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# REPORT

## RIGHTS, QUALITY OF LIFE AND CHILDCARE

### CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT



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## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the post-financial crisis economic recovery (2014), Spain ranked in the middle (21<sup>st</sup> out of 40<sup>th</sup>) of a list of middle –and high– income OECD countries in meeting a set of child indicators linked to the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>. Ten years later, after a period of recovery and the effects of the pandemic crisis in 2020-2021, as well as high inflation in 2022-2023, which will have a strong impact on child-headed households and children, the situation of children and child-focused policies continue to present a complex picture, with lights and shadows, in our country.

On the one hand, childcare in Spain has undoubted strengths. In the field of education, there are high enrolment rates, practically complete from the second cycle of infancy onwards, and significant progress has been made in recent years in the first cycle, although there are notable inequalities between the different Autonomous Communities in the extension of education from 0 to 3 years of age. At the same time, children's health status is good, stable over time and generally resilient, largely due to a national health system that has proved capable of guaranteeing them adequate minimum health standards, despite the inequalities that are observed due to different levels of household income. It is also important to highlight the progressive provision of more and better resources for leisure, recreational, cultural and sporting activities available to children both in the family and in community spaces, particularly at the local level, although again with significant differences arising from situations of spatial segregation of housing, by territory and between urban and rural environments. It is no less relevant to observe how, in the last decade, greater attention has been paid to children from the political and policy point of view, leading to an improvement in the legal instruments for protection and the adoption of improved strategic instruments, with the State Strategy for Childhood and Adolescence standing out. At the same time, greater social awareness and sensitivity to the treatment, protection and inclusion of children,

#### **NOTES**

1 UNICEF Spanish Committee: “Construyendo el futuro. La infancia y la Agenda de Desarrollo Sostenible 2030 en España. Luces y sombras”.

in parallel with improvements in the country's educational and material standards, provide a more favourable context for improving child well-being.

All of this in a world in which there are clear opportunities for progress both in children's policies and in an approach to policies as a whole that places children at the centre. We have already mentioned the progress made in extending, with the aim of universalising, the first cycle of early childhood education, reinforcing a crucial stage for the development of children's capacities, although there is still some way to go in guaranteeing access to places, as well as minimum levels of quality and inclusiveness, which are homogeneous in all territories and environments.

In addition, advances in digitalisation, and its application in companies, public administrations and society as a whole, open up possibilities for improvement and innovation in educational methods, and can contribute to compensating educational inequalities and in access to cultural goods if the provision of connectivity and devices is guaranteed, especially for households with fewer resources. At the same time, the accelerated progress in highly versatile technological tools, such as artificial intelligence, opens up new perspectives for improvement in different areas of childcare, including new developments in the fields of psycho-pedagogy and neuroscience.

On the other hand, nevertheless, Spain has certain weaknesses, the first of which are high child poverty rates: 32.3 per cent (in terms of the AROPE rates) and 27.5 per cent (in terms of the relative monetary poverty rate) in children aged 0 to 12, higher than in other countries with similar or lower income levels, which are maintained over time and become chronic in comparatively high percentage of the child population<sup>2</sup>. Living childhood at a socio-economic disadvantage is often an insurmountable burden on people's life trajectories, feeding the well-known intergenerational transmission of poverty<sup>3</sup>, as well as social inequity and economic inefficiency that generates significant collective costs<sup>4</sup>. This reality is reflected, among other things, in the problems many families with children have in accessing decent housing and basic supplies, which has a negative impact on child welfare. This is compounded by the comparatively low poverty-reducing effect of policies to support families with children, in some cases due to their design and configuration. And not unrelated to this is the still insufficient attention received by important groups of children in a situation of special vulnerability, such as those belonging to single-parent households, ethnic minorities or those of migrant origin. These situations are aggravated by territorial differences and by certain gaps in access and availability of services between cities and rural areas.

2 UNICEF (Cantó, O. y Ayala, L.) (2020): “¿Cómo reducir la pobreza infantil en España? Análisis y recomendaciones”. And UNICEF Spain (2023): “España: pobreza infantil en medio de la abundancia (Pobreza infantil en los países de la OCDE/UE)”.

3 Ayllón, S. (et al.) (2022): “La transmisión intergeneracional de la pobreza y la desigualdad de oportunidades en España”.

4 OECD: “The economic costs of childhood socio-economic disadvantage in european OECD countries”. *OECD papers on well-being and inequalities*, 2022, No. 9. Cantó, O., González, L., et al.: “El coste de la pobreza infantil en España”.

All of this calls into question the effectiveness of rights and a decent quality of life for a significant proportion of children in Spain, who are demanding equal opportunities policies to compensate for the inequalities of the households in which they live. This is visible in the educational gaps that generate segregation, such as the different capacity to access inclusive and quality education, a good predictor of educational outcomes and subsequent employment trajectories. Health risks are also detected in part of the child population, due to certain difficulties of access to different levels of health care, the incidence of pathologies such as obesity or the worrying trend visible in certain indicators of child and youth mental health, aggravated by the insufficient attention it receives. And, to a large extent related to the above, no less urgent are the new risks and emerging threats to children's health and safety in the digital environment, based on the early, widespread and intensive use of the internet and social networks.

The Economic and Social Council (Consejo Económico y Social) agreed to prepare a report addressing the situation of children in Spain, in comparative perspective, and the policies that most directly affect their needs, with the aim of identifying possible shortcomings and areas for improvement that would allow us to advance as a country in guaranteeing the rights of children and their comprehensive protection, increasing the well-being and opportunities of children. In 2022, the 7<sup>th</sup> Cycle began within the system for monitoring the application of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which will culminate in 2024 with new concluding observations to Spain by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Through this report, the ESC (CES, by its initials in Spanish) wishes to contribute to the quality public debate in this field.

The purpose of the report is to analyse the situation and policies for all children in the aforementioned age groups in Spain, while paying specific attention to children in situations of socio-economic disadvantage in low-income households, as this is where a greater frequency of situations of vulnerability and risk of exclusion are concentrated, all in the context of the crises of recent years and the social scars generated. Improving the care and quality of life of the child population is one of the most important challenges, and at the same time one of the greatest stimuli we have as a dynamic society which, for decades, has been undergoing profound transformations.

The decline in births and the increase in life expectancy have changed the age structure of the Spanish population, as in many other countries. Advanced demographic analyses show how today's societies, including Spain's, achieve intergenerational reproduction with lower fertility rates, maintaining or even increasing populations, based on the greater reproductive efficiency of successive generations<sup>5</sup>. The arrival at fertile ages of practically all the men and women belonging to a given generation, in contrast to previous historical stages with high numbers of births and infant deaths,

5 MacInnes, J. and Pérez Díaz, J.: "La tercera revolución de la modernidad; la revolución reproductiva". *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (REIS), 2008, No. 122. And the works cited therein.



has enabled today's societies to reach a threshold of efficiency that is the key to many of the recent sociological changes.

This dynamic is shaping a society that is different from that of decades ago, with a progressively greater weight of older age groups and a growing focus on longevity, in which new challenges are posed and which is giving way to important changes, among others, in the dynamics of work and consumption, in care needs, or in gender roles. The sexual division of labour, between productive (paid) and reproductive (unpaid) work, has changed significantly: in addition to the growing incorporation of women into productive work, men are participating more in reproductive work, although still in a minority, and there is still an important margin to be covered. All this represents a societal success parallel to the increase in life expectancy. And it allows for several considerations: first, that parental and extended family care (the role of grandparents in child-rearing) for children benefits from this dynamic in terms of time commitment and bonding; second, that better family care must be accompanied by consistent support policies, as well as general public policies that put children at the centre; and third, that intergenerational reproduction has been possible because each generation has taken better care of its children, supported by improved material conditions, making it possible to increase the years/life/person ratio and for children to reach old age in better health. Investing in children, improving their quality of life, raising their capacities and promoting their opportunities, is therefore investing in better living conditions throughout the population's age structure.

Chapter I of the report describes what children are like in Spain in terms of the main demographic variables (evolution of child cohorts and their distribution across the territory); and what the households in which they live are like, which makes it possible to observe the importance of the social gradient that is projected in the main areas (education, health, housing or protection against abuse and violence) that affect their living conditions.

Chapter II covers advances in the framework of children's rights. With the ratification, in 1990, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Spain became part of the international concert promoting a child care policy based on a rights-based approach defined in accordance with international standards. Although this required Spain to begin to adapt its legal system to the standards derived from this consensus, it was not until well into the new century that certain very important regulatory and strategic milestones materialised within a process that was largely completed, but subject to the adaptations required by a constantly changing social reality.

Chapter III concentrates on the central part of the report, children's policies, beginning by highlighting the need for them, not only from a social justice perspective, especially in relation to disadvantaged children, but also as a social investment that generates returns in the medium and long term, as all the studies point out. Investment in policies to support families with children (income support, reconciliation),

in child health, in education and quality care services from an early age, in access to and enjoyment of decent housing, or in a good system for preventing and protecting children from neglect and violence, as the main areas, is also supported by analyses that point to greater efficiency and economic growth (employability, wages, aggregate demand, savings in social costs) derived from a higher quality of life and well-being during childhood.

But beyond the important effects in economic terms, the need for strong child policies must be underpinned by broader approaches to measuring the well-being of societies. In this regard, a major initiative such as the European Child Guarantee (ECG) recalls that “investing in equal opportunities for children lays the foundation for sustainable and inclusive growth that fosters just and resilient societies and upward social convergence”<sup>6</sup>.

In this sense, raising awareness throughout society of the importance of maintaining a high level of investment in education from 0-3 years of age should be a priority. Education and care in the early years provides the environment to enhance the neurological foundations of children’s capacities (emotional, social, cognitive) provided that access to quality services is ensured and that it is accompanied by comprehensive policies to support families, especially the socio-economically disadvantaged. Under these conditions, the possibility of developing good skills from an early age favours the inequality-reducing role of education, by improving educational performance and subsequent life trajectories, generating significant collective returns. To do otherwise is to assume a waste of skills and talent in our country.

