

REPORT CARD 11

The well-being of children: how does the UK score?

On a scale of one to ten, how satisfied do you feel with your life? Has anybody asked you that question before? Have you ever thought about your own well-being and happiness as a young person growing up in the United Kingdom in the twenty-first century?

Do you have enough money to do the things you want to do – like swimming or playing a musical instrument? Do you eat three meals a day – including breakfast? Do you have somewhere quiet to do your homework? How much exercise do you do every day? Have you ever been bullied? Do you feel safe where you live? Do you have the chance to invite your friends round to your house to play from time to time? And how easy is it to talk to your mum or dad – or to your school friends?

In 2007 UNICEF, the world's leading organisation for children and children's rights, published a ground-breaking study looking at the well-being of children and young people in some of the world's richest countries. Researchers asked lots of probing questions that compared life for children in 21 different countries – from Poland to the United States.

They looked at things like child poverty, health, education, where children lived and their safety. They also looked at risk factors like violence, smoking, alcohol and drugs that can affect how children live their lives.

Shockingly, the United Kingdom was bottom of the league table. It turned out that children and young people in Britain were among the unhappiest, unhealthiest, poorest and least educated in the developed world in the early years of the new millennium.

The findings were a big wake-up call for adults in this country – especially for the people and organisations that are responsible for the well-being of our children and young people.

Children and young people in the 2000s

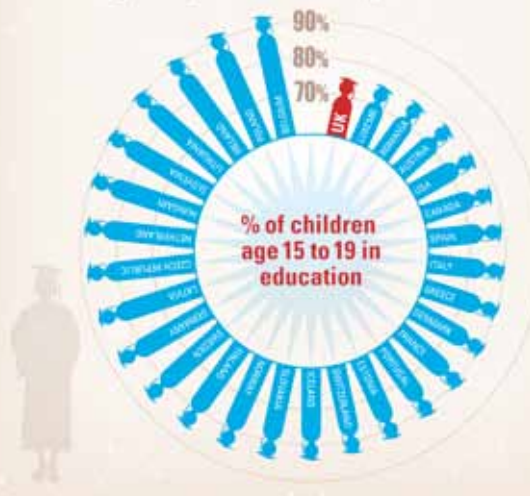
Six years on, UNICEF has published another study comparing the well-being of children and young people across 29 countries – and looking at whether children's lives have improved at all in the original list of 21 countries since the first study took place.

The good news is that the United Kingdom fared much better this time around. Instead of ending up at the bottom of the pile, we ranked 16th out of the world's richest 29 countries. And 86 per cent of children living in the UK reported a high level of life satisfaction.

The UK is one of the few major developed nations with an infant mortality rate of more than 4 deaths in every 1,000 live births. It is double that of Sweden.



The UK has the lowest % of young people in further education among major developed nations



But there is still a long way to go before we can give ourselves a pat on the back:

- The UK still has the lowest rate of young people going into further education among the countries in the study. The proportion of young people age 15 to 19 enrolled in schools and colleges is more than 80% in every major developed nation, except the UK where the rate is just 74%.
- We were placed **in the bottom third of the infant mortality league table**. The UK death rate of infants under the age of 1 is approximately double the rate of Sweden or Finland.
- We are **one of only three rich countries with a teenage pregnancy rate of more than 30 per 1,000**. The UK is also one of only three countries where the rate of teenage births has not fallen over the first decade of the 2000s. This finding is particularly significant because the UK's teenage pregnancy rate was already the highest in Europe at the beginning of the millennium.)
- And we have one of the highest alcohol abuse rates by young people. Around one in five children in the UK age 11 to 15 report having been drunk on at least two occasions.

But it's not all bad news:

- We have **one of the lowest rates of child deprivation in the developed world**. Which means that children in the UK generally have the material things they need to enjoy life – including at least one meal a day with meat, chicken, fish (or a vegetarian equivalent); enough money to join in with school trips and events; the chance to take part in regular leisure activities like swimming; access to an internet connection; and two pairs of shoes that fit properly.
- We are **one of only four rich countries to see a drop in the percentage of overweight children** in the first decade of the new millennium (the others being Belgium, France and Spain).
- We have **one of the lowest children's cigarette smoking rates in the rich world**. The UK is also one of only four countries that have more than halved the proportion of young people who smoke cigarettes over the first 10 years of the 21st century

It's not all bad news

Some of these statistics inevitably focus attention on the negative behaviours of young people. But in almost all cases, these behaviours involve only a small minority of children and young people. The same data can also be used to show the good news that across the world's richest countries:

- » **99%** of girls don't get pregnant while still a teenager
- » **92%** of children don't smoke cigarettes
- » **85%** of children aren't overweight
- » **86%** don't use the drug cannabis
- » **85%** don't get drunk
- » **about two thirds** are neither bullied nor involved in fighting.

