdal (25.0%), and Værøy (25.0%). Similar to Finland, all of these municipalities are rural and characterised by a high proportion of individuals with low educational attainment (above 25%). Additionally, in all of these municipalities, more than 20% of the population are children under the age of 14. Moreover, in four of these municipalities, over 10% of the population have a foreign background.

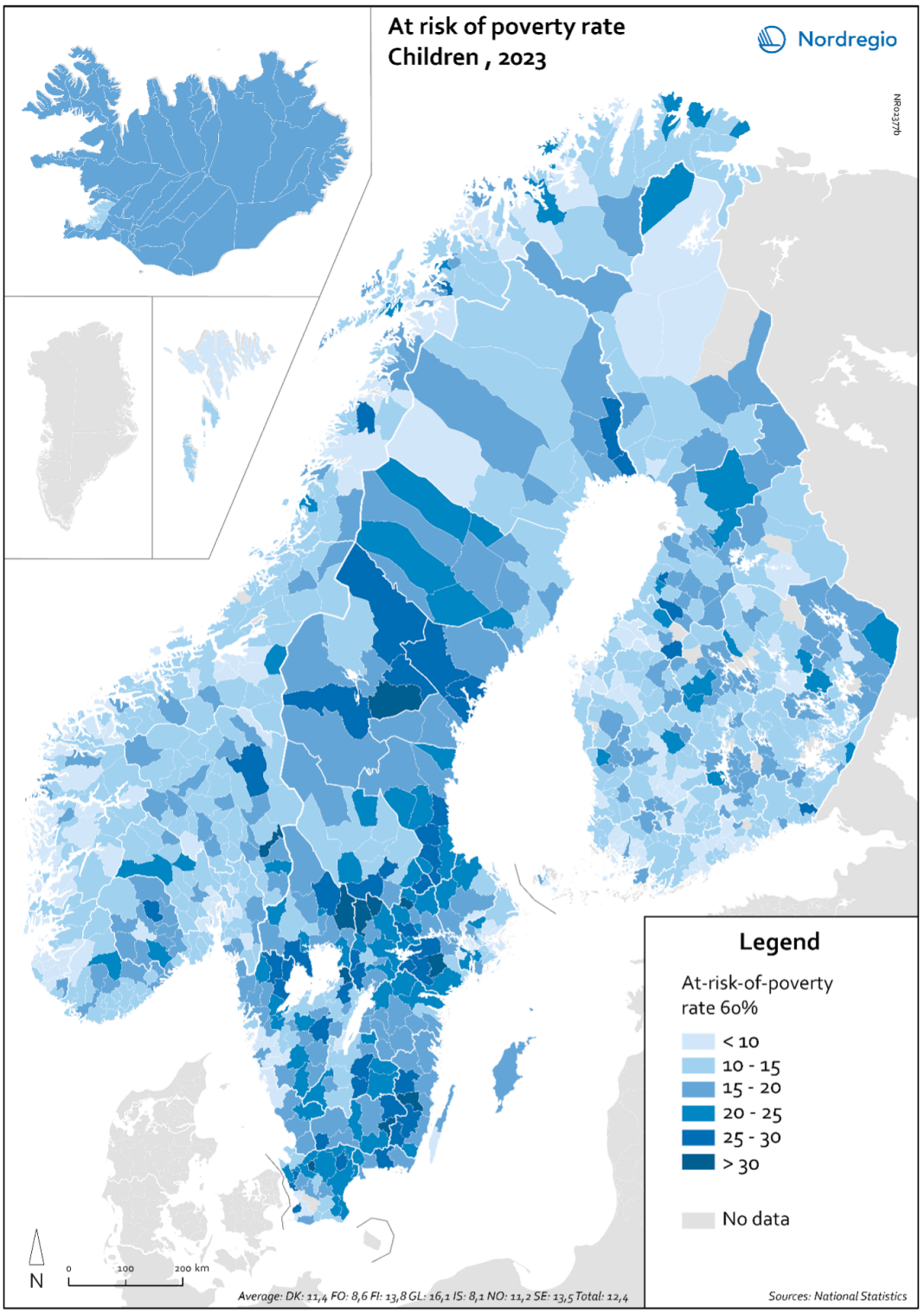
Finally, the case of Sweden reveals a significantly higher incidence of child poverty compared to the other Nordic countries. In nearly 17% of Swedish municipalities (49 out of 290), child poverty rates exceeded 25%. The average rate of child poverty across municipalities is 18%, while the national average stands at 19.8%. Municipalities with exceptionally high concentrations of child poverty, where rates exceed 30%, are primarily located in the central and southern part of Sweden. These municipalities include Hällefors (38.6%), Högsby (37.6%), Perstorp (37.3%), Flen (36.0%), Filipstad (34.6%), Lessebo (33.0%), Gullspång (32.1%), Bräcke (31.4%), Fagersta (30.7%), and Ljusnarsberg (30.6%). Most of these municipalities are rural (8 out of 10), with the proportion of individuals with low levels of education exceeding 27% in nearly all cases and relatively high unemployment rates. Additionally, many of these municipalities have a significant share of individuals with a foreign background, ranging from 26% to

4. For more statistical indicators at the municipality level see Digital inclusion

45%. Bräcke is somewhat of an exception, as the proportion of migrants is 19.3%, and the percentage of individuals with low levels of education is relatively modest at 23.4%.

Overall, these findings indicate significant geographic disparities in child AROP across the Nordic countries. Rural areas generally show higher rates of child AROP, particularly in Sweden and Finland.

Map 1: Child AROP levels (60%) by municipality in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, 2021



Source: *National Statistical Institutes: Statistics Norway* (2025), *Statistics Sweden* (2025), *Statistics Faroe Islands* (2025), *Statistics Iceland* (2025), *Statistics Finland* (2025). *Note: In Denmark, the 50% threshold indicator is the only available measure of AROP at the municipal level for children and therefore Denmark is omitted from the map.*

Household composition

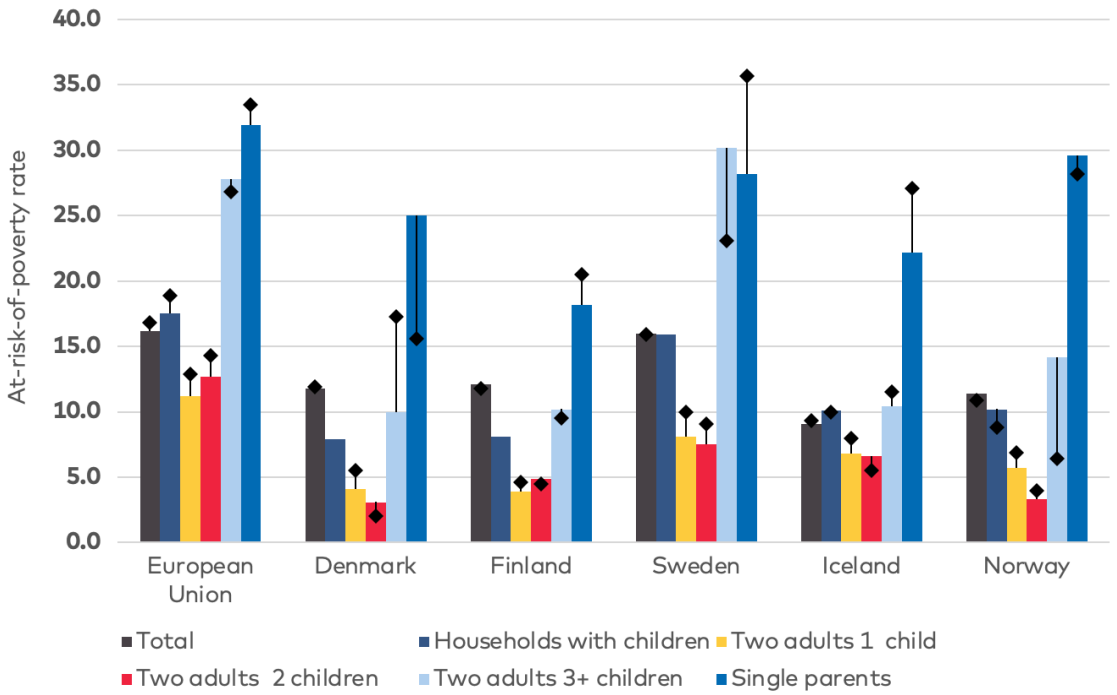
Household structure plays a pivotal role in shaping the at-risk-of-poverty among children. The academic literature suggests that children in single-parent households face a substantially higher risk of poverty compared to those in two-parent families (Bostic, 2023; Gornick & Jäntti, 2011; Young Håkansson, 2024a). Similarly, relative to smaller families, children growing up in large families also have a higher risk of poverty (Gornick & Jäntti, 2011).

Figure 7 illustrates the at-risk-of-poverty rates after social transfers in 2023, with 2013 levels indicated by black diamonds. These rates are measured at 60% of the median equivalised income and are categorised by household type. When comparing the overall at-risk-of-poverty rate of the total population to that of households with children, the differences appear relatively small. However, disaggregating the data by household composition reveals substantial disparities across all Nordic countries. Households with two adults and up to two children exhibit significantly lower poverty risks compared to other household types. In contrast, single-parent households with dependent children consistently display the highest at-risk-of-poverty rates in most Nordic countries, exceeding 20% in all countries. Notably, Norway and Sweden report particularly high levels, approaching rates comparable to the EU average of 32%. Similarly, households with three or more dependent children face significantly higher poverty risks than those with only two children. An interesting pattern emerges in Sweden, where large families, rather than single-parent households, exhibit the highest poverty risk.

Over the decade between 2013 to 2023, the AROP for children growing up in single-parent households declined in Finland, Iceland, and Sweden, and increased in Denmark and, to a lesser extent, in Norway. Simultaneously, the at risk of poverty rose by 7–8% points in Sweden and in Norway for children growing up in large families. This underscores that, although the Nordic countries generally maintain lower overall AROP rates compared to the EU levels, substantial disparities persist among different household types. In particular, some of the most disadvantaged households, such as large families in Sweden and Norway, have experienced an increase in poverty levels, as have single-parent households in Denmark.

Figure 7: At-risk-of-poverty rate by household type, 2023 and 2013, cut-off point: 60% of median equivalised income after social transfers

Columns: 2023 / Dots: 2014



Source: ***Eurostat (2024b)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate by household type (ILC_LI03). Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.*

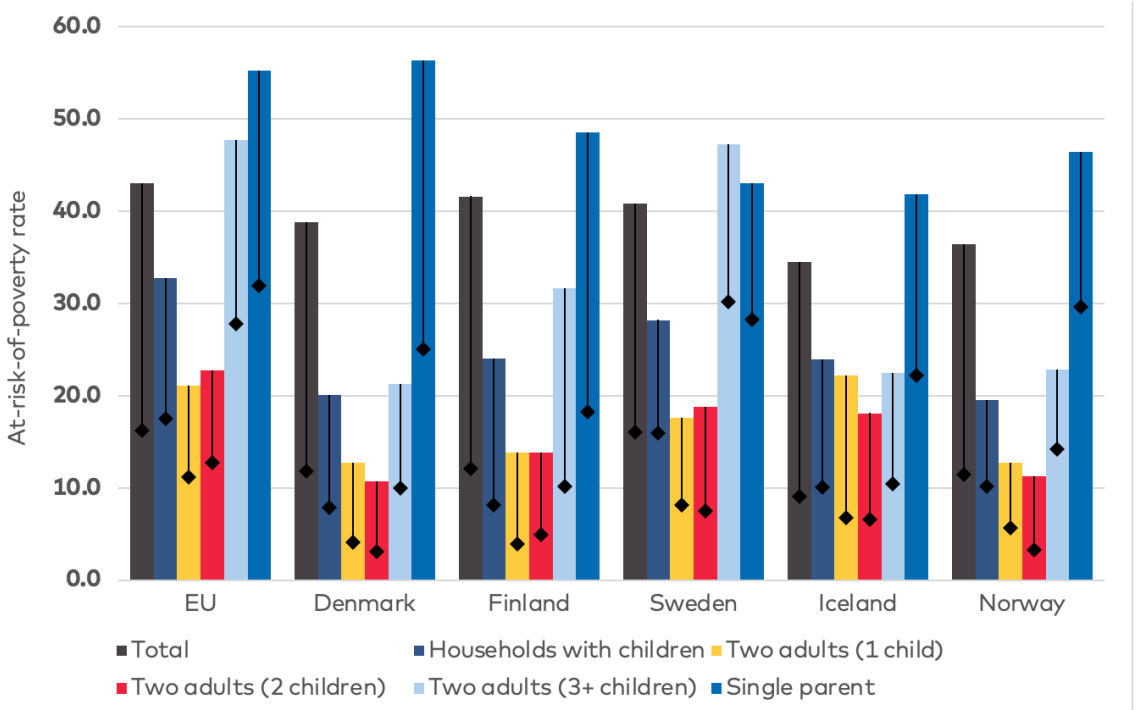
Building on the discussion of how social transfers relate to child poverty rates, and the variations in poverty risk among different household types shown in Figure 7, an important question emerges: How do these payments correspond to poverty outcomes across various household categories? The results of this assessment are displayed in Figure 8, which presents the at-risk-of-poverty rates before and after social transfers in 2023, measured at 60% of the median equivalised income by household type. The primary objective of this figure is to illustrate the relationship between social transfers and poverty risk.

Nordic countries generally exhibit somewhat lower overall poverty risks before social transfers compared to the EU average for most household types. The redistribution of income through social transfers reduces at-risk-of-poverty rates by approximately 26 percentage points – a level of redistribution comparable to that observed in the EU as a whole – resulting in lower post-transfer poverty levels. In most countries, single-parent households with dependent children consistently experience the highest at-risk-of-poverty rates before social transfers, ranging from 41% to 56%, with particularly high levels in Denmark (56%). Households with three or more dependent children also face significantly higher pre-transfer poverty risks compared to households with two children, particularly in Sweden (47%) and Finland (32%).

A comparison of poverty risks before and after social transfers shows that the largest reductions in poverty rates have taken place among single-parent households in most countries, with the notable exception of Sweden. Comparing Denmark and Finland with Sweden highlights this difference: while single-parent poverty rates in Denmark and Finland were higher before social transfers, they decline substantially post-transfer, whereas Sweden and Norway continue to report relatively high levels. In fact, the redistributive effect for the most disadvantaged groups (single parents and large families) appears more modest in Sweden relative to the other Nordic countries and even relative to the EU average, leaving these groups particularly vulnerable.

Figure 8: At-risk-of-poverty rate **before (columns)** and **after (dots)** social transfers by household type, 2023: 60% of median equivalised income

Columns: Before / Dots: After



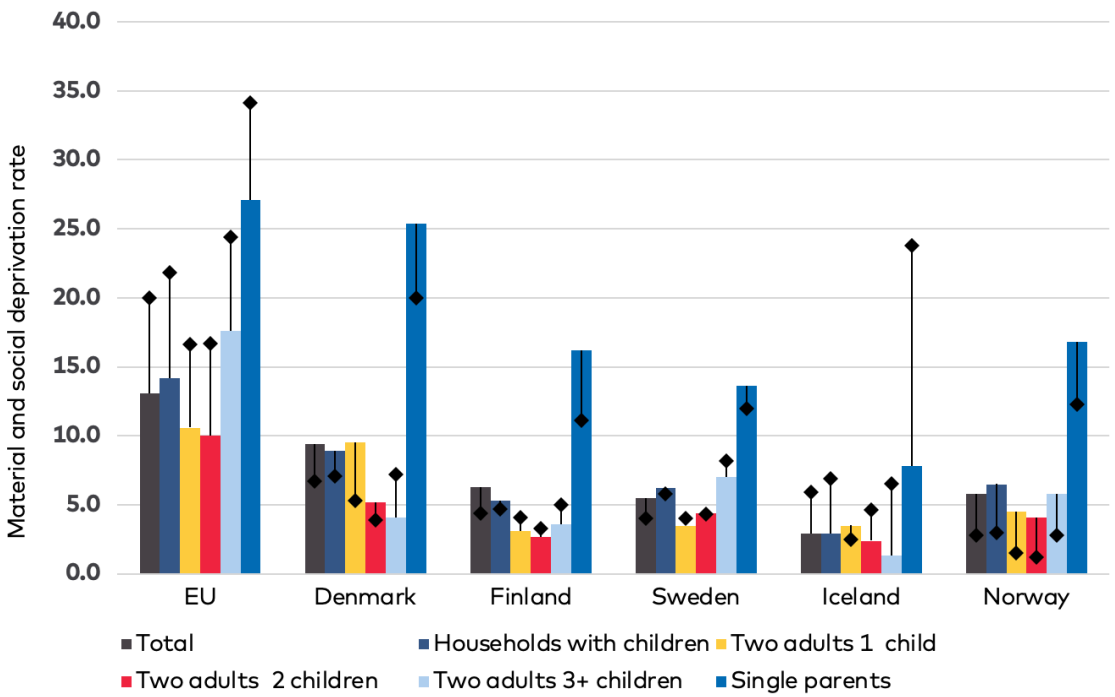
*Source: **Eurostat (2024b)**. At-risk-of-poverty rate by household type (ILC_LI03) and **Eurostat (2025a)**. At-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers (pensions included in social transfers) by household type (ILC_LI09B). Note: 1) Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data. 2) Pensions included in social transfers*

Figure 9 illustrates the material and social deprivation rates by household type in the EU and Nordic countries for the years 2014 (the earliest available data point, represented by the black diamonds) and 2023, allowing for a comparison of changes over time. Consistent with the findings on poverty rates, the results indicate that single-parent households experience the highest levels of deprivation across all regions. The EU averages remain higher than those observed in the Nordic countries, where overall deprivation rates are comparatively lower.

The material and social deprivation rates indicator provides a broader measurement of deprivation and social exclusion. Unlike the findings on relative poverty, as reflected in the AROP (above), Sweden reports lower levels on this indicator compared to other Nordic countries. These discrepancies may be attributed to variations in the prices of goods across the Nordic region. Furthermore, while material and social deprivation rates have remained stable or shown slight improvements for most household types since 2014, deprivation among single-parent households has increased in all Nordic countries except Iceland.

Figure 9: Material and social deprivation rate by household type – 2014 and 2023

Columns: 2023 / Dots: 2014



Source: **Eurostat (2025h)**. *Material and social deprivation rate by income quintile and household type (ILC_MDSD02). Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.*

Labour market attachment and educational levels of the household heads

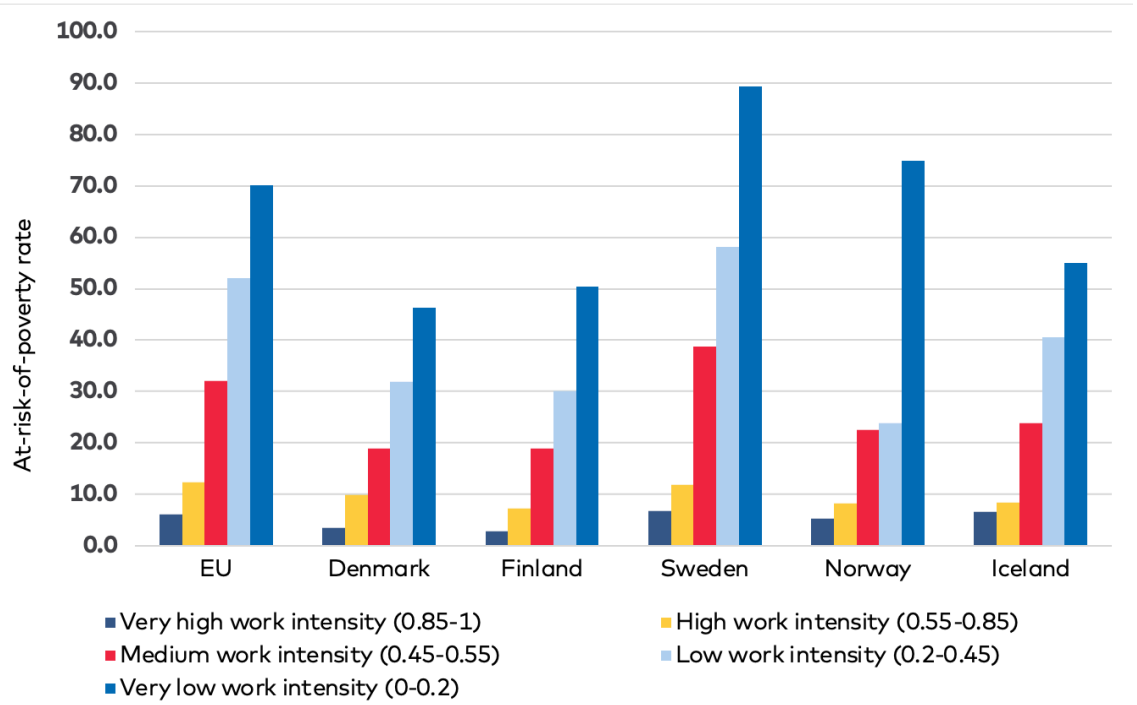
Labour market attachment and extent of work intensity are highly associated with the economic outcome of the household and to the risk of poverty. Household work intensity is calculated by comparing actual months worked by all working-age household members against the total months they could theoretically have worked during the reference period (for more information see Glossary: Persons living in households with low work intensity (Eurostat, 2025g). Figure 10 presents the AROP rate in 2023 for households with dependent children, broken down by work intensity categories used by the Eurostat: very high (0.85–1), high (0.55–0.85), medium (0.45–0.55), low (0.2–.45), and very low (0–0.2). These categories can be interpreted as the extent to which the adults in the households work most of their potentially available time, with very high work intensity representing approximately full-time employment of both spouses in the case of two adults. The poverty risk is defined as the percentage of households earning less than 60% of the median equivalised income. The figure highlights that poverty risk is inversely correlated with work intensity across all countries, with households in the very low work intensity category (0–0.2) consistently exhibiting the highest poverty rates. In the EU, this group shows a poverty risk of approximately 70%, with higher rates among this group in Sweden, reaching almost 90%, and 75% In Norway. Iceland, Finland, and Denmark report lower rates for this category, standing at 55%, 50%, and 45%, respectively. Considering that the AROP rate presented in Figure 10 reflects post-transfer poverty, the difference in the AROP of very low-intensity work households among the Nordic countries once again highlights the role of social transfers in alleviating poverty, especially for households which might have very limited income from work.

As work intensity increases, poverty risks decline sharply. For households in the low (0.2–0.45) and medium (0.45–0.55) work intensity categories, poverty risks remain significant but are considerably lower than those with very low work intensity. The EU maintains poverty risks of around 52% and 32% in these categories, respectively, while Nordic countries except for Sweden report substantially lower rates, often below 25% for medium (0.45–0.55) work intensity category.

As can be expected, households with children with high (0.55–0.85) and very high (0.85–1) work intensity face the very low AROP across all countries, often below 10%. Denmark, Finland, and Norway outperform the EU average showing especially low AROP levels in the very high work intensity category, near 5%.