Finally, Chapter IV contains the main conclusions and proposals that aim to focus on those issues that are considered to be most in need of improvement, but without ignoring the unquestionable progress made in our country in child welfare over the last few decades.

Childhood policies in Spain currently have the advantage of having an important European regulatory, strategic and financial support framework, which provides a very solid basis for developing instruments such as the State Strategy for the Rights of Children and Adolescents 2023-2030 (EEDIA, by its initials in Spanish) and the State Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee (PAEGIE, by its initials in Spanish). The European framework represents, above all, an important opportunity for the development of consistent childhood policies in our country, guaranteeing their stability and continuity in the coming years. Although greater political attention is currently being paid to children, in line with and driven by EU policies, it can be said that Spain is lagging behind in tackling childhood policies as a global, comprehensive and coherent strategy, with the aim of placing children at the centre of public policies, a challenge set by both the European Union and the international organisations of which

6 Council Recommendation EU 2021/1004, of 14 June.

our country is a member. Part of this is the lack of a comprehensive state framework for regulating the basic conditions for the legal, social and economic protection of families in Spain, which would improve family support policies, as the Economic and Social Council has had occasion to point out<sup>7</sup>. It is therefore necessary to consider childhood policies as a national objective, placing this long-range goal within a broad consensus that ensures its continuity beyond the electoral cycle.

The articulation of this objective should be supported by an instrument such as budgets with a children's "brand". Public policies to guarantee the rights and well-being of children require not only a sufficient level of investment, but also the support of instruments that make it possible to know with transparency and reliability the resources allocated to the child population, both in the design of budgets and in the expenditure actually executed. Firstly, because it is necessary to comply with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the observations made in this regard by the Committee on the Rights of the Child for all States parties and for Spain<sup>8</sup>; but, above all, so that it is possible to make progress in the consistency, effectiveness and efficiency of these policies, making it possible to assess their suitability for the fulfilment of children's rights.

The measurement of budgets and public spending on children has been a pending task in recent years due to its complexity, the unavailability of data of sufficient detail and quality, and the lack of appropriate methodologies. For this reason, some relatively recent initiatives undertaken with these objectives in mind are of great importance. Systematised quantitative information is also provided, and the reports on the impact on children, adolescents and families in the draft general state budget laws, which have been carried out since 2019, represent a step in the right direction, although they are not sufficient<sup>9</sup>. The first evaluations of budgetary investment in children in our country based on a specific methodology observed that the proportion of spending allocated by the State (central administration) to children is very low and is poorly targeted, largely due to the distribution of competences in some of the major spending functions that affect them<sup>10</sup>.

For sufficient investment in children, it is therefore essential that the spending of the Autonomous Communities, which have these competencies (health, education, housing, social services and assistance), be appropriately targeted in this regard. It is therefore necessary to promote the application of this type of methodology not only by the central administration but also by all public administrations, as, in fact, some

7 ESC Opinion 6/2023, on the Preliminary Draft Law on Families.

8 Committee on the Rights of the Child: General Comment No. 19 (2016) on Public Expenditure and the Rights of the Child (Article 4). Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic report of Spain (2018).

9 The last one, corresponding to the Draft General State Budget Bill for 2023 (<https://www.sepg.pap.hacienda.gob.es>).

10 Unicef Comité Español (Garcimartín, C. *et al.*, 2018), *Medición de la inversión presupuestaria en la infancia. Propuesta metodológica y primeros resultados en España* (Working document).

regional governments have begun to do. This would allow for the systematic processing and traceability of budgetary and spending data on children, as well as the analysis and monitoring of their evolution over time and the evaluation of their execution in order to assess their orientation towards the child population<sup>11</sup>.

Children's policies, especially in some of their dimensions, must be designed with the participation of children. Children's participation is one of the rights with the greatest scope for guaranteeing its effective exercise, facilitating their progressive access to free, responsible and active citizenship. The exercise of this right requires strengthening the quality and activity of the participation councils for children and adolescents, starting with the State Council (CEPIA), and developing barometers and opinion polls specifically focused on the child and youth population<sup>12</sup>. This would make it possible to improve the institutional consideration of their opinions and perceptions of the problems that affect them within children's policy programmes at different levels.

This report focuses first and foremost on the 0-12 age group. This is because, in addition to the unquestionable relevance of quality and inclusive care policies from the earliest stages of life, when basic cognitive, emotional, affective and social skills are being formed during early childhood, it is necessary to attend to their continuation in the primary education stage, where the first maturity takes place and where these skills must be strengthened and reinforced in educational and socialising environments that must also be inclusive and of high quality. Throughout these years, resources should be available for the early detection of possible problems in children, both personal and from their environment, that may hinder their full development. But this option in the report does not exclude the consideration of other groups of children and young people when necessary. Insofar as the available information allows, the age groups 0 to 6 and 7 to 12 years old are considered in a differentiated manner.

In the diagnosis of the situation of childhood, the personal variables of sex, age and nationality, as well as the territorial variable and the differentiating characteristics of urban and rural environments, are considered in a transversal manner and again when the information allows it.

11 González-Bueno Uribe, G. (2020): "La medición de la inversión pública en la infancia: justificación y propuesta metodológica", *Presupuesto y Gasto Público*, No. 98.

12 Thus, among others, UNICEF España (2022): "¿Qué opinan los niños, niñas y adolescentes? Resultados de la tercera edición del Barómetro de Opinión de Infancia y Adolescencia", 2021-2022.

**CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS:  
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

## 1. Childhood in Spain, main advances and pending challenges

The situation of children in Spain has improved considerably over the last few decades. Children as a whole are in good health, stable over time and, in general, resilient, largely due to the efficiency and quality of the National Health System (NHS), which has a broad portfolio of services and guarantees effective, almost universal access to healthcare. However, certain gaps in access and care need to be addressed, especially in relation to some emerging health problems.

In the field of education, there are high enrolment rates, practically full enrolment from the second cycle of infancy onwards, and in recent years there have been significant advances in the first cycle, even though there are inequalities between the Autonomous Communities in the extension of education from 0 to 3 years of age. We have a largely equitable education system, in which the existence of a good school climate also stands out. On this basis, technological advances offer possibilities for improvement and innovation in teaching methods, and can help to compensate for educational inequalities and inequalities in access to cultural goods, if the provision of connectivity and devices is guaranteed, as well as adequate digital training, especially for households with fewer resources.

Household income support policies, particularly those directly related to children, have incorporated in recent years certain improvements with a significant potential for guaranteeing income support, although there is still a wide margin for their full implementation and for improving their capacity to reduce poverty. At the same time, there is undoubted progress in policies to achieve a co-responsible work-life balance, but again, there is room for improvement in their effectiveness.

Especially in the last decade, greater attention has been paid to children in politics and policies, which can be seen in the improvement of legal protection instruments and the adoption of strategies that set out the roadmap for the coming years. Spain has an advanced legal and strategic framework for the protection and promotion of children's rights, in coherence with the international commitments undertaken, although it is necessary to improve the application of the former and ensure the implementation of the latter, facilitating transparency and evaluation.

A greater awareness and sensitisation of society towards the good treatment, protection and inclusion of children, in parallel with a rise in the educational and material level of the country, offer a more favourable context for the improvement of child welfare.

In recent decades, therefore, welfare policies have had a very positive impact on the living conditions of children. However, it is essential to continue improving them in order to address the social impacts of the recent crises and thus consolidate a favourable framework for the well-being and full development of children under equal conditions. Advancing both in specific policies for children and in an approach to public policies as a whole that places children at the centre should be assumed as a national objective, and this far-reaching goal should be the object of a broad consensus that ensures its continuity beyond electoral cycles.

Especially, poverty rates in the population aged 0 to 12 higher than in other countries with a similar or lower income level, which are maintained throughout time and which become chronic in a comparatively high percentage of children's population, should continue to be fought. This is one of the most urgent challenges, since it questions the effectiveness of the basic rights of a significant proportion of childhood in Spain.

The assumption of a public role in the full development of children must be translated, as expressed by the ESC in its Opinion 6/2023 on the Preliminary Draft Law on Families, into a comprehensive approach to policies to support families and children. This support must contribute to materializing life and family projects, as well as investing in the abilities of children as a basis for the productive development and well-being of society as a whole.

## 2. Investing in childhood as a country objective, the key role of policies

A full childhood, understood as the satisfaction of the basic needs, especially during the early ages, allows for setting the grounds for good health condition, good educational results and an overall quality of life. On the contrary, children who grow up with socioeconomic lack and/or lack of affection tend to have problems or retardation in their cognitive development to a greater extent, what may lead, in turn, to worse academic results and a higher risk of retaking a course, school failure or early school leaving. Additionally, they have greater health issues and physical development, among other extremes.

The impact on the person of the socio-family environment in which he or she grows during his or her childhood tend to occur again in intergenerational terms, even more when vulnerability situations are cumulative and persistent, and concentrate in certain types of households, what has important social impacts. Public policies are key axes to mitigate this inequality inertia. Thus, they are essential tools to improve living conditions of children's population, since they have an impact, either directly or indirectly, in all the areas that make up development during childhood.

But, in addition, public policies from a childhood point of view are important to channel the social and collective repercussions that arise from the living conditions of children's population in terms of cohesion and equality, productivity, efficiency and economic sustainability, or health and social welfare. High social impacts in macro-economic terms, as indicated by the most recent studies, both at an international and at a national level.

Spain, according to the OECD study, shows macro-economic costs of child poverty above the average of European countries, that is 4.1 per cent of the GDP and comes mainly from wage losses, whose weight in the total macro-economic cost is proportionally higher than in other countries (2.14 per cent of GDP, compared to the 1.38 per cent on average in European countries). These results have been complemented by a pioneering study for Spain in which the cost of child poverty was estimated to be 5.1 per cent of GDP of 2019.