How does the UK compare with other countries?

Key findings

		Overall well-being	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4	Dimension 5
		Average rank (all 5 dimensions)	Material well-being	Health and safety	Education	Behaviours and risks	Housing and environment
			(rank)	(rank)	(rank)	(rank)	(rank)
1	Netherlands	2.4	1	5	1	1	4
2	Norway	4.6	3	7	6	4	3
3	Iceland	5	4	1	10	3	7
4	Finland	5.4	2	3	4	12	6
5	Sweden	6.2	5	2	11	5	8
6	Germany	9	11	12	3	6	13
7	Luxembourg	9.2	6	4	22	9	5
8	Switzerland	9.6	9	11	16	11	1
9	Belgium	11.2	13	13	2	14	14
10	Ireland	11.6	17	15	17	7	2
11	Denmark	11.8	12	23	7	2	15
12	Slovenia	12	8	6	5	21	20
13	France	12.8	10	10	15	13	16
14	Czech Republic	15.2	16	8	12	22	18
15	Portugal	15.6	21	14	18	8	17
16	United Kingdom	15.8	14	16	24	15	10
17	Canada	16.6	15	27	14	16	11
18	Austria	17	7	26	23	17	12
19	Spain	17.6	24	9	26	20	9
20	Hungary	18.4	18	20	8	24	22
21	Poland	18.8	22	18	9	19	26
22	Italy	19.2	23	17	25	10	21
23	Estonia	20.8	19	22	13	26	24
23	Slovakia	20.8	25	21	21	18	19
25	Greece	23.4	20	19	28	25	25
26	United States	24.8	26	25	27	23	23
27	Lithuania	25.2	27	24	19	29	27
28	Latvia	26.4	28	28	20	28	28
29	Romania	28.6	29	29	29	27	29

If you're looking for the best place to grow up, head for The Netherlands – top of the league in child well-being among the world's richest countries. The Netherlands is the only country ranked among the top five rich nations in all five dimensions of child well-being that were measured in the study:

- wealth
- health and safety
- education
- behaviour and risks
- housing and environment.

Four Nordic countries (Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) sit just below The Netherlands at the top of the table.

The bottom four places in the table are occupied by three of the poorest countries in the survey (Latvia, Lithuania and Romania) and by one of the richest (the United States).

You can see how the UK compares to other rich countries in this table, which ranks the 29 countries according to the overall well-being of their children.

Do you see anything that surprises you? Are you surprised to see that countries like Portugal and Ireland are higher up the league table than the UK? Or that the United States is almost at the bottom of the table?

In fact, there doesn't appear to be a strong relationship between the comparative wealth of a country and overall child well-being – the wealth of

a country doesn't always lead to happier and healthier children.

Why do you think that might be? What is it that makes you feel most satisfied with your life?

Overall, there has been widespread improvement in most indicators of child well-being since the first study took place – in particular, in terms of family wealth, child death rates, and smoking among children. Enrolment rates in further education have increased in most nations too, and the great majority of countries have also seen declines in teenage birth rates, cannabis use, fighting and bullying. Around half of the countries in the study showed an increase in children's overall life satisfaction.

However, against this backdrop of steady improvement, researchers warn that this progress may have been halted or even thrown into reverse by the widespread economic recession that began in 2008. The statistics gathered for this report reflect the beginning of the economic downturn but not its full consequences.

Over the last three years, many of the world's richest countries have seen further rises in unemployment and falling incomes, as well as cuts in government services that some of the poorest families rely on most.

This is likely to have a profound impact on child well-being over the coming years. UNICEF UK is campaigning on behalf of children and children's rights in the UK to make sure that what money is available is spent wisely on children and children's services.

UNICEF believes that the potential impact on children and young people should be one of the first considerations before decisions are made to cut services. We think that children's rights should be given priority – and that one government department should be given oversight of policies affecting children and young people. Governments should be asking children regularly how they feel about their lives. And Governments should focus on helping the poorest children at this time of great financial pressure on families.

What do you think?

Let us know

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The Report Card series

UNICEF produces the *Report Card* series to encourage the monitoring of children's well-being, to allow us to compare the achievements of different countries, and to stimulate debate and the development of policies to improve children's lives.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is the world's leading organisation working for children. We work with children, families, local communities, organisations and governments in more than 190 countries to help every child realise their full potential. In everything we do, the most disadvantaged children and the countries in greatest need have priority.

UNICEF UK raises funds for UNICEF's emergency and development work around the world and advocates for lasting change for children worldwide. This includes, for example, working to change government policies and practices that restrict child rights in the UK and internationally.

