



Make
Mothers
Matter

Reinforcing the Child Guarantee

2026

Make Mothers Matter



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Background

In 2019, Ursula von der Leyden announced the creation of the European Union (EU) Child Guarantee as part of a plan to identify children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and provide access to essential services. In 2021, the European Commission formally proposed a Council Recommendation on the EU Child Guarantee, which was adopted this same year, thereby establishing it as part of the EU's broader social inclusion and child rights agenda.

The objective of the European Child Guarantee is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access of children in need to a set of key services:

- free early childhood education and care
- free education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day)
- free healthcare
- healthy nutrition
- adequate housing

To ensure equal opportunity for all children, in particular those children most at risk of experiencing social exclusion due to poverty, inclusive and universal access is vital. Children most at risk belong to groups in vulnerable situations including Roma children, children from migrant backgrounds, children with disabilities, children in alternative care and with precarious family situations, and those living in single-parent households².

To implement the Recommendation, it is required that Member States should allocate at least 5% of their European Social Fund (ESF+) to tackling child poverty if their level of child poverty sits above the EU average. The average between 2007-2019 is documented as 23.4% (AROE). Member States that currently sit below the average must allocate an appropriate amount of their ESF+ to tackling child poverty³.

In addition, the Recommendation requires Member States to develop national action plans (NAPs) detailing how they intend to deliver on the Child Guarantee, with these plans extending through to 2030 and reflecting national, regional, and local contexts, as well as existing measures supporting children in need. Member States are also invited to report biennially on their progress in implementing the Guarantee. The European Commission is scheduled to produce a mid-term assessment of these plans in 2026.

By adopting the European Child Guarantee Recommendation, Member States have made an historic pledge to guarantee access to essential services for children in vulnerable circumstances. By prioritising those most at risk, the initiative seeks to disrupt the cycle of poverty and enhance the prospects for children facing social exclusion. This policy offers both preventive and responsive mechanisms, providing for immediate needs whilst also addressing the underlying factors that sustain social disadvantage.

Evaluation of the current state: critical gaps and urgent challenges

The Child Guarantee goes beyond being just a policy; it has already led to meaningful changes. With focused social investments, creative service models, expanded school meals, and increased child participation, its positive impact can be seen and measured. It is therefore crucial to protect, improve, and expand the Child Guarantee so that every child in Europe benefits. While this approach offers great potential to tackle child poverty thoroughly and proactively, significant challenges still exist and must be addressed to make this initiative successful.

Despite the EU Child Guarantee's ambition, **child poverty in the European Union is increasing** rather than declining. According to Eurostat, from 2019 to 2023, the number of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion rose from 19 million (23.6%) to nearly 20 million (24.8%), highlighting the worsening crisis⁴. As evidenced by several NAPs submitted by Member States, vulnerable children facing distinct barriers are still not adequately identified, and there remains a persistent lack of key qualitative and quantitative objectives and targets. Instead, there is continued repetition of existing measures and a lack of appropriate and dedicated funding. In addition, some countries demonstrate ineffective coordinated efforts and thus a lack of implementation.

The strengthened Child Guarantee, together with other EU initiatives such as the revised EPSR Action Plan and the new Anti-Poverty Strategy, presents a critical opportunity to place child and family poverty at the centre of Europe's social agenda and address its structural causes.

At Make Mothers Matter (MMM), we emphasise that child poverty cannot be effectively addressed without tackling family poverty as a whole. Around 20 million children (one in four) in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and we know that child poverty often stems from family poverty⁵. Without a comprehensive, **family-centred response**, poverty is perpetuated across generations, creating a persistent cycle of disadvantage.

Certain family structures face disproportionately higher risks. **Single-parent households**—85% of which are headed by women—are particularly vulnerable⁶. Approximately one in six (17%) children grow up in single-parent households in Europe⁷, and of those households almost a half of lone mothers (48%) and almost a third of lone fathers (32%) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁸. These figures point to systemic inequalities, including income insecurity, inadequate access to affordable childcare, and barriers to employment. In addition, structural factors such as housing instability, limited access to essential services, and insufficient preventive and family support services undermine parents' ability to provide stable and nurturing environments for their children. Poverty also remains a contributing factor to family separation across the EU, with children at risk of being placed in institutional care due to economic hardship rather than neglect.