These studies show that vulnerability during childhood entails high monetary costs for society as a whole (higher the earlier it occurs in childhood and the longer it persists) and demonstrate, in addition, that the potential return on investment in effective strategies and policies to combat child poverty is high in economic and social terms.

In conclusion, there is a widespread agreement on: 1) the need to strengthen childhood policies, given their high social and economic returns; 2) that these policies introduce the early care approach, as it will increase their effectiveness (higher returns and lower investment); 3) that the child focus is addressed centrally and comprehensively in policies (given the multidimensional nature of child well-being); and 4) that they are mechanisms for preventing vulnerability in children and containing long-term effects (reducing the cycle of poverty).

At EU level, important measures have been implemented in the framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights, such as the European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child or the European Care Strategy, as well as the European Child Guarantee (ECG), which aims to guarantee children's access to essential services in order to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion, which affects one in five children in the region and intensely in some countries such as Spain.

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*Major advances  
in children's policies  
in the EU*

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Key to the implementation of the ECG will be the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which requires countries with child poverty rates above the 2017-2019 average (23.4) to allocate 5 per cent of this fund to combat child poverty. Member States, in turn, made national commitments in this regard and have to develop a State Action Plan for the implementation of the ECG, as well as to designate a national coordinator.

These initiatives represent an unparalleled step forward in the field of European social policies for children. They have been accompanied by improved measurement (indicators) and monitoring mechanisms (in the framework of European Semester)



and integrated into a coordinated strategy that harmonises policies and establishes a clear roadmap with measurable targets. All in all, further strengthening of children's policies at EU and national level is to be achieved.

Spain has two important instruments: The State Strategy for the Rights of Children and Adolescents 2023-2030 (EEDIA, by its initials in Spanish), and the State Action Plan for the Implementation of the ECG 2022-2030 (PAEGIE, by its initials in Spanish), show that, aligned with the EU level, the child focus is gaining ground in Spain, both from a comprehensive perspective in the State Strategy, and from a more specific perspective of the fight against child poverty in the Action Plan. These instruments will be the benchmark for the child focus that will guide policy action in Spain in the coming years.

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*The children's approach  
is gaining ground  
in Spain*

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For the implementation of the ECG, as established at EU level, Spain will have to dedicate, at least, 5 per cent of ESF+ resources. In addition, there will be a programme to combat material deprivation (new at the state level), of which approximately 30 per cent will be earmarked for the provision of basic food and material assistance to children in vulnerable situations. A total of 983 million euros is foreseen to be allocated.

## Proposals

### **Budgets with a children's brand**

1. Investing in children as a national objective, based on a broad consensus that goes beyond the electoral cycle, should be projected in the preparation of budgets with a "brand" for children as the main instrument of the policies of both the central government and the autonomous communities. This would make it possible to know and evaluate the resources allocated and applied to the child population.

### **Take advantage of the European strategic and financial framework for children to promote national policies**

2. Use the window of opportunity opened by the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights to make further progress towards a European Union in which children are firmly anchored at the centre of policies in order to achieve more socially cohesive and egalitarian societies, and economically more productive and efficient.
3. Make effective use of the European framework for the development of consistent childhood policies in Spain, guaranteeing their stability and continuity in the coming years.

### Successfully implement the European Child Guarantee in Spain

4. Allocate and fully execute the budget allocated to the measures foreseen in the ECG Implementation Plan and carry out an evaluation of the impact of its implementation.
5. Incorporate in the planned biennial monitoring reports an adequate framework of analysis to assess progress in Spain in each of the key areas of the ECG.
6. Have a defined set of indicators that best identifies groups in a situation of particular vulnerability.
7. Provide the figure of the National Coordinator of the IEG, as the person responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the plan in all territorial areas, with the necessary financial and human resources, as well as a solid mandate that guarantees his/her functions in an effective and efficient manner.

### 3. Ensuring economic protection for families with children

The living conditions of children in Spain are marked by a high rate of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE rate of 32.3 per 100, ECV 2023), which is an anomaly in the European environment for a high-income country with a developed social protection system.

*The challenge of eradicating poverty that affects 1 in 3 children*

Child poverty in Spain is emerging as a challenge fundamentally related to monetary poverty, which is high and intense, and with a growing incidence of severe material deprivation, which is a dimension of absolute vulnerability and, therefore, particularly serious (there are already 1 in 10 children in this situation). For its part, although low labour intensity has less weight in the set of factors, there is still the challenge of improving both the system of family social benefits and the quality of the jobs of families in vulnerable situations as a way of reducing the AROPE registers.

The economic situation of households with children varies significantly according to their composition. Single-parent households face the highest rates of poverty or social exclusion and the highest presence in the lowest income brackets, followed at some distance by extended households.

Households in poverty, at risk of social exclusion or otherwise vulnerable deserve special attention. Among them, the socio-economic situation of single-parent families, and especially those in which the single parent is a mother, justifies priority attention to them.

Over the last few decades, an important set of income support instruments has been deployed to help offset the economic costs to families of raising children. Among others, they consist of both benefits directly related to children and others which, although not aimed at children, take into account the presence of children in the calcu-

lation of the amount or their duration. These policies can be universal, so that children, regardless of the income level of their parents, can grow and develop in conditions of social well-being; or targeted, avoiding the risk of poverty or social exclusion in the face of certain contingencies, whether chronic or transitory.

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*Making the household  
income protection  
system more effective*

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Without ignoring the positive impact that family benefits have on a significant proportion of the population, the socio-demographic reality of childhood shows that the system of income protection for families with dependent children still has significant imbalances, excessive fragmentation and policy gaps.

The impact of social transfers on reducing child poverty is notably limited compared to the EU average. On the other hand, social protection spending in Spain is not only lower than the European average, but spending on families and children is barely half the EU average. Thus, together with the adjustments that need to be made in the design of benefits, Spain has a wide margin in terms of public spending until it comes at least close to the European average.

However, not all instruments available to families behave in a similar way. Most of the benefits directly related to childhood do not depend on the family's income level, but seek to compensate for certain costs associated with raising a child, especially in cases that require special protection, such as multiple births, serious illness or disability of the child.

On the other hand, as instruments explicitly aimed at eradicating poverty, the Childhood Assistance Supplement (CAPI, by its initials in Spanish) represents a qualitative leap with respect to previous policies aimed at this end, not only because of the increase in the amounts, but also because of the income thresholds that give access to the benefit. Nevertheless, since its entry into force, this instrument has shown significant shortcomings in both its implementation and its adequacy. At present, almost eight out of ten potential beneficiaries have not accessed this benefit, and the amounts are still far from covering the costs associated with raising children.

While the system of financial support for families with children has shown limited effectiveness as a whole, this does not necessarily imply that all instruments share the same problem when analysed individually. In fact, in contrast to the limited impact observed in benefits directly linked to children, child supplements to unemployment benefit and unemployment benefit for the self-employed have a strong capacity to maintain the income level of unemployed households, even generating a greater redistributive effect than policies aimed exclusively at children. On the other hand, the adequacy of these benefits is not only due to the generosity of the amounts, but also to their timely and adequate availability at the right time. This combination allows them to act as real "automatic stabilisers", preventing families from falling into situations of risk of social exclusion due to job losses.

On the other hand, personal income tax allowances for families with children also show an effective and accessible behaviour in terms of modifying the part of the income

that is not taxed and contributing to sustaining family incomes by compensating for the costs associated with raising children. This type of support may be refundable or non-refundable, and as a whole represents an integration of functions between the tax and social protection systems, following a European trend towards an integral system.

In terms of volume, non-refundable tax allowances that reduce the tax base constitute the largest part of the support to households. They benefit all families with dependent children who file a tax return. However, the non-refundable nature of these benefits limits their effectiveness, as they do not equally benefit households with very low incomes, since those without a sufficiently large tax base do not experience a significant reduction in their tax liability.

On the other hand, refundable tax benefits such as the deduction for maternity, the deduction for disabled descendants or the deduction for large families can be received as direct transfers, even if the taxable income is below the exemption threshold. In this sense, although limited in Spain, refundable benefits have a very significant redistributive potential, as they benefit all households regardless of their income and can be converted into net benefits for those with no tax liability.

In contrast to the previous instruments, the last link in the fight against poverty and social exclusion of families, the Minimum Living Income (MIV), has faced significant challenges in terms of management and accessibility. Although it is designed to provide a minimum income to families in severe poverty, with a notable increase in the amounts for families with dependent children or single parents, resolution times, application complexity and non-beneficiary rates are still excessively high, raising concerns about its effectiveness in protecting families against poverty. Moreover, the entry into force of the MVI has not achieved an adequate level of coordination with the regional minimum incomes, which continue to show significant territorial inequalities.

## Proposals

### Improving the effectiveness of the income protection system

1. It is necessary to improve the effectiveness of the system through a firm commitment to increase investment in social protection for children and families. One of the ways of achieving this objective is to advance in the consolidation of the CAPI as a support benefit for the upbringing of families with lower incomes, raising the amounts to thresholds close to the cost of upbringing, while working on a redesign aimed at reducing the current coverage gap.
2. The increase in investment should be geared towards coordination and efficiency in the implementation of social benefits that share similar objectives. In this sense, it is essential to raise the coverage rates of the MVI and the CAPI, and to homogenise the level of child protection at the regional level through better coordination of regional revenues with the MVI.

In short, although some instruments achieve their objectives better in isolation than others, as a whole they form a fragmented system, which is not always coordinated between different levels of protection and which, in budgetary terms, shows a limited effort in comparison with the EU average. All of this results in a system of aid that is not very effective in terms of redistribution and which does not contribute enough to reversing the fact that children are the demographic group most exposed to the risk of poverty and exclusion.

