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# Poverty and child deprivation in Belgium

A comparison of risk factors  
in the three Regions and neighbouring countries



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in the three Regions and neighbouring countries

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## COLOPHON

### TITLE

**Poverty and child deprivation in Belgium :**  
a comparison of risk factors in the three Regions and neighbouring countries

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## FOREWORD

Is anyone still unaware of the alarming figures on child poverty today? For almost a decade, they have been brought to the attention of policy-makers and the general public, hammering home the same figures (poverty risks of 40%, 25% and 15% respectively in Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders), with the risk of weakening collective indignation and even creating political resignation. Do we need to be reminded that the stakes are high? This must be obvious, as the issue concerns not only our children but the future of our entire society. The precarious living conditions of these children prevent them from developing harmoniously and such a bad start in life has a long-term impact. In other words, if we can improve these children's living conditions and support their development from a young age, we can refute the fatalistic statistical prediction whereby a poor child has every chance of becoming a poor adult. This is the reason why the King Baudouin Foundation stresses the need for an ambitious policy regarding children living in poverty and their families.

Resignation is not an option. We must constantly look for ways of mobilising the relevant actors. Taking a fresh look at the statistics on child poverty is one such way and this motivated the King Baudouin Foundation to publish this research.

We thank the authors of this report, Professor Frank Vandenbroucke (from the University of Amsterdam) and Anne-Catherine Guio (at the LISER-Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research). With support from the NET-SILC3 network, they analysed the factors explaining child deprivation across European countries. In addition, they focused on the differences between Belgium and its neighbouring countries, as well as on differences between the three Regions of Belgium, Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. They proposed this additional research to the King Baudouin Foundation, with a view to disseminate it as widely as possible. The indicators of child deprivation and the comparison between the three Regions did not yield a more encouraging picture than the percentages mentioned above. We nevertheless hope that this analysis will prove to be more motivating to take action, for two reasons. Firstly, it shifts from the rather abstract notion of a "threshold of poverty" to a close examination of the reality of children's lives. Secondly, the indicators of deprivation in themselves contain the seeds for action, because they directly point to the relevant policy levers.

Studying the reality of children's lives reveals shameful shortcomings of our society. In Brussels, for instance, as many as 33% of children are deprived of holidays, 19.8% of regular leisure activities, 15.7% of new clothes, 10% of books and 10% of Internet. In Wallonia, the level of child deprivation is comparable to that in Croatia, Malta, Poland and the United Kingdom, whilst even in Flanders, where child deprivation is among the lowest in Europe, 41% of children living in (quasi-)jobless households are considered as being deprived.

The researchers did not wish to limit their contribution to an analysis of the data. They also submitted to the King Baudouin Foundation a report containing

recommendations, in which they integrated the nuances and complementary ideas suggested by members of a committee composed of experts working in the field. These recommendations appear in the last part of this report. They show that no individual actor and no single level of authority can succeed by working alone. The situation of poor children will only be significantly improved through a combination of tax and benefit policies and measures in the domains of childcare, education and extracurricular activities, housing, training and employment. In other words, a large array of policy fields and competences have to come together, which requires ambitious political vision, supported by all levels of government and well-coordinated with the local level.

If we want a real investment in the fight against child poverty, our society must not only be aware of the problem, it must also see it less as the consequence of individual choice and more as the result of social processes and specific mechanisms of exclusion. In the long run, such an investment will be highly beneficial, not only for the underprivileged children themselves, but also for society as a whole.

The Foundation would like to express its thanks to Anne-Catherine Guio and Frank Vandenbroucke for their remarkable scientific work and to the members of the committee for their input to the recommendations. We will present the results of their work, laid down in this report, to all relevant Belgian actors.

The King Baudouin Foundation

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## SUMMARY

The rate of monetary poverty is a relative measure that depends on the level of income in each country under review: those considered as poor are people whose income falls below 60% of the median national income. The authors of this report have used another indicator to study the “absolute” levels of poverty across countries, that of child deprivation. This indicator measures the daily difficulties encountered by children, based not on a monetary concept, but rather on their access to the same ensemble of 17 items considered as necessary for any child living in Europe today. These include items such as whether: the child eats fruit and vegetables every day; the child can invite friends to play and eat from time to time; the child can participate in school trips and events; the child’s home is adequately warm; the child can leave for at least a week’s holiday each year; etc. A child is considered to be living in deprivation if he/she is deprived of at least three of these 17 items. The greater the number of lacked items, the more severe the level of deprivation.