This illustrates the strong correlation between labour market participation and poverty risk while highlighting the effectiveness of Nordic welfare systems in reducing poverty in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, particularly among households with lower work intensity. However, the elevated poverty risk among households with very low work intensity underscores the crucial role of employment in poverty prevention, a factor that is particularly significant in Sweden and Norway.

Figure 10: Risk of poverty (% of households) by country and work intensity 2023: Households with dependent children, 60% of median equivalised income



Source: **Eurostat (2025b)**. *At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, work intensity of the household, and broad age groups (ILC_LI06). Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.*

Figure 11 illustrates the AROP rates for children in 2013 and 2023, with 2013 levels indicated by a black dot, categorised by the educational attainment level of their parents across the Nordics and the EU. The data is disaggregated into three parental education levels: low, medium, and high.[5] The figure demonstrates a clear negative correlation between parental educational attainment and child poverty risk, similar to the observation of work intensity presented above. Across all regions, children whose parents have a low level of education face the highest AROP. This trend is particularly pronounced in Sweden and Norway, where the AROP rate for households with children of low-educated parents is 57% and 47%, respectively. Finland and Denmark also exhibit substantial disparities, though at lower absolute levels. Conversely, children of highly educated parents consistently experience the lowest risk of poverty, with rates remaining below 11% in all countries.

5. The educational attainment level is classified according to ISCED — the international standard classification of education, using the (latest) 2011 version see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED)

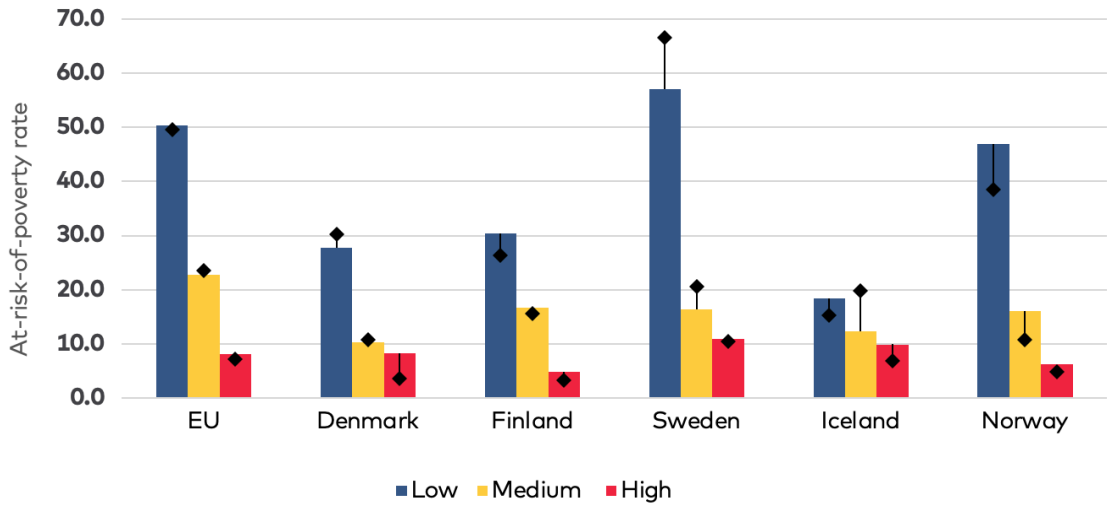
   We focus on the following aggregations of ISCED levels: ISCED levels 0-2: low, ISCED 3-4: medium, ISCED levels 5-8: high.

While the overall pattern is consistent across countries, some national variations are evident. For instance, Sweden exhibits the greatest disparity based on educational attainment, whereas Iceland has relatively lower poverty rates across all groups. The EU average follows a similar trend but generally reflects higher levels of poverty than those observed in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland.

Over time, as indicated by levels in 2013, the AROP among households with children of low-educated parents has increased slightly in Finland, Iceland, and Norway. In Norway, this increase is about 8% points, highlighting a negative socioeconomic trend for this group and the increasing importance of education of the parents for the risk of poverty of the households.

Figure 11: At-risk-of-poverty rate for children by educational attainment level of their parents, 2013, 2023

Columns: 2023 / Dots: 2013



Source: **Eurostat *(2025e)***. *At-risk-of-poverty rate for children by educational attainment level of their parents (population aged 0 to 17 years) (ILC_LI60). Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.*

Figure 12 presents material and social deprivation rates for children in the EU and Nordic countries based on their parents' educational attainment in 2014 (black diamond) and 2023. Similar to the findings on the AROP indicator, the results reveal a strong negative correlation between parental education and child deprivation. Across all regions, children whose parents have low educational attainment experience the highest levels of material and social deprivation. This trend is particularly pronounced in the EU, where the deprivation rate for children of parents with low education

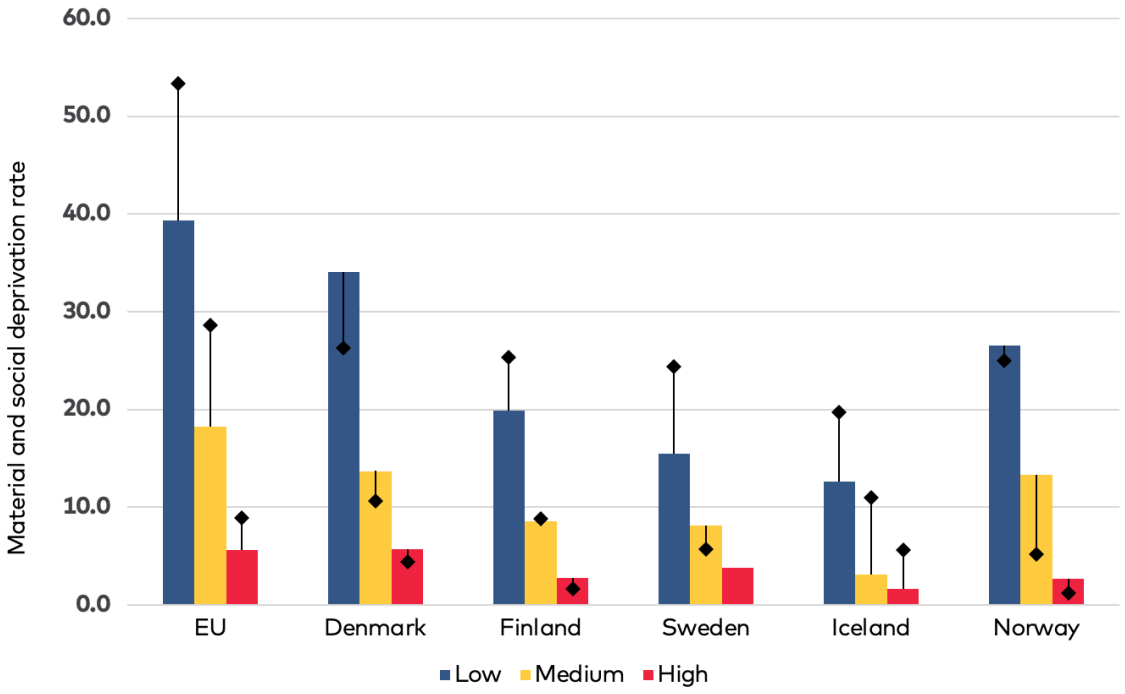
exceeds 35%, compared to significantly lower rates among children of parents with medium or high educational attainment.

Among the Nordic countries, Denmark and Norway have the highest child deprivation rates for families with low parental education, while Iceland records the lowest overall deprivation levels. In all countries, children of parents with high educational attainment have the lowest deprivation rates, often remaining below 5%. The disparity between educational groups is evident across all countries, underscoring the protective effect of higher parental education against material and social deprivation. Over time, there has been a slight decline in material and social deprivation among children of parents with low educational attainment in Finland, Iceland, and Sweden. However, the overall gradient in the association between parental education and child deprivation has remained relatively stable.

These findings illustrate the relationship between parental education and child poverty. While the Nordic welfare systems are linked to overall lower deprivation rates compared to the EU average, the data indicates that children from low-education households experience disproportionately higher rates.

Figure 12: Material and social deprivation rate for children by educational attainment level of their parents, 2014, and 2023

Columns: 2023 / Dots: 2014



Source: **Eurostat (2024e)**.Material and social deprivation rate for children by age and educational attainment level of their parents (ilc_mdsd10). Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.

Migrant and refugee status

As highlighted in the literature, migrants and particularly refugees are disproportionately represented among low socioeconomic groups and face an elevated risk of poverty, a pattern that extends to their children (Epland & Hattrem, 2023; Galloway et al., 2015; Gustafsson & Österberg, 2016; Obućina & Ilmakunnas, 2020; Salonen et al., 2021). While Eurostat data does not provide specific information on refugee status, it does include details on parental citizenship and place of birth, offering valuable insights into the poverty conditions of migrant families.

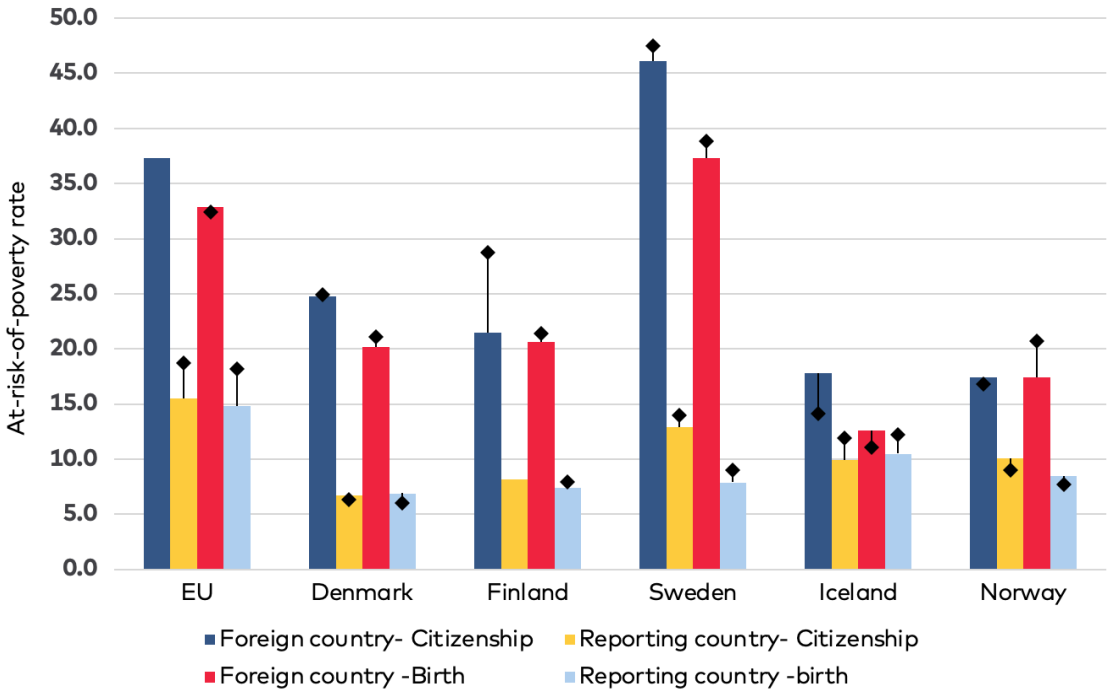
Figure 13 illustrates child AROP in 2013 and 2023, based on the parents' citizenship and place of birth. As expected, children of foreign citizens face a significantly higher risk of poverty compared to children of native citizens. In Denmark and Sweden, for example, children of foreign citizens are three times more likely to be at risk of poverty than citizens of the host country. In Denmark, fewer than 7% of children of native citizens are at risk, compared to over 24% of children of foreign citizens. The disparity is even more pronounced in Sweden, where 46% of children of foreign citizens are at risk of poverty, compared to nearly 13% of children of native citizens.

The gaps are somewhat smaller in Finland, Iceland, and Norway, where children of foreign citizens are 2.6, 1.8, and 1.7 times more likely, respectively, to be at risk of poverty than those of citizens of the host country. Although the data for Iceland is from 2019, it indicates relatively small differences between the poverty risk of children of migrant parents and those of native-citizen parents. In most Nordic countries, the poverty risk for children of foreign citizens has declined somewhat between 2013 and 2023.

The findings regarding the parents' place of birth closely mirror those based on citizenship, with children of foreign-born parents facing a significantly higher risk of poverty compared to those of native-born parents. The disparities are particularly pronounced in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. In Sweden, for example, children of migrant parents are more than four times as likely to be at risk of poverty compared to children of native-born parents, with 8% of the latter at risk, compared to over 37% of the former. While the results based on the parents' place of birth largely mirror those based on citizenship, some differences emerge. Specifically, the risk of poverty among children appears higher when classified by parental citizenship rather than by parental place of birth. This discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that, over time, some migrants acquire citizenship and are thus classified within the native-born group. Moreover, individuals who obtain citizenship are often better integrated, as naturalisation typically requires meeting various conditions, such as a minimum length of residency, language proficiency, and financial self-sufficiency. As a result, those who naturalise are likely to have lower poverty risks compared to those who do not obtain citizenship. In contrast, parental place of birth is a fixed characteristic, making it a more stable indicator for assessing long-term disparities in the poverty risk faced by their children.

Figure 13: At-risk-of poverty rate for children by country of birth or citizenship of parents (population aged 0 to 17 years), 2013 and 2023

Columns: 2023 / Dots: 2013



Source: **Eurostat (2025c)**. *At-risk-of-poverty rate for children by citizenship of their parents (population aged 0 to 17 years) (ILC_LI33), and* ***Eurostat (2025d)****. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children by country of birth of parents (population aged 0 to 17 years) (ILC_LI34). Note: Values for Iceland are based on 2019, the last available data.*

2.6 Future directions

This chapter has examined child poverty in the Nordic countries, exploring patterns and variations across different measures and population groups. While the Nordic countries consistently maintain lower at-risk-of-poverty rates (10–13%) compared to the EU average (16–17%), Sweden stands out as an exception, with a rising poverty trend peaking at 22% in 2021. Though social transfers correspond to reductions in child poverty across the region, Sweden's post-transfer child poverty rate of almost 20% exceeds both the EU average and the rates in other Nordic countries (10–12%). Norway also experienced a rise in the proportion of children at risk of poverty over the same period, increasing from less than 9% in 2023 to a peak of nearly 15%.

The chapter also reveals significant spatial disparities within the Nordic region, particularly in Sweden and Finland. While Denmark, Iceland, and Norway maintain low overall at-risk-of-poverty rates across municipalities (5–10%), Sweden and Finland show higher levels (15–20%), with nearly 17% of Swedish municipalities and certain

rural areas in Finland experiencing child poverty rates above 25%. These regional inequalities highlight the potential value of spatially targeted policy interventions.

Furthermore, child poverty rates vary considerably across demographic groups. Single-parent households and those with three or more children show elevated poverty risks, often exceeding 20%, with single-parent households in Denmark showing pre-transfer poverty rates as high as 56%. Work intensity is strongly associated with poverty outcomes, as households with very low work participation show the highest poverty rates. Additionally, children of parents with low educational attainment and foreign citizenship show higher poverty rates. In Sweden, for example, child poverty rates among foreign citizens reach 46%, compared to 13% among native citizens.

Understanding these patterns requires consideration of the data sources and methods used in the analysis. This chapter primarily relies on aggregated country-level data from Eurostat, derived from EU-SILC surveys, which provide a key source for comparing income and living standards across EU/EEA countries. While these statistics offer useful insights into national trends, they do not capture individual-level variations. Additionally, the reliance on sample-based survey data rather than population-wide registry data means that all estimates are subject to sampling error and statistical uncertainty. Confidence intervals are not routinely reported for all indicators, which means that some of the observed differences – particularly smaller variations between countries, subgroups, or over time – may not be statistically significant. This limitation is particularly relevant when examining specific subgroups of children in low-income households or interpreting fine-grained comparisons. Furthermore, since Eurostat poverty indicators are primarily based on relative poverty, they provide limited insight into absolute poverty and long-term changes in living conditions.

Moreover, this analysis takes a broad perspective, and assessing Nordic countries solely through the lens of relative poverty may not fully capture the complexities of child poverty. Differences in non-monetary support, such as school-based nutritional programmes, and housing assistance, could influence child well-being in ways not entirely reflected in poverty data. Nonetheless, despite these considerations, the overall trends in the at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate remain discernible, providing a useful basis for drawing broader conclusions.

The Nordic countries have access to register data that can provide a more detailed picture of child poverty. Unlike sample surveys, these datasets allow for more granular analyses, making it possible to examine variations in child poverty with greater precision. They also support multivariate analyses that can help identify factors associated with low income among families with children, such as parental employment status, household composition, education level, and regional differences. However, these data are not publicly available and require applications and appropriate analytical tools to access through national statistical institutes. Furthermore, combining them into a unified Nordic dataset presents methodological and administrative challenges, making this a potentially valuable avenue for future research. Also, these datasets support analysis of how various social welfare

programmes relate to child poverty outcomes. By comparing policy approaches across different Nordic countries, researchers and policymakers can examine which measures are associated with lower levels of economic vulnerability among children. Another important area of study is the higher representation of children with immigrant backgrounds in low-income groups. These insights can inform the design of policies that address the needs of vulnerable children.

Overall, while the Nordic welfare model is associated with relatively low child poverty rates in comparative terms, Sweden's higher poverty rates, regional variations, and differences across demographic groups point to areas where policy approaches may warrant further attention. Targeted social support, labour market participation, and attention to educational and integration outcomes could contribute to more equitable opportunities for well-being and economic security among children across the Nordic countries.

Model photo: Maskot / Johnér

3. Measures and instruments to promote social mobility and enhance protective factors

GEIR MØLLER & KARIN GUSTAVSEN

3.1 Introduction

Growing up in poverty has profound and long-lasting consequences for children's development, health, and future life chances. Even in the Nordic countries – traditionally characterised by high levels of equality and social mobility – recent research points to widening socioeconomic gaps (Aaberge & Bengtsson, 2023; Eika & Langørgen, 2025). Eurostat data also show that the proportion of children living in low-income households has increased in Norway and Sweden, while the trend has been more stable in Denmark and Finland. As a result, a growing share of children living in low-income families are at increased risk of experiencing poorer health, lower educational attainment, reduced participation in leisure activities, and weaker attachment to the labour market later in life.

Poverty can be transmitted across generations through a complex interplay of mechanisms. Research by Lorentzen and Nielsen (2008) shows, for example, that social assistance receipt can be intergenerational, and that children growing up in economically marginalised families face an elevated risk of receiving social assistance as young adults. The mechanisms include limited access to quality education, lower self-efficacy, social exclusion, and restricted cultural and social capital. These factors interact and reinforce one another over time. However, Elstad and Heggebø (2024)

caution against overstating the strength of this association. Their findings indicate that although children from low-income families are at higher risk, most do not remain poor as adults, and the majority of adults living in poverty did not grow up in poor families. This suggests that intergenerational patterns exist, but they account for only a limited share of overall poverty.

In light of these risks, there is also a substantial body of literature examining how to break cycles of disadvantage and improve social mobility. Research from Norway and Sweden demonstrates that early intervention can have significant impacts on children's development and long-term life outcomes (Fløtten & Grødem, 2014). Universal welfare measures such as free early childhood education, school meals, and access to leisure activities have likewise been shown to reduce inequalities in participation and learning outcomes (Campbell et al., 2014). An expert group appointed by the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Families has further documented that participation in early childhood education has substantial effects on children's language development, school performance, and later educational attainment (Expert Group, 2024).

Both Fløtten and Grødem (2014) and Eklund Karlsson et al. (2022) show that the Nordic countries share a universal welfare model characterised by extensive cash benefits, free or subsidised services, and a strong political commitment to reducing social inequality and child poverty. At the same time, the studies emphasise that universal measures alone are not sufficient to prevent rising levels of child poverty. Fløtten and Grødem (2014) point out that Norway stands out for its many small, locally initiated and holistic projects, whereas the other Nordic countries rely more on integrated services and broad family policy measures.

In the more recent study, Eklund Karlsson et al. (2022) conclude that the similarities across the Nordic countries outweigh the differences. They find that all Nordic countries offer a wide range of measures for families with children, most of which are universal in nature. However, they argue that the region lacks proportionate universalism, an approach in which measures are universal in access but scaled in intensity according to need. According to the authors, universal policies are widespread, but they are not sufficiently intensified for children and families facing the greatest risks. The authors also note that decentralisation and variations in municipal capacity may contribute to growing geographical inequalities.

In an international perspective, the Nordic countries are often highlighted as particularly relevant cases for studying policies aimed at reducing child poverty and social inequality. This relevance stems from their universal welfare regimes, characterised by extensive public provision, high levels of redistribution, and a strong emphasis on equal access to services across the life course. Universal arrangements such as publicly funded education, childcare, and leisure opportunities are central features of the Nordic model. As a result, Nordic experiences offer important insights into how broadly accessible measures can be combined with targeted support to address socioeconomic inequalities, making them of interest well beyond the Nordic context.

Against this backdrop, this chapter presents and discusses key measures that have proven effective or show promise in reducing low participation and promoting social mobility among children and young people growing up in low-income families. Drawing on both established and emerging research, the chapter identifies interventions with the potential to generate lasting change. The chapter is organised into five categories of measures. The first category concerns early childhood education and care (ECEC), with a focus on how high-quality ECEC systems can compensate for socioeconomic disadvantage and reduce early inequalities. The second category examines school-based interventions, particularly whole-school approaches (WSA) that combine teaching, support services, and relational practices to strengthen pupils' learning, well-being, and long-term opportunities. The third category reviews parenting and family support programmes, which are widespread across the Nordic region. The fourth category covers measures that enhance children's participation in leisure activities, an area where the Nordic countries have developed an increasing number of initiatives to remove financial and structural barriers to organised sports, culture, and recreational activities. Finally, the fifth category addresses area-based initiatives, which involve comprehensive, place-based strategies that combine multiple interventions and cross-sectoral services for families living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

3.2 Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) refers to organised provision of care and education for young children prior to compulsory schooling. As a universal welfare provision in the Nordic countries, ECEC constitutes a central arena for early intervention and social equalisation through its mandate of care, play, learning, and formation. For children growing up with limited economic and social resources, high-quality ECEC can compensate for inequalities in the home environment and provide access to developmental and stimulating experiences.

The underlying mechanisms include social participation, a stable and predictable environment, and the fulfilment of developmental needs that might otherwise remain unmet, such as warmth, learning support, stable adult relationships, play-based learning, and early language and numeracy stimulation. For many children, these elements constitute important protective factors, enabling ECEC to function as a preventive measure that reduces the risk of marginalisation and social exclusion later in life.

Across the Nordic region, several policy initiatives have been implemented to strengthen the role of ECEC as an inclusive and equalising institution. These measures can broadly be divided into three main categories:

- Economic support schemes: To ensure that all children can attend early childhood education and care, measures such as free core hours and income-based fee reductions have been introduced. These reduce financial barriers and increase participation among children who might otherwise be excluded.
- Quality improvement and competence development: Efforts to strengthen the quality of ECEC are particularly important for children in vulnerable life situations. These include staff training, stronger pedagogical leadership, the use of educational tools for language stimulation and social development, and systematic work on inclusive practices.
- Targeted support for vulnerable groups: Several municipalities and national initiatives have developed interventions aimed at children with specific needs, such as language support for children from minority backgrounds, additional assistance for children with psychosocial difficulties, and strengthened co-operation with parents in vulnerable situations.

