

Methodological Note for Child Policy During COVID-19 Database¹

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Introduction

The Database reports the policy responses taken to protect children and their families during the first 9 months of COVID-19 in 2020 (most widely March to December 2020) in 40 countries. It therefore focuses on the pandemic's first 'shock' period. The purpose and intent of the Database is to make available a systematic collection of evidence of the main child- and family-relevant measures adopted in the countries covered. The Database expands the available evidence on COVID-19 by adopting a child and family specific focus, bringing in different policy areas, and presenting measures taken over a period of at least 9 months.

The Database provides evidence to undertake a stocktaking of policy content, effort and orientation within and across countries and to enable analysis of the capacity of different countries to reform their policies and innovate in key areas of policy during the pandemic. It will also enable discussions of and provide resources for the further development of a framework and set of indicators to monitor and assess progress in child and family policy.

Forty countries are covered in the Database, all of which are either EU and/or OECD member states. Most are countries that would be considered high-income. As well as all the EU member states, the database also includes Australia, Canada, Chile, Iceland, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Switzerland, Turkey, UK, and US.² The country selection was dictated in the main by available evidence and, secondarily, to ensure regional spread and diversity.

The key question underlying the construction of the database asked:

Did countries mobilise a policy response specifically for children and families during the first nine months of the pandemic and, if so, what measures were put in place?

Six fields of policy are covered: income support, education, early childhood education and care, parental leave, food support, and health-related provision. In each case, the database lists and itemises the details of the policy under a standardised series of headings.

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² Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States.

Conceptual Background and Methodological Details

For its conceptual orientation and identification of policy fields that should be covered, the database drew on the academic and policy literatures on topics relating to children's wellbeing and social policy measures for children and families. The former literature helps to identify different conceptions of childhood, children's status in society and child well-being, while the latter examines the policy measures that are available to support children and families and the potential strengths and weaknesses of different policy approaches and designs.

The importance of establishing the meaning of a child-specific focus draws from work that emphasises the child's personhood and the need to understand children as both connected to but also separable from their parents and families (Daly 2020). Three understandings of child protection and child well-being underpin the database: child poverty; child welfare; and children's rights. Although highlighting different constituent elements and outcomes, each has a crucial contribution to make to an overall understanding of protection and support for children as a goal of social policy, in general and during the pandemic. Child poverty draws attention to income adequacy and the role and functions of states to offer financial support to families rearing children. Child welfare underlines the importance of support services for children and their families and signposts the significance of children's access to parental care and psychosocial or anti-violence support. A children's rights perspective emphasises the development and circumstances of the 'whole child', drawing attention to the measures to protect or enhance children's access to developmental services (early childhood education and care (ECEC), education and health), the extent to which policy prioritises or 'sees' the child and the conditions of access to see whether a rights basis prevails. Giving children 'voice' – in the sense of allowing them a say in decisions affecting them and generally respecting their agency – is a further vital aspect of the children's rights perspective but it is outside the scope and resources of the project. However, the database does examine an element relevant to this by identifying whether measures target children directly.

The definition adopted by the database of 'child- and family policy during COVID-19' is as follows:

Child-related social policy during COVID-19 is defined as policy actions taken by countries to protect children and their families from the impacts of the pandemic and minimise negative impact on children's survival, wellbeing and development.

This definition leads the database to focus on and track policy developments that explicitly targeted the wellbeing of children and their families. Which policy areas are these?

The literature on child and family policy highlights a number of measures and fields through which states and public policies affect the wellbeing of children and families (Tirivayi et al. 2020; OECD 2021). The classic measures are income support, education, and ECEC. Food support and school feeding programmes are another important policy measure, their prevalence

dependent to some extent on the extent of child and family poverty in a country. The COVID-19 context signally influenced the needs to which policy had to respond. In April 2020 for example, UNICEF called for global and national action to keep children healthy and well nourished, to keep them learning, to support families to cover their needs relating to the care of children, to protect children from violence, exploitation and abuse, inter alia (UNICEF 2020). In light of the pandemic and especially the wide recourse made to lockdown and its spotlighting of health and wellbeing, two further policy domains are considered critical to assessing policy during COVID-19: support for parental care for children and children's access to vaccination and other health services. In all then the database covers the following six policy fields:

- Additional income support for families with children;
- Education;
- Early childhood education and care (ECEC);
- Parental leave;
- Food-related provisions; and,
- Health-related measures.

Taken as a whole, the six domains of policy dovetail closely with the understanding of the child's needs articulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the main areas that the EU Child Guarantee prioritises for free access by children (ECEC, education, health and nutrition³), and key dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Construction and Structure of the Database

Data Sources

The Database was assembled mainly on the basis of evidence from extant COVID-19 comparative policy databases, especially those compiled by international non-governmental organisations or international research collaborations. Among their advantages are: availability and ease of access; standardisation of data across countries; longitudinal coverage. The following are the main such sources used (together with the supporting agency):

- COVID-19 EU Policy Watch (Eurofound);
- COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker (United Nations);
- Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic (UNESCO);
- International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research (International Network of Leave Policies and Research);
- Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford);
- Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19 (World Bank);
- Social Protection Monitor on COVID-19 (International Labour Organisation).