This study has used this new indicator, agreed at the European level in March 2018, to compare the levels of child deprivation in Belgium (nationally and in each of the three Regions) and in other European countries. It shows that the level of child deprivation is roughly 15% in Belgium, similar to that in France, but above the levels in other neighbouring countries. However, when a higher threshold (i.e. a larger number of items) is used to assess deprivation, the difference compared to our neighbours widens. Thus, 12% of children in Belgium are deprived of at least four items, compared with between 7% and 9% in the Netherlands, Germany and France, whilst this share is only 2% in Luxembourg.

This Belgian national average masks large differences between the Regions: the rate of children deprived of at least three items is 29% in Brussels, 22% in Wallonia and 8% in Flanders. Within the European ranking, Flanders is among the top group of countries, whilst the Brussels Region occupies an extreme position, with a very high level of severe forms of child deprivation. Wallonia is in an intermediate group of countries that includes Croatia, Malta, Poland and the United Kingdom, but nevertheless has a high level of child deprivation.

The research analyses the risk factors explaining child deprivation. These are principally associated with household resources (disposable income, but also employment, education and debt, etc.), household needs (housing and healthcare costs etc.), and household composition (for instance, living in a single-parent family influences both resources and costs). The impact of these variables differs considerably from one country to another. In the richer countries, the relative impact of variables linked to household needs/costs is greatest, whilst the impact of household resources is generally greater in the most disadvantaged countries. There are, therefore, not just differences in the socio-economic composition of the populations of European countries, such as differences in the proportion of households without employment: each variable, such as the absence of a job, also has a different impact on the risk of deprivation.

The research results also show that, even when account is taken of individual differences (e.g. household income), the level of wealth of the country continues to have an impact. This means that vulnerable groups presenting similar characteristics are better protected in the wealthiest countries than in the poorest countries. A nation's wealth can be interpreted as an approximation of certain variables that are not measured in the model, such as household wealth, in-kind support between households, the quality and financial accessibility of education, childcare, health and public transport etc., all of which exert an impact either on real household resources or on the costs that households face.

The analysis for Belgium shows similarities and differences between the Regions. Household income is the major determinant of child deprivation across all Regions, but it exerts a significantly higher impact in Flanders, which means that each additional euro offers greater protection against deprivation in Flanders. The risk of child deprivation also increases when the child lives in a household that is (almost) without employment, in a single-parent household, in rented accommodation or in a household that is heavily indebted, or with at least one household members suffering from chronic health problems. Deprivation is also influenced by the parents' level of education and training; this is particularly the case in Wallonia and Brussels, no doubt because the overall level of unemployment is higher in these Regions and the less skilled are comparatively more at risk of frequent periods of unemployment.

Compared to other European countries, Belgium is characterised by a high proportion of deprived children living in (quasi-)jobless households. This is explained by two factors: on the one hand a high proportion of children living in (quasi-)jobless households, especially in Wallonia and Brussels, and on the other hand a high risk of deprivation for these children in all three Belgian Regions. The authors attribute this to the fact that most minimum social benefits (such as minimum unemployment benefits and social assistance) do not lift the beneficiaries above the Belgian poverty threshold. This is also the case in Flanders, where the proportion of deprived children living in (quasi-)jobless households cannot be ignored (41%), despite an overall level of household unemployment that is much lower.

In their conclusions and policy recommendations, the authors emphasise that it is possible to have both fewer children in (quasi-)jobless households and to provide better income protection for these households, as proven by the examples of other countries. They remind us that Belgium has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which implies an unambiguous public responsibility for the protection of children's rights. This should, from the beginning of the next legislature, motivate the federal as well as the regional and community governments to establish ambitious "master plans" against child deprivation, with an important role for local governments. These plans should cover a wide range of areas:

- **Employment:** through tax and benefit measures that reduce wage costs and increase net income for low-skilled workers, and by investing in the social economy.
- **Living standards:** by upgrading replacement incomes and social benefits so that they constitute adequate protection against poverty and by stronger targeted measures in support of disadvantaged families, in the context of child benefit reform (which is now a competence of the Regions).
- **Housing:** by increasing the provision of social housing, providing increased support for social housing agencies (which must also ensure quality coaching) and by the extension of housing benefits for renters.
- **Early childhood:** by investment in affordable and quality childcare, with rules of priority access for underprivileged groups.
- **Public and social services:** through the development of services (health, culture, sports...) that are accessible to everyone.
- **Education:** through the creation of so-called “broad” schools that are embedded in their local community and capable of tackling, together with local partners, deprivation with regard to: nutrition (by providing daily healthy meals), educational support (by organising support for all pupils), the costs of schooling (by limiting the costs of educational materials and activities) and extracurricular activities.