The concept of high-quality ECEC is frequently used in the literature, but without a fixed or universally accepted definition. However, the descriptions largely overlap with the characteristics identified in research on quality in Nordic ECEC settings. As in the broader quality literature, the emphasis is placed on process quality – the quality of everyday interactions between children and staff – as the most crucial aspect of ECEC quality.

High-quality early childhood education and care in a Nordic context

A high-quality ECEC setting can be understood as a knowledge-based universal welfare service with well-documented effects on children's development. It targets all children aged 1–6 years but is particularly important for children from low-income families, minority backgrounds, and other vulnerable groups (Gupta & Simonsen, 2009; Sluiter et al., 2025).

The purpose of high-quality ECEC is to promote children's cognitive, social, and emotional development through an inclusive and stimulating learning environment, while simultaneously contributing to social equity and lifelong learning. The concept builds on three integrated dimensions of quality: process quality, structural quality, and system quality.

Process quality is the core of high-quality ECEC. It refers to the quality of children's direct experiences in the setting, particularly their interactions with adults and peers. It encompasses emotional support, cognitive stimulation, language enrichment, social guidance, and structured play. Research shows that process quality is the most consistent predictor of children's development and is especially important for children with risk factors (Pianta et al., 2016; Sluiter et al., 2025; von Suchodoletz et al., 2023).

In practice, high process quality means that staff are emotionally available, sensitive, and skilled in supporting children's development. They create an environment of safety,

curiosity, and exploration, and facilitate learning through play, dialogue, and social interaction. Staff also help children regulate emotions, develop language, and build relationships, contributing to inclusive communities where every child is seen and valued (Eadie et al., 2024; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009).

Structural quality refers to the organisational and physical conditions that enable high-quality pedagogical practice. This includes small group sizes, favourable child–staff ratios, staff with formal early childhood education qualifications, and stable relationships over time (Wechsler et al., 2016; Bauchmüller et al., Gørtz & Rasmussen, 2014). Staff stability and access to supervision and professional development are crucial for maintaining quality. Structural quality also involves curriculum frameworks and pedagogical principles that are research-based and developmentally appropriate. It provides the necessary conditions for realising process quality.

System quality comprises the overarching governance structures of ECEC systems. This includes political and administrative governance, funding arrangements, regulation, rights-based access, and systematic quality development (Urban et al., 2023; Gray-Lobe et al., 2021). System quality is maintained through: universal access ensuring every child's right to an ECEC place (Gupta & Simonsen, 2009); public financing that guarantees economic stability (Karila, 2012); national curricula and quality standards defining pedagogical content and practices (Urban et al., 2023); systems for evaluation and quality monitoring (Sluiter et al., 2025; von Suchodoletz et al., 2023); and professional development and leadership promoting continuous competence enhancement (Wechsler et al., 2016). System quality enables and strengthens both structural and process quality.

The potential equalising effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) are commonly explained through theoretical perspectives that emphasise how early learning and development are shaped by children's everyday environments and social interactions. Central to this literature are developmental and sociocultural theories, which highlight the formative role of early relationships, guided participation, and language-rich interactions for children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Vygotsky, 1978; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This theoretical foundation is closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, which conceptualises development as the result of dynamic interactions between the child and multiple environments over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In ECEC research, these ideas are often operationalised through the structure–process–outcome model, which links structural conditions such as group size and staff qualifications to the quality of everyday pedagogical interactions and, in turn, to children's developmental outcomes (NICHD, 2002; Rademacher et al., 2025). In the Nordic context, these perspectives are combined with a strong emphasis on child-centredness, participation, and social justice, reflecting a view of ECEC as both an educational setting and a universal welfare institution. Together, they support a broad understanding of quality in ECEC that integrates structural, process-related, and system-level dimensions (Jensen, 2009; Karila, 2012).

A substantial body of empirical research has examined the effects of ECEC participation on children's development, with particular attention to differences across socioeconomic groups. High-quality ECEC has well-documented positive effects on children's development, both in the short and the long term. Short-term studies show that children attending high-quality settings develop stronger language skills, better mathematical understanding, and greater social competence (Morgan, 2019; Schoch et al., 2019; Pianta et al., 2016; von Suchodoletz et al., 2023; Eadie et al., 2024; Rege et al., 2024; Rademacher et al., 2025). Longitudinal studies also show that high-quality ECEC increases the likelihood of completing upper secondary school, pursuing higher education, and achieving stable employment. It also contributes to reduced crime and improved health in adulthood (Schweinhart, 2005; Gray-Lobe, Pathak & Walters, 2021; Bauchmüller, 2014).

The effects are particularly strong for children from low-income families and minority backgrounds, making ECEC a powerful instrument for social equity (Gupta & Simonsen, 2009; Drange & Telle, 2015; Jensen, 2009). In contexts with generally high baseline quality, such as Denmark, average effects on non-cognitive outcomes are modest, but ECEC still outperforms informal family-based childcare for vulnerable children (Gupta & Simonsen, 2009).

Meta-analyses also show that process quality – especially the quality of interactions between children and adults – has a significant and lasting impact on children's social-emotional development, with the largest gains for vulnerable groups (Sluiter et al., 2025; von Suchodoletz et al., 2023). Structural quality exerts an indirect effect by providing the necessary conditions for high-quality processes (Wechsler et al., 2016; Eadie et al., 2024), while systemic quality is essential for ensuring coherence, scalability, and sustainability in quality development (Urban et al., 2023).

Beyond individual benefits, economic evaluations demonstrate that investments in high-quality ECEC yield substantial societal returns. Estimates range from seven to sixteen times the amount invested, with a reduced need for special education, lower crime rates, improved health, and increased productivity (Dietrichson et al., 2018; Schweinhart, 2005).

Illustrative example: TETT PÅ

The 'TETT PÅ' initiative (Up close) in Bærum municipality in Norway is a concrete example of how the three dimensions of quality can be operationalised within a Nordic ECEC system. The initiative is implemented across the municipality's ECEC sector (110 units) and is anchored in the financial plan and key governance documents (Bærum kommune, n.d.).

At the core of 'TETT PÅ' is a systematic strengthening of process quality grounded in evidence-based practice. The initiative employs the research-based observation tool CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), which is rooted in the 'teaching through interactions framework' (Hamre et al., 2013; Evertsen et al., 2022). CLASS focuses on three interrelated dimensions:

- Emotional support: warmth, security, and relational availability.
- Classroom organisation: structure, predictability, and support for self-regulation.
- Instructional support: language stimulation, cognitive challenge, and developmentally attuned guidance.

Each ECEC unit is observed twice a year by certified CLASS observers, and the feedback provides the basis for targeted coaching and documented improvement over time. This coaching includes the use of practice narratives and reflective teams, where pedagogical leaders facilitate structured discussions based on concrete everyday situations. Guidance and reflection are integrated into the centres' meeting and learning structures and form part of a continuous improvement cycle: observation → feedback → coaching/reflection → testing in practice → new observation.

'TETT PÅ' strengthens structural quality through measures ensuring small child groups, favourable staff–child ratios, and employees with relevant qualifications. Professional development is central: all ECEC centres have CLASS-certified observers, and courses and training are offered for childcare workers, assistants, and newly employed teachers. A fixed meeting structure and annual planning cycles ensure continuity and predictability in quality development. The structural components are designed to support process quality by creating time, space, and competence for reflection, coaching, and pedagogical development.

System quality in 'TETT PÅ' is ensured through political and administrative anchoring, predictable funding, and strategic implementation. The initiative is embedded in municipal policy documents and in the financial plan. To ensure sustainability and scalability, implementation is organised into six cohorts over five years.

Reflections

Quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a multifaceted and context-dependent concept that cannot be reduced to simple indicators. The three-dimensional framework outlined above forms an analytical framework that explains both how quality emerges and how it can be developed. Structure and system conditions enable process quality, which in turn has a direct impact on children's development and well-being.

With regard to the equalising effect of ECEC, there is broad agreement that high-quality settings are particularly important for children from low-income families and minority backgrounds. Studies such as Perry Preschool, Head Start, and Boston Universal Preschool show that children attending high-quality ECEC are more likely to complete upper secondary school, pursue higher education, and achieve stable employment (Schweinhart, 2005; Gray-Lobe et al., 2021). In Nordic contexts such as Denmark and Norway, the effects are more moderate, but the distributional impacts seem to be clear (Gupta & Simonsen, 2009; Drange & Telle, 2015).

We can therefore conclude that the socially equalising potential of ECEC is well documented, but this effect is conditional on quality. Low-quality ECEC may have limited or no positive impact, and in some cases may even be counterproductive. It is thus crucial that all three quality dimensions are present and work together.

At the same time, we must recognise that quality does not emerge automatically. It must be built through intentional pedagogical practice, professional competence, and systematic effort, especially in areas with low participation and high vulnerability. Quality should not become a control mechanism, but a tool for development that is grounded in children's rights, strengths, and needs. Ultimately, it is about creating ECEC settings that not only measure quality but enact it in every interaction with every child.

Developments in the field

Research on ECEC quality has expanded substantially over the past decades, both in scope and methodological sophistication. Two key trends currently distinguish the research frontier.

First, recent meta-analyses and longitudinal studies have reaffirmed the centrality of process quality. Methodologically, this has pushed the field towards more frequent use of observational tools such as CLASS (classroom assessment scoring system). Analytically, it has shifted the focus from asking whether ECEC matters, to asking which aspects of everyday practice matter most for which children. This opens up new possibilities for practice-based improvement but also risks narrowing the notion of quality to what is easily measurable within standardised instruments.

Second, increasing attention is being directed towards the role of ECEC as a socially equalising intervention. Although the average effects of ECEC participation may be moderate in high-income countries with already high baseline quality, several studies

show that children from low-income families and minority backgrounds benefit disproportionately from high-quality ECEC (Gupta & Simonsen, 2009; Drange & Telle, 2015). At the same time, research underscores that the effects are conditional on quality, and that low-quality ECEC may have limited or even negative effects.

Summary

ECEC is a central universal welfare provision with substantial potential to promote children's development and counteract social inequality. Research shows that high-quality ECEC has particularly positive effects for children from low-income families and minority backgrounds, and can contribute to improved school performance, better health, and enhanced life chances in the long term.

Taken together, the evidence reviewed in this section suggests three key points. First, high-quality ECEC is one of the most promising universal measures for improving the life chances of children growing up in low-income families, particularly when process quality is strong. Second, structural and system-level arrangements only contribute to social equity when they effectively enable such high-quality everyday interactions. Third, large-scale quality initiatives such as 'TETT PÅ' illustrate that it is possible to work systematically with all three dimensions at once – but also that this requires long-term political commitment, professional leadership, and sustained investment.

3.3 Measures in schools

Introduction

School and education have long been regarded as among the most important instruments for promoting social mobility and reducing poverty (OECD, 2012; Holmlund & Nybom, 2023). The education system has the potential to function as a social equaliser by providing children from different social backgrounds with equal opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for further education and participation in the labour market. Research also shows that children from families with low socioeconomic status consistently have lower learning outcomes and weaker school performance than children from more advantaged homes (Cooper & Stewart, 2021; Holmlund & Nybom, 2023; Expert Group, 2024).

Despite being viewed as instruments of social equalisation, schools and educational systems may also reinforce rather than eliminate inequality. This may be linked to the fact that children from low-income families encounter more structural and pedagogical barriers at school, and that schools often fail to compensate for differences in home environments and access to resources (Sandsør et al., 2023; Expert Group, 2024). Empirical research also indicates that disparities in educational achievement between children from different social strata emerge at an early stage and tend to intensify throughout the schooling trajectory (Holmlund & Nybom, 2023; Cooper & Stewart, 2021).

At the same time, research emphasises that it is not schooling itself, but rather how the school is structured and equipped with compensatory measures that determines whether it contributes to reducing or reinforcing social inequalities (OECD, 2018; Holmlund & Nybom, 2023). For example, studies show that measures such as reduced class size, targeted tutoring, and strengthened social and emotional learning have particularly large effects for students from low-income families (Dietrichson et al., 2017; Nickow et al., 2020; Expert Group, 2024).

The school thus appears as a double-edged sword: it can both reproduce inequality and help counteract it. The critical question is therefore what actually has an equalising effect. We can distinguish between three main categories of measures aimed at compensating for social inequality in schools: structural measures, pedagogical measures, and socially supportive measures.

Structural measures encompass organisational and financial arrangements within the school system. This also includes the universal and comprehensive school, which in itself has an equalising effect by limiting early stratification and reducing the influence of family background on educational outcomes (Aakvik et al., 2010; Meghir & Palme, 2005; Pekkarinen et al., 2009). Beyond this universal structure, structural factors such as overall funding levels, teacher capacity, resources for additional instruction and teachers' qualifications shape schools' ability to provide equal opportunities (Holmlund & Nybom, 2023). Other complementary structural measures include free and integrated after-school programmes, which provide access to learning support and social environments, and free school meals, both of which can reduce socioeconomic barriers to participation and learning (Cohen et al., 2021; Expert Group, 2024; Olgacher, 2025).

Pedagogical measures target the content and methods of teaching and aim to strengthen students' academic development, both within and beyond the classroom. In Frønes et al. (2020), with data from Nordic countries, findings emphasise the importance of the teacher's role, instructional quality, and classroom discipline. Research has also shown that pedagogical approaches that combine play and learning are particularly effective for children with weak academic foundations (Expert Group, 2024). This category also includes measures such as free homework support, which provides accessible academic assistance after school for students who do not receive such support at home.

Socially supportive measures aim to strengthen students' psychosocial development and well-being, and to compensate for differences in home environments. A central measure here is social and emotional learning, which involves systematic work on students' social skills, self-regulation, and relationships. Social and emotional learning has been shown to improve both well-being and the learning environment (Wigelsworth et al., 2022). Another measure is the 'enhanced team around the student', consisting of interdisciplinary teams of teachers, social workers, school nurses, and child welfare/mental health professionals who support students with complex needs (Expert Group, 2024).

A substantial body of empirical research demonstrates that the effects of specific, measurable interventions vary. However, studies emphasise that individual measures tend to have a limited impact on isolation. What matters most is the combined effect of multiple, coordinated interventions (Dietrichson et al., 2017; OECD, 2018).

Whole school approach

A whole school approach (WSA) is best understood not as a specific programme, but as a design logic for school development. Rather than adding isolated projects on top of everyday practice, a WSA seeks to align the school's core functions – teaching and learning, pastoral care, leadership, organisation, and partnerships with families and communities – around a shared set of goals and values. In doing so, a WSA may encompass and integrate all the three main categories of measures aimed at compensating for social inequality in schools (structural, pedagogical, and socially supportive measures). In this sense, a WSA differs from stand-alone interventions by targeting the conditions under which teaching and learning take place, not only the activities themselves.

A review of the literature shows that WSA is based on at least three fundamental principles that appear to be at the core of the models that are most likely to reduce inequality and to support vulnerable student groups (Haworth et al., 2015; Cavanagh et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2025).

First, they are multi-level. It means that interventions are designed to interact across the classroom, the whole school organisation, and the wider community. For example, a focus on students' social and emotional learning may be reflected simultaneously in classroom pedagogy, staff development, school policies, and collaboration with external services.

Second, WSA models combine universal, selective, and indicated measures in line with the principle of proportionate universalism. That is, all students are offered supportive environments and learning opportunities, while additional intensity and tailored support are provided to those facing greater adversity. In practice, this means that whole-school initiatives such as anti-bullying work or social and emotional learning are complemented by targeted group programmes and individual follow-up for students with more complex needs.

Third, WSAs are explicitly value-driven and relational. Core values such as inclusion, social justice, participation, and respect are not only stated in policy documents, but are expected to be part of daily relationships in the school. Research on health-promoting and community-oriented schools highlights school belonging and trust between students, staff, and families as central mechanisms that strengthen resilience and mitigate the risks associated with poverty and other stressors.

Within this broad framework, WSA models vary in both their substantive focus and degree of formalisation. Some emphasise particular domains, such as health and well-being, as in the whole school, whole community, whole child approach (WSCC). Others concentrate on mental health and social inclusion, as does, for example, the network of

experts on the social dimension of education and training (NESET). There are also approaches that lean on sustainability and democratic participation, or academic improvement in low socioeconomic contexts (Lewallen et al., 2014; Cefai et al., 2021; Mathie & Wals, 2023; Lo, 2020). At the same time, models differ in structure: some, like WSCC, are organised around clearly defined and fixed components, while others adopt more flexible, context-dependent designs. UNESCO's global citizenship education model (GCED), for example, specifies overarching values and organisational principles, leaving the choice of concrete measures open to local adaptation. Nevertheless, WSA models share a common logic of reorganising the whole school around coherent goals, values, and practices, and often integrate multiple domains in practice.

A whole school approach does not rest on a single, unified theory, but can best be understood as an umbrella approach drawing on several complementary theoretical traditions. A central point of reference is provided by systemic and ecological perspectives, most notably Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development, which conceptualises children's learning and well-being as shaped by interactions across multiple levels, from the immediate classroom environment to institutional, community, and policy contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rosa & Tudge 2013). This perspective is closely aligned with the WHO framework for health-promoting schools, which similarly emphasises that educational outcomes are produced through the interaction of school organisation, relationships, curriculum, and the wider social environment (Langford et al., 2016).

The relational and pedagogical dimensions of WSA are further informed by theories of social and emotional learning and sociocultural learning. A central reference is the collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning (CASEL) (Frye et al., 2024; Wigelsworth et al., 2024). This framework defines social and emotional learning as a set of five core competence domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These ideas also resonate with sociocultural theories of learning, which stress that learning is socially mediated, culturally situated, and dependent on participation in meaningful practices (Vygotsky, 1978).

It can also be argued that WSA is grounded in theories of learning organisations and implementation science, which highlight how change depends on leadership, professional learning communities, and iterative implementation cycles.

All in all, WSA can be seen as grounded in a multi-layered theoretical foundation rather than a single explanatory model. Despite this diversity, the literature consistently points to three core ideas: schools should be understood as complex systems; universal and targeted measures need to be integrated across organisational levels; and meaningful participation by students, staff, families, and communities is essential for promoting equity, learning, and well-being.

Existing evaluations of WSA models report a range of outcomes related to students' well-being, school climate, and academic achievement. However, most evaluations have been conducted outside the Nordic countries, and the findings are not uniform.

While some studies report positive effects in specific domains, others find no or limited effects.

Nevertheless, several studies offer relevant insights and suggest that WSA may be a promising approach in Nordic contexts as well. In Denmark, an evaluation of the WSA initiative 'Up' found improvements in students' social and emotional competencies, increasing from 33% before to 41% after implementation (Nielsen et al., 2015). A similar WSA implemented in a marginalised area in the Netherlands showed improvements in students' quality of life during the intervention period, although these gains diminished once the programme ended (Elsenburg et al., 2023). According to the authors, this indicates that WSA initiatives require sustained implementation to maintain effects. A third study, from Australia, stands out for using a quasi-experimental design (Balasooriya Lekamge et al., 2025). Building on the WHO framework for health-promoting schools, the model showed clear improvements in student satisfaction, mastery, and mental health, particularly in schools that had implemented the model for the longest period (six years).

Several review studies conclude that whole school approaches are promising, although the empirical evidence remains mixed (Goldberg et al., 2019; Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023; Haataja et al., 2025). However, reviewing the literature, Zhou et al. (2025) argue that WSA has clear potential to reduce social inequality, but emphasise the need for more robust effect studies. Overall, existing evaluations suggest that WSA models can have positive effects on students' mental health, social and emotional competencies, school climate, and academic achievement. Across studies, early intervention and coordinated support emerge as key conditions for achieving these outcomes.

Illustrative example: NESET

A prominent example of a whole school approach (WSA) in the European context is the EU-based NESET model (Network of experts on the social dimension of education and training), which was developed to strengthen mental health, social inclusion, and well-being through systemic and coordinated school-wide practices (European Commission, 2018). A distinctive feature of the model is that it treats mental health not as a specialised add-on, but as an integral part of the school's educational mission. This requires embedding well-being in the curriculum, school culture, leadership routines, and everyday interactions, thereby linking academic learning with relational and emotional development. The NESET model operationalises WSA across three interconnected levels:

- **Classroom level:** Students receive instruction in social and emotional learning, resilience, and mental health literacy. Teachers are trained in relational pedagogy, stress regulation, and inclusive practices, and they learn to identify early signs of distress. This classroom component is designed not only to strengthen individual competencies, but also to cultivate a psychologically safe and participatory learning climate.

- **School level:** The whole school develops a shared value framework grounded in belonging, respect, and co-operation. Student participation is formalised through councils and well-being committees, while parents are engaged as partners in planning and follow-up. Leadership plays a central role by coordinating professional learning communities and prioritising staff well-being. This is based on the assumption that teacher well-being is a prerequisite for sustained support to students.
- **Intersectoral level:** The school collaborates with health services, social services, and voluntary organisations through interdisciplinary teams. These partnerships make support services more accessible, reduce stigma, and strengthen early intervention, particularly for students with emerging or complex needs. This component reflects a key insight from research: whole-school work has greater impact when schools are connected to a wider ecosystem of services.

The NESET model offers universal measures (such as social and emotional learning and well-being initiatives) to all students, selective measures (such as stress management) for at-risk groups, and individualised follow-up in collaboration with external specialists. A further strength of the model is that it explicitly links universal well-being work with targeted support, aiming to reduce inequalities in mental health outcomes and access to services.

Reflections

From a social inequality perspective, the central question is whether a whole school approach can change how schools respond to the needs of students growing up in low-income families. Existing research and reviews point to several potential equalising mechanisms. First, whole-school efforts to strengthen school climate, relationships, and a sense of belonging may buffer the negative effects of low socioeconomic status on learning by reducing violence, increasing safety, and improving teacher–student relationships. Second, integrated approaches that connect education with health and social services, often through school–community partnerships, can reduce access barriers for families with limited resources. Third, WSAs that combine universal and targeted measures appear better equipped than stand-alone programmes to address the disproportionate burden of adversity faced by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, even though robust evidence on distributional effects remains limited.

Because there is no fixed model, a WSA must always be developed locally. This is both a strength and a challenge. On the one hand, schools can adapt the framework to local needs, existing services, and the Nordic tradition of universal provision. On the other hand, the approach can be perceived as demanding in terms of time, coordination, and professional capacity. Several authors highlight lack of time and resources, competing priorities, as well as implementation fatigue as central obstacles to whole-school change (Zhou et al., 2025). In this sense, WSA emerges as a promising but demanding strategy rather than a ready-made solution.

At the same time, the content of WSA can be dynamic, and much of what is described in the literature already exists within Nordic school systems. WSA may therefore be understood primarily as the development of an overarching framework that helps bring these elements together. In addition to structural coherence, the value-based framework may be equally important. It is also worth emphasising that long-term commitment is a key success factor.