While the Child Guarantee focuses on children's access to services, it does not sufficiently address the conditions of parents, particularly mothers, who are primary caregivers. Without strengthening family support systems and recognising the vital role of caregivers, the initiative risks treating the symptoms of child poverty rather than its root causes. Policies that claim to 'put children first' have often been unsuccessful because they attempt to separate children's needs from those of their families. The realisation of children's rights cannot exist in a vacuum; they are intrinsically linked to the strength and support of their families.

Consequently, **family support must be acknowledged as both a political priority and a strategic investment**⁹. Therefore, EU and Member State policies must adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses the entire family unit. This includes adequate income support, facilitating access to employment, and establishing social protection systems that reflect the realities of diverse family structures.

Recommendations to strengthen the Child Guarantee

At MMM we propose six recommendations to better centre family life and support those most at risk to best tackle child poverty:

1. Revise and strengthen NAPs through ongoing feedback.
2. Remove barriers to accessing social protection through targeted and intersectional approaches.
3. Adequately fund the eradication of children's poverty.
4. Ensure universal access to maternal healthcare, including mental health services.
5. Invest in early childhood and family support services.
6. Multi-sectoral coordination.

1. Revise and strengthen NAPs through ongoing feedback

NAPs are living documents and should be updated regularly. Member States should revise and enhance their NAPs using biennial reports, feedback from the European Commission, and input from civil society organisations. This ensures gaps or new issues are addressed and encourages innovation in tackling child poverty. The European Commission's 2026 mid-term report should be utilised as a key moment to strengthen these plans.

2. Remove barriers to accessing social protection through targeted and intersectional approaches

To be effective, the Child Guarantee must better reach those most at risk. This requires targeted outreach to vulnerable groups, particularly single-parent households which demonstrate a poverty rate nearly three times as high as two-parent households. These families often face a **unique set of challenges**, including limited financial resources, reduced social support networks, and increased care responsibilities, all of which can compound and exacerbate their vulnerability. To achieve this, it is imperative policymakers eliminate legal and administrative barriers that block vulnerable children and parents from accessing social



protection, while also addressing the underlying causes of the non-take-up of available benefits and services. This includes revising residence rules and ensuring all children can use essential services, regardless of their status.

Addressing these issues requires an intersectional approach in both policy design and implementation, one that recognises children's disadvantages as complex and overlapping. For example, a child in a single-parent home might also contend with the additional barriers of being from a migrant background or living with a disability, further compounding their risk of poverty and exclusion. Therefore, policy measures must be tailored and flexible, enabling **coordinated services across sectors** to ensure their needs are met. By combining targeted outreach with an intersectional policy framework, the Child Guarantee can more effectively disrupt cycles of disadvantage and open opportunities for every child to thrive.

Effective social protection systems play a crucial role in reducing child poverty by providing direct support to families. Evidence shows these policies lower poverty rates and fosters social inclusion, helping children and families participate fully in society. By offering financial aid and free access to services like early education, school meals, healthcare, and family support, these systems address the root causes of child poverty and promote equal opportunities.

3. Adequately fund the eradication of children's poverty

In order to ensure adequate funding to work towards the eradication of children's poverty, it must be recommended that at least 5% of ESF+ resources are allocated to tackling child poverty in all EU Member States. For countries with an AROPE (At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion) rate above the EU average, this allocation should be increased to at least 10%, with focus on targeting the most affected groups and areas. Currently, these countries already invest an average of 7.22% of their ESF+ funding in child poverty-related measures, raising this to 10% would be a realistic and impactful step toward breaking the cycle of poverty. In addition to this, it is important that all Member States' Children's Guarantee NAPs maintain transparency in their financial allocations. Transparent budgeting and reporting allow for effective monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that funds are used efficiently and that progress towards the eradication of child poverty can be tracked.

4. Ensure universal access to maternal healthcare, including mental health services

Maternal wellbeing plays a crucial role in a child's development, with early intervention and perinatal support services being essential to preventing long-term adverse effects for both mothers and their children. Evidence from research highlights that neglect, stress or violence resulting from maternal mental health issues can cause physiological disturbances or even lasting biological impacts, which may hinder a child's development and their future ability to participate productively in society¹⁰.

According to Professor Annette Bauer¹¹, **poor maternal mental health** is strongly influenced by various social determinants, such as gender discrimination, violence, lack of social support, socioeconomic status/poverty, substance abuse, and natural disasters, among others.