All this must be based on networking and a proactive and outreaching approach. Local government plays a critical role in this respect, which merits support: by reaching out to the most vulnerable families, the efficacy of existing services can be increased considerably.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the determinants of child deprivation in the Belgian Regions, using the child-specific deprivation indicator adopted at the EU level in March 2018. It draws on the econometric analyses by Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt (2018), who analysed the micro and macro drivers of child deprivation among 31 European countries <sup>1</sup>.

Our aim in this paper is to better understand the differences between Belgium and other EU countries and, within Belgium, between the Belgian Regions.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 defines child deprivation and provides an illustrative analysis of child deprivation in the EU countries and Belgian Regions. Section 3 reviews the macro- and micro-determinants of child deprivation, as highlighted in Guio et al (2018). Section 4 presents the results of an econometric analysis of Belgian data. Section 5 concludes and discusses some policy recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne-Catherine Guio is from the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER, Luxembourg), Frank Vandenbroucke is from the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands). This work builds largely on a paper written by Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt, which has been supported by the third Network for the analysis of EU-SILC (Net-SILC3), funded by Eurostat. The analyses and conclusions are solely those of the authors. E-mail address for correspondence: anne-catherine.guio@liser.lu.

## 2. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF CHILD DEPRIVATION IN BELGIUM AND BELGIAN REGIONS, COMPARED TO EU COUNTRIES

The best way to provide accurate information on the actual living conditions of children, without making assumptions about the sharing of resources within the household, is to develop child-specific deprivation indicators - i.e. indicators based on information on the specific situation of children, which may differ from that of their parents. Such information was collected in 2009 and 2014 for the whole EU in the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). The data were collected in households with at least one child aged between 1 and 15 years, from the household respondent (not from children themselves). According to the survey protocol, if in a given household at least one child does not have an item, it is then assumed that all the children belonging to that household lack that item. It is important to keep in mind that only children living in private households were surveyed, those living in institutions and those suffering from extreme poverty (e.g. the homeless, those living in squats or living with adults in irregular situations) are not included in the analysis.

The final list of items proposed by Guio et al (2017) and adopted at EU level in March 2018 for the measurement of child deprivation consists of the following items, which cover both material and social aspects of deprivation:

1. Child: some new (not second-hand) clothes
2. Child: two pairs of properly fitting shoes
3. Child: fresh fruit and vegetables daily
4. Child: meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent daily
5. Child: books at home suitable for the child's age
6. Child: outdoor leisure equipment
7. Child: indoor games
8. Child: regular leisure activities
9. Child: celebrations on special occasions
10. Child: invitation of friends to play and eat from time to time
11. Child: participation in school trips and school events
12. Child: holiday
13. Household: replacement of worn-out furniture
14. Household: arrears
15. Adults in the household: access to Internet
16. Household: home adequately warm
17. Household: access to a car for private use

Lacking an item is considered a sign of deprivation only when it is lacking for financial reasons. The incidence of deprivation for each individual item is presented in Table 1 for all EU countries, the Belgian Regions and the EU-28 average.

The 'heat map' in Table 1 highlights countries showing consistently high deprivation levels across several items (in orange/red), such as Bulgaria and Romania, or, on the contrary, low levels (Nordic countries, Austria, Netherlands and Luxembourg - in green). It also highlights countries where there is a mixed picture depending on the item, i.e.

countries displaying a relatively poor score for some items but a relatively better score for others. At the bottom of the table, the figures for the three Belgian Regions are contrasted with those for EU countries. If we included the Belgian Regions in the EU country ranking (see the cautionary note below), Flanders would be placed among the five best performers for most items, and Wallonia would be in the group of countries with intermediate performances, such as the Czech Republic, Portugal, Poland and the UK. Brussels would be in a position close to Greece, the Baltic Republics, Slovakia and Serbia. One should note that this indicator is based on the same set of items for the whole EU: when comparing Belgian Regions with other EU countries, we highlight the absolute differences in children's actual living conditions in the different entities, in contrast with the relative monetary measure usually applied to monitor child poverty.

**Cautionary notes:**

We need to be cautious when comparing Belgian Regions and EU Member States for different reasons: (1) There are sampling errors linked to the point estimates, which are larger for regional indicators than for national indicators; (2) We are comparing quite different geographical entities. When comparing regions and nations, we should realise that other countries may also have large interregional disparities. (3) When comparing the Brussels Region and other entities, we should keep in mind that poverty is concentrated in large cities in most European countries. However, we consider it worthwhile to present figures for Brussels and to compare them with other regional/national entities, given the institutional responsibility the Brussels Region has in the fight against poverty via decentralized competences. (4) These caveats hold both for comparisons regarding deprivation and income poverty; when we calculate regional poverty rates (as below, in Figure 2), we use the national poverty threshold.