Developments in the field

The review of the literature on WSA reveals several emerging developments. First, WSA is increasingly understood as a systemic and flexible model, rather than a model consisting of predefined or fixed interventions. This shift emphasises building structures, leadership, culture, and a learning organisation capable of integrating different measures as needed (Mathie, 2024; Cavanagh & Smith, 2024). Second, recent studies call for more targeted models for vulnerable groups, that is, students with special educational needs or those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Cefai et al., 2021; Cavanagh & Smith, 2024; Haataja et al., 2025). In contrast to earlier models that focused primarily on universal interventions, newer approaches highlight the combination of universal and selective measures, often framed through the principle of proportionate universalism. In other words, contemporary research is increasingly concerned with how WSA can contribute to reducing inequality. Third, there is greater emphasis on teachers' professional capital, professional learning communities, and the teacher's role as an agent of change (Frieling et al., 2024; Sawyer et al., 2025). Fourth, recent studies stress the importance of the implementation process itself – including duration, fidelity, leadership, and organisational readiness – in shaping outcomes (Balasooriya Lekamge et al., 2025). Taken together, these developments point in a common direction: WSA is increasingly understood as a long-term, systemic approach to school development that integrates organisational, pedagogical, and relational change, with a particular focus on equity and the needs of vulnerable student groups.

Summary

This section has described school-based measures that can mitigate the negative consequences of growing up in low-income families. The starting point is research showing that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have lower academic performance, and that schools can both reinforce and counteract inequality. School measures can be grouped into three main categories: (1) structural measures such as financial arrangements, free after-school provision and integrated support teams; (2) pedagogical measures such as instructional practices or homework support; and (3) socially supportive measures aimed at strengthening students' psychosocial development.

A whole school approach (WSA) can be understood as a framework that seeks to create a coherent school environment for all students. In doing so, a WSA may encompass and integrate structural, pedagogical, and socially supportive measures as well. Although WSA models differ in their specific components, they share the

ambition of improving students' well-being, learning, and sense of belonging. Studies suggest that WSA can have positive effects, especially in schools with high levels of social disadvantage, though the evidence base remains mixed. This is probably related to the fact that WSA is difficult to implement. Successful implementation requires time, resources, leadership commitment, and local adaptation.

3.4 Parenting and family support

Introduction

Parents play a fundamental role in children's development. A safe and stimulating home environment is essential for well-being, learning, and social belonging. In the early years of life, parents' ability to meet children's material and emotional needs is crucial for healthy development. Later, parents play a central role in supporting school performance, social skills, and the ability to cope with challenges in adulthood.

When parents are unable to fulfil these tasks, the risk of serious consequences for a child's health and life course increases. Children growing up in low-income families are particularly vulnerable, as financial constraints often limit parents' ability to provide a stable and stimulating environment. Poverty can lead to high levels of parental stress, which in turn reduces their capacity to provide care and support.

For children, this may result in lower self-esteem, an increased risk of mental health problems, and poorer academic performance in the short term. Over the longer term, the consequences may include lower educational attainment, weaker attachment to the labour market, and an increased risk of health problems. Recent brain research highlights the importance of parenting support as a stress-reducing factor: prolonged and uncontrollable stress in childhood – especially in the absence of stable, supportive adults – can negatively affect brain development, particularly in areas that regulate emotion, impulse control, and learning (Blair & Raver, 2016; Lupien et al., 2009).

Parenting support initiatives have therefore gained increased attention as a strategy to counteract the negative consequences of poverty. Such initiatives aim to strengthen parental caregiving skills, reduce stress, and foster positive interactions with children. In this chapter, we focus particularly on family coordinators and three related models of parenting and family support. We first provide a brief overview of the Nordic tradition of various models involving coordinators or case managers. The role of the coordinator is further illustrated through three examples: 'Nye mønstre' (New patterns), 'Opgang til opgang' (Entrance to entrance) and nurse–family partnership ('Sammen på vei').

The family coordinator

In many recent initiatives, parenting and family support is organised around a family coordinator who follows the family over time. Despite variations in design, these models share some core features: they give families a single entry point into an otherwise fragmented service system, facilitate comprehensive assessment and

planning, coordinate contact with social security, schools, health and housing services, and at the same time provide stable relational support. In this way, the coordinator role links everyday family life with the broader welfare system and is particularly relevant for families in persistent low income, who often have limited capacity to navigate complex service pathways.

Nordic research indicates that such coordinator functions can help bind services together around vulnerable children and families. However, many such functions are project-based, weakly embedded in ordinary operations, and characterised by unclear mandates that lie somewhere between administrative coordination and relational social work (Møller et al., 2021; Lehto-Lundén et al., 2024; Skolverket & Socialstyrelsen, 2023). An important exception is Iceland, where a national child coordinator scheme was established by law in 2021. This model organises support at three levels, from universal services and early help to a dedicated coordinator and multidisciplinary support team for children with more complex needs and thus represents a more institutionalised and permanent coordination model.

In the following, we illustrate different ways of operationalising the family coordinator role through three examples. 'Nye mønstre' and 'Opgang til opgang' are explicitly organised around a designated coordinator or contact person. By contrast, in the nurse–family partnership, the specially trained nurse functions as a long-term key worker and acts as a bridge between the family and the wider service system.

Nye mønstre

'Nye mønstre' is a long-term, municipally anchored model for families living in persistent low income and often facing complex challenges related to health, housing, employment, schooling, and social relations. The model is built around a family coordinator who serves as the family's primary contact person and ensures coordinated and comprehensive support for both children and adults. Rather than establishing a new service alongside existing ones, the initiative reorganises and makes better use of the ordinary welfare services already in place (Mølland et al., 2023a; Mølland et al., 2023b).

The core of the intervention is that each family is assigned a permanent family coordinator responsible for maintaining oversight, connecting the various elements of support, and following the family over time – up to five years. Each coordinator works with approximately ten families, allowing sufficient time for relational work, practical assistance, and cross-sectoral coordination. Continuity is a key principle: ideally, the same coordinator accompanies the family throughout the entire period and remains easily accessible (Mølland et al., 2023a; Vigsnes et al., 2024).

The mechanisms in 'Nye mønstre' can be understood as a combination of assessment, follow-up, and coordination. The intervention begins with a comprehensive assessment of the family's situation, covering areas such as economic conditions, housing, health, employment, education, relationships, leisure activities, and everyday functioning. Based on this assessment, a dynamic family plan is developed jointly with parents and

children. Follow-up primarily takes place through home visits, which constitute the main arena for guidance and support. This guidance focuses on everyday functioning and may include organising finances and routines, supporting school and kindergarten attendance, accompanying families to meetings with the Labour and Welfare Administration, schools or health services, assisting with practical tasks in the home, and facilitating children's participation in leisure activities (Lundberg & Danielsen, 2024).

The relationship between the coordinator and the parents and children is a central mechanism of the intervention. Over time, the aim is to build a trusting relationship in which the coordinator becomes a stable, predictable, and accessible adult with whom the family can discuss concerns and make decisions. As trust develops, the coordinator can both support and challenge the family, helping parents strengthen their sense of mastery and ownership of their goals. User involvement is an integral part of the model (Vigsnes et al., 2024).

Another key mechanism is the coordinator's system-level work. This includes navigating the service landscape, establishing contact with relevant agencies, convening meetings when needed, contributing to shared understanding among actors, and, when necessary, acting as the family's advocate within the system (Mølland et al., 2023a; Vigsnes et al., 2024).

The literature on 'Nye mønstre' shows that the initiative draws on a theoretical framework combining systems theory, professional theory, and relational perspectives on change. Vigsnes et al. (2024) describe the model as systems-oriented, with the primary aim of improving interactions between families and their surrounding environments, rather than seeking to change the family itself. The family coordinator role is further anchored in a professional perspective, drawing on the international definition of social work, which emphasises support, empowerment, and coordination across services (IFSW, 2014). Relationships are identified as a core mechanism of change. A trust-based relationship between the coordinator and the family is described as a fundamental precondition for the intervention to function, a finding that is also supported empirically by Danielsen and Lundberg (2024).

The impact research on 'Nye mønstre' is embedded in a comprehensive, long-term evaluation design (Mølland et al., 2020), though results are not yet available. Qualitative studies nevertheless provide a clear picture of the intervention's significance in families' everyday lives. Lundberg and Danielsen (2024) show that parents report both small, concrete improvements (better financial overview, greater daily stability, easier contact with services) and major changes related to safety, housing, and their relationship with the support system. The authors describe how the coordinators' flexible and long-term follow-up works by ensuring that help is available over time, is practical in nature, and contributes to better coordination of services.

Oppgang til oppgang

'Oppgang til oppgang' is a Danish model that in many ways builds on principles similar to 'Nye mønstre': long-term relational work, practical support, and active coordination of services for families with complex needs. However, the model distinguishes itself through a stronger anchoring in the local neighbourhood.

'Oppgang til oppgang' is a comprehensive, community-based model for families living in disadvantaged housing areas (Kjær et al., 2023). The support is low-threshold and relationship-oriented, and is closely embedded in families' everyday lives. The target group consists of families facing multiple and interrelated challenges related to economic conditions, health, employment, parenting, and housing. The initiative is implemented through a partnership between the municipality, housing-related services, and local civil society actors, with outreach workers assigned to follow families within defined residential areas.

At the core of the model is an outreach contact person who builds and maintains a stable relationship with families. This role involves providing practical support and guidance, helping families navigate the service system, and coordinating across schools, health services, social services, and the voluntary sector. Much of the work takes place through informal conversations, small practical actions, and relational support, which over time can open the way for more targeted interventions (Kjær et al., 2023). In addition, the initiative includes a neighbourhood dimension that aims to strengthen social cohesion and well-being through shared activities and the use of common community spaces.

The evaluations indicate particularly positive effects for children and young people, including reduced school absenteeism and increased working hours among youth. For adults, the results point to some favourable structural outcomes, such as a lower risk of early retirement and increased participation in flexible forms of employment, while effects on regular employment appear more limited (Simonsen & Skipper, 2023; Kjær et al., 2023). The municipality also reported reduced public expenditures for participating families. Similar to findings from other Nordic coordinator models, these experiences suggest that proximity, relational continuity, and flexibility create favourable conditions for change. At the same time, the model remains vulnerable to project-based organisation, unclear mandates, and weak structural anchoring.

Nurse–family partnership

Nurse–family partnership (NFP) is a selective and indicated home-based parenting support programme for first-time pregnant women in vulnerable life situations. Internationally, the programme recruits young first-time mothers with low income, low education, weak attachment to the labour market, unmarried status, and often considerable psychosocial challenges (Olds et al., 2013; Nøkleby et al., 2021). In Norway, the target group has been further developed, focusing on first-time mothers who meet multiple vulnerability criteria, including experiences of maltreatment or violence, previous child-welfare involvement, limited social networks, persistent low income,

mental health difficulties, substance use problems, lack of work or education, and/or young age (Pedersen et al., 2019; PwC, 2023).

The core of the NFP consists of long-term, structured home visits delivered by specially trained nurses. The visits start early in pregnancy and continue until the child reaches two years of age. Intensity is highest in the early phases and gradually tapers over time. In the original model, families may receive up to 60–64 visits (Olds et al., 2013; Nøkleby et al., 2021). The content of the visits follows a planned progression aligned with the child's development and the family's situation, addressing topics such as maternal health, parent–child interaction, the home environment, future plans and goals, and navigation of the welfare system (Pedersen et al., 2019). The programme is manualised, with clearly defined core components, standardised assessments and a specified visit frequency, while still allowing for individual tailoring. Systematic data collection and documentation are integral to quality assurance, professional supervision, and research (Olds et al., 2013; PwC, 2023).

NFP is grounded in three main theoretical pillars. Ecological theory frames child development as shaped by interactions between the child, the family, and wider social systems. Attachment theory highlights the importance of parental sensitivity and the development of secure attachment relationships. Self-efficacy theory focuses on strengthening parents' confidence in their ability to manage both the parenting role and decisions in their own lives (Nøkleby et al., 2021). In the Norwegian context, these perspectives are explicitly integrated together with complementary methods such as motivational interviewing, the newborn behavioural observations system, and video-based interaction guidance (Pedersen et al., 2019; PwC, 2023).

In the short and medium term, NFP aims to improve maternal health during pregnancy and strengthen sensitive and stable caregiving. The programme also seeks to support children's cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development, reduce injuries and maltreatment, and promote maternal mental health and effective collaboration with services (Nøkleby et al., 2021; Pedersen et al., 2019). In the longer term, NFP aims to increase parents' participation in education and the labour market, reduce reliance on child welfare and other costly services, and lower the risk of crime, substance use, and marginalisation in the next generation (Miller, 2015; Nøkleby et al., 2021).

Effect studies conducted in Canada, England, Netherlands and United States show generally positive, though not uniform, outcomes. Overall, the evidence points to improvements in children's language development, fewer injuries, and reduced child maltreatment, as well as fewer child welfare cases. Studies also find reductions in closely spaced pregnancies and some long-term effects on crime and substance use (Miller, 2015; Nøkleby et al., 2021; Catherine et al., 2025).

In Norway, no full effect study has yet been conducted, and findings are therefore based on implementation and process evaluations. These show that the programme is experienced as helpful by families, and appears to strengthen caregiving environments, parental mental health, and coordination across services (Pedersen & Nilsen, 2018; PwC, 2023). For example, Pedersen et al. (2019) report that many participants

describe the nurse as the most important support person during a vulnerable phase of life. Overall, the evidence suggests that NFP has a strong empirical and theoretical foundation and is well targeted at vulnerable first-time families. The strongest effects are observed when the programme is implemented with high quality, sufficient intensity, and close integration with the wider service system (Olds et al., 2013; Miller, 2015; Catherine et al., 2025; Pedersen et al., 2019).

Reflections

Parenting support interventions have traditionally been based on the assumption that improving parental skills will lead to better developmental outcomes for children. Although manual-based programmes show generally positive effects, it is reasonable to question how well such interventions meet the needs of families living in persistent low income. For these families, parenting is closely intertwined with economic stress, unstable housing conditions, health problems, and weak connections to public services – factors that fall outside the traditional focus on parental skills and parent–child interaction.

The examples in this chapter represent more holistic approaches. Rather than focusing solely on parenting or family relationships, these interventions provide support wherever needs arise. The coordinator is expected to relieve burdens, help families navigate the system, coordinate services, and build bridges between the family's everyday life and a fragmented welfare system. This is likely to be particularly important for low-income families, who often have limited capacity to manage bureaucracy and a complex service system.

A consistent feature across all three interventions is that the relationship with the coordinator functions as a mechanism in its own right. A long-term, predictable, and accessible helper provides both emotional support and a stable entry point into the service system. Support is not delivered primarily through instruction, but through sustained interaction, joint problem-solving and opportunities for mastery in everyday situations. In this respect, the nurse–family partnership stands out, as the relationship is established already during pregnancy and continues throughout the child's first two years. This period is widely recognised in developmental psychology and neuroscience as particularly sensitive. Early childhood, and infancy in particular, is marked by heightened vulnerability to stress, unstable caregiving, and violence, while also being a phase of high responsiveness to protective factors. Prolonged and uncontrollable stress during this period may affect brain development and stress regulation in ways that have lasting consequences, which underscores the importance of early, relationship-based support for both children and parents.

At the same time, the interventions represent different approaches to the coordinator role. In a nurse–family partnership, the coordinator is a specially trained nurse working within a tightly manualised model with predefined themes, structure, and fidelity requirements. The relationship is important, but the scope for discretion is clearly regulated. In 'Nye mønstre', the coordinator is also a professional, but with a stronger

emphasis on system work and cross-sectoral coordination, and with substantial room for professional judgement in adapting support to the family's needs and local service structures. In 'Opgang til opgang', the coordinator/contact person is more often a volunteer or semi-professional rooted in the local community, with high flexibility and close proximity to families' daily lives, but with less formal authority vis-à-vis public services. Taken together, the three initiatives can be understood as three distinct models of the coordinator role. This raises further questions about how such a role should be designed to address the particular challenges associated with growing up in a low-income family.

Summary

Parenting support has traditionally been understood as manualised programmes aimed at strengthening parental skills and regulating children's behaviour. Research indicates that such programmes can have positive effects, but that effect sizes are often moderate, variable, and sensitive to contextual factors. Critics of their behaviourist foundations point to a narrow understanding of parenting and argue that these interventions insufficiently address the structural and material conditions shaping the lives of families living in persistent low income.

More recent models developed within and beyond the Nordic region represent a shift towards more relational and system-oriented forms of support. These approaches place greater emphasis on the relationship between parents and professionals, on coordination across services, and on linking families to existing welfare provisions. Various coordinator arrangements and initiatives such as 'Nye mønstre', 'Opgang til opgang', and NFP also illustrate a move away from time-limited courses towards long-term, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive support.

In the context of poverty, it is particularly notable that these models combine work on the parent–child relationship with assistance in navigating and making effective use of the ordinary welfare system. In doing so, they address a broader set of factors than parenting practices alone when seeking to strengthen families' resources. A key question, however, is whether such relationally grounded and structurally anchored forms of support offer greater potential for long-term social equalisation than traditional parenting programmes.

3.5 Measures that promote participation in leisure activities

Introduction

Children and young people growing up in households with persistent low income often face structural barriers that limit their access to organised leisure activities. Leisure activities play an important role in children's social development, well-being, and sense of belonging. Such activities can function as arenas for mastery, friendship, and participation, and therefore have the potential to counteract some of the negative consequences of economic marginalisation. Studies also indicate that access to financial resources restricts opportunities for participation (Hyggen et al., 2018; Myksvoll et al., 2023).

In recent years, the Nordic countries have developed a range of initiatives aimed at ensuring that all children and young people have the opportunity to take part in leisure activities, regardless of their family's financial situation. The initiatives vary in form and focus, but can broadly be divided into the following categories:

- Financial support schemes, such as leisure cards and activity funds, where families receive direct support to cover participation-related costs.
- Facilitation measures, such as equipment libraries, free transport, or low-threshold local activities that reduce practical and financial barriers.
- Collaborative initiatives, where municipalities, voluntary organisations, and sports clubs work together to include children and young people from vulnerable groups.
- Information and guidance measures, such as activity guides or leisure coordinators, who help families identify and make use of relevant opportunities.

Common to these measures is their aim to compensate for inequalities in living conditions by strengthening children's opportunities for participation, belonging, and development. The measures typically seek to reduce barriers to joining organised leisure activities. As an illustration of initiatives to promote increased activity, we provide a more detailed description of the different leisure card schemes in the Nordic countries.

Leisure card

The leisure card is a public support scheme that provides financial assistance to children and young people, enabling them to participate in organised leisure activities. The scheme is particularly relevant given the existence of comparable models across the Nordic region. In Iceland, the leisure card also forms part of a broader, coordinated youth prevention strategy within the framework of the Icelandic prevention model ('Planet Youth'), where financial support for leisure participation is combined with other preventive measures (Kristjánsson et al., 2019).

The design of leisure card schemes varies across the Nordic countries. In Norway, the scheme has been piloted as a largely universal model, but with considerable local flexibility and differing degrees of targeting towards low-income families (Arnesen et al., 2022). In Denmark, the leisure card is typically means-tested and paired with coordinator roles and close collaboration with civil society organisations (Pilgaard & Mellmølle, 2025). Iceland operates a universal leisure card where activities must have a formal contract with the municipality, meet minimum duration requirements, and be delivered by qualified instructors (Reykjavík City, 2023). Finland has taken a different approach by offering free after-school activities on school premises, coordinated by municipalities and integrated into the school day (Laimi et al., 2023). Sweden introduced a national scheme in autumn 2025, combining universal and selective elements through both a general card and an enhanced subsidy for socioeconomically disadvantaged households (Socialdepartementet, 2024). Despite differences in design and implementation, these Nordic models share a common ambition: to reduce financial barriers and strengthen social inclusion by ensuring that all children and young people have access to meaningful leisure activities.

The level of financial support varies across the Nordic countries. In Norway and Denmark, municipalities typically offer a moderate annual allocation per child, sometimes supplemented by support for equipment (Arnesen et al., 2022; Pilgaard & Mellmølle, 2025). Iceland's universal scheme provides a relatively high allocation per child, while Sweden combines a lower universal allocation with additional support targeted at socioeconomically disadvantaged households (Socialdepartementet, 2024). Finland, by contrast, funds free after-school activities rather than individual allocations (Laimi et al., 2023).

Research on children's and young people's participation in leisure activities rests on at least three different theoretical traditions. First, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development emphasises that children's development is shaped through interactions between the individual and multiple layers of their environment, where organised leisure activities form a key microsystem that interacts with school, home, and the local community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Second, theories of social capital highlight that participation in activities provides access to networks, norms, role models, and resources that are unevenly distributed across social groups (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Third, positive youth development (PYD) offers a broad developmental-psychological framework that describes how meaningful activities contribute to the so-called five Cs – competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring – which in turn promote well-being and civic participation (Bowers et al., 2010; Holt et al., 2017).

The literature identifies several mechanisms that help explain why participation in leisure activities can benefit children and young people. These mechanisms are commonly grouped into individual, relational, and structural processes. At the individual level, organised activities support skills development, mastery, and self-regulation, which in turn strengthen confidence, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Ravn & Clement, 2025). Participation in sports and physical activity is also associated with long-term health benefits (Bengtsson et al., 2025). At

the relational level, studies highlight the importance of supportive adults, stable peer groups, and positive social norms. Participation fosters a sense of belonging and social integration, reduces loneliness, and expands children's social networks (Tu, 2020; Heckel et al., 2024; Luong et al., 2024). At the structural level, organised activities provide meaningful and structured use of time, which can replace risky time use patterns and contribute to greater stability in everyday life (Mahoney et al., 2006). Activities also offer safe arenas, establish norms for co-operation and responsibility, and create links between home, school, and the local community (Mansfield et al., 2020). Economic and practical measures, such as leisure cards, operate at this level by reducing barriers to participation. Their effectiveness therefore depends not only on increasing participation rates, but also on ensuring that participation takes place in safe, inclusive environments characterised by positive relationships. Research further suggests that such schemes have the greatest impact when combined with complementary measures, including equipment support and personalised guidance (Arnesen et al., 2022; Pilgaard & Mellmølle, 2025; Laimi et al., 2023).

Several studies have shown that leisure initiatives aimed at children and young people in low-income families can contribute to social equalisation and the prevention of exclusion. Evaluations of measures such as leisure cards and equipment libraries indicate that these initiatives can increase participation among children and young people or lower the threshold for participation (Socialstyrelsen, 2021; Arnesen et al., 2022; Myksvoll et al., 2023). At the same time, evaluations point out that it is difficult to measure effects in terms of increased participation, partly because changes usually arise when several measures are implemented simultaneously.