³ The EU Child Guarantee also includes housing as an essential service for children. See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021H1004&from=EN>

Since these databases did not contain detailed information on child-related policies, other sources were also consulted. Government and other national sources were important for this purpose as were country reports from work undertaken under the auspices of the EU, OECD, and UNICEF and cross-national research activities (e.g., those of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, European Social Policy Network).

The dataset was assembled through an iterative methodology that was designed to be rigorous, especially given a high burden of proof for data collection during the COVID-19 outbreak (Bakrania et al. 2020). Relying on desk-based research, the data was assembled and checked in three steps as follows:

- First, existing international databases were reviewed and searched to identify relevant measures and to extract the details for those countries covered by the databases;
- In a second step, other sources, especially national level data, were reviewed for additional information and detail when this was available and considered helpful;
- A third step involved reaching out to national correspondents and experts for information when this was necessary (e.g., lacking sufficient data or needing to check details).

In effect, the evidence was verified by triangulation across sources.

The Database concentrates almost exclusively on policy decrees at a national level. This is for two main reasons: first, because the national level was by far the most common level at which policy was made; and secondly, sub-national data did not exist or was difficult to obtain. However, in regard to ECEC and food-related provisions, local-level policy responses were also included where possible as municipalities were often responsible for making decisions in these two policy areas in many countries.

Time Period Covered

In terms of the time period, the dataset generally covered the onset of the pandemic in the country in the year 2020 until the end of that year. In some cases data was not available for the full nine months (see Table 1). Furthermore, the data on the COVID-19 vaccine exceptionally covers the year 2021 because the use of the vaccine for children was approved in countries from the year 2021.

Table 1 Time Period Covered for Different Policies

Policy area		Time period covered
Additional income support for families with children		March to December 2020
Education	Full or selective opening of primary schools	March to June 2020
	Other education support	March to December 2020
ECEC	Full or selective opening of ECEC settings	March to June 2020
	Other ECEC support	March to December 2020
Parental leave		March to December 2020
Food-related provisions		March to July 2020
Health	COVID-19 vaccine rollout for children	January to December 2021
	Psychosocial and/or anti-violence support	March to December 2020

Main Lines of Enquiry Regarding Policies

The following are the main details and lines of enquiry in each policy field.

Table 2 Details of Policy Measures

Policy areas	Measure category	Focus
Additional income support for families with children	Cash transfer	When a country provided a one-off payment or a regular payment over a certain time period and the key details regarding amount, duration and beneficiary
	Cash for care	When a country provided financial assistance (rather than utilising the parental leave system) for parental caregiving due to the child's illness or quarantine, or the closure of care or educational settings and the key details
	Easing of eligibility conditions	When a country relaxed eligibility conditions for the receipt of income support and the conditions applied to eligibility
Education	Full operation of schools without interruption	When a country kept schools fully open
	Targeted opening of schools	When a country delimited school opening and for which groups of children
	No national lockdown of schools but some state level closures	When a country did not implement a national-level lockdown but allowed jurisdictions to decide the opening or closure of ECEC settings
	Distance learning support	When a country provided learning devices (e.g., laptops, tablet PCs, and mobile phones) and/or internet access for distance learning and to whom and under what conditions
	Additional learning support	When a country provided additional follow-up educational programmes (e.g. summer schools) or

		expanded them and to whom and under what conditions
ECEC	Full operation of ECEC settings without interruption	When a country kept ECEC settings fully
	Targeted opening of ECEC settings	When a country delimited access to ECEC settings for which groups of children and if emergency care was provided and if so for which groups of children
	Expansion of ECEC subsidies for access	When a country provided additional childcare subsidies and the details of amount and beneficiary
Parental leave	Paid parental leave	When a country introduced a new paid parental leave or expanded existing paid leave policy and the conditions of access and duration
	Unpaid parental leave	When a country introduced a new unpaid parental leave or expanded existing unpaid leave policy and the conditions of access and duration
Food-related provisions	School-related feeding and replacement	When a country kept schools open and continuously provided subsidised school meals or provided food-related resources (in the form of cash, vouchers, and food parcels amongst others) to temporarily replace existing school meal programmes and the details of what was provided, to whom and when
	School-unrelated food support	When a country provided food-related resources to families and children in need that was not distributed through schools or education providers and the details of what was provided, to whom and when
Health	COVID-19 vaccine	When a country made COVID-19 vaccines available for children
	Psychosocial support	When a country expanded psychosocial support or provided a grant to relevant non-governmental organisations for this purpose and the details
	Protection against domestic violence	When a country expanded the functioning of shelters/counselling services or provided a grant to relevant non-governmental organisations for this purpose and the details

The Details Recorded in the Database on Each Policy

The data of the downloaded excel file is organised under 14 headings.