Unlike most of the countries around us, Spain does not have a universal child-rearing benefit, which significantly limits the possibilities of mitigating poverty and the risk of exclusion in childhood and favouring the effective integration of children into society. In a context of high fragmentation and limited budgetary effort, it is advisable to review and simplify the current system of child-oriented benefits, so that the cases currently addressed by a plurality of instruments are integrated into a universal policy. This should adapt the amounts and duration of the benefit according to the contingencies that may occur during pregnancy, childbirth or growth.

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*A parenting support benefit*

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### Proposals

#### **A parenting support benefit**

3. Creation of a universal (non-income-conditional) child-rearing allowance.
4. Universalise financial support for basic childcare needs by extending existing tax breaks to lower income families. The creation of a universal childcare benefit, together with the extension of existing tax benefits to families with dependent children, and the consolidation of CAPI as a benefit targeted at lower-income families would have positive effects on children in Spain as a whole and would extend protection to families with fewer resources. In this way, a general and universal child-rearing support mechanism and a specific support mechanism to address the risk of poverty would coexist in the same protection system.

#### **4. Deepening support for co-responsible work-life balance**

Spain has made important legislative and social advances in the consolidation of a system of reconciliation and co-responsibility between work and family life, becoming an international benchmark in measures such as the equalisation in 2019 of leave for the biological mother and the parent other than the biological mother, which became 16 weeks (six of which are compulsory and the other ten optional, but non-transferable).

The evolution of social considerations and the impetus of Community law have given rise to a new generation of policies that promote co-responsibility as an inseparable

principle of work-life balance. These policies deepen the objective of effective equality between women and men.

Much of the success of such policies is due to the fact that the notion of co-responsibility is not only limited to the balanced sharing of care in the family environment, but also to the involvement of public authorities in creating the necessary conditions for adults and children to have the necessary time for quality parenting.

Once benefit or paid leave is exhausted, there is a policy vacuum, as schooling is guaranteed from the age of three. This gap in coverage forces families to make cost-opportunity decisions about childcare provision for their children. Among the multiple options, many of which are conditioned by income level, labour and social security regulations provide for reduced working hours or leave of absence to care for children, although none of these are accompanied by income replacement mechanisms. This results in eloquent gender disparities, as overwhelmingly more women choose to interrupt, partially or totally, their professional careers in order to carry out child-rearing tasks. From another perspective, this negatively affects positive parenting, which is characterised by the involvement, accessibility and shared responsibility of both parents, crucial aspects in the intellectual and emotional development of children, especially in their early years.

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*Promoting a model of convergence between the parental leave scheme and the schooling guarantee*

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Specifically, a type of instrument that aims to fill a certain gap in policies that have not achieved the necessary viability and guarantee of rights. This is the case of the Co-responsible Plan (Plan Corresponsables), aimed at creating quality professional care services to meet the reconciliation needs of families with children and young people up to the age of 16.

## Proposals

### Convergence of policies

1. It is advisable to promote a model of temporary convergence between paid parental leave and guaranteed schooling that provides families with certainty about the possibilities of care and, at the same time, prioritises the impact of these policies on the lives of children as well as on those of their parents.
2. Move forward with appropriate and innovative solutions, among which it would be advisable to develop and increase the budget allocation for the Co-Responsible Plan as a measure to support families with reconciliation needs, especially single-parent families.

## 5. Guaranteeing early care to childhood

Early childhood education and care is a pathway to equity and social justice, inclusive economic growth and the promotion of sustainable development. As well as being one of the main determinants of child well-being and its potential to equalise social inequalities, in educational terms its benefits are manifold, and the return on investment is the highest of all educational phases, especially for disadvantaged children. This is why the right to early childhood education is recognised by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and is part of the objectives and strategies of UNESCO and the OECD to expand and improve care services. The European Union has incorporated this right to early childhood education in the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the European Child Guarantee.

The LOMLOE establishes the unitary and educational nature of the early childhood education stage by including the first cycle as a first stage of early childhood education, which is divided into two cycles. Both cycles are voluntary, but while in the second cycle access is universal and free of charge, in the first cycle both universality and gratuity are not guaranteed. Spain has been characterised by an almost full enrolment in the second cycle of pre-primary education (3-6 years) for more than a decade, while 42 per cent of children under 2 years of age are enrolled in the first cycle of pre-primary education.

The progress made in recent years in formal socio-educational care for children under 3 years of age places Spain (48.6 per cent) among the countries that by 2022 had already reached the European target for participation in early childhood education and care, according to the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union (2022) for 2030 (45 per cent), although it is still below the national target for 2030 (50.9 per cent). However, a significant proportion of children are still out of school, which also makes it difficult for parents to reconcile work and family life. It is therefore necessary to guarantee the coverage of schooling from 0 to 3 years of age. Its extension is feasible in terms of investment, given the current level of early schooling, its foreseeable growth trend in the current demographic context, and the boost to schooling through the PRTR (by its initials in Spanish, Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan).

The great progress made in the schooling of children under the age of three hides significant inequalities, including: variations in rates between different regions and by size of habitat, significant social inequalities in access, particularly for the most disadvantaged, and difficulties in the enrolment of pupils who require special attention.

Public underfunding and insufficient public provision to meet the demands of families in this respect, especially the most vulnerable ones, as well as the regressive nature of current investment in schooling for 0–3-year-olds, make it necessary to improve affordability. This need, expressed by households that have not been able to access ECEC because they consider the cost to be unaffordable, coincides with the reality of expenditure for families who have enrolled their children in school, since a large part of the cost of early childhood education is paid by families, with clear consequences in terms of equity.

On the other hand, there are information problems that make it difficult to assess the provision of quality early childhood education that ensures the social inclusion of minority groups and some of the most disadvantaged groups, such as Roma pupils, foreign pupils, pupils with special educational needs, or pupils with disabilities. However, in some of these groups there are gaps in the early schooling of these pupils in relation to the general population.

Other weaknesses of 0-3 years care are related to the heterogeneity or atomisation in the provision of these services, due to their influence on accessibility and affordability, the lack of diversification of early care that responds to the needs of families, and the configuration of a multilevel offer with an important municipal presence in some regions.

In order to ensure that the benefits of ECEC lead to increased well-being and development of children under the age of three, it is important to establish common quality standards across the territory. However, in contrast to other stages, there is still no common framework in early childhood education that defines the principles, objectives and standards for assessing structural, process and outcome quality. Some progress has been made in regulating aspects related to structural quality, such as the curriculum, and assessment and monitoring in pre-primary education, but minimum state requirements for institutions serving children under 3 years of age have not yet been established. This delay is significant, as the expansion of the number of places under the PRTR's 0-3 schooling programme is taking place without updated minimum requirements in line with the latest European recommendations. Insufficient cooperation and collaboration between administrations, among other factors, may be producing inter- and intra-regional inequalities in terms of the design, access and quality of services. Moreover, pupil/teacher ratios in the first cycle are currently high and teachers' working conditions can also be improved.

### Proposals

1. Increase social awareness about the importance of this vital and educational period, as well as the need to work in order to guarantee the rights and well-being of children under 3.

### Universalise education from 0 to 3 years

2. Increase availability of public places and improve affordability with equity, as the most important challenges. In this sense, it is necessary to:
  - 2.1. Approve the plan for the extension of free early childhood education, as envisaged in the LOMLOE. This Plan should increase public funding and the co-responsibility of both the regional administrations with the MEFP (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, by its initials in Spanish) and the Autonomous Regions with local corporations. It should also include a timetable for implementation, and take into account the risk of this investment becoming a structural expense, in order to make it more sustainable.



- 2.2. Make progress in the implementation of the territorial cooperation programme for the promotion of schooling in the first cycle of early childhood education, included in the PRTR (component 21) in a more homogeneous territorial manner.
- 2.3. Make progress in the schooling objectives established in the State Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

### **Compensating role of early childhood education**

3. Strive for a better balance between widening access and affordability with improving quality in the move towards universal and free access from 0 to 3 years of age. In this sense, it is necessary to:
  - 3.1. Guarantee the access to quality education and care to children in situation of vulnerability (at risk of poverty or social exclusion, of migrant origin or from ethnic minorities, who live in precarious family situations, with disability or mental health problems, among others).
  - 3.2. Increase public investment, especially for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.
  - 3.3. Develop an integrated system of ECEC that coordinates education, health, social welfare and family services.
  - 3.4. Establish a common legal framework defining the principles, objectives and standards of quality, including non-authorized private facilities and unique models of care.
  - 3.5. Reducing pupil/teacher ratios, and improving the training, working conditions and professional recognition of early childhood educators and carers. Among other aspects, there is a need to fully align early childhood qualification requirements with European recommendations, as well as to improve the economic value assignment and social valuation of professions that are overwhelmingly composed of women.
  - 3.6. Encourage the involvement of families and communities in ECEC, respecting cultural diversity.

### **System governance**

4. Improve the governance of the system for the provision of places for 0–3-year-olds. This requires, among other issues, greater homogeneity in the public price systems, in the regulation of the basic elements to guarantee the quality of supply, or in important aspects to improve the accessibility of ECEC, such as admission criteria and their evaluation, and even in direct funding to families and private centres.

### **Improvement of statistics**

5. Establish a monitoring and evaluation system that allows for the identification of the improvement areas in education and care for the early childhood, which makes disaggregated data essential for these ages.

## 6. Consolidating Quality Primary Education

The LOMLOE significantly modified the order and organisation of Primary Education teaching. One of the most important new features of this law is its eminently competency-based nature, as the system is structured around eight key competences that must underpin the weight of education in the different areas of primary education. The right to free and compulsory education at this stage is complemented by other rights that are not unrelated to the educational process and by other competences of a transversal nature that are included in the curriculum.

The lack of systemic assessments of educational outcomes at this stage is highly relevant, since in low –and middle– performing countries, such as Spain, greater standardisation of external tests is associated with higher student performance. The LOMLE incorporated the realisation of two types of assessment during this period: a general and a diagnostic assessment of the system. The only information on performance in literacy, STEM, citizenship, and social-emotional skills comes from international assessments in which Spain has taken part. Nevertheless, it has not participated in the language proficiency studies, and it is one of the eight European countries with major shortcomings in complying with European Union recommendations to include affective-sexual education in school curricula from early ages.