Evidence from Denmark suggests that leisure cards lead to higher and more sustained participation when combined with adult support and active brokering into voluntary associations (Socialstyrelsen, 2021). In Finland, studies report broad participation and positive effects on well-being and social inclusion, particularly when activities are offered immediately after school and in familiar school-based settings (Laimi et al., 2023). Iceland's universal scheme also appears to increase participation and shows potential for transferability to other contexts. A quasi-experimental study of an Iceland-inspired model in the United States found that the odds of participating in organised leisure activities more than doubled in the first year. The strongest effects emerged when the scheme was easy to use and paired with locally adapted implementation (Meyers et al., 2023).

Illustrative example: Danish leisure card

As an illustration, we provide here a more detailed description of the Danish leisure card. The reason for choosing this example is that the scheme has been tested over time and is relatively well documented. Two key sources of knowledge are Socialstyrelsen (2021) and the evaluation by Pilgaard & Mellmølle (2025).

The Danish leisure card has evolved as a municipal, structural prevention measure under Section 11(6) of the Social Services Act (Serviceloven), which authorises

municipalities to provide financial support for children's and young people's participation in leisure activities. Municipalities decide for themselves whether to implement such a scheme, how it should be designed, and which eligibility criteria should apply. As of 2024, around 84–85 of Denmark's 98 municipalities operates a leisure card or similar arrangement, and just over one-third also employ a municipal leisure mentor to support the scheme.

Although the schemes differ in form, their core function is to provide financial support – and in some cases equipment support – for participation in organised leisure activities. Families typically receive between 1,000 and 2,000 DKK per child per year, although some municipalities cover actual participation fees regardless of level. In many municipalities, the leisure card is a one-off grant, while others allow repeated applications. Applications may be initiated by the child, parents, professionals or associations, and allocations are usually made on a trust-based assessment that does not require formal financial documentation.

Municipalities administer the scheme locally, with substantial scope for adaptation. Responsibility typically lies within the culture and leisure department or the children and youth sector, often supported by a designated project leader. Municipalities develop systems for registering children, processing applications, approving eligible activities, and handling payments. Payments may be made directly to families as reimbursement, but most commonly they go straight to clubs and associations. Schools, social services, refugee services, child welfare services, and voluntary organisations serve as key channels for disseminating information, recruiting participants, and supporting families in navigating the scheme.

Experience suggests that while financial support is valued by families, the scheme is used more intensively and reaches more children when it is complemented by a leisure mentor function. These mentors help identify eligible children through collaboration with schools, child welfare services and health clinics, and they support families in finding suitable activities and navigating entry into voluntary associations. Municipalities without such mentor functions often report low application rates and unused funds, whereas municipalities with mentors both distribute more leisure cards and experience higher levels of repeated use.

At the same time, evaluations point to several challenges. Administrative procedures can be time-consuming and fragmented, and co-operation with schools is not always straightforward. Municipalities also face a growing dilemma between providing repeated support to the same children and prioritising new applicants. In response, several municipalities are developing a 'third pillar' that focuses on strengthening the capacity of leisure organisations and expanding inclusive activity offers for target groups.

Reflection

Overall, evidence from the Nordic countries suggests that leisure cards and comparable schemes can increase participation in organised activities, particularly among children and young people who might otherwise be excluded. At the same time, evaluations show that these effects are strongest when financial support is embedded within a broader set of measures such as equipment loans, outreach and information efforts, and recruitment through schools and public services. The leisure card should therefore not be viewed as a stand-alone intervention, but as one important element within a wider inclusion strategy.

Research on the mechanisms underlying the benefits of leisure participation emphasises that positive outcomes depend less on participation per se than on the quality of the activity environment. Studies consistently show that competence development, a sense of belonging and well-being require safe and inclusive settings, characterised by stable adult support, clear structures, and genuine opportunities for mastery. In this context, it is noteworthy that both the Icelandic and Swedish schemes make use of accreditation or approval systems for eligible activities and providers. Such systems allow public funding to be used not only to expand participation, but also to set expectations for quality and inclusion, thereby influencing the types of activities that are offered.

The choice between universal and selective design also raises important questions about stigma. Selective schemes can be more precisely targeted, but they may also be experienced as stigmatising by those who receive support. Universal schemes reduce this risk but provide weaker redistribution. The Swedish model with differentiated levels may offer a response to this dilemma, though it remains to be seen how the selective component will function in practice. It is reasonable to assume that stigma may be reduced when a scheme is presented as universal, while targeted supplements are delivered in ways that are not publicly visible. This may allow policymakers to combine high legitimacy with strong targeting, without creating visible distinctions between children.

Developments in the field

Although the Nordic countries share the ambition of reducing economic and structural barriers to children's participation in leisure activities, the schemes are evolving in different directions. Finland, Iceland, and Sweden have all established national models. Finland differs from the others by prioritising school-based approaches in which activities are placed close to the school day and the local environment. These activities are free of charge, take place immediately after school, and are held on school premises. This reduces the need for transport and logistical arrangements and appears to increase participation, particularly among children in low-income families (Laimi et al., 2023).

A distinguishing feature of the Icelandic and Swedish schemes is the use of approval or accreditation requirements for organisations eligible for support, which provides greater opportunities for governance and quality control. Denmark, by contrast, has adopted a largely targeted, municipality-based model that combines financial support with equipment provision, coordinator roles, leisure guides, and close follow-up (Pilgaard & Mellmølle, 2025). Norway also operates a municipal model. The Norwegian leisure card pilots were initially framed as universal, but evaluations show considerable variation in practice. Many municipalities linked the leisure card to complementary measures such as equipment libraries, guidance services, and other public-sector supports (Arnesen et al., 2022). As a result, it is likely that a variety of local adaptations now exist across Norwegian municipalities.

Summary

This section has examined leisure initiatives as compensatory measures for children and young people growing up in low-income families. The evidence reviewed indicates that participation in organised leisure activities can promote social inclusion, well-being, and development, particularly when activities are stable over time, of high quality, and embedded in supportive relationships with adults and peers.

Leisure card schemes are widespread across the Nordic countries, but they vary considerably in design and implementation. Despite these differences, research indicates that financial support alone is not sufficient. The greatest effects are observed when economic support is combined with complementary measures such as outreach, guidance, equipment provision, and organisational support for inclusive activity environments.

Taken together, the findings suggest that leisure initiatives are most effective when they are embedded in broader inclusion strategies that address both access and quality. Leisure cards should therefore be understood not as stand-alone instruments, but as entry points to social arenas where relational, developmental, and health-promoting mechanisms can unfold.

3.6 Area-based initiatives

Nordic area-based initiatives

Area-based initiatives in the Nordic countries can be understood as place-specific and cross-sectoral interventions targeting geographically defined areas with concentrated living-condition challenges, commonly described along two dimensions: the balance between housing and planning instruments and social measures, and the degree of state steering versus local implementation (Brattbakk & Andersen, 2017; Stjernberg et al., 2025). Across the Nordic countries, area-based initiatives vary primarily along these two dimensions, reflecting differences in the balance between housing and planning

instruments and social measures, as well as in the degree of state steering versus local implementation.

Denmark appears as the most interventionist case. Through the so-called ghetto and parallel society policies, housing and planning instruments have played a dominant role, including demolition and restructuring of housing stock, changes in tenure forms, and regulation of settlement patterns in designated areas (Stjernberg et al., 2025; Sørensen et al., 2024). These structural interventions are supplemented by extensive social housing initiatives, but several studies point to a limited degree of integration between the structural housing measures and the social interventions (Jensen, 2021; Christensen et al., 2021).

Norway represents a clear contrast, as its area-based initiatives have primarily been socially and service-oriented. Norwegian initiatives have made limited use of intrusive housing policy instruments, instead emphasising the strengthening and coordination of municipal services in areas such as education, health, and preventive work, combined with leisure activities, voluntary sector involvement, and the establishment of neighbourhood meeting places (Andersen & Brattbakk, 2020; Eimhjellen et al., 2023). Partnership-based governance models between the central government and municipalities, with a strong emphasis on local anchoring and participation, have been a defining feature (Ruud et al., 2020).

Sweden has long experience of state-initiated area-based initiatives characterised by goal- and indicator-based steering, where municipalities have held primary responsibility for implementation (Stjernberg et al., 2025). These initiatives have combined housing-related and social measures within education, employment, safety, and prevention, but without resorting to intrusive housing market regulation. The literature describes Swedish area-based initiatives as largely focused on local service coordination and social mobilisation, functioning mainly as support and implementation tools for existing welfare policies (Hertting & Urban, 2020; Karlsson, 2016).

Finland stands out by having developed few explicit area-based initiatives, instead relying on long-term spatial planning and housing policy aimed at preventing segregation, particularly through strategies for mixed tenure housing (Stjernberg et al., 2025). Social measures are largely embedded within universal welfare services such as education, health, and family services, rather than organised as place-specific programmes (Ruonavaara et al., 2025; Rosengren et al., 2025).

Iceland has limited experience with area-based initiatives compared to the other Nordic countries. According to Stjernberg et al. (2025), place-specific initiatives have only recently been developed, primarily in the Reykjavík area, and are mainly linked to social and preventive measures within existing welfare and service systems.

Taken together, the Nordic countries illustrate variation in approaches to area-based initiatives. Denmark and Norway can be understood as contrasting cases: Denmark emphasises strong housing and planning regulation, while Norway relies primarily on social, service-oriented, and partnership-based instruments. Sweden occupies an

intermediate position, combining strong state steering with locally implemented social and organisational measures, while Finland stands out with a more distinctly preventive approach based on spatial planning, housing policy, and universal services. Despite these differences, the Nordic countries share a common understanding that complex living-condition challenges in disadvantaged areas require holistic and cross-sectoral responses.

Measures in area-based initiatives: Scope and quality

While the previous section illustrated how area-based initiatives are implemented in practice, this section turns to the social measures that typically form part of such initiatives. In this regard, the question is not only what types of measures are included, but also whether these measures are of sufficient quality and intensity to have a compensatory effect for children and young people growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Across Nordic area-based initiatives, social measures typically target children, young people, and families and include strengthened early childhood education and schools, leisure activities, preventive and outreach services, parental support programmes, and initiatives aimed at strengthening participation, safety, and inclusion in the local community (Brattbakk & Andersen, 2017; Stjernberg et al., 2025). These measures are often delivered through existing welfare services, but are adapted to local conditions through increased presence, coordination, and collaboration with voluntary organisations.

In addition to the measures themselves, area-based initiatives depend on organisational arrangements that ensure coherence and coordination. Two elements recur across Nordic experiences: coordination and participation. Coordination refers to efforts to align measures across sectors, services, and arenas in order to create more coherent and mutually reinforcing interventions. Research shows that initiatives tend to function better when key actors such as schools, early childhood education, social services, police, housing authorities, and voluntary organisations collaborate within stable coordination structures (Vista Analyse, 2015; Eimhjellen et al., 2023). Participation and co-creation involve residents in the design and implementation of measures. Such involvement is highlighted in the literature as important for local adaptation, legitimacy and ownership, and as a counterweight to top-down governance in disadvantaged areas (Brattbakk & Andersen, 2017; Hertting & Urban, 2020). Together, coordination and participation shape whether measures operate as fragmented efforts or as part of a coherent area-based initiative.

Evaluations and knowledge reviews of Nordic area-based initiatives consistently show that the most robust and recurring outcomes relate to procedural and organisational aspects rather than to documented changes in living conditions, educational attainment, or employment. The literature shows that the most tangible outcomes of area-based initiatives are related to organisational and process-oriented changes, including improved coordination between services, strengthened local presence, increased accessibility of welfare services, enhanced collaboration with civil society,

and stronger local co-operation and trust (Ruud et al., 2019; Hertting & Urban, 2020; Schwabe et al., 2025). By contrast, evidence of effects on long-term outcomes such as living conditions, educational attainment, employment, or social mobility remains limited and difficult to document. Overall, the evidence indicates that area-based initiatives primarily achieve short-term and intermediate objectives related to service coordination, accessibility, and local collaboration, while long-term effects on living conditions and life chances are difficult to measure and document.

These findings point to a critical explanatory gap between short-term organisational outcomes and more substantive effects on living conditions and life chances. A key issue in this regard concerns not only whether social measures are included in area-based initiatives, but whether they are of sufficient quality and intensity to have a compensatory effect. Research from early childhood education, schooling, and leisure-time interventions shows that positive effects depend on high-quality provision, qualified staff, continuity, and adequate resources. In this perspective, area-based initiatives may also be understood as a form of proportional universalism, where universal services are delivered with greater intensity and support in areas with higher levels of disadvantage. However, several evaluations indicate that social measures within area-based initiatives are often implemented as add-ons or short-term projects, rather than as sustained improvements to core services, which limits their potential compensatory impact (Schwabe et al., 2025; Brattbakk & Andersen, 2017).

From measures to mechanisms: Neighbourhood effect

Area-based initiatives are commonly based on the assumption that their effects extend beyond individual measures to influence neighbourhood-level social dynamics. This assumption is captured in the concept of neighbourhood effects, which refers to the idea that characteristics of the local social environment have an independent influence on children's and young people's development beyond individual and family-level factors (Norges forskningsråd, 2005; Galster, 2012; Li et al., 2022).

Within neighbourhood research, these effects are commonly understood through the concepts of social capital, social cohesion, and collective efficacy. These concepts describe collective characteristics of neighbourhoods that emerge over time through patterns of relationships, norms, and interaction, and that cannot be reduced to individual attributes (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Breedvelt et al., 2022). Social capital refers to relational resources embedded in networks of trust, reciprocity, and mutual support, including both bonding ties within groups and bridging and linking ties across groups and institutions. Social cohesion captures residents' sense of belonging, safety, and shared responsibility, while collective efficacy combines social cohesion with shared expectations about taking action when neighbourhood conditions or children's well-being are threatened (Browning & Cagney, 2002; Coley et al., 2025).

A substantial body of research indicates that these collective neighbourhood characteristics are associated with outcomes relevant for children and young people. Higher levels of social capital and collective efficacy are linked to lower levels of crime and violence, better physical and mental health, stronger social support, and closer

connections to schools and local communities (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Browning & Cagney, 2002; Visser et al., 2021; Breedvelt et al., 2022). Vyncke et al. (2013) further show that the neighbourhood social climate can moderate the relationship between parental stress and children's behaviour, suggesting that cohesive neighbourhoods may buffer some of the negative effects associated with family-level disadvantage. This buffering function lies at the core of what is commonly referred to as neighbourhood effects.

Importantly, research also suggests that collective neighbourhood characteristics can be shaped by policy interventions. In this perspective, area-based initiatives can be understood as attempts to strengthen neighbourhood effects by fostering social capital, cohesion, and collective efficacy. Nordic experiences indicate that measures such as sustained meeting places, inclusive leisure activities, outreach and relational services, and stable adult presence in the local environment can contribute to building trust and reducing social distance (Brattbakk & Andersen, 2017; Vista Analyse, 2015). Such measures can therefore be seen as an extension of the social measures discussed in the previous section, targeting not only individuals and families, but the relational infrastructure of the neighbourhood itself.

Qualitative studies further highlight the role of local organisations and professionals as intermediaries who connect residents to public services and institutions, translate between systems, and facilitate co-operation across sectors (Custers & Engbersen, 2024). These actors contribute to what is often described as linking social capital, helping ensure that resources and services reach those most in need.

In general, this body of research suggests that area-based initiatives may influence children's and young people's development not only through the direct effects of individual measures, but also through their potential to shape collective neighbourhood characteristics. In this sense, investments in relationships, meeting places, and local collaboration structures can be understood as mechanisms that mediate between measures and outcomes, complementing the social interventions discussed above. However, identifying neighbourhood effects empirically is difficult, as it is hard to separate the influence of neighbourhood characteristics from individual characteristics, and uncertainty therefore remains regarding the strength and persistence of such effects (Galster, 2012).

Relational welfare and area-based initiatives

Building on the discussion of neighbourhood effects, the perspective of relational welfare offers a conceptual framework for understanding how collective neighbourhood characteristics are actively shaped through policy, services, and local interaction. In this perspective, relational welfare provides a way of understanding how the effectiveness of area-based measures depends on the relational structures through which they are implemented.

The perspective of relational welfare provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding why some area-based initiatives succeed in strengthening

neighbourhoods and local communities, while others do not. In this context, relational welfare refers to an understanding of welfare as something that is produced through relationships, trust, and co-operation between individuals, services, and communities, rather than solely through individual benefits or service provision. At its core lies the idea that welfare is not created primarily through services and structures, but through relationships, networks, and local cooperation. Cottam (2011, 2020) argues that sustainable welfare solutions require strong, reciprocal relationships between people and between residents and institutions, and that public services must be designed to support, rather than replace, local networks.

Relational welfare also offers more precise concepts for how such qualities emerge. Von Heimburg and Ness (2021) argue that welfare depends on 'the four Rs': redistribution, recognition, representation, and relationships. In an area-based initiative, this means that residents not only need improved services and meeting places, but also must be included, listened to, and given influence. These are conditions for building what neighbourhood research identifies as social trust and collective responsibility. Research on relational practice in public services similarly shows that continuity, presence, collaboration, and reciprocity trigger positive mechanisms that reduce isolation and strengthen community bonds (Lamph et al., 2023). In this sense, relational welfare can help clarify the mechanisms that underpin thriving neighbourhoods: trust, belonging, and social support do not arise automatically, but develop through repeated interactions, shared activities, common spaces, and services that facilitate cooperation.

At the same time, the perspective warrants critical attention. The literature on relational welfare is normative and idealistic, often based more on case studies and narratives than on strong causal evidence. The concept says little about the structural conditions required for relational processes to take root in disadvantaged areas, where time pressure, insecurity, weak organisational foundations, and limited resources frequently make relationship-building difficult. Despite these limitations, relational welfare remains a fruitful perspective for understanding the relational dimensions of neighbourhood development.

All in all, the literature reviewed in this chapter indicates that the effectiveness of area-based initiatives depends on the interaction between concrete measures, organisational arrangements, and relational dynamics at neighbourhood level. While measures and organisation provide necessary conditions, it is through the development of trust, social ties, and collective capacity that such initiatives may generate cumulative and potentially lasting effects for children and young people.

Summary

Area-based initiatives in the Nordic countries can be understood as place-based, cross-sectoral responses to concentrated living-condition challenges, combining physical, social, and organisational measures. Although the specific design and institutional context of such initiatives vary across countries, the literature reviewed in this chapter

points to a shared understanding that complex neighbourhood-level problems require coordinated and locally anchored interventions rather than isolated sectoral measures.

Across Nordic experiences, the most consistently documented outcomes of area-based initiatives relate to organisation and process, including improved coordination between services, strengthened local presence, enhanced collaboration with civil society, and increased accessibility of welfare services. Evidence of long-term effects on living conditions, educational attainment, employment, or segregation remains limited and difficult to establish. This underlines the importance of focusing not only on the inclusion of social measures, but on their quality, intensity, and institutional anchoring within area-based initiatives.

The chapter further highlights that area-based initiatives are often underpinned by expectations of neighbourhood effects, understood as the influence of collective neighbourhood characteristics such as social capital, social cohesion, and collective efficacy. Research suggests that such characteristics are associated with positive outcomes for children and young people and can be strengthened through sustained investments in meeting places, relational services, participation, and local collaboration. In this perspective, area-based initiatives can be seen as attempts to build the relational and social infrastructure of neighbourhoods. The perspective of relational welfare offers a conceptual framework for understanding why relationships matter for the effectiveness of area-based initiatives.

3.7 Discussion

Four measures and a unifying structure of relationships

In this chapter, we have presented five types of measures that, in different ways, seek to promote social mobility and counteract the negative consequences of growing up in low-income families. The measures vary in structure, design, and target group, but they all rest on a core assumption: that inequality can be compensated for through targeted, high-quality, and relationship-oriented interventions. At the same time, research shows that the category of intervention in itself is not sufficient. Rather, it is the specific characteristics of the interventions – such as quality, continuity, accessibility, and relational mechanisms – that ultimately determine their effectiveness.

The first type of measure concerns what are often described as high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. Research highlights process quality as the key mechanism behind their equalising effect. ECEC becomes effective only when children encounter emotionally available adults, language-rich environments, play-based learning, social structure, stability, and a sense of security. Structural and systemic conditions (staffing, competence, small group sizes, quality assurance) are necessary prerequisites, but it is the interactions and relationships that generate the actual impact. In this way, high-quality ECEC functions as a compensatory measure for children who receive less linguistic, cognitive, and relational stimulation at home.

Over time, such provision can also help reduce poverty and inequality by better preparing children for school.

The second type of measure is whole-school approaches (WSA). These combine structural interventions (e.g., free-of-charge after-school programmes, interdisciplinary teams, school meals), pedagogical measures (homework support, small-group instruction, systematic learning support), and socially supportive initiatives such as social emotional learning (SEL), school-based social workers, and inclusion measures. A WSA is therefore not a single intervention but an overarching framework that creates coherence across multiple compensatory mechanisms. Research indicates that these measures can be effective for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly when they are implemented over time, are well-coordinated, and combine academic and social components.

The third type of measure includes parenting support programmes and more system-oriented models such as family centres and coordinator schemes. Here, we have highlighted three initiatives: 'Nye mønstre' (New patterns), 'Opgang til opgang' (Entrance to entrance) and nurse–family partnership. In all these, the coordinator role acts as a bridge between the family and the support services, helping compensate for the fact that low-income families often have fewer resources and weaker system literacy. If such measures also include a system for capacity-building within the service apparatus, thereby laying the foundation for developing poverty-aware services, this contributes to strengthening the relationships between low-income families and the support system (Gustavsen, 2023).

The fourth type of measure encompasses economic and organisational mechanisms that increase children's participation in leisure activities, such as activity vouchers, leisure passes, and equipment centres. These measures reduce financial barriers, and their effect emerges when children gain access to inclusive environments, stable adults, safe social relationships, and opportunities for mastery. In other words, these interventions function as an entry point to arenas with potentially strong relational and identity-forming mechanisms. In addition to strengthening social bonds and a sense of community, participation in leisure activities can also yield direct cognitive benefits for children and young people. Such experiences may enhance concentration, problem-solving skills, and feelings of mastery – factors that contribute to the development of psychological resilience and learning capacity. Meaningful leisure activities also stimulate the brain through the release of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins. These chemicals are directly associated with feelings of happiness, reward, and a reduced risk of depression and anxiety (Gustavsen, 2023).

The fifth type of measure is area-based initiatives. These differ from the previous four in that they do not target a single arena but rather the totality of children's environments. Area-based initiatives can be understood as the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. In Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, the mesosystem refers to the interactions and linkages between a child's immediate environments – such as family, school, leisure activities, and local services – and is

therefore critical for understanding how coordinated efforts can shape children's everyday lives. Research also shows that relationship-building is one of the most essential features of such initiatives. Through cross-sector coordination, local participation, and the creation of shared meeting places, area-based initiatives aim to strengthen trust, social networks, and collaboration between residents and public services. These relational processes often determine whether measures remain isolated efforts or evolve into a coherent neighbourhood-wide strategy capable of mobilising local resources and supporting children's development.