- The first column (column A) is the name of the ‘**country**’. Overseas territories are not taken into account.

- The second column (column B) ‘**policy area**’ specifies to which of the six categories each policy measure belongs: i) additional income support for families with children; ii) ECEC; iii) education; iv) food-related provisions; v) parental leave; and vi) health.
- The next column (column C) is ‘**title**’. The measure’s official title is used here wherever possible. If the measure did not have an official title given by the country’s government, the name of measure is used as a title.
- The fourth column (column D) is ‘**measure**’ which categorises each policy measure by type.
- The fifth column (column E) offers a ‘**brief description**’ of each policy measure’s key details. If the measure has an official title, the original title is indicated with brackets in this column.
- The sixth column (column F), ‘**eligibility**’, provides information on eligibility criteria (e.g., entitlement conditions relating to children’s age, parent’s occupation, type and employment status, and income and assets).
- The ‘**type**’ column (column G) presents the form of each policy measure, such as cash (social insurance or social assistance), tax credit, in-kind benefit, voucher, additional funding (for local authorities or non-governmental organisations) and service.
- The eighth and ninth columns (columns H and I) are ‘**announced/start date**’ and ‘**end date**’. The date format is day/month/year (DD/MM/YYYY). If a specific day is unknown, the date is provided in the format of month/year.
- The tenth column (column J) lists the ‘**amount**’, which indicates the level in terms of amount of support provided as part of each policy measure’s provision. It is presented either in each country’s national currency or as a percentage of replacement/compensation.
- The eleventh column (column K), ‘**total cost**’, shows the amount of budget allocated to each policy measure or actual spending in each country’s national currency.
- The twelfth column (column L), ‘**recipients**’, indicates who is the targeted recipient of each policy measure. Here, the term ‘parents’ does not necessarily mean biological parents. Rather, parents refer to both biological and non-biological guardians who are responsible for parenting and nurturing of children.
- The penultimate column (column M) is ‘**route to the child**’, identifies whether children are the focus or intended recipient directly or indirectly through their parents.
- The last column (column N) ‘**source(s)**’ lists the sources of information used.

A Note on Interpreting the Evidence

A number of points need to be carefully considered when using the information in the database. First, the baseline policy landscape differed considerably across the 40 countries. This was the case in two senses. For one thing, the pandemic affected countries at different time periods. Hence, the exigency was different at different points of time, even within countries. However, the fact that the database covers the first 9 months of 2020 (and February in the Japan and

South Korea given earlier onset of the pandemic there) means it covers the shock periods in all countries. A second relevant point to note is that the measures adopted also depended on the existing policy system, and especially its capacity to cope with the shock. This affected especially whether there was a need for additional measures to be introduced. Hence a country's failure to take an action may be due to the sufficiency of existing support and/or that the perceived need was not of sufficient scale to adopt additional measures. Furthermore, lack of action in some of the policy areas might be due to the fact that similar or substitute measures were present or taken in other areas. Contextualisation is therefore vitally important when the evidence is being assessed and utilised.

Caution is needed for another reason also. Relying on existing sources runs the risk of information gaps. That is, if an adopted measure was not included/reported in the primary sources, then it is unlikely to be included in the data. The researchers cross-checked the evidence with other sources and/or country experts whenever necessary and possible, but due to the nature of certain kinds of sources, there is a risk that measures in some countries were overlooked because of lack of reporting. Lastly, it should be noted that the database presents information on policy inputs; outcomes of the adopted measures, while important, are outside the scope of the monitoring effort.

References

- Bakrania, S., Chávez, C., Ipince, A., Rocca, M., Oliver, S., Stansfield, C. and Subrahmanian, R. (2020) *Impacts of Pandemics and Epidemics on Child Protection: Lessons Learned from a Rapid Review in the Context of COVID-19*, Innocenti Working Papers no. 2020-05.
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- Richardson, D., Carraro, A., Cebotari, V., Gromada, A., Rees, G. (2020) *Supporting Families and Children Beyond COVID-19: Social Protection in High-income Countries*, UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti, Florence.
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- UNICEF (2020) *Protecting the Most Vulnerable Children from the Impact of Coronavirus: An Agenda for Action*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/agenda-for-action>

Appendix I. Links for the Main International Databases Used

- Country reports from the European Social Policy Network:
https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?advSearchKey=%20ESPN_covid2021&mode=advancedSubmit&catId=22&policyArea=0&policyAreaSub=0&country=0&year=0
- Country reports from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights:
<https://fra.europa.eu/en/themes/covid-19>
- Eurofound COVID-19 EU Policy Watch:
<https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/index.html>
- International Labour Organisation's Social Protection Monitor on COVID-19:
<https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowWiki.action?id=3426>
- International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research:
<https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/archive-reviews/>
- Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker:
<https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>
- UN COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker: <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>
- UNESCO Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by COVID-19:
<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
- World Bank Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19:
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/37186>