Estimated average scores in reading comprehension, mathematics and science for primary school students in Spain are lower than the average of the European Union and, in both cases, the positive development in performance experienced in previous years is reversed. Average scores in civic and citizenship competence do not differ from this average and the weight of social and economic status in them is lower.

Average results in primary education are reflected and exacerbated in ESO due to the cumulative nature of learning. Socio-economic and territorial inequalities and gaps that start in primary school tend to continue or become more acute in the next stage, as educational policies and structures and the school environment influence average performance and, above all, school failure. However, the Spanish education system is fairly equitable and is able to attenuate individual socio-economic inequalities more, although a gender gap is still present.

Spain stands out for having a good school climate, which is very valuable given its relevance to the quality of education, and for its positive impact on the quality of learning, communicative processes and the quality of education, self-esteem, and the students' well-being. Spain's participation in the OECD's Study on Social and Emotional Skills has allowed us to learn how these skills differ among students according to their socio-demographic characteristics, how they influence their academic and life achievements, and how the school and family environment affects the development of these skills. Knowing these extremes is key to advancing students' academic success and well-being.

Some of the learning problems related to school failure, such as grade repetition or low achievement in basic skills, tend to start in primary education, but are accentuated in ESO. However, the excessive focus on results and the early school leaving (ESL) indicator has not helped to focus attention on educational processes, and therefore on school failure during primary education, which, although important, has been neglected in the compensation measures promoted for years to reduce ESL.

In school failure, there is a strong and negative causal link between repetition and graduation in ESO, in addition to associations between grade repetition and socio-economic and cultural status. Furthermore, school segregation and absenteeism are often considered as predictors of school failure. Repetition rates in primary school are lower than in ESO and the incidence of the problem of absenteeism at this stage is unknown. Since LOMLOE, staying in the same school year in basic education should be considered an exceptional measure that can only be adopted once during primary education, although changing the so-called ‘repetition culture’ will probably require time and effort.

The data show that, in relation to neighbouring countries, segregation in Spain is higher in primary than in secondary education and varies greatly by territory. In addition, a significant proportion of schools have a very high or high level of concentration of pupils in poverty. School segregation between educational networks explains approximately between 20 and 25 per 100 of the total. In addition to the PROA+ programme, in Spain, the LOMLOE has introduced certain response measures aimed at reducing this situation.

The indicators of funding and educational environment in primary education are quite favourable, as the reduction of pupil numbers has led to ratios similar to those of the European Union, the age structure of teachers is younger than in other educational stages, and most of them feel very satisfied with their profession. On the other hand, from a European point of view, the level of public expenditure, although it could be improved, is in the middle ground.

Primary education is obligatory and free of charge, but there are some costs related to schooling that must be assumed by households. The educational administrations contemplate different support systems which, although different in nature from grants, reach almost 6 out of 10 students, while the percentage of students with at least one grant or aid is higher than that of students with at least one grant or aid (of any type) is 25.2 per cent. However, there is unequal coverage between the Autonomous Communities, both in terms of students receiving grants and other systems of financing books and teaching materials, and there is also significant disparity both in the access criteria and in the costs covered.

Digitalisation may become a tool for social inclusion, as it has a potentially equalising power to equalise opportunities for learning and participation, but at the same time it raises some concern and debate about its impact on health and well-being. The appropriate and safe use of ICT is a socio-community issue that goes beyond the school environment, but which the educational community must help to address by improving students’ digital competence.

It is essential to know the level of digital competence of pupils at this stage, which is why the new strategic framework of the European Education Area 2021-2030 considers it among its basic indicators. In turn, The LOMLOE promotes digital learning and establishes that the development of students' digital competence starts from the early childhood education stage, and especially in compulsory education. Nevertheless, this competence has not yet been systematically and homogeneously assessed at the national level.

The education administrations have made a great effort to improve digital competence in education, through a greater provision of equipment, the certification of teachers' digital competences and the revision or development of digital plans for schools. However, the degree of implementation of programmes for these purposes could be improved. In addition, continued emphasis should be placed on reducing the differences in access between rural and urban environments, and also on reducing the access and use gap that still exists, and which particularly affects the most vulnerable families and groups. Finally, although the relationship between children's digital competence and parental digital competence in education has been little studied, some studies indicate that digital life in the family, and the family's cultural and economic capital, are some of the most important predictors of children's digital competence and their self-perception of it. Improving this competence among parents will therefore be beneficial for children.

### Proposals

1. Maintain investment in education in the face of declining student numbers, in order to improve the quality of education by increasing real expenditure per student. This could allow, among other improvements, to better serve vulnerable and special needs students, provide more personalised attention to students in order to improve academic performance, reduce learning problems related to school failure and improve programmes to compensate for educational inequalities, help families that may have problems to assume some school costs and complementary activities, and even reduce ratios, or improve digitalisation in education.
2. Monitor and evaluate programmes at national and regional level to reduce school failure, so that remedial action can be taken and inform the development of future policies and programmes to reduce it.
3. The role of the ACs in policies to reduce school segregation is very broad, and it is therefore in the interests of all schoolchildren that a consensus should be reached in this respect. Especially if we bear in mind that various reforms in neighbouring countries, as well as some OECD recommendations, show that it is possible to reduce segregation while respecting school choice.
4. Improve the coordination of the different educational administrations in order to reduce the existing disparity with regard to the coverage, access criteria and costs covered by the system of grants and study aids, and other systems for financing books and teaching materials for compulsory education.

5. Ensure quality, accessible and inclusive extracurricular and educational leisure or free-time activities for children and teenagers at risk of poverty or social exclusion, during the school year and in non-school periods.

#### **Digital transformation of education**

6. Achieve an effective and beneficial digital transformation of the education system by involving the entire educational community, including support by families. It is essential to achieve a degree of acquisition of adequate digital competences by these actors both to ensure children's well-being in the face of emerging risks to their health and safety, and to ensure that they benefit from the use of ICTs in school.
7. Guarantee, on the part of schools, the protection of students' personal data, as well as preserve privacy in the use of applications for the management of digital education (the entire educational community should be aware of and respect the specific recommendations on privacy in online teaching drawn up by the Spanish Data Protection Agency).

#### **Maths and reading comprehension reinforcement plan**

8. Guarantee the measures announced in the School Reinforcement Plan in mathematics and reading comprehension, with the collaboration of the Autonomous Communities in its implementation. Ensure sufficient and targeted funding for the plan, and that its implementation at school level is effective and efficient. To have an ex-ante and ex-post evaluation to detect both its achievements and shortcomings. Consider the proposals, both of a general and specific nature, made by the State School Council and other relevant institutions in both disciplines, as well as international and national experts on this matter.

#### **Extending evaluations**

9. Work, on the part of the Administrations as a whole, to ensure that both the general evaluation of the system and the diagnostic evaluation during this stage are carried out in all the Autonomous Communities and that their application allows for the comparability of results.
10. Participate at national level in all international assessments that measure key competences for learning.

#### **Improvement of statistics**

11. In order to reduce the high rate of absenteeism in Spain and to adopt appropriate measures, it is necessary to have anonymised data that allow us to obtain a more accurate picture of its incidence among certain students, as well as its correlation with certain characteristics of the school that correlate with absenteeism.
12. Improve the official statistics on grants and study aids, in order to capture, in a single homogeneous and precise indicator, their coverage, since with the data available, it is extremely difficult to obtain easily interpretable and comparable information.

## 7. Continue to improve and protect children's right to health

The health status of children in Spain is good and stable over time. This success is based on the efficiency and quality of the National Health System (NHS), which has a broad portfolio of services and guarantees effective, almost universal access to healthcare.

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*Addressing gaps  
in access to and provision  
of health care*

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Nevertheless, a small but significant percentage of children have unmet medical needs that are higher than the EU-27 average, 4.6 per cent in 2021 (0-17 years in this case). These access problems are concentrated in some specialist areas and for children facing specific vulnerabilities and, singularly, poverty and social exclusion. Children in single-parent households also have higher than average access problems. This issue is of particular importance, as children, especially in early childhood, require specific and more intense care.

Childhood health is partly determined from gestation onwards, with early childhood being a key stage in determining health status in adulthood. The main indicators reveal Spain's positive performance in this area. With regard to breastfeeding, the percentage of breastfed children (exclusively breastfed or not) at 6 months of age in Spain is close to two thirds of the total and clearly exceeds the average rates in the European Union. The perinatal mortality rate has fallen drastically in recent decades and is one of the lowest in the European Union, although there is still room for improvement in reducing territorial dispersion. The percentage of low-birth-weight babies has also fallen. Vaccination coverage of the population under 2 years of age is above 95 per cent.

Early childhood care contributes to the effective diagnosis of childhood disability and, in Spain, 172,200 children and adolescents aged between 2 and 15 years have some kind of disability or limitation (21.8 per 1,000 children).

Resources for children's health care have recently faced a critical context that has strained their activity. The number of paediatricians in the NHS has continuously increased in recent years. Nevertheless, newly trained paediatricians are mostly directed towards hospital care, so that the ratio of paediatricians in primary care has remained stable. The limited capacity of primary care to attract specialists means that, at present, a significant part of primary care for children is provided by family and community medicine specialists and that paediatric quotas exceed the recommended ratios. Thus, in the map of child care, there are places in primary care that are not occupied by paediatric specialists (a quarter of the total, occupied by family and community medicine specialists) and, on the other hand, there are paediatric quotas that exceed the number of children that can be adequately attended to.

Efforts in favour of specialisation and efficient distribution of professional resources are essential to promote adequate levels of healthcare quality, especially given that the number of paediatric visits per inhabitant per year has remained stable.