Quality and relationships as core elements

The review of the five measures suggests that their impact on social mobility is not determined by the type of intervention itself, but by how the measures are designed and implemented. Early childhood education, schools, leisure initiatives, parenting support, and area-based programmes can all generate equalising effects, but only when they are characterised by specific qualities such as strong process quality, integrated and coherent approaches, and well-developed relational components.

A further core dimension of quality across the five measures is the central role of relationships. In different forms – between children and adults, between families and services, and between services and local communities – relationships function as a prerequisite for interventions to connect with families and produce meaningful benefits for children in low-income households. This understanding resonates with the perspective of relational welfare, which views welfare not primarily as benefits or discrete services, but as something generated and sustained through trust, proximity, collaborative practices, and stable bonds between people and institutions (Cottam, 2011; Von Heimburg & Ness, 2021).

Research on relational welfare shows that relationships operate on multiple levels (Lamph et al., 2023). At the individual level, it concerns safe, caring, and available adults – something particularly beneficial for children living with high stress and uncertainty. At the service level, relationships function as a bridge between families and the system. And at the organisational level, strong relationships across services form the basis for coordination, information sharing, and integrated support around the child. This also serves as a counterbalance to vertical governance in the public sector, which often reinforces siloed structures.

Viewed in this light, the perspective of relational welfare helps clarify why the five measures tend to be effective when they succeed. High-quality early childhood education offers a relational safety net for the youngest children. Schools with holistic orientations are marked by secure teacher–student relationships and inclusive learning environments. Leisure activities generate impact when children feel recognised and supported by adult leaders and develop positive peer relationships. Parenting support and coordinator schemes are effective when trust is built over time and when sustained relationships are established both between practitioners and families and between families and the wider service system. Area-based initiatives, in turn, link these efforts by connecting the key arenas in children's everyday lives.

As noted, the quality of the measures is crucial, and relationships form a key part of that quality. Relationships function as a central mechanism of impact, enabling interventions to work as intended. While structural conditions such as funding and organisation are necessary, they are not sufficient. Lasting effects arise only when measures foster stable, trusting, and inclusive relationships between children and adults, families and services, and across the wider system. Relational quality can therefore be viewed as the mechanism that converts solid structures into actual social mobility.

Structure as a prerequisite for relational quality

It is important to emphasise that relationships cannot be regarded as the sole or primary mechanism behind social equalisation (Von Heimburg & Ness, 2021). The Nordic welfare states are fundamentally built on universal economic arrangements such as child benefits, subsidised early childhood education, free schooling, and publicly supported student financing. All these arrangements have historically contributed more to social mobility than most relationally oriented interventions. In this light, relational mechanisms help explain how services make an impact, but they cannot substitute for the foundational role of economic security.

To understand how the welfare system functions as a whole for children and young people in low-income families, it is useful to consider at least three interdependent dimensions: a) economic support schemes that provide material security and reduce stress; b) institutional arrangements – such as ECEC, schools, health clinics, and employment and welfare services – that organise and structure the provision of support; and c) relational mechanisms that concern the quality of interactions between children, parents, and professionals within and across these structures. Seen together, these dimensions illustrate that the five measures discussed in this chapter cannot be understood in isolation. Rather they form part of a wider welfare ecosystem in which economic, structural, and relational conditions must work in concert.

Final reflections

It is reasonable to argue that if families facing difficult living conditions received timely and effective support, both the families themselves and society at large would be spared considerable strain and cost.

A key intervention that should be integrated across all areas discussed is the strengthening of knowledge and competence. Services that work with low-income families must have knowledge about what poor living conditions entail, what socioeconomic stress is, and how to practise in a way that is sensitive to disadvantaged living conditions (Gustavsen, 2023). This includes knowledge about the brain's responses to stress and how such stress can trigger cognitive, psychological, and somatic challenges.

In addition, there is a need to promote evidence-informed practice as a guiding principle for the development and implementation of measures and policy instruments. Evidence-informed practice does not imply a narrow reliance on standardised interventions, but rather a context-sensitive integration of different forms of knowledge. This includes research-based and theoretical knowledge, professional expertise and judgement, as well as the experiences and perspectives of service users. Such an approach allows interventions to be adapted to local conditions and complex family situations, while still being grounded in the best available knowledge.

Equally important is an understanding of what evidence-informed practice requires, and how welfare professionals can and should work in a knowledge-based manner. This entails a continuous commitment by both practitioners and leaders to monitor their own practice and ensure that interventions genuinely produce benefits for the families they are intended to support.

Model photo: Lena Granefeldt / imagebank.sweden.dk

4. Growing up with low income: Children's experiences and strategies

TONE FLØTTEN

Children find themselves in a situation in which they compare themselves with other children on a daily basis. Other children, consciously and unconsciously, may come to see poorer children – who are unable to take part in the same leisure activities, or who are dressed unfashionably or in second-hand clothes – as different, because they stand out from the crowd. This may trigger a process of stigmatisation and exclusion

– Larsen & Müller, 2015, p. 36

4.1 Poverty from a child-centred perspective

Just over twenty years ago, British researcher Tess Ridge published a book titled *Childhood poverty and social exclusion: From a child's perspective* (Ridge, 2002). This book is regarded as a pioneering work in the study of children and young people's own perspectives on growing up in poverty. In this chapter, a 'child perspective' refers to an approach in which children are treated as competent social actors and informants, and where knowledge about childhood conditions is grounded in children's own accounts of experiences, meanings, and priorities. It therefore goes beyond adult assessments of children's needs, and beyond interpreting children's situation solely through parents' resources or household-level indicators.

Until the 1980s, childhood research had been dominated by developmental psychology and adult perspectives (Alanen, 1988; James & Prout, 1990/2015). Children were often treated primarily as objects of socialisation, and research relied largely on parents' or professionals' descriptions rather than on children's own voices. Research on child poverty was similarly dominated by quantitative analyses of household income and parental circumstances, while children themselves were included as informants to a limited extent. Inspired by the new sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990/2015; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Mayall, 2002), Ridge (2002) was among the first to examine poverty systematically as lived and understood by children. She employed child-centred methods to elicit low-income children's own accounts of everyday life, school, and social exclusion.

Ridge's child-centred approach has resonated in more recent research. Listening to children's and young people's experiences is crucial for understanding how income poverty operates in everyday life. Children's experiences cannot simply be inferred from their parents' situation or from statistical income measures. Such sources rarely capture how children interpret their circumstances, including experiences of belonging, shame, or their ability to live what they perceive as a 'normal' childhood. By including children's perspectives, research can illuminate how economic constraints shape friendships, school participation, leisure activities, and self-understanding in ways that are easily overlooked in traditional living-conditions analyses.

Research inspired by the new sociology of childhood shows that children are competent informants who can describe experiences and needs that adults do not always perceive. Children's perspectives therefore provide a more nuanced knowledge base for policymaking and strengthen the potential to develop measures that address real needs and prevent both marginalisation and long-term consequences. Taking children's voices seriously is therefore not merely a methodological choice, but also a matter of rights and democracy. Children and young people have the right to be heard on issues that affect their lives (Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), and their experiences are essential for developing evidence-based policies that work.

In Nordic policy cooperation listening to children and young people and strengthening their voice and participation is presented as part of building a socially sustainable

Nordic region. In the strategy for achieving Vision 2030, social sustainability is linked to inclusion, equality, and social cohesion, and the document states that civil society, especially children and young people, should be given a stronger voice and participation in Nordic cooperation (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020). Maintaining trust and cohesion in the Nordic region is highlighted as a core objective within the same strategic priority, with an emphasis on democracy, inclusion, and non-discrimination.

As this chapter examines children's lived experiences within the wider policy ambitions outlined above, it is necessary to clarify how the report understands child poverty in analytical terms. Child poverty can be defined in different ways and measured using different indicators. It has multiple causes and is associated with consequences that extend beyond income alone. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, this report recognises child poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon. This includes factors such as low household income, material and social deprivation, and children's own experiences of not being able to participate on an equal footing with their peers. Chapter 3 sheds further light on how these various dimensions influence the everyday opportunities available to children. In this chapter, the term 'poverty' is employed in this broader sense.

How can the experiences of children and young people be studied?

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches can be employed to generate knowledge about children's and young people's experiences. In recent decades, a distinct field of research known as child indicators research has emerged based on quantitative data. This research has been driven partly by a stronger children's rights perspective and partly by the new sociology of childhood, which views children as independent social actors (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2007). Researchers can now draw on a wide range of datasets that include child-specific indicators:

- UNICEF, OECD, and WHO have developed large, global indicator systems, such as the OECD Child well-being dashboard and PISA study, UNICEF's Innocenti reports, and WHO's Health behaviour in school-aged children (HBSC). The Children's worlds study is a further example. The European study of living conditions, EU-SILC, contains some indicators of children's living conditions. The Nordic countries are included in these international comparative studies.
- The Nordic Council of Ministers has compiled a joint Nordic indicator set for children and young people in the Nordic Statistics Database. The indicators cover demographics, physical and mental health, family and housing conditions, education and skills, working life, and leisure and culture. Publications such as *Nordic Children and Young People in Figures 2021* (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021) present these indicators in a consolidated form and are used as a knowledge base for both policy and research.

- The countries have developed their own studies that function as data repositories on children's and young people's lives. 'Ungdata' in Norway, Icelandic youth study, 'Børn og unge' in Denmark (Ottosen et al., 2022), 'Ung idag' [young today] in Sweden, and the Finnish 'Youth barometer' are examples of such national studies.

The national (and global) studies provide direct information about the experiences of children and young people based on their own reports, as well as indirect information through register data and statistics, and from studies where parents provide information.

Indicator-based studies are used to varying degrees to shed light on poverty and its consequences. As many of them are based on children's and young people's own experiences and perceptions, the studies vary and differ in the extent to which they contain data that can form the basis for poverty measures. Several studies use the Family Affluence Scale (FAS) as a measure of families' material well-being. FAS is a child-reported composite index originally developed in Scotland and then adapted for use in the HBSC study on health behaviour in school-aged children. The aim of the scale is to capture socioeconomic position through concrete and relatively easy-to-answer questions about household assets and consumption-related opportunities. In its current versions, it typically includes indicators such as car ownership, having one's own bedroom, the number of computers or tablets in the household, the number of bathrooms, and the frequency of family holidays, and it is scored and grouped into affluence categories that can be compared across countries and over time (Currie et al., 2024). Because it relies on tangible items and experiences rather than parental income reports, FAS is often considered particularly useful in surveys of children and adolescents, where standard income measures are unavailable or unreliable.

This index cannot necessarily replace a traditional income poverty measure, since it captures material affluence and relative household resources rather than income, consumption needs, or the ability to meet necessities. It is also sensitive to cross-national differences in consumption patterns and in the diffusion of consumer goods, which can affect the meaning of specific items. Studies do however suggest that the Family Affluence Scale provides a good reflection of material affluence at an aggregated, national level (Boyce et al., 2006), while there is greater uncertainty as to how well the indicator captures poverty (Corell et al., 2021; Brook et al., 2024).

In other studies, responses from children and young people are combined with register data to create economic indicators based on parents' income. However, there are relatively few analyses that use these data to analyse low income or poverty per se. For instance, in the main reports from 'Ung idag' in Sweden, the Icelandic youth study, the Danish 'Youth analysis' (DUF), or the Finnish 'Youth barometer', low income is not used as a background variable to explain other outcomes.

In addition to the quantitative indicator studies, qualitative approaches are used to elicit children's and young people's own perspectives. Methods such as in-depth

interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and child-friendly techniques – such as drawings, photo diaries, and creative exercises – enable children to express experiences and perspectives that often fail to be captured by standardised study instruments.

Such methods make it possible to explore stigma, shame, social exclusion, strategies for concealing deprivation, and children's and young people's own understandings of what is experienced as deprivation or as a deviation from what is considered normal. Interviewing children who live in low-income families nevertheless raises certain ethical concerns, particularly because discussions on economic deprivation may touch on sensitive issues and evoke discomfort or sensations of inadequacy. Nor is it a given that children and young people are always aware of their family's actual financial situation. Research shows that parents often go to great lengths to shield their children from financial difficulties (Thorød, 2006). However, as the chapter will illustrate, the degree to which children are shielded varies, and many children are aware of the family's financial situation.

Although qualitative studies provide rich and valid information about children's and young people's own experiences, it can be difficult to determine whether these experiences are specific to children in low-income families unless interviews also include children who do not live with economic deprivation. Some research studies and NGO reports in which children's voices are included have therefore also conducted interviews with children who do not experience income poverty. This provides an important comparative perspective (Hakovirta & Kallio, 2015; BLD, 2015). Hearing what children and young people more generally think about poverty is also significant for those children who grow up in poverty. For instance, children's views on the causes of poverty can affect how they relate to poor children. It also provides some indication about the position of poor children in society (Hakovirta & Kallio, 2015).

As the basis for this chapter, we have compiled Nordic research articles and reports, as well as reports from voluntary organisations in which children's and young people's views on various aspects of poverty are documented. We have primarily focused on publications issued after 2015. The studies referenced differ in terms of sampling methods, sample sizes, research methods, and measures of poverty. We do not provide an account of this in each individual example; instead, we refer the reader to the respective studies for more detailed descriptions.

In what follows, we will first present children's and young people's experiences of how they perceive their material and social living conditions, as well as how low-income affects relationships within the family. We then summarise what the literature says about children's and young people's strategies for coping with economic constraints. Finally, we comment on the importance of safeguarding children's opportunities for participation and genuine influence.

4.2 Children's experiences related to material deprivation

Economic deprivation often manifests itself through children's material living conditions. It is well documented in research that children who grow up in low-income families are more likely than other children to experience various forms of deprivation. The quantitative data shows a clear pattern.

EU-SILC data (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions) for Norway illustrates how economic deprivation affects children's access to basic necessities. Six per cent of low-income families could not afford for their children to eat a daily meal of fruit/vegetables or meat/fish, compared with one per cent of all families with children. Similar proportions (six versus one per cent) reported that they could not afford to buy new clothes for their children. The study also shows that low-income families are less likely than others to be able to afford the equipment needed for indoor and outdoor activities, and that a greater proportion of children in these families lack a safe place to play (With & Thorsen, 2018).

The Danish study 'Børn og unge – Velfærd og trivsel' [Children and young people – Welfare and well-being] includes an indicator of low material affluence. In 2021, seven per cent of all children and young people (aged 3–19) experienced low material affluence, compared to 34 per cent of children in families with incomes below a poverty line set at 50 per cent of median. Three per cent of children aged 7–19 did not have a quiet place to do their homework, compared to seven per cent of children in poor families. Renting accommodation was also far more common among low-income families (69 versus 37 per cent). (Ottosen et al., 2022).

Save the Children Finland regularly conducts the 'Children's voices' study. In the 2025 study, 19 per cent of children and young people who rated their family's financial situation as poor reported that they did not receive sufficient and varied food at home. It must be noted that children's perceptions of their own material situation and their family's income may be influenced by their overall satisfaction with life (Sletten et al., 2004; Haanpää et al., 2019). The corresponding figure among children who consider their family's financial situation to be good was four per cent (Save the Children Finland, 2025).

Several organisations in the Nordic region report increased demand for food distribution from families with children, particularly following the rise in prices from 2022 onwards. Both Stadsmissionen in Sweden and the Danish Food Bank have recorded an increase in families with children seeking food aid (City Church Mission Sweden, 2019; Fødevarebanken, 2023). A Norwegian study showed that half of the people receiving food aid in May 2023 had children living at home (Fløtten et al., 2023).

Qualitative studies provide a more detailed insight into how material shortages can shape everyday life. The examples below illustrate how lack of access to necessities can constitute a burden for children and young people in the Nordic region (see the cited reports for a description of the methodology):

I can't ask my parents for money like other people my age do. I must use the money I've earned myself, and sometimes I even have to put the money towards buying food (Save the Children Finland, 2025, p. 19).

Sometimes we don't have breakfast at home and I'm hungry at school. I'm so hungry that I can't think. (Girl, aged 16) (Odenbring, 2018, p. 853).

Potatoes cost money, rice costs money, meat costs money at home. Food costs money, kind of thing. There's less food on the table, my parents need to cut back on their spending. They might go round wearing torn clothes themselves so that they can give their children new clothes. (Girl, aged 15–17) (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 33).

I remember worrying that we wouldn't have any food in the fridge when I was little. My mum doesn't say much, but I noticed it. (Voksne for barn, 2021, p. 18).

My parents don't have a lot of money. So, I feel guilty every time I do something, like having a bath or putting too many clothes in the wash (so that we end up doing more washing and using more water). I never put much water in the bath. But the problem is that I've been using loads of water over the last few weeks. I've had a bath every day, for example. So I just feel guilty about it. What should I do? How should I talk to them about it? (Girl, aged 13) (Børns vilkår, 2024).

These statements illustrate how economic deprivation can affect children's everyday lives when it comes to food, clothing, and household expenses. At the same time, statements from adults reflecting on their childhood show that the children's parents adopted strategies for making a lot out of a little, and for shielding their children from this reality:

We couldn't afford much, but my mum always made sure we had food in the fridge. That gave us a sense of security, in a way (Woman, aged 22) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019).

My mum was really good at making a lot out of a little, she could make a big lasagne and freeze it so we could have it over several days (Woman, aged 27) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019).

Children's understanding of poverty

The fact that poverty in the Nordic region can be expressed in terms of basic shortages such as lack of food does not necessarily align with what other children and young understand as poverty problems. Hakovirta & Kallio (2015) interviewed 30 Finnish children about poverty. The children were not selected from low-income groups; based on the FAS, they belonged to middle-income households. These children did not perceive poverty in Finland as a lack of necessities. They did not believe that

people who were poor lacked things like clothing, accommodation, mobile phones, or equipment for participating in leisure activities. However, they did believe that what poor children had might well be outdated or even broken.

> *The ones who don't have a lot of money for example always wear the same clothes even if they're sometimes dirty and so forth and if they have a phone then it looks a little cheaper and it might be a little broken, and then the ones who have money always wear different clothes and if someone comes to pick them up from school, the car's humongous and some kind of designer car and whatnot and then they have these more expensive clothes. (Boy, aged 15) (Hakovirta & Kallio, 2015, p. 325).*

In studies conducted by Save the Children Norway, children often describe poverty by referring to other parts of the world or as a lack of opportunity to participate, rather than as a lack of basic necessities:

> *When you think of poverty, you think of poor children in Africa. We forget that it happens here at home too. We mostly have clothes, food, and places to live in. That's great, but it doesn't necessarily mean that people's living conditions are all that good. (Girl, aged 15) (BLD, 2015).*

> *If people are poor in Norway, I think they have a house but can't afford to take part in activities, or they don't have enough clothes. And if they want to go cycling, you can't afford to buy a bike. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 10).*

At the same time, children are aware that some of their peers don't have enough food:

> *We can see the difference in the food. Some people bring loads of food for lunch, and some don't. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 17).*

> *A friend of mine didn't bring any food with her for a whole week, so the other students had to give her food. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 17).*

> *I was on a trip. I'd brought two sandwiches with me, and one girl never used to bring food or fruit to school. And I've shared my fruit at breaktime several times. On the trip, I gave her a sandwich because she didn't have any food with her, not even a water bottle (...) (Girl, aged 17) (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 16).*

A study of children and young people in the Faroe Islands shows a similar pattern: Children describe specific shortages, including food shortages, but rarely use the term poverty. Rather, they state directly how they perceive the situation (Barnaverkætlanin, 2025).

Overall, the quantitative data show that children in low-income families are at significantly higher risk of material deprivation than other children, also in terms of

basic needs. However, this does not apply to the majority of children in this group. Most children living in low-income families do not report severe material deprivation. The qualitative studies show that children's and young people's understanding of poverty varies: Some link poverty to the absence of essentials, while others understand poverty to be a relative phenomenon linked to consumption, participation, and social comparison. This duality – between risk and variation in actual living conditions, and between absolute and relative understandings – is consistent with the broader discussions on how poverty should be understood in Nordic welfare societies (see chapter 1).

4.3 Social relationships

Good relationships with friends and family are fundamental to children's and young people's well-being and mental health (Haanpää et al., 2019). Several studies show that children in vulnerable positions, including children in low-income families, report lower mental and social well-being on average than other children (Lausten et al., 2025; Ottosen et al., 2022).

At the same time, children's own voices show that positive relationships depend not only on the people surrounding them, but also on the opportunity to participate, to contribute, and to present themselves as other children and young people do in interactions with their peers. Children describe how their financial situations become a framework for friendships and how minor differences can have a major impact on everyday life.

Self-esteem and life satisfaction

The Danish 'Børn og unge' [Children and young people] study shows that children and young people generally report a high level of life satisfaction, but that satisfaction is lower among children growing up in poor families (Ottosen et al., 2022). Finnish schoolchildren also emphasise the importance of their financial situation. Haanpää et al. (2019) find that both social relationships and the family's financial situation explain variations in children's perceived life satisfaction.

This is consistent with findings from the Finnish Children's Voices' study (Save the Children Finland, 2025), where children in families with low self-reported income are significantly less likely than others to say they are happy with themselves as they are. In the Icelandic youth study, children who rate their family's financial situation as poor are more likely to report low life satisfaction (Directorate of Health, 2025).

Qualitative studies provide a more direct insight into how poverty is perceived by children themselves. Several of them describe low self-esteem, shame, and feelings of being less worthy when they are unable to participate on an equal footing with others:

> *You can end up feeling worthless. Unimportant. You might be bullied because you don't have what others have. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 9).*

> *You have negative thoughts about yourself, or start putting everyone else down because you feel bad about yourself. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 9).*

Here, children themselves elaborate on how economic deprivation affects their self-image – to a degree that is often not fully captured in study data.

Relationships with peers

Family finances affect not only self-esteem, but also children's ability to develop and maintain friendships. Quantitative studies from Finland, Norway, and Sweden indicate that children and young people in economically disadvantaged families often have limited social interaction, fewer close friends, and a higher risk of being bullied (Sletten et al., 2004; Sletten, 2010; Hjalmarsson & Mood, 2015). In Denmark, the 'Børn og unge' study shows that poor children report being bullied more frequently than others (Ottosen et al., 2022, p. 115).

That said, it is important to emphasise the fact that most children living in low-income families do *not* report significant social problems. Nevertheless, there is clearly an increased risk, and the children's own descriptions indicate why.

> *I would never bring home friends, because it's so embarrassing that we have so few things compared to others. (Save the Children Sweden, 2013, p. 25).*

> *I remember always trying to come up with excuses so that they wouldn't see how we lived. But I did have visitors sometimes, and they'd ask me why we always hang out in the basement, can't you show us the whole house? What they didn't know was that we were only renting the basement (Girl, aged 18) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019, p. 18).*

Children who themselves are not living in low-income families recognise the mechanisms:

> *People who don't have much money don't want to bring anyone home, they make excuses and that kind of thing. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 10).*

These experiences illustrate how financial strain, as children experience it, can translate into everyday strategies of concealment (avoiding visits, making excuses) that in turn reduce opportunities for friendship and participation.