Table 1: “Heat map” of shares of children lacking items (% of the population aged 1-15, in EU countries covered by EU-SILC and Belgian Regions, 2014).

	“Fruit & vegetables”	Books	Shoes	“Indoor games”	Proteins	Internet	Celebration	“Outdoor equipment”	Clothes	“School trips”	Friends	Car	“Home warm”	Leisure	Arrear	Holidays	Furniture
Sweden	0.1	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.4	1.3	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.7	3.1	0.8	2.5	8.8	5.5	5.6
Finland	0.3	0.5	0.8	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3	3.5	0.6	0.1	3.6	0.7	1.3	16.5	7.2	11.6
Iceland	0.4	0.3	1.9	0.2	0.8	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.9	0.6	0.1	2.7	2.2	4.3	24.1	3.6	20.4
Denmark	0.5	2.5	2.3	0.8	0.6	0.6	1.3	2.2	2.0	1.4	1.5	5.1	2.5	3.3	9.5	9.1	14.6
Switzerland	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.7	1.3	0.9	1.4	0.4	1.6	0.8	0.4	4.5	1.0	5.1	10.8	4.9	12.5
Austria	0.5	1.3	1.1	1.1	1.8	1.0	1.8	3.1	1.9	2.5	3.6	7.4	4.3	10.2	10.6	17.8	15.7
Netherlands	0.6	0.5	3.6	0.4	2.5	0.2	1.9	1.6	1.6	1.4	1.2	6.5	2.8	6.4	9.5	16.2	25.2
Luxembourg	0.8	0.8	1.0	1.5	1.1	1.4	1.9	2.7	2.9	3.6	2.3	2.1	1.0	2.7	6.3	9.4	20.9
Slovenia	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.3	2.5	2.0	5.9	2.3	3.4	3.3	4.0	10.7	28.0	7.2	15.8
Spain	1.7	2.3	3.0	3.5	2.9	13.5	11.4	5.8	7.7	10.6	12.8	6.6	12.0	13.1	17.8	34.5	46.4
Germany	1.8	0.7	2.2	0.6	3.6	0.9	1.5	1.3	2.1	0.6	1.7	4.4	5.3	6.2	9.7	17.4	17.8
Malta	1.9	2.0	5.9	2.1	6.9	4.4	4.9	4.1	6.1	2.7	4.9	4.5	21.6	6.0	22.0	34.9	29.7
Cyprus	2.1	5.4	1.3	3.6	2.4	8.7	10.8	7.7	5.4	2.5	12.3	1.4	25.4	21.2	41.7	40.2	60.9
Belgium	2.3	4.4	3.6	2.5	2.7	3.8	5.8	4.2	8.2	3.8	6.0	7.4	4.8	9.0	12.1	19.2	18.4
Italy	2.6	7.7	2.9	5.6	5.7	10.8	7.1	6.0	8.5	9.5	7.5	2.3	18.4	13.7	20.6	29.5	38.8
Ireland	2.6	1.0	6.5	1.4	3.1	4.8	3.0	3.2	12.3	3.3	3.2	6.6	9.4	7.3	25.6	53.1	28.6
France	2.7	1.2	5.2	1.0	2.3	1.8	5.2	1.7	8.9	4.8	2.4	2.8	5.1	6.2	15.0	11.6	28.0
Portugal	2.9	6.4	3.6	5.4	1.2	11.5	8.3	4.6	14.4	9.1	13.6	9.9	25.2	23.4	17.7	36.7	57.5
Czech Republic	3.0	2.0	3.0	2.8	4.7	4.0	3.6	7.8	6.3	5.0	2.4	11.8	6.0	8.5	10.4	8.7	47.8
Poland	3.5	2.9	1.4	2.3	3.0	3.1	9.7	4.3	3.2	8.5	8.7	7.5	7.9	18.8	19.3	26.2	31.5
United kingdom	3.6	1.0	2.2	1.4	3.0	4.7	2.3	5.7	3.7	3.3	7.1	10.7	9.4	6.3	18.0	35.3	31.6
EU-28	4.1	4.4	4.7	4.7	5.2	6.9	7.2	7.1	7.5	7.4	8.2	8.7	10.0	12.6	18.3	26.3	33.8
Croatia	4.5	7.2	3.2	5.7	6.2	4.9	5.6	5.9	5.3	7.8	7.4	7.0	9.1	8.9	35.9	29.2	32.3
Greece	5.4	7.2	0.6	4.1	9.2	8.9	18.9	10.1	1.8	21.2	14.1	8.6	30.5	15.8	54.2	41.3	57.5
Estonia	6.7	2.5	1.6	1.6	6.1	0.9	3.4	3.7	2.4	3.0	4.9	9.7	1.4	4.1	16.2	10.3	27.4
Lithuania	7.8	2.3	0.4	2.8	6.3	5.3	5.0	6.6	13.0	5.8	9.9	12.0	25.6	18.8	17.8	19.2	50.1
Serbia	9.7	7.9	8.2	6.2	15.1	13.8	10.6	10.9	13.8	15.0	7.9	20.9	15.6	20.9	48.5	39.7	61.4
Slovakia	9.8	10.4	6.6	7.6	12.9	9.1	12.0	11.0	14.0	9.1	15.3	13.9	7.8	11.0	10.8	15.5	45.3
Latvia	10.0	11.0	11.7	8.7	8.2	8.1	10.3	16.4	24.5	7.6	11.3	23.4	18.2	16.2	31.6	27.6	57.7
Romania	14.8	24.8	28.0	42.4	21.6	36.7	33.2	55.5	26.6	30.3	40.1	45.3	15.4	60.1	29.3	61.4	67.3
Hungary	22.8	15.5	7.8	13.7	22.0	18.2	15.4	17.0	27.2	15.2	30.6	31.1	12.5	20.9	36.2	51.1	52.9
Bulgaria	40.2	43.2	49.0	38.4	42.4	26.9	32.3	52.0	36.2	42.5	41.4	30.2	40.2	52.3	43.9	54.6	72.1
Brussels	7.6	10.6	8.0	7.4	9.7	10.4	15.6	12.6	15.7	12.5	15.8	25.4	12.3	19.8	13.0	32.0	28.4
Wallonia	3.9	4.7	6.5	1.8	3.8	4.9	8.5	4.8	14.0	5.4	8.6	6.0	6.7	13.3	15.9	24.8	29.5
Flanders	0.2	2.9	1.0	1.9	0.5	1.8	2.1	2.0	3.0	0.9	2.2	4.5	2.0	4.0	9.5	13.0	9.5