Despite the aforementioned broad coverage of the NHS, the current legal configuration of the public health care system presents some specific gaps in effective coverage which, precisely, affect groups of children in a situation of special vulnerability, such as children with parents of migrant origin who are not entitled to publicly-funded health care.

Royal Decree-Law 7/2018 restored the right to health protection for persons not registered or authorised as residents under the same conditions as persons with Spanish nationality. However, the introduction of the requirement of accreditation of a stay of more than 90 days in the country and, for those persons with stays of less than 90 days or unable to demonstrate this minimum period, the requirement of a report from the social services of the autonomous communities, has opened the door to different interpretations of the implementation of the regulation which, in some cases, have led to the exclusion of children whose parents are in an irregular situation from health care.

## Proposals

### Ensuring access to quality health care for all children

1. Redouble, given the specific needs of early childhood, efforts to remove barriers to effective access to health care, establishing specific actions aimed at vulnerable children, with parents providing the necessary information, providing the necessary information to parents, promoting socio-health coordination and strengthening the community dimension of health care.
2. Extend the exemption from the user's financial contribution, in whole or in part, to all healthcare services and, in particular, to those areas of care of the NHS that are most uncovered.
3. Guarantee the supply of the recommended vaccines throughout the territory, taking the Advisory Committee on Vaccines of the Spanish Association of Paediatrics (CAV-AEP, by its initials in Spanish) as a reference, in order to prevent inequalities being generated according to the place of residence of children. In addition, high levels of childhood vaccination coverage should be preserved in the face of the risk posed by the increased pressure on primary health care.
4. Ensure early diagnosis of disability by health services and help address barriers for those with lower incomes. Beyond screening, it is also essential to promote effective access to rehabilitation and dependency care services for all children.
5. Faced with a context of sub-optimal distribution of specialised resources, rather than a deficit, encourage the attraction of paediatricians to primary care. From training, rotation time in primary care could be increased during the years of specialisation in paediatrics. Paediatric specialisation should be extended to nurses.



6. Promote the attraction of paediatricians to rural areas. Although the ratios in predominantly rural areas do not differ from those in the country as a whole, their dispersion constitutes an obstacle to quality care, overloads hospital care (for example, via hospital emergencies) and, in any case, it is necessary to invest in an adequate number of professionals in public services that aspire to fix the population in the area or attract new flows of people.
7. In accordance with the proposal contained in the ESC Report 1/2024 *The health system: current situation and prospects for the future*, Opinion 7/2022 on the Preliminary draft law amending various rules to strengthen equity, universality and cohesion of the National Health System and in line with what has been stated by institutions such as the Ombudsman, universal coverage should be guaranteed for groups in highly vulnerable circumstances, including minors, regardless of their administrative situation. To this end, and in line with the Draft Law on the universality of the SNS, the definitive procedure for the recognition of the right to healthcare for Spanish and foreign citizens should be established.

The link between nutrition and healthy lifestyles makes it necessary to interpret the high levels of childhood obesity in Spain as a multifactorial phenomenon related to diet, but also with the lack of physical activity, excessive screen time and insufficient sleep. Obesity has a negative impact on childhood health that can be transmitted into adulthood and has a marked social gradient.

At present, 5.6 per cent of households with children up to 12 years of age do not have access to the minimum ration of meat, chicken, fish or its vegetarian equivalent. More than half do not eat vegetables at least every other day and one third do not have breakfast every day.

In addition, one third of children do not meet the recommended daily hours of sleep and physical activity time. Together with the growing percentage of children with excessive screen time, this is leading to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle.

The awareness of the benefits of an adequate diet and healthy lifestyles during childhood involves the different actors and areas involved (family, education, health, active leisure and sport, territory, digital and audiovisual, etc.), as set out in the National Strategic Plan to Reduce Childhood Obesity (2022-2030).

Access to the school canteen plays a key role in children's nutrition, as well as forming part of the educational experience and offering a high social return, by favouring the reconciliation of employment and parenting. The benefits of the school canteen are concentrated on children in vulnerable situations, for whom access to the service means the guarantee of at least one healthy meal per school day.



For this to be possible, conditions must be created for the provision of and access to a quality school canteen service in line with the objective set by the IEG. In parallel, a higher quality of service should be promoted.

These are necessary conditions, but not enough for children to have access to the service. It is necessary to move towards a universal and free school canteen service, as is the case in some of our neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, the immediate priority must be to guarantee access for all children experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Nevertheless, the different thresholds of access to school meals grants in the different autonomous communities, together with the system of competition according to the available credit, currently prevent the reach of school meals grants to all children who need them most.

## Proposals

### Promote access to healthy nutrition and habits

8. Promote priority access to or funding of the cost of extracurricular sports activities for the most vulnerable children. In general, schools should enable access to physical activity, with the creation of healthier school environments, with more green areas and adequate spaces for recreation, as well as allowing their use during non-school hours.
9. Given the importance of food in the child-rearing basket, implement measures aimed at ensuring access to healthy food specifically targeted at low-income families and through non-stigmatising means (food vouchers, which is the option advocated by the ESF+ in the current programming period).
10. Offer the school canteen service in a greater number of centres and with a special effort in the secondary stage, where the deficit in provision is greater, accompanied by the necessary awareness-raising actions to attract pupils to the service.
11. Encourage a more strategic use of public procurement in favour of the quality of the canteen, based on an adequate remuneration of the service in the tendering procedures and giving sufficient weight to the criteria and clauses related to the quality of the offers.
12. Guarantee territorial equity in access to the canteen service by setting a common state threshold for access to canteen grants equivalent to that of relative poverty, regardless of whether the Autonomous Communities can establish additional, more ambitious targets.
13. Guarantee the direct granting and the allocation of expandable budget lines for canteen grants, in order to consolidate the subjective right nature of the aid. Also, emphasis should be placed on administrative simplification and flexibility of aid, in order to increase the capacity to respond to situations of vulnerability that arise.

Some of the greatest health care needs of children are concentrated in the area of mental health. Poverty and social exclusion, traumatic family events, unwanted loneliness, among many other factors, have led to a significant increase in the prevalence and risk of mental health and behavioural disorders in recent years, with

a threefold increase in psychiatric contacts of patients aged 0-14 years since 2020. Cases of suicide ideation and attempts, and completed suicides have also risen in prominence.

In this context, mental health care faces challenges such as the need to increase the number of specialised professionals, the high reliance on medication and, despite the enormous progress made in recent years, to eradicate stigmatisation of mental health problems once and for all.

With regard to the provision of psychiatrists, and following the breakthrough of the formal establishment in 2021 of a specialist qualification in child and adolescent psychiatry, the main challenge lies in an adequate deployment of this figure in the NHS.

The incorporation of a greater number of specialised professionals into the NHS is a key element for improving access to mental health services, as well as for relieving the pressure on primary care and paediatric care caused by these types of disorders. However, basic care should contribute to strengthening the preventive dimension of mental health, contribute to screening for disorders or preventing their further development.

Nor is childhood unaffected by the high prescribed consumption of anxiolytics, antidepressants and hypnotics and sedatives in Spain, which has seen a rise in recent years (9.4 defined daily doses per 1,000 assigned persons/day between 0-14 years of age in 2021, 19.4 per cent more than in 2017).

Efforts in the health field must be coordinated with equally crucial areas for the promotion and care of child and adolescent mental health and, in particular, education.

These issues have been contemplated by the Mental Health Strategy of the National Health System 2022-2026, the implementation of which is promoted by the 2021-2024 Mental Health and COVID-19 Action Plan. The Strategy includes a specific axis dedicated to child and adolescent mental health and should contribute to the coherence of regional initiatives that address mental health care.

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*Provide sufficient resources for mental health care from a holistic approach*

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## Proposals

### **Improving child and adolescent mental health through specialised and comprehensive care**

14. Increase the ratios of clinical psychologists in the NHS above the current level, guarantee a balanced provision throughout the territory, overcoming current inequalities, and move towards the recognition and deployment of the speciality of clinical child and adolescent psychology.

15. With regard to the number of child psychiatrists, it is necessary that the calls for applications for posts in this recently created speciality be accompanied by the necessary budget allocation to produce a net increase in specialised psychiatrists.
16. Promote primary care as the initial point of care for children's mental health. To this end, it is necessary to introduce specialised content in child and adolescent mental health among primary care professionals.
17. Reduce prescribed pharmacological consumption in childhood in favour of more effective therapeutic alternatives with lower risk at that age, prioritising personalised care by specialised professionals.
18. Promote specific and specialised training for teachers and educational staff, covering the areas of prevention, care and postvention of mental health problems. This training should complement, collaborate and favour synergies with the figure of the welfare coordinator.
19. Prioritise the monitoring and evaluation of the interventions contemplated in the Mental Health Strategy of the National Health System 2022-2026, identifying the programmes and innovations generated throughout the territory and which, due to their effectiveness, should be scaled up and consolidated in a common portfolio of mental health services.

The portfolio of NHS services has been enriched with new benefits over the years. However, as the ESC has highlighted in its Report 1/2024 *The health system: current situation and future prospects*, some areas of care should be subject to improvements in coverage.

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*Expanding the portfolio of services to key areas for child health*

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Oral health is an area of care that generates significant gaps in coverage. 7.1 per cent of childhood (from 0 to 17 years) had unmet oral health care needs in 2021. The situation worsens considerably for children living in poverty (17.2 per cent), as barriers to access are related to the high cost of treatment and the burden of payment.

In turn, vision problems in childhood have acquired a significant magnitude and are inseparable from lifestyle habits and emerging phenomena with a full impact on the younger generations, such as screen viewing. However, this contrasts with a partial health care system, focused on visual screening, but with little support for the financing of treatment.

## Proposals

### Expanding the portfolio of services in the most uncovered areas

20. Implement a Plan for the Expansion of oral health services in the NHS that identifies children from 0 to 14 years of age as a priority group (as opposed to the current 6-14 years). This measure is key to reducing the current territorial differences in the definition of the target child population in the regional plans for children's oral health care and reducing the social gradient that affects oral health care.
21. Include the cost of spectacles and contact lenses as part of the common portfolio of services, prioritising access to this benefit for children living below the poverty line or in a situation of vulnerability.

