

## Universal Children's Day

The annual Universal Children's Day represents an opportunity to consider how children in Europe are faring in some of the key areas covered in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and what the European Union is doing to protect their rights and ensure their wellbeing.

### Background

In 1954, the United Nations [recommended](#) that all countries establish a national day to promote children's rights and welfare, and set 20 November as Universal Children's Day. It was on this date that the UN General Assembly adopted the [Declaration of the Rights of the Child](#), in 1959, and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC), in 1989. The CRC, which has been [ratified](#) by all the European Union (EU) Member States, requires governments to realise every child's rights to adequate living conditions, health and education, as well as their rights to family life, to be protected from violence, not to be discriminated against, and to have their views heard. The EU itself is not a party to the Convention, but the CRC plays an [important role](#) in guiding the development of its [law](#) on children's rights. [Article 24](#) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (based on Articles 3, 9, 12 and 13 of the CRC), recognises that children are independent holders of rights with their own needs and interests, whilst Article 3 [TEU](#) makes protecting the rights of the child one of the goals the Union must pursue in internal and external policy. The EU has a [policy framework](#) on children's rights and child protection and an overall [strategy](#) for work in this area. The EU and its Member States must also ensure that their work towards the new UN Sustainable Development Goals [aligns](#) with the CRC.

### Overall measures of child wellbeing in Europe

*The CRC commits governments to providing every child with an adequate standard of living to ensure physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, including support to those in need (Article 27), access to education (Article 28), and health (Article 24).*

Social and economic disadvantages in early life have repercussions into adulthood and even across generations, making child wellbeing vital for individuals and society as a whole. Unicef's 2016 [State of the World's Children Report](#) illustrates that both developing and developed countries need to do more to **reach children and families at risk of poverty and exclusion**. In the EU, **one in four children are affected** (25 million) according to Eurostat [figures](#). Whilst children's risk of poverty or social exclusion varies between countries, being highest in **Romania** (46.8 %) and **Bulgaria** (43.7 %), and lowest in **Sweden** (14.0 %) and **Finland** (14.9 %), the rate rose from 2010 to 2015 in approximately half of the EU Member States. The highest increases were in **Greece** (up from 28.7 % in 2010 to 37.8 % in 2015), **Cyprus** (+7.1 pp), and **Italy** (+4.0 pp). Unicef finds that the economic crisis has had a [lasting impact](#) on child wellbeing in Europe and that the poorest and most vulnerable children have suffered disproportionately. Its [league tables](#), with indicators on poverty, education and health, show how far countries have allowed their most disadvantaged children to fall behind the 'average' child. In '[How's life for children?](#)' the OECD measures 10 dimensions of well-being, highlighting divergences between boys and girls, and children of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Children with [disabilities](#) and [migrant children](#) also face problems accessing health services, uneven opportunities for education and higher rates of poverty, and those in the older age range are disproportionately likely not to be in training or employment.

**Article 12 CRC gives children the [right to be heard](#): [Children's Worlds](#)**, the first worldwide survey to measure **children's own perceptions of their wellbeing**, has findings for seven EU countries ([DE](#), [ES](#), [ET](#), [MT](#), [PO](#), [RO](#), [UK](#)), and will later have results for a further three (FI, IT, PT). In 2014, 2 693 children aged between 4 and 19 from 71 different countries were [consulted](#) on **how governments should spend public money on children**, producing key messages on why and where they should invest and how children could be involved in decisions.



## Protecting the rights of children in conflicts and on the move

*The CRC commits governments to protect and care for children who are affected by armed conflict (Article 38) and aid their recovery (Article 39). Child refugees have the right to special protection and help (Article 22).*

An estimated **250 million children across the world live in areas affected by conflict**, and the UN [reports](#) that related children's rights violations are on the rise. According to Unicef's 2016 [study](#) on child migrants and refugees around the world, **28 million children have been forcibly displaced**, with a further **20 million child migrants**. Children now make up **half the world's refugees**. In **Europe**, around 30 % of asylum-seekers in 2015 and the first half of 2016 were children, nearly 70 % fleeing conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. An alarming number are travelling alone. It is [reported](#) that almost 90 000 [unaccompanied children](#) applied for asylum in EU countries in 2015. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) [finds](#) that their situation raises concerns and should be a priority for national governments. Unicef [stresses](#) that urgent action is needed to protect children at all stages of their journey, including when they reach their destination, where they may face obstacles to integrating and starting new lives. It also highlights that failure to identify children at risk and provide safe transit and reception facilities that meet child protection standards and legal and practical access to asylum make them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Europol figures [show](#) that at least **10 000 refugee children have gone missing** after arriving in Europe, with many feared to be exploited and abused for sexual or labour purposes. Children are also particularly vulnerable to both physical and psychological violence while in [migration detention](#), making it a threat to their wellbeing.

The [Exile Voices](#) project has allowed Syrian refugee children aged 10 to 15 to [document](#) their daily lives.

## Protecting children from violence, abuse and exploitation

*The CRC commits governments to protect children from all forms of violence and abuse (Article 19) and sexual exploitation (Article 34).*

Unicef has [documented](#) **widespread violence against children** around the world. It may take numerous forms (physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect) and happen in various contexts, including at home, at school and within institutions. [Analysis](#) of violence towards children in the EU finds that the extent is difficult to assess, but existing estimates give cause for concern. Besides child migrants, vulnerable children include [children with disabilities](#) and girls at risk of [FGM](#). There are also new challenges in the digital environment, which can be a [risky space](#) for children. Online child sexual abuse is on the [rise](#), according to Europol.

In a [worldwide consultation of children](#) for the UN, protection from violence was one of their highest priorities.

## Recent EU action

*On children's wellbeing.* FRA is [analysing](#) national data related to the Commission's 2013 strategy '[Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage](#)', which aims to help prevent and tackle child poverty and social exclusion and promote children's wellbeing. EU-funded [research](#) has explored the feasibility of a longitudinal study to provide comparable data and reviewed policy in [each](#) Member State.

*On conflict and migration.* The EU has [Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict](#). It is supporting [education in emergencies](#) and [working](#) with Unicef to protect child refugees and migrants. The [10th European Forum on the rights of the child](#) on 29-30 November 2016 will focus on their protection, whilst FRA is conducting [research](#) on migration-related detention of children in the EU.

*On EU action to protect children from violence.* The EU has adopted legislation to eradicate various forms of violence to which children are subjected, including [human trafficking](#) and [sexual abuse and exploitation](#). Member States have primary responsibility for child-protection systems, but the EU also supports national action. Recent initiatives include a [mapping](#) of the national systems and a [Better internet for children](#) strategy. The EU is also [taking steps](#) to ensure that children are heard.

The **European Parliament** does not have a specific committee on children's rights, but has a cross-party [Child Rights Intergroup](#). Many MEPs have pledged to become child rights champions through signing a [Child rights manifesto](#). Parliament regularly speaks out on the issue, and has called for action on [child poverty](#) and [online child sexual abuse](#) and an end to migration [detention](#) for children. Parliament has also stressed the need to [protect](#) all child migrants and refugees, and specifically [unaccompanied minors](#) and [girls](#).

Ahead of Universal Children's Day, the European Parliament hosted a [symposium](#) with children to discuss how children's voices can be heard on issues that affect them.