Participation in leisure activities

Being able to participate in leisure activities is important for children and young people. Leisure activities are an important arena for social belonging, friendship, and a sense of achievement for children and young people. International research emphasises the fact that such participation strengthens both social capital and health (Putnam, 1995; Coleman, 1988).

In Nordic debates on poverty, the fact that children from low-income families participate less in leisure activities than other children is highlighted as a significant concern. The strong desire for all children to be able to participate has been the starting point for local and national initiatives to reduce the financial barriers to participation. Examples of national initiatives include the Norwegian grant scheme for the inclusion of children and young people, the Finnish model for leisure activities where all primary school pupils receive a free leisure programme linked to the school day, or the Swedish fritidskort [leisure card]. There are also many local initiatives, such as the leisure pass [fritidspas] scheme in Danish municipalities or the municipal recreational card in Iceland.

Additionally, local clubs and associations have their own schemes for including children from low-income families. Such schemes may, for example, be fully or partially funded by organisations or foundations.

Despite all these programmes, there is a clear social gradient in all the Nordic countries in terms of participation.

- The Finnish Children's Voices' study (Save the Children Finland, 2025, p. 2) describes how the family's financial situation has a significant impact on children's and young people's participation in leisure activities. Just over a quarter of children in low-income families reported being able to participate in leisure activities in the same way as their peers. Almost half felt that it was generally too expensive for them to have a hobby, and they either had to give up their hobbies or find some alternative activities that were free.
- The Swedish 'Ung idag' [Young today] study (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2021) shows that four out of ten young people do not participate in leisure activities because of the costs (this figure applies to young people in general).
- The Danish 'Børn og unge' study contains no specific questions about leisure activities, but there is no difference between children from poor families and other children when asked whether they have been to a cinema, theatre, water park, or sporting event in the past year (Ottosen et al., 2022).
- Analyses of 'Ungdata' (Norway) show that there is a clear social gradient in leisure participation in organisations, clubs, teams, or associations. The proportion of pupils in Years 8 to 10 who say they participate varies from 37 per cent among those in the lowest socioeconomic group to 74 per cent among those with the highest socioeconomic status. Moreover, young people with the lowest socioeconomic status are far more likely than others to find that their parents are unable to pay for the activities in which they wish to participate (Ekspertgruppe om barn i fattige familier, 2023).

Children and young people who participate in the various organisations' studies perceive being unable to participate in leisure activities as a problem:

> *We had a club at school, but you had to pay 25 kroner to get in, right, and 25 kroner might not seem like much, but it was too much for us. So sometimes I guilt-tripped my friends into paying an extra 25 kroner so that I could join in (Norwegian Red Cross, 2022, p. 28)*
>
> *I noticed it in Year 4, when my friends did gymnastics and dance classes. I asked if I could join, but we couldn't afford it. My little sister was given priority, so she got to join the Scouts (Woman, aged 21) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019, p. 15).*
>
> *They feel more excluded, and children who don't take part in leisure activities end up being left out, but it also becomes a kind of division – the kids who take part in a leisure activity end up forming a kind of group, while those who don't end up being pushed to the side (Save the Children Sweden, 2025, p. 21).*

Children associate lack of participation with exclusion and passivity:

> *Otherwise, this results in less physical activity; people just stay at home, get bored, end up being less fit, they might feel left out if their friends go and they cannot afford it themselves (Save the Children Sweden, 2025, p. 21).*
>
> *(...) Sport costs money, youth activities keep children in the suburbs away from crime. So if young people do not have the money to spend on leisure activities, this makes it easier for them to end up on the road to crime, because they have nothing else to keep them away from it. (Save the Children Sweden, 2025, p. 21).*

They are also very clear about what would be needed to increase participation:

> *If leisure activities were free, many children would go there when their parents were working instead of staying home on their own or hanging around outside. (Save the Children Sweden, 2025, p. 21).*
>
> *You feel left out, because everyone in the class has an activity they go to, but we can't afford it. It makes me sad. So it should be free (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 20).*
>
> *The most important thing is having a youth club that doesn't cost anything and that provides food. Then we can hang out with our friends for free (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 32).*

Findings across Nordic qualitative studies show that financial circumstances shape children's social lives in ways that are not always captured by traditional indicators. Children's own voices paint a clear picture: financial barriers limit self-esteem, social participation, and the opportunity to be part of the community. Leisure activities,

friendships, and everyday life are shaped by what the family can afford, and this creates both practical and symbolic boundaries. Overall, children's experiences indicate that social participation cannot be understood independently of economic frameworks, and that efforts to strengthen life chances for children and young people must be based on their own descriptions of what stands in the way of living regular lives as children and young people.

4.4 Family relationships

What is known as the family stress hypothesis (Conger et al., 1994) describes how financial difficulties create stress for parents, which in turn affects parents' mental health and the quality of their parenting, and thus children's development. The model has strong empirical support and is used internationally to explain how socio-economic status affects children's well-being and life chances (Conger et al., 2010). Research from the Nordic countries indicates that these mechanisms also apply here.

Weakened relationships and reduced sense of belonging

Quantitative data show that on average, children in economically vulnerable families report weaker relationships with their parents than other children. In the Danish 'Børn og unge' study, fewer than half of children from poor families say they have a strong relationship with their parents, compared to two-thirds of children from non-poor families. Almost all children report that they feel safe at home, but the proportion who do not feel safe at home is higher among children living in low-income families (20 versus 6 per cent) (Ottosen et al., 2022, pp. 100 and 106).

Icelandic data show that children who perceive their family's financial situation to be poor are less likely than other children to report receiving the emotional support and help they need from their parents (Directorate of Health, 2025).

Parents' attempts at shielding – and children's awareness of the situation

Parents' accounts in qualitative studies suggest two recurring strategies for managing poverty in relation to children. First, many parents try to shield children from financial concerns by treating money as an adult matter and avoiding detailed discussions about the household's economic situation (Näsman & Fernqvist, 2022). Second, parents often prioritise children's needs and participation over their own, for example by cutting back on their own consumption to provide school-related items, clothing, or opportunities for leisure activities that help children 'fit in' with their peers (Thorød, 2006; 2012).

Nevertheless, many children and young people describe being aware that their family has limited financial resources, both through their parents' behaviour and through specific shortages. In a study from Save the Children Sweden, children describe reading the situation through their parents' anxiety, priorities, and body language:

> *I can tell they're short of money because they're worried and struggling to pay the rent. You don't go to training sessions and things like that very often. I can just tell from their faces, too. (Boy, aged 14) (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 13).*

> *You just notice things in lots of different ways. So, for example, if a child wants to buy new clothes, you realise, you can tell by the parents that they can't, because they have to pay the rent and buy food and stuff. (Girl, aged 12) (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 13).*

Children in Norwegian studies express the same views:

> *Parents talk about it all the time. Children do understand! And you can hear – if they talk about it in the bedroom. The way they talk to each other. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 13).*

These quotations suggest that children's understanding of their family's financial situation is often more accurate than parents realise. Recognising that parents are struggling causes children to worry about their parents. In the Finnish study 'Children's Voices' (Save the Children Finland, 2025), 42 per cent of children in low-income families (self-reported) say they are worried about their parents' ability to manage their financial situation, while just 13 per cent of children from high-income families express similar concerns. Thorød's (2012) study suggests that children actively shield their parents by refraining from expressing their material or social needs.

A further point that needs to be mentioned is that there is not necessarily always alignment between parents' and children's perceptions of financial strain. Studies of young people in Oslo show that children and young people may report a different perception of the family's financial situation to that of their parents, and that these differences may partly be due to children relating to different reference groups than adults (Pettersen & Sletten, 2018). While parents assess their financial situation by considering their own life experience and knowledge of the family's overall financial situation, children are more likely to compare themselves with their peers in the local area, particularly in areas where most people are fairly affluent (Pettersen & Sletten, 2018). This means that children may feel poorer than their parents perceive themselves to be, or conversely, less poor than the objective financial situation suggests, depending on what is normal for the people around them. This finding is related to the observation that shielding does not always work in the way parents believe. Children interpret the situation on their own terms, even when parents attempt to downplay their concerns.

Consequences for family atmosphere and interaction

In line with the family stress hypothesis, children report that financial strain affects the atmosphere in the home. Several describe increased irritability, tension, and conflict when the family's financial situation is under pressure:

> *The atmosphere at home may become bad if the family does not have much money. Or people become irritated more easily because they do not have the things they need. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 13).*

> *The worst thing is that there is a lot of tension at home. (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 13).*

Children and young people who themselves are not living in low income families may perceive how economic constraints shapes the situation in their friends' families:

> *Instead of talking to the kids and keeping an eye on them, they're so stressed about just surviving. They focus on getting through to the next month. (Boy, aged 20 about other parents in the local area) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019, p. 26).*

These quotations are consistent with international research showing that financial stress can reduce parents' emotional availability and increase the risk of conflict within the family.

However, a recent Norwegian research project on parenting practices adds nuance to this overview. In the study 'Foreldrepraksis i Norge' [Parenting practices in Norway], researchers found that Norwegian parents consistently report parenting styles characterised by support and warmth, across socioeconomic backgrounds (Jessen et al., 2024). The analyses also show a clear tendency for supportive, emotionally socialising parenting practices to be more common among parents with lower incomes or parents who are outside the labour market than among parents with high incomes and full-time jobs. Similar, albeit slightly weaker, patterns are found for parenting styles characterised by warmth and autonomy (Jessen et al., 2024). The researchers point to parental stress as a key explanatory factor: high stress levels are associated with more dismissive and chaotic parenting styles and more use of coercion; and this in turn relates to a lower quality of life and more behavioural problems in children, regardless of income level (Jessen et al., 2024).

In combination with qualitative studies showing that many low-income parents make significant efforts to shield the children and maintain good relationships with them, the findings can be interpreted as meaning that some low-income parents attempt to compensate for economic deprivation through a particularly high degree of emotional support and presence. This provides a more complex picture than the family stress hypothesis alone would suggest. Financial difficulties can contribute to anxiety, worry, and strain within the family, but they also trigger counterstrategies where parents consciously invest in their relationships with their children.

4.5 Health

Social inequalities in health are substantial and persistent among both adults and children, and with respect to both mental and physical health (Marmot & Bell, 2012; Bøe et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2014; Ahlborg et al., 2017; Bekken et al., 2018; Elstad et al., 2022). One of the most consistent findings in research on children growing up in income poor families is that they are at greater risk of mental and physical health problems than other children. Low income can affect children's health in several ways. Firstly, financial resources can directly determine whether parents can afford healthy and sufficient food, good living conditions, participation in health-promoting activities, and necessary healthcare services. Secondly, financial difficulties can affect health indirectly through increased parental stress, for example (cf. the family stress hypothesis).

The following are examples of studies that confirm social differences in health among children and young people:

- A study of 5,781 Bergen children aged 11–13 found a clear inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and mental health across all symptom dimensions. Poor family finances predicted both a higher level of mental health problems and an increased likelihood of receiving a psychiatric diagnosis (Bøe et al., 2012).
- A study that includes data from all the Nordic countries shows a clear correlation between parents' financial stress and mental health problems in children aged 4–16, emphasising the importance of relative deprivation and income inequality as determinants of mental health (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2016).
- A review article documents a persistent social gradient in overweight and obesity among children in the Nordic countries. Children from families with a low socioeconomic position have a higher prevalence of obesity; and the gradient becomes steeper with age for girls, while it increases for boys in late adolescence (Rasmussen et al., 2014).
- A Nordic study of chronic health conditions shows a clear social gradient for all diagnostic categories. For instance, the prevalence of asthma is higher among children with parents with low levels of education, and eczema is more common among children from working-class families than among children from higher social strata (Grøholt et al., 2002).

Studies in which children and young people themselves report on their health also show clear differences according to family financial situation:

- In a Nordic study of self-reported health among more than 30,000 young people aged 11, 13, and 15, the risk of reporting poor health was about twice as high among young people with poor family finances as among those with good finances (Torsheim et al., 2018). In this study, financial circumstances were measured using the Family Affluence Scale (FAS).
- In the Danish 'Børn og unge' study, children and young people in poor families are more likely than others to report long-term illness or complaints, poor health, obesity, mental health problems, and eating disorders (Ottosen et al., 2022). Another Danish study found that young people from lower occupational classes report low life satisfaction more frequently than young people from higher occupational classes (Holstein et al., 2020).
- A Finnish study of school students in Years 8 and 9 shows clear socioeconomic differences in anxiety and depression (Kaltiala et al., 2023).
- The Norwegian 'Ungdata' studies show that young people from families with low socioeconomic status are less satisfied with their own health and more often have physical and mental health problems than young people from families with more resources (Bakken et al., 2016; Sletten, 2015).

Results such as these can be found in a number of studies (see, for example, Hyggen et al., 2018 for an overview).

The qualitative studies of children's experiences of low income contain fewer statements that directly address health. This may be because health is perceived as a sensitive topic, so children and young people are rarely asked about it, and they themselves rarely raise their own health situation in conversations about finances. The lack of qualitative studies of how children and young people perceive their own health considering the family's financial situation indicates that there is a need for more research to help us understand how financial situation affects health.

4.6 Social exclusion and shame

Above, we saw that children and young people living in economically disadvantaged circumstances rarely talk about their own mental and physical health. This can be understood in light of how low income interferes with social relationships and self-understanding. When children experience exclusion – at school, in their free time, or in everyday situations with their peers – it can be difficult to talk about situations that are perceived as vulnerable.

Experiences of social exclusion and shame are well-documented aspects of perceptions of poverty, as research among adults shows (Walker, 2014; Gubrium & Lødemel, 2015). These experiences can also have an impact on children and young people, contributing to topics such as health, participation, and personal needs being downplayed or left unsaid. International research suggests that children and young people may experience similar processes of devaluation, social categorisation, and feeling less worthy than others because of economic deprivation (Ridge, 2002, 2011). These studies indicate that the mechanisms that create shame and stigma among adults, such as the perception of being unable to participate on an equal footing with peers or lacking what is regarded as socially expected, may also operate in childhood.

Experiencing shame can have a serious impact on the welfare of children and young people. Shame affects how they see themselves, how they relate to others, and how willing they are to ask for help when they need it. Shame erodes self-confidence and self-esteem and can make children feel they are not as good as others. It can make it difficult for them to open up because they feel afraid or embarrassed to talk about what they are struggling with. Moreover, shame can lead to isolation in that children distance themselves from friends and activities, which increases the risk of problems with mental health.

In a Finnish study, researchers investigated the relationship between poverty and stigma in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Vuorenlinna et al., 2023). They were concerned with both perceived stigma (that is, whether children experienced exclusion) and internalised stigma (that is, whether children expressed a sense of shame, guilt, or inferiority). Their conclusion was that both subjective poverty (families struggling to make ends meet) and material deprivation (lacking common necessities and activities) are strongly associated with higher levels of both perceived and internalised stigma. These findings remain robust even when controlling for other socioeconomic and psychosocial factors. The correlation is particularly strong between internalised stigma and subjective poverty, while material deprivation has a slightly stronger impact on perceived stigma. The study concludes that poverty acts as an important driver of shame and stigma among Finnish children, even in a Nordic welfare state with relatively low levels of poverty.

Qualitative studies from Finland, Norway, and Sweden confirm that children growing up in low income families can associate poverty with shame and stigma. Children

report experiences of teasing and exclusion and say that they develop strategies to hide the family's financial situation. For instance, they may sometimes distance themselves from communities to avoid revealing that they are unable to afford the same things as others. Lacking material goods, such as clothing or equipment for leisure activities, can lead to social stigmatisation, making it safer for them to distance themselves and avoid situations that would highlight their income situation (Harju & Thorød, 2011; Fernqvist, 2012; Odenbring, 2018).

Some children and young people describe feelings of shame and inferiority quite directly.

> *There's mostly shame involved, but also fear (Save the Children Finland, 2025, p. 24).*
>
> *It's embarrassing, and you feel ashamed. People might look at you (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 10).*
>
> *I'm open with my friends now about the fact I don't have much money, but I'm so ashamed that I talk about it as little as possible (Voksne for Barn, 2020, p. 12).*
>
> *Everything is so embarrassing! It's embarrassing to have no money, it's embarrassing to lie to friends, it's embarrassing to talk about how I feel, and it's embarrassing when people are sympathetic. It's embarrassing no matter what I do, and I feel like I'm worth less than everyone else (Voksne for Barn, 2020, p. 41).*

Both quantitative and qualitative studies suggest that shame and social exposure play an important role in children's and young people's experiences of poverty. Nevertheless, we still know relatively little about the extent of shame and stigma among children and the ways in which they are expressed. Most studies of stigma have been conducted among adults, and only a limited number of studies have systematically shed light on how children themselves perceive and cope with such feelings. Thus, there is still a lack of knowledge about the extent to which poverty triggers stigmatising experiences for children, how this is expressed in their daily lives, and its consequences for their social participation and well-being.

4.7 Children's strategies

Parents develop many strategies for coping with low income, and qualitative studies show that parents go to great lengths to protect their children (Thorød, 2006). For instance, a Swedish study of families experiencing economic hardship comments on how parents put their children's needs before their own, and the needs of younger children before those of older ones (Harju, 2008).

As poverty can be difficult to talk about and is often hidden, many children and young people develop strategies to help them cope with the situation: within the family, at school, among friends, and in relation to leisure activities. Adjusting in order to cope with the situation involves exercising agency. Such strategies can be understood as ways of creating control, predictability, and social belonging in an everyday life shaped by financial constraints. Research has shown that the extent to which children perceive a sense of agency influences how poverty affects them (Ridge, 2002; Van der Hoek, 2005; Harju, 2008; Fernquist, 2012), so these strategies may be appropriate on many levels.

A distinction can be made between active and reactive strategies for coping with limited family finances (Harju, 2008). We have not identified any quantitative studies of the types of strategies used by children and young people to cope with poverty, but reports from voluntary organisations provide examples of both types of strategies. However, these strategies can impose significant burdens, requiring children to take on disproportionate amounts of responsibility or withdrawing from social arenas, for example. They may also come at a cost, increasing stress, feelings of guilt, or social withdrawal, for instance.

By employing active strategies, children and young people attempt to influence their own scope for manoeuvre. For instance, they might save money, refrain from asking parents for money, ask for things well in advance so that their parents can plan, or buy things cheaply or second-hand. The following quotations illustrate how children refrain from asking their parents for money:

> *I've never asked. I'm ashamed about asking my parents for money, I've never done it. So, because of that, I've always felt real pressure to get a job as soon as I was old enough (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 14).*

> *If your parents don't have a lot of money, if you want to ask for something, you end up feeling quite guilty (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 14).*

Children and young people may also endeavour to contribute to the family finances themselves, or save to buy the things they want:

> *I realised this when I was just six. We didn't have enough food, and our clothes were full of holes. I remember me and my little brother chopping wood and selling it. I remember we earned 1,000 kroner. My little brother and I went down to the shop and bought bread rolls, they cost a krona each. Then we knew we'd have money for breakfast and packed lunches for a little while. (Girl, aged 19) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019, p. 15).*

> *It's normal for teenagers who have summer jobs to give their parents the first money they earn because they feel sorry for their parents. It's actually very normal.' (Girl) (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 14).*

> *This business with clothes has really shaped me. I was so embarrassed. I remember the first time I bought branded clothing, I bought a hoodie. I saved for almost a year and it cost me 1000 kroner. I wore that hoodie every day that year in Year 9, and I washed it more or less every night. That made me feel like I fitted in more. (Boy, aged 17) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019, p. 20).*

> *You might say things that aren't quite true so that you don't get teased or bullied. Like, 'we didn't bother going on holiday this year, we stayed at home' (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 10).*

> *We were going on one of those White Bus trips [i.e. school study trip that follows the route and history of the WWII White Buses rescue missions, helping students learn about the Holocaust and the war through visits to memorial sites and museums]. We were supposed to sell tins of biscuits for 60 kroner, but we sold them for 100 kroner instead. That gave us a bit of pocket money for the trip (Man, 21) (Church City Mission Norway, 2019, p. 23).*

Children also describe strategies for dealing with school lunches, school trips, and extracurricular activities to reduce the risk of revealing the family's financial situation (Odenbring, 2018).

> *I told them I couldn't go on the class trip, but in reality, we didn't have the money to buy the things I needed to take (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 16).*

Not all children have the opportunity or energy to actively influence the situation. Unlike active strategies, where children and young people try to find solutions so they can have the kind of consumption they want, reactive strategies involve accepting the limits and either waiting for things to get better or pretending not to care about having what other children have.

> *If you're part of a poor family, you can't think about yourself. You must think about your brothers and sisters first – they need packed lunches and have to go to school. You can't really think about yourself (Save the Children Norway, 2020, p. 13).*
>
> *You're at home. That can also lead to problems – well, not problems exactly, but children find it a bit harder to socialise with others. Because you're at home all the time and only go out when it's time for school (Boy, aged 17–19) (Save the Children Sweden, 2024, p. 19).*
>
> *Luckily, there was a group of people at school who were against designer labels. We wore second-hand clothes from Fretex or hand-me-downs and thought the others were just superficial (Woman, aged 27) (Church City Mission, 2019, p. 20).*
>
> *One thing I'm very grateful to my parents for, although I wasn't back then, was that they saved a lot of money by not buying clothes or food or the latest mobile phone. I didn't get … I've always inherited phones from my parents. But they spent loads of money on cultural … I was allowed to try everything I wanted to because … well …, I wasn't very grateful then, I didn't realise then, but I see it now, and it's given me more than a mobile phone. That would've been broken and destroyed a long time ago, wouldn't it? So that's given me so much. It's taught me how to learn, even though I can't dance now, I can't do the splits any more (laughs). It's made me a richer person, you could say. In my head (Red Cross, 2022, pp. 24–25).*

The quotations highlighted here illustrate the fact that children and young people apply different strategies to help them cope with the economic deprivation they experience. However, these quotations are merely examples, selected to illustrate points. Save the Children Sweden (2024) arrived at the following conclusion:

> *The strategy highlighted most by children and young people to whom we have spoken is that they adapt their stated needs to the family's financial situation, and that they take responsibility for helping out financially at home as far as they can (p. 14).*

The conclusion by Harju (2008) is as follows:

> *The most crucial strategy for children is to use their own money above all for their own consumption, but also for the household's shared consumption (p. 131).*

Although these are important findings from the qualitative studies, we cannot know how common it is for children and young people in low-income families to develop strategies, or which strategies are most prominent. Nor do we know whether there are any systematic differences between children and young people in terms of the types of

strategies that they develop. For instance, how do age, family composition, place of residence, ethnic background or networks, and other available resources impact the choice of strategies? And how do different strategies affect how children cope as they grow up? In other words, there are many unanswered questions about what children and young people are doing to tackle poverty and what consequences their strategies have in the short and long term.