The proposed advances depend on the availability of quality data. However, knowledge of the health status of children in Spain is limited by the scarcity of up-to-date statistics that are sufficiently disaggregated by age and sex. The latest available reference of the National Health Survey (ENS, by its initials in Spanish), with a frequency of five years, dates from 2017, so it is not a useful tool for the updated analysis, especially after the pandemic, of children's health, their health care needs and access to it.

The mainstreaming of children in health and health care statistics is a basic condition for the analysis of their situation and the design of effective public policies.

## Proposals

### Improving health statistics with a focus on children

22. Increase the frequency of the National Health Survey. Extend the analysis of the age range from 0 to 14 years to all sources of the NHS Statistical Information System, tend to extend it to 17 years and establish an appropriate age disaggregation. It is also necessary to disaggregate by gender. On the other hand, progress should be made towards disaggregation according to income level, migrant origin and, in general, according to the vulnerability factors envisaged in the State Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee (PAEGIE, by its initials in Spanish).

## 8. Mainstreaming children's needs into housing and urban planning policies

For the first time in Spain, a State law, Law 12/2023 of 24 May on the Right to Housing, provides guarantees for the protection of minors by establishing that they should be a priority group, with reference to the habitability of housing, stability and legal security of ownership, the use and enjoyment of housing, and social housing parks.

*Ensuring access to decent housing for all households with children*

The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States to take appropriate measures to assist families with dependent children in order to guarantee them, in case of need, housing support programmes. PAEGIE considers that decent housing is fundamental to combating child poverty and social exclusion, and one of the barriers to effective access to rights and services for children and adolescents, and sets out a series of rights to which a response must be made.

Within Spanish households, 20.3 per cent have their home without any type of encumbrance, although those with dependent children have a tenure structure with a higher frequency of home ownership with mortgage and renting at market rates than households without children. Rising prices for both types of tenure and the costs of basic utilities, together with rising interest rates in recent years, has led to an increase in financial stress linked to the costs of maintaining housing where children live and especially in households at risk of poverty. When housing costs overburden households, future impoverishment and housing exclusion are more likely to occur.

The main housing habitability deficits affect children living in households at risk of poverty, and although the most important difference is observed in relation to the ability to maintain the right temperature in the home, it also occurs among children living in damp or dark housing.

The PAEGIE itself acknowledges that there are few policies specifically targeting children and adolescents in the area of housing, and housing programmes, plans and initiatives do not compensate for the needs of households with lower income levels.

The low spending on housing in Spain in relation to other social benefits not only fails to take into account the relationship between housing and child poverty, but may also be overburdening other welfare state benefits.

The key to ensuring that housing policy has a beneficial impact on children is marked not only by the need for the number of housing units made available at a 'social' price to be sufficient to meet the residential needs of the population, but also by how families with children and adolescents are prioritised in the access.

On the other hand, data limitations often impede an assessment of effective access to social housing.

### Proposals

1. Prioritise families with dependent children at risk of vulnerability in terms of access to housing, both in policies to increase the stock of public rented social housing and in aid to guarantee access to decent and adequate housing, as well as in policies for the rehabilitation and refurbishment of degraded housing and environments.
2. Promote, reinforce and provide resources for the housing measures of the State Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

3. Measure the scope and effectiveness of spending associated with different housing policies and prioritise those with the greatest impact on child well-being, in order to better target housing spending.
4. Improve data, research and knowledge on the impact of housing programmes, plans and initiatives on families with dependent minors.
5. Develop into concrete measures the concept of “special attention” to “families, households and cohabitation units with dependent minors”, which appears in several articles of the new Law on the Right to Housing, and incorporate them into national, regional and local housing regulations, strategies and policies.
6. In order to address the economic precariousness that housing costs may represent for families with children, public authorities should ensure that such expenditure does not represent an economic burden for vulnerable households.
7. Identify in official statistics the number of children and adolescents affected by eviction situations, and implement the Ombudsman’s recommendations on children in evictions.
8. Maintain public aid to guarantee basic supplies (electricity, drinking water, gas and internet) for families with dependent children in a situation of vulnerability, reducing the risk of service cuts, and establish the necessary measures to facilitate the maintenance of housing in habitable conditions and in an inclusive environment.
9. The National Strategy for the fight against homelessness in Spain 2023-2030 must take into account dependent minors in the quantification and characterisation of people in a situation of homelessness in Spain, in the challenges, and in the measures, and provide for the allocation of resources for the habitability of shantytowns until such time as they are eradicated.

Throughout this report, reference has been made to the framework of rights recognised by different legal and political instruments in favour of children, highlighting among them the right to recreation, play and amusement. One of the fundamental areas where this right is relevant is public space. In this regard, after analysing housing conditions from the perspective of children, the report looks at urban planning in order to understand how the urban environment and public space policies have a significant impact on children’s opportunities and quality of life.

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*Strengthening specific objectives with a children’s approach in the Spanish Urban Agenda*

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The growing interest in the integration of a children’s perspective in the planning and design of urban and rural environments is due to the recognition of at least two factors.

On the one hand, during childhood, attachment to place is particularly relevant, as children develop strong emotional attachments to their physical environment. This attachment leads them to experience and enjoy public space in unique ways, which is reflected in their preference for natural over man-made environments, as well as their increased interest in open spaces, parks, play areas or sports facilities. Such environments provide opportunities for exploration and play, which act as self-directed learning activities and are inherently enjoyable.

On the other hand, segregation and degradation of urban environments is expressed in that lower income groups are relegated to urban areas with greater deficits in terms of public services, accessibility to green areas, environmental quality or safe mobility. Consequently, policies related to public space are crucial to mitigating these disparities and ensuring that cities, towns and communities provide equitable and adequate access to quality services and infrastructure. From a child's perspective, 'distributive spatial justice' implies that, regardless of their family's income level, children are able to develop an emotional attachment to urban environments that meet conditions of quality and social well-being, such as green and recreational areas, road safety and freedom from pollution, among other aspects.

The two most important frameworks for the development of child-friendly urban strategies are the Spanish Urban Agenda (AUE, by its initials in Spanish), which integrates the criteria established in international agendas, and the Child Friendly Cities (CAI, by its initials in Spanish) initiative. While the EUA provides a set of diagnostic indicators and contextual information to assess the urban development conditions of the more than 8,000 Spanish municipalities, enabling them to develop strategic plans and urban interventions that consider the specific needs of children; the CAI initiative promotes local policies based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and emphasises the importance of child and youth participation in the development of these policies.

Despite the opportunities they offer, both instruments have some limitations. In the case of the Spanish Urban Agenda, despite having an exhaustive list of indicators and ten ambitious targets, it is virtually devoid of a children's perspective in driving urban development. This is not to say that the targets set do not have a positive impact on children, but the absence of references to children is related to the tendency to develop urban strategies that focus on the needs of adults. For example, when it states that one of the lines of action is to increase the provision of parks in residential areas, no thought is given to such sensitive aspects for children as the type of play structures in these parks (fixed and standardised or variable and adaptable to the creative process involved in play, for example), nor is attention paid to the fact that beyond the presence of parks, urban space provides places and elements that invite play and exploration, so that children's interaction with the environment is in a broad sense. Similarly, the specific objective of promoting citizen participation in the governance of the urban

model does not take into account children's participation, which is so important in the CAI initiative.

On the side of the Child Friendly Cities programme, although its objectives are aimed at establishing a local policy that allows children and adolescents to develop their lives in more habitable, sustainable and equitable environments in a broad sense, the emphasis of the CAI seal of recognition has focused on strengthening the right to participation through the Children's Participation Councils or equivalent, which must be present in all municipalities with the CAI seal. While the importance of participation is understood as an approach that attends to children's views on issues that concern them and relativises the voice of experts, the model of institutionalising participation in these Councils may not be fully aligned with the maturity and way in which children experience public space, especially at the youngest ages. Ultimately, while it promotes an interesting form of participation, at the same time it rules out other ways of understanding the relationship between children, public space and the right to participate.

## Proposals

### **Greater integration between the Spanish Urban Agenda and the Child Friendly Cities programme**

1. Considering the enormous social, cognitive, emotional, academic and psychological benefits of being able to play outdoors, it is essential to incorporate into the Spanish Urban Agenda specific objectives related to "child-friendly urban planning", taking into account the potential impact on children of urban design as a whole. This could include, among others, an indicator that measures the percentage of the population with availability and accessibility to green areas within 300 metres of their place of residence.
2. The different public administrations at local, regional and state level, in collaboration with initiatives such as Child Friendly Cities, among others, have the opportunity to promote an Urban Agenda for Children. This agenda will not only contribute to reducing inequality gaps, but could also take alternative playground models of flexible and unstructured structures that encourage forms of play that combine creativity, autonomy, controlled risk, conflict resolution or teamwork. Changing the predominant paradigm of fixed-structure playgrounds in Spain will mean a significant advance in the quality and development of children.
3. As a framework for a broader set of policies, the Spanish Urban Agenda requires that its strategies be subject to an evaluation of results.



## 9. Effectively protecting children from neglect and violence

The protection system, as a substantial part of child policies, based on universality, a rights-based approach, the protection of the best interests of the child and the right to be heard, is aligned with and responds to the international commitments assumed by Spain, based on successive legislative milestones following the ratification in 1990 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As an integrated system of norms, institutions and policies, it must guarantee effective protection, based on good treatment, of children's rights in the face of neglect and violence.

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*A system in line with international standards*

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However, an important institutional element for the closure of the system has yet to materialise: the adaptation of the Jurisdiction to children through specialisation in civil and criminal law.

On the other hand, the protection system does not function optimally in practice, and it is possible to identify a number of important areas where there is –sometimes considerable– room for improvement.