If left unaddressed, **maternal mental health challenges** impose a **significant economic burden** on societies across the EU, alongside their profound social consequences. Much of this cost arises not only from the direct impact on mothers' well-being, but also from **the long-term effects on their children's mental health and development**. This

intergenerational dimension amplifies the overall burden, as unmet needs today can translate into higher social and economic costs in the future. It underscores the urgent need for early support and preventive care, including **sustained investment in mothers during pregnancy and throughout the first years of their children's lives**, both to improve outcomes for children and to protect mothers' health and well-being, while reducing long-term public expenditure.

According to Dr. Alain Gregoire², early emotional adversity and poor mental health are **trans-generational**. One interesting thing that Dr. Gregoire asserts is that **for children living in poverty**, it is not the subpar conditions themselves that have the greatest negative impact. Instead, **it is the mother's emotions and internalisation of poverty that gets passed on**, whether that be as early as in the womb or as the child develops.

Therefore, it is imperative that all Member States ensure universal access to high-quality maternal healthcare, encompassing both physical and mental health support, delivered through **integrated maternal services that include mental health care**. This approach not only supports mothers but also enhances the wellbeing and cohesion of the entire family.

We also call for **maternal mental health to be explicitly embedded into the Child Guarantee** national action plans, and for the **2022 WHO guide on perinatal mental health**¹³ to be fully implemented across Europe. Furthermore, we urge the Commission to propose a Council Recommendation on Perinatal Mental Health, reinforcing the commitment to early, integrated, and preventive maternal care.

5. Invest in early childhood and family support services

It is imperative to invest in early childhood services, which subsequently results in investment in family support services. From pregnancy to age three, children require **nurturing care** to reach their full potential, as stated by the World Health Organisation "all infants and children should receive responsive care during the first 3 years of life; parents and other care givers should be supported to provide responsive care"¹⁴. However, this understanding is not sufficiently embedded in policy or practice and parents are often overlooked during these critical developmental years of their children.

Work by Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman reinforces the importance of early interventions, namely home visits by healthcare professionals to first-time mothers, in the improvement of children's cognitive and socio-emotional development¹⁵. **Encouraging nurturing care and support for families is essential to breaking cycles of disadvantage** and building stronger, more cohesive communities. Providing comprehensive early years services, accessible parenting programmes, and integrated family support not only benefits individual children but also strengthens the social fabric as a whole. When parents and caregivers are empowered with **resources, guidance, and emotional support**, they are better equipped to respond to their children's needs, fostering healthy development and resilience from the earliest stages of life.



We must guarantee every **child's right to family life** by ensuring that poverty, precarious housing, or lack of access to adequate public services are never used as sole reasons to place a child in institutionalised care. Instead, policies and practices should prioritise keeping families together wherever possible, recognising that the **family environment is**

fundamental to a child's wellbeing and development. Resources should be directed toward strengthening families and preventing separation, these services should be designed to empower parents and carers, equipping them to provide a safe, nurturing environment for their children.

6. Encourage multi-sectorial coordination

To tackle the complex and layered issue of child poverty, the EU Child Guarantee needs to encourage strong collaboration among a wide array of EU policies. This spans social protection, early childhood support, inclusive schooling, deinstitutionalisation, family and community-based care, healthcare, food and nutrition, housing, climate and environmental action, economic measures, and taxation, especially with attention to ensuring a Just Transition. For greater consistency and effectiveness, the Child Guarantee should use shared indicators and comprehensive accountability frameworks.

Conclusion

Whilst the Child Guarantee offers significant stepping stones towards addressing child poverty, the reality is that the situation continues to deteriorate and much more remains to be done. It is clear that a broader, more holistic approach is required, one that supports not only the child but the entire family unit. By expanding the scope of intervention to include comprehensive assistance for families, including universal access to maternal healthcare services, targeted outreach to vulnerable groups, and intersectional policy frameworks, we can begin to break the cycle of disadvantage. Only by recognising and responding to the multifaceted challenges faced by vulnerable families can we ensure lasting positive outcomes for children and promote greater social cohesion. This calls for coordinated, flexible policies and services that adapt to the evolving needs of all family members, thereby laying a stronger foundation for every child to flourish and participate fully in society.

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