The qualitative studies conducted in other countries point in the same direction as the Nordic ones: children and young people develop different strategies for coping with limited financial resources. This suggests that such adaptations are not unique to the Nordic countries, but are part of more general ways in which children relate to poverty. Ridge (2002) and Van der Hoek (2005) show how children and young people actively try to make their everyday lives appear as normal as possible and to maintain a sense of belonging to their peers, despite limited resources. In this research, children are understood as active agents who interpret their situation and develop strategies to cope with economic deprivation, rather than as passive victims of their parents' income situation.

4.8 From child-centred perspective to child participation

So far, we have shown how growing up in low-income families affects children's everyday lives and their opportunities to participate in social communities. Documenting children's own experiences and the strategies they develop provides valuable knowledge for decision-makers and for professionals working with children affected by income poverty. At the same time, there is a considerable distance between adopting a child-centred perspective in poverty research and ensuring that children and young people have genuine influence over decisions that shape their lives. This section therefore examines what participation means in a Nordic context, the ambitions expressed in legislation and professional practice, and the ways in which meaningful participation can challenge established structures.

Children's right to participation is firmly rooted in the Nordic welfare states. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated or given precedence in all the Nordic countries. For instance, child protection legislation, social services legislation, and the education sector emphasise that children's voices must be heard, and they must be given influence in matters that concern them (Haugli et al., 2019).

Participation is also embedded in statutory participatory bodies across the Nordic countries. For example, Norwegian municipalities are required to establish a youth council (or another representative body for young people) (The Local Government Act §5-12), and Finnish municipalities must establish a youth council or a similar youth influence group (Municipalities Act, section 26). In Iceland, the Youth Act (No. 70/2007) similarly provides for local youth councils that advise municipal governments on youth issues. In the education sector, pupils' influence is likewise supported through legally

anchored structures such as student councils, for instance in Denmark's Folkeskole Act (§46) and Sweden's Education Act (Chapter 4, §9).

Despite strong normative grounding, as well as legal and institutional structures for participation, research shows that the principle of participation is applied unevenly. In Sweden, studies of social services have shown that children's views are often, but not always, systematically obtained or emphasised in follow-up work (Pålsson et al., 2025). Finnish research points out that children's participation rights are recognised across several sectors, including education, while children are consulted less consistently in some family law proceedings, a concern also raised in international monitoring of Finland's implementation of child participation rights (Tolonen, 2019*).* Hartoft (2019) shows how children's right to participation is clearly set out in Danish law. She concludes that Denmark takes children's rights seriously, but that there is still some way to go before the principles of participation and self-determination are realised in practice. In Norway, research on, for example, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and municipal services has shown that children's perspectives are rarely sought when making decisions that affect the family's financial situation or children's everyday lives (Rugkåsa & Bergheim, 2020).

Across all the Nordic countries, therefore, there is a gap between the firm legal grounding of children's rights and actual institutionalised practice. Children's voices are often heard, but typically in limited forms such as conversations, consultations, or surveys. As a result, their opportunities to influence decisions at a level where their input would change practice are limited. For children in families with persistent low income, this means that their experiences, needs, and priorities often remain underrepresented when devising measures that directly affect their participation, everyday lives, and well-being.

To make this gap more precise, it is useful to distinguish between different levels of children's involvement. Not all efforts to listen to children amount to participation in the sense implied by Article 12. The following typology clarifies the difference between understanding children's situation, eliciting children's own accounts, and ensuring genuine influence over decisions.

Levels of involvement

It is useful to distinguish between three levels of involvement from children:

1. Child-centred perspective: adults are concerned with children's situation and try to understand how children feel.
2. Children's perspective: children are given the opportunity to express their own perspective, in their own words.
3. Children's participation: children have genuine influence over decisions that affect their lives.

Much research, including studies of child poverty, has shifted from a child-centred perspective to inclusion of children's own stories. However, this does not necessarily mean participation and co-determination. Participation is more than simply being listened to. For participation to be considered genuine, there must be an opportunity to influence the outcomes of processes and measures. When children's voices are used only as sources of information to improve services, without the children themselves having any real influence, there is still a low level of participation.

From consultation to genuine co-determination

Roger Hart (1992) introduced what is known as the ladder of participation, which describes different degrees of participation, from manipulation and tokenism to cooperation and self-initiated action. The model is still widely used as an educational framework, but it has also faced criticism for being too linear and assuming that more participation is always better (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). In Why participation matters, UNICEF Innocenti points out that forms of participation must be adapted to the child's age, maturity, situation and context, and that genuine participation can take different forms.$

Nevertheless, the ladder provides a useful language for analysing the situation. In many Nordic services, children's participation is still at levels where the primary elements are information and consultation. Adults often decide what topics are relevant to discuss, how the discussion should take place, and what forms of participation are possible. For instance, Rugkåsa and Bergheim (2020) call for a clearer participant perspective in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration's comprehensive follow-up of children in low-income families.

Participation in Nordic welfare states – ambitions and practice

There are examples across the Nordic region of innovative initiatives that give children a more active role. In Iceland, for example, a project has been conducted in which children and young people have participated directly in the development of leisure programmes and local activity offerings (Rauterberg, 2019). In Sweden, a project is underway that aims to measure the effects of participation in health-promoting leisure activities through children's active participation (Ramji et al., 2024).

However, research from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden documents the fact that participation is often limited when children encounter complex or resource-intensive services (Križ & Skivenes, 2012). Children from low income families are at particular risk of not being heard. Research suggests that this is largely related to how services and professional cultures are organised, rather than a lack of willingness to include children. Participation for children in vulnerable situations often requires more time, closer follow-up, and secure relationships – conditions that are often difficult to fulfil in services characterised by high workloads and limited resources.

Participation – more than co-determination

UNICEF Innocenti (2025) highlights three main reasons as to why child participation is crucial:

1. **Participation transforms life.** Participation strengthens children's self-esteem, sense of control, and sense of belonging. It also fosters a critical sense of agency. It can be argued that this is particularly important for children experiencing poverty, as economic marginalisation is often accompanied by shame and low influence in everyday life.
2. **Participation strengthens policies and services.** Children bring in knowledge that adults do not have. Interventions are more effective when they are based on children's own experiences. This can lead to both better services and better decisions.
3. **Participation builds more inclusive societies.** When children participate in decisions that affect them, they develop skills such as responsibility, negotiation, and citizenship. However, participation is important not only for the child. It is also beneficial for society. It can strengthen democratic systems in general and contribute to social cohesion (Gottschalk & Bohran, 2023).

For children in low-income families, participation can also help to highlight needs that would otherwise remain hidden. This applies to everything from participation in leisure activities to what is required to cope with schooling or experience a sense of social belonging. Participation can therefore function as a measure to counter both social exclusion and shame.

4.9 The way forward – how to promote genuine participation?

Several elements appear to be essential in strengthening children's participation in the Nordic welfare states, including participation of children living in low income families:

- Systematic approaches: Children's voices must be systematically sought across all relevant services, not just for selected projects.
- Methodological diversity: Conversations are one way of listening to children, but they do not always suffice. The methods must be adapted to the child's specific situation. Creative methods, group processes, and digital tools can make participation possible for more children.
- Expertise: Professionals must be given both the expertise and the space to work in ways that allow children to participate.
- Low threshold for vulnerable children: Children living in low-income families may face many challenges, and the services must actively compensate for this to give them the opportunity to participate.

- Long-term involvement: Children should participate through processes, not just through individual statements.
- More research: There is a need for knowledge about how participation works in practice for children in low-income families.

From a Nordic perspective, children are normative rights holders with a right to participation. Nevertheless, both research and practice show that children affected by poverty are often left out of participatory arenas. Hart's model illustrates that participation can be understood at various levels, but the question in the Nordic region is not whether children are high enough on the ladder. What matters is whether services and structures give children opportunities to influence their everyday lives through participation that is genuine, meaningful, and adapted to their situation.

These Nordic discussions also speak to broader international debates about how to operationalise children's participation rights in welfare services and policymaking. Although this chapter focuses on children from the Nordic countries, its themes have clear international relevance. The right of children to be heard is universal, yet translating this right into meaningful participation remains challenging across contexts. The Nordic countries are often seen as high-capacity welfare states with strong rights frameworks, which makes them a useful case for examining how participation is implemented in practice and how children's perspectives are connected to real decisions. Nordic research also illustrates a broader methodological point: children can provide knowledge about their lives, needs, and constraints that adult proxies and administrative indicators do not fully capture. Finally, recent Nordic policy strategies frame children's and young people's voice as part of building socially sustainable and cohesive societies, highlighting links between participation, inclusion, and trust. Taken together, Nordic experiences can inform international discussions on how to design participation that is inclusive, avoids tokenism, and contributes to policies that better reflect children's lived realities.

Model photo: Lieselotte van der Meijs / imagebank.sweden.se

Closing remarks: Strategic conclusions and opportunities for Nordic co-operation

The report is an integrated knowledge base on children growing up in households with a persistently low income in the Nordic region. Although the overall at-risk-of-poverty rate remains below the EU average, the analysis reveals significant national and regional disparities, identifying households at elevated risk, including single-parent families, households with three or more children, those with very weak attachment to the labour market, low parental education and a foreign-born background. The findings are based on harmonised Eurostat data (2003–2023) and are supplemented by indicators of material and social deprivation, work intensity, and parental education. Statistical uncertainty and data gaps are made transparent.

The report combines comparative indicators, peer-reviewed research, documented Nordic practices, and children's perspectives. Across topics, the knowledge base ranges from comparatively extensive syntheses to smaller but growing bodies of studies. The report reflects this diversity instead of focusing on ranking fields by formal evidence levels.

Research is particularly comprehensive within early childhood education and care (ECEC), especially regarding how high-quality pedagogical practices support children's interactions, development, and learning.

Research also highlights several approaches with positive but implementation-dependent results – including whole-school models that combine learning and well-being, sustained family support and coordination, low-threshold leisure

participation, and area-based collaboration. Their effects depend on duration, fidelity, local capacity, and coherent implementation.

The following proposals build on the analytical and empirical foundation presented in this report. They are intended as knowledge-based options that can support national policy development within existing legal and institutional frameworks.

Areas that may be considered for joint Nordic follow-up

1. Strengthen children's voices in politics and services

The findings presented in Chapter 4 offer insights into how children's experiences of living in a low-income household can influence their participation, sense of belonging, and ability to influence their everyday lives. In line with the Nordic vision 2030, which emphasises inclusion, participation, and social sustainability across the Nordic region, it may be beneficial for the countries to consider developing shared, practical approaches to embedding children's voices in the design, delivery, and evaluation of relevant policies and services. The aim would be to support participation methods that are age-appropriate, accessible, and sensitive to the needs of vulnerable groups, thereby strengthening opportunities for children across the region.

2. Establish common Nordic indicators for comparability

Building on the existing Nordic Statistics Database (e.g., on the modules of Children & young people and Social integration & income), it could be beneficial for the Nordic countries to establish a common indicator framework using comparable, Eurostat-based indicators such as AROP 60/50 (reported before and after social transfers), household work intensity, parental education, and material and social deprivation, disaggregated by household type and region, to support comparable analysis across countries. Where legally and technically feasible, the countries could develop supplementary harmonised indicators and explore register-based solutions to improve precision over time and address gaps not yet covered by the current dashboards.

3. Develop common guidelines for inclusive, universal services

Shared guidance should be developed on quality-focused ECEC, whole-school approaches, low-threshold leisure participation, and area-based collaboration, paying explicit attention to implementation quality (leadership, workforce competence, and relational continuity). These options reflect the evidence and practical insights reviewed in Chapters 1–3 and the perspectives of children and young people in Chapter 4.

4. Test and scale targeted universalism through pilot projects

Prior to wider implementation, conduct time-bound pilots that vary the intensity of universal programmes according to need. These pilots should include logic models, fidelity checks, suitable comparators/counterfactuals, a minimum duration, and an independent evaluation with harmonised indicators.

5. Introduce rapid measures against economic shocks for families with children

Shock-responsive mechanisms. Consider measures that can provide households with children with rapid protection against sudden cost-of-living increases, alongside long-term investment in infrastructure for mobility and inclusion, such as ECEC quality, educational transitions, accessible leisure, and relational support teams.

6. Shared Nordic evidence to support national priorities

The proposed options are grounded in the report's analytical foundation, which includes comparative indicators, research reviews, documented Nordic practices, and children's own perspectives. They are presented as knowledge-based policy options to support the development of national measures aligned with each country's priorities and legal frameworks. The proposals also reflect the Nordic ambition for social sustainability under Vision 2030, where cooperation adds value through comparable data, shared learning, and coordinated Nordic strategies.

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Absolute poverty measurement in the Nordic countries

Introduction

The Nordic countries lack a harmonised approach to measuring absolute poverty. While all Nordic nations have developed sophisticated welfare monitoring systems, they employ different conceptual frameworks and operational definitions when assessing poverty below relative income thresholds. The absence of a unified measurement standard complicates cross-national comparisons and highlights the tension between anchored income thresholds and dynamic reference budgets in capturing material hardship within Nordic contexts.

Sweden

Statistics Sweden employs multiple poverty measures, encompassing both relative indicators (such as the at-risk-of-poverty threshold) and absolute measures. The principal absolute poverty metric is the 'low-income standard' (*låg inkomststandard*), which quantifies the income necessary to cover essential living expenses. These expenses comprise basic consumption (including food, clothing, and leisure activities), housing costs, electricity, home insurance, childcare, local transportation, and union membership fees (Statistiska centralbyrån (SCB), 2023).

The low-income standard threshold varies by household composition, temporal period, and geographical location within Sweden. In 2023, the threshold for a single-parent household with two children residing in a major urban area was SEK 22,200, whilst a two-adult household with two young children required SEK 26,600 (Statistiska centralbyrån (SCB), 2025).

Data from 2023 indicate that 145,000 children resided in households below the low-income standard. Longitudinally, the number of children experiencing absolute poverty has declined by approximately 50,000 since 2014. This reduction is particularly pronounced among children with foreign backgrounds, where the proportion living in households with a low economic standard decreased from 28% to 16%. The majority of children in households below the low-income standard reside with single mothers (Statistiska centralbyrån (SCB), 2025).

Norway

Norwegian national statistics currently lack an official definition of absolute poverty. Nevertheless, the concept has been examined in various research publications and governmental reports, including work by Statistics Norway (Langørgen et al., 2024). Langørgen and colleagues (2024) conducted a comprehensive review of poverty measurement approaches and concluded that relative poverty measures are more methodologically sound, as absolute poverty metrics necessitate adjustments for inflation, purchasing power parities (PPP), evolving consumption patterns, and broader societal developments in material living standards. They contend that constructing a meaningful absolute poverty measure would entail excessive methodological and measurement challenges.

Some Norwegian poverty research (e.g., Borgeraas, 2017) has utilised a reference budget developed by Oslo Metropolitan University as a foundation for operationalising absolute poverty. This reference budget delineates category-specific expenditures required for different household types to achieve an 'acceptable' living standard. In this framework, a household of two adults and two children should possess a minimum income of NOK 36,648 in 2021 (Langørgen et al., 2024, p. 134). Borgeraas (2016) also refined this reference budget to establish a 'minimum budget'. However, this definition has remained unrevised since 2016. Applying the reference budget criterion, 10.3% of households fell below the threshold for an acceptable living standard during the 2019–2021 period. Under the more stringent 'minimum budget' measure, 4.6% of households were classified as below the threshold.

Finland

Finland does not maintain an official definition of absolute poverty within its national statistical framework. However, analogous to Norway, a reference budget (or budget standard) approach has been periodically employed to assess absolute poverty. Karvonen, Kestilä, and Saikkonen (2022) compared the reference budget measure with the AROP (at-risk-of-poverty) indicator and determined that fewer children reside in households with incomes below the reference budget compared to those identified through the at-risk-of-poverty measure.

The reference budget methodology has been applied in additional studies, including research by Saikkonen and Mukkila (2025), Mäkinen (2023), and Penne et al. (2016). According to Mäkinen (2025), reference budgets should not be conceptualised as absolute poverty measures, but rather as relative ones, given that they are predicated upon socially acceptable standards within a given society rather than strictly subsistence-level requirements. This characteristic renders them relative to prevailing societal norms, whilst remaining distinct from measures anchored to median income distributions.

Denmark

Consistent with other Nordic nations, Denmark predominantly employs relative poverty measures. Under a definition established by the Thorning government, an individual is classified as poor if their income falls below 50% of the median income for three consecutive years, they are not enrolled in education, and they possess savings not exceeding DKK 100,000 (CEPOS, 2023). This constitutes a relative measure as it is anchored to median income.

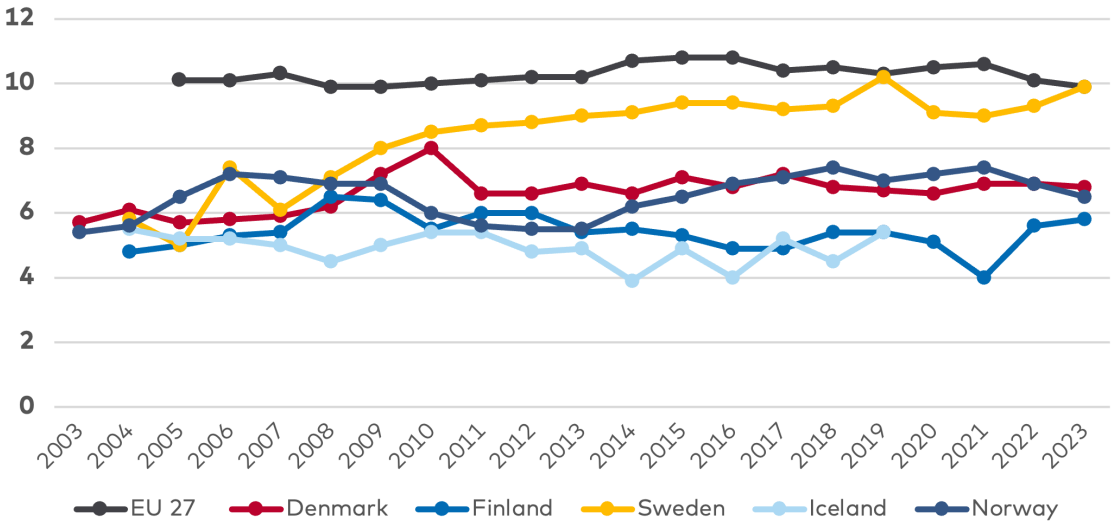
Statistics Denmark also provides a measure designated as 'absolute poverty', which is utilised to monitor progress toward United Nations Agenda 2030 objectives. Under this framework, absolute poverty is defined as 50% of the 2015 median income, with subsequent annual adjustments based on inflation rather than income growth. The elevated inflation rates in 2022 resulted in an increase in the proportion of individuals classified as living in absolute poverty, rising from 2.6% in 2021 to 3.0% in 2023. Nevertheless, the absolute poverty rate has declined since 2015, when it stood at 3.6% (Danmarks Statistik, 2023).

CEPOS (2023) conducted a comparative analysis of poverty measures from 2000 onwards, examining trends under both relative income and inflation-adjusted definitions, revealing substantially divergent trajectories, with higher levels of relative poverty compared to absolute ones.

Iceland

No published information on absolute poverty measurement has been identified for Iceland.

Figure A: Risk of poverty (% of households) by country and time:
50% of median equivalised income



Glossary

EU-SILC: EU statistics on income and living conditions

EU-SILC is the primary source for comparable data on income distribution, poverty, social exclusion, and living conditions across the European Union. It supports policy monitoring through the open method of coordination (the EU's voluntary method for coordinating policy without binding legislation). EU-SILC was piloted in 2003 with six member states and Norway. The data collection formally began in 2004 and gradually expanded to include all EU member states plus Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey by 2007.

Two types of data are collected annually through EU-SILC:

- **cross-sectional data** capturing income, poverty, social exclusion, and living conditions at specific points in time, and
- **longitudinal data** tracking individual changes over four-year periods.

While the main focus lies on detailed income components at both personal and household levels, the data also contains information on social exclusion, housing, employment, education, and health.

EU-SILC functions as a common 'framework' rather than as a common 'survey'. The framework defines harmonised lists of both target primary, annual variables and secondary variables every four years (or less frequently). These are transmitted to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office responsible for producing comparable European statistics. The framework also defines common guidelines and procedures as well as concepts (household and income) and classifications to maximise information comparability.

The reference population includes all private households and their current members residing in participating countries at the time of data collection, generally excluding people in collective households and institutions. National territories representing up to 2% of the population may be excluded. All household members are surveyed, but only those aged 16 and above are interviewed. More information about EU-SILC is available in Commission (2025b, 2025a).

AROP – At-risk-of-poverty rate (60%)

The at-risk-of-poverty rate (60%) refers to the proportion of individuals living in households whose equivalised disposable income is below 60% of the national median after social transfers. It is a key measure of relative income poverty (Eurostat, n.d.-b). In the context of child poverty, this indicator represents the percentage of children living under these economic conditions relative to all children. AROP is the most widely used and standardised measure of relative poverty in the literature.

Material deprivation rate
The material deprivation rate, as defined by EU-SILC, measures how many individuals lack the financial means to afford goods and services generally regarded as essential for a decent standard of living. The indicator distinguishes between people who cannot afford specific items and those who do not have them for other reasons, such as personal preference or lack of need. The material deprivation rate is calculated as the share of the population experiencing an enforced lack of at least 7 out of 13 deprivation items (6 individual-related items and 7 household-related items).

Very low work intensity (VLWI)
The very-low-work-intensity (VLWI) indicator identifies individuals aged 0–64 and living in households where working-age adults (18–64) have, in sum, worked 20% or less of their combined maximum possible work capacity during the previous year. These households are also referred to as quasi-jobless households. Work intensity is calculated by comparing the total number of months worked by all working-age household members (with part-time work converted to full-time equivalents) with the total number of months they could theoretically have worked during the reference period.

Working-age adults include those aged 18–64, excluding students aged 18–24, self-identified retirees, pension recipients (except survivor pensions), and inactive individuals aged 60–64 in households primarily supported by pension income. Households consisting solely of children, students under 25, and/or individuals aged 65 years or older are excluded from calculations.

AROPE – At risk of poverty or social exclusion
AROPE is a composite indicator that counts individuals experiencing at least one of three conditions:

- being at risk of poverty,
- experiencing severe material and social deprivation, or
- residing in households with very limited employment.

Each person is counted only once, even when meeting multiple criteria. The AROPE rate expresses this population segment as a percentage of the total population. This metric serves as the primary tool for tracking the EU's poverty and social exclusion goals and previously functioned as the key indicator for the EU 2020 strategy.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)
ECEC refers to the organised provision of care, education, and developmental support for children prior to compulsory schooling. In the Nordic countries, ECEC is a universal, publicly financed service with rights-based access and a dual mandate to promote children's well-being, learning, and social inclusion.

Whole-school approach (WSA)
WSA refers to a comprehensive and coordinated framework for school development in which teaching and learning, student well-being, leadership, and organisation and collaboration with services are aligned around shared goals. Rather than relying on isolated programmes, a WSA integrates pedagogical, structural, and relational measures across the school as an organisation.

About the publication

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– Nordic approaches to social mobility and remaining challenges

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