The increasing numbers of children and adolescents under protection measures indicate, without ruling out an improvement in the detection and response of the system, that prevention policies are not working sufficiently, which means that on many occasions the consequence is the separation of the child from his/her family, and the consequent guardianship by the Administration.

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*Protection in the face of risk and neglect: strengthening prevention*

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The ultimate objective of prevention is that the separation of the child from his/her family should be the system's last resort, in a way that is more in line with the rights-based approach and with the protection of the best interests of the child that emanates from the CRC and which informs the entire system of child and adolescent protection.

When a child is separated from his or her family, it is important that the competent bodies of the Autonomous Communities facilitate compliance with the legal preference for foster care measures, temporary or permanent as appropriate, and that they prevent younger children from being placed in children's centres, preserving the formation of the attachment bond in these children. In this sense, it will be essential that the intermediate and final goals of the EEDIA (by its initials in Spanish, State Strategy on the Rights of Children and Adolescents) and the PAEGIE (by its initials in Spanish, State Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee) are met, and the implementation of the measures should be monitored in order to ensure that they are implemented.

Promoting the foster care culture should contribute to solving the growing deficit of foster families in Spain and the increasing difficulty in complying with internationally supported legal preferences.

Unaccompanied migrant children are a demographically small group, but their numbers are significant, they form part of the wider international migratory movements, and they present a specific problem within the protection system due to their particularly vulnerable situation. In this context, it is necessary to guarantee them the same rights and full integration, especially the educational and employment support necessary for their transition to adult life, as demanded by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Ombudsman and specialised organisations.

The rising numbers of different forms of violence against children, as shown by various prevalence indicators, made it necessary to have a comprehensive protection law with an emphasis on prevention. With the approval of Organic Law 8/2021, of 4 June, on the Organic Law on the Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence (LOPIVI, by its initials in Spanish), the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in this area have been complied with. The subsequent approval of the Strategy to End Violence against Children and Adolescents 2023-2030 (EEVIA, by its initials in Spanish) marks the roadmap for tackling this reality throughout this decade.

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*Protection in the face  
of violence: raising  
awareness, preventing and  
detecting efficiently*

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However, it is necessary and urgent to effectively implement the instruments for the development of the Law, included in the Implementation Plan agreed by the Sectoral Conference on Childhood and Adolescence, and to prevent delays from accumulating. It is also necessary to promote the application of the Strategy, whose pace and effectiveness are in question. The effective implementation of both LOPIVI and the EEVIA requires permanent cooperation between the Spanish Government and the regional governments.

Improved statistical knowledge will contribute to greater visibility of this violence. Visibility should also be enhanced through actions by public authorities and administrations that go to the root of the problem, counteracting the growing structural violence in today's society and preventing a certain normalisation of violence from continuing to settle.

Participation in digital technologies (devices, internet and social networks) in a responsible and safe way, with adequate training, support and supervision, is today fundamental for the socialisation, integration and development of children and adolescents. However, new forms of online violence, and in general the emerging risks in the field of digital technologies, some with a strong gender component, pose threats to the rights of children and adolescents, as shown by the increase in cybercrime figures. It is therefore essential to make progress in guaranteeing a safe digital environment, which is fundamentally the responsibility of public authorities and administrations, as well as, in their sphere of responsibility, of digital service providers. In this respect, the recent creation of a committee of experts for the development of a safe digital environment for youth and children is positive.

## Proposals:

### **Complete the protection system:**

1. Comply with the legal provisions (twentieth final provision of the LOPIVI) in order to have a justice system adapted to children, in line with the existing consensus on this objective.
2. Address the observations and recommendations made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child on juvenile justice.

### **Protection in the face of risk and neglect: strengthening prevention**

3. Prioritise support and accompaniment policies as a complement to the capacity of families to exercise their parental duties responsibly. This implies: A) Primary prevention: making income guarantee, housing, health, etc. policies more effective through the available instruments (the IMV -Minimum Basic Income- and PAEGIE, among others); and B) Secondary prevention: acting in situations declared to be at risk with support and accompaniment measures, especially for the most vulnerable families.
4. Adequately equip the network of primary and specialised social service systems, which act on the front line of detecting and treating situations of risk for children, with sufficient social work professionals. Tackling territorial disparities in the provision of these basic resources, which currently generate unjustified inequality in access and protection of rights. The PRTR provides a specific investment framework that must be fully implemented, but it must also provide for the future continuity of this funding.
5. The above proposals suggest the need to increase public investment in policies for the protection of children from neglect, in view of the increase in needs, which involves all Administrations. It would also be advisable to reactivate the processing of a framework law on social services, with due respect for the competency scheme, which would introduce coordination and levelling mechanisms capable of guaranteeing a common minimum of rights, resources and benefits throughout the national territory.
6. Pay special attention to intersectional situations of social defenselessness, such as minors with disabilities who are at risk.
7. Allocate sufficient resources for comprehensive policies to support and accompany foster families. Such policies should provide financial support, technical support and recognition of their work. It is advisable to promote specialised foster care and professionalised foster care, which contribute to the objectives of guaranteeing the preference for foster care.
8. Temporary foster families should be able to improve their chances of accessing permanent foster care or adoption, as a better guarantee of the best interests of the child, avoiding new ruptures of the family bond when permanent protection measures are applied.

9. Make substantial progress in the announced strategy of deinstitutionalisation through the progressive elimination of stays of minors under guardianship in protection centres, and within a process in accordance with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: reduce the size of the centres, eliminate the larger ones, ensure conditions of treatment and coexistence in the centres that are similar to family environments, and facilitate regular contact with the minor's family, always with attention to his/her best interests.
10. Protection centres for minors under guardianship by the administrations should allow them to fulfil the same purposes as the educational system, guaranteeing them opportunities and preparing them for the transition to independent adult life. The necessary means of adaptation to the needs of institutionalised minors with disabilities should be provided.
11. Put into full operation the instruments foreseen in the LOPIVI to prevent and detect possible situations or practices of violence towards children and adolescents in the centres, in general and especially in relation to minors with disabilities.
12. Explore, beyond the design of a specific migration contingency management model, the possibilities of integrating unaccompanied migrant children into the more stable mechanisms of bilateral cooperation on migration, opening up opportunities for regular migration in the framework of education, training and employment projects.

### **Protection in the face of violence: to make visibility, prevention and detection effective**

13. Finalise in the short term the implementation of tools that allow for a more rigorous knowledge of the dimension and characteristics of violence against children, and design protection policies based on better evidence, putting an end to the problems of dispersion and lack of comparability between sources: the Register of Users of Social Services against Violence (RUSSVI, by its initials in Spanish), and the Central Register of information.
14. Continue to strengthen measures to prevent and avoid gender-based violence, both direct violence against girls and the impact of such violence on girls and boys (vicarious violence).
15. Prevent sexual violence, which has a strong gender component, against girls and boys. Develop adequate sexual and affective education, in which the family and the school play an essential role. Prevent sexual violence, which has a strong gender component, against girls and boys. Develop adequate sexual and affective education, in which the family and the school play an essential role. Provide, as soon as possible, an effective and identity-neutral age verification tool that checks the age before accessing to online content potentially harmful to children and adolescents, such as pornography or gratuitous violence.

16. Make a greater effort in training and awareness-raising to prevent and detect intersectional violence against children and adolescents: children and adolescents with physical or intellectual disabilities, LGTBI children and adolescents, and migrant children and adolescents in situations of risk and vulnerability, among others.
17. Put into effective operation tools such as protocols for action against violence in the educational environment, in the sports and leisure environment, etc., and the figures of the protection delegate in the same area, as well as the welfare coordinator in the educational environment, in order to improve the early detection and prevention of bullying and violence in educational centres.
18. Propose that behaviours, strategies and acts that seek or contribute to the promotion of addictions in a broad sense among children and adolescents can be considered a form of violence that should be integrated into the mechanisms of awareness, prevention, detection, treatment and reparation of the Law, becoming part of the targets of policies to eradicate violence.
19. It is necessary for the Administrations to work continuously to make the provisions of the LOPIVI on actions against violence in the technological environment (Articles 45 and 46) more specific and effective, when they are generic, programmatic and suffer from a certain lack of specificity, which can undermine their effectiveness.
20. Starting with the education system as the guarantor of the full integration of students in the digital society, the educational community must have the appropriate means, especially more resources for initial and continuous training in digital skills and risks, in the context of the digital transformation of education envisaged in the PRTR.
21. Public Administrations should provide families with support and accompanying resources so that they become more involved in educating children to use the Internet responsibly and safely.

## 10. Continue to improve statistical information and ensure the evaluation of policies on children

The greater and more systematic political attention paid to children in recent years has resulted both in improved instruments for a better understanding of their situation and in the adoption of strategic tools aimed at structuring the actions of institutions in this area, as analysed throughout this report.

The global, comprehensive and coherent conception of childhood policies, and the consideration of these as a far-reaching national objective, which converge in the idea of ‘investing in children’, as proposed in this report, demand a permanent effort to improve statistical sources on living conditions and the state of children’s rights in Spain.

The quality of these sources is unequal, according to the areas of child and youth reality analysed in the different chapters, and therefore attention is drawn to the need to prioritise action in those areas with the greatest shortcomings. These improvement objectives require a greater effort of cooperation and collaboration between the administrations with the corresponding competencies in cross-cutting policies and those relating to childhood.

There is also a need for mid-term and final evaluations of the different strategies recently launched to improve the living conditions and development of children, guaranteeing their well-being and future opportunities. The successful implementation of the State Strategy for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, the Strategy for the Eradication of Violence against Children, and the State Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Spain, among other tools, and in a complementary manner to the horizontal policies on income guarantees, education and health, will be crucial to consolidate the progress made and to face the challenges that are still pending, as well as the emerging challenges. These evaluations should make it possible to ascertain the impact of the policies applied, based on compliance with the indicators they contain, and to facilitate the adoption of new policy instruments based on evidence of their effects.