Source: Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt (2018) for EU countries.

Authors' computation for Belgian Regions, on the basis of EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data.



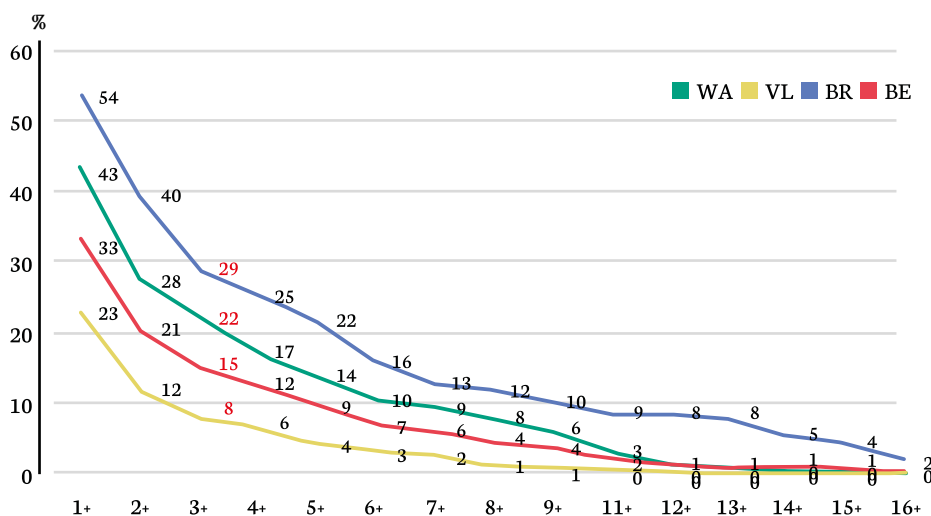
We have focused so far on the percentage of children lacking each individual item; we will now look at the extent to which children cumulate the 17 deprivations. Figure 1 presents the distribution of children (aged 1 to 15) according to the number of items lacking. These figures are presented for the Belgian Regions (Panel A), and for some neighbouring countries (the Netherlands, France, Germany and Luxembourg, Panel B).

Panel A shows that in Brussels (BR), more than 50% of children lack at least one item, 29% lack at least three items (three items is the threshold used at the EU level to define child deprivation) and 22% lack at least five items, i.e. an extremely severe level of deprivation. In Wallonia (WA) these percentages attain respectively 43%, 22% and 14%; in Flanders (VL) they are far lower: 23%, 8% and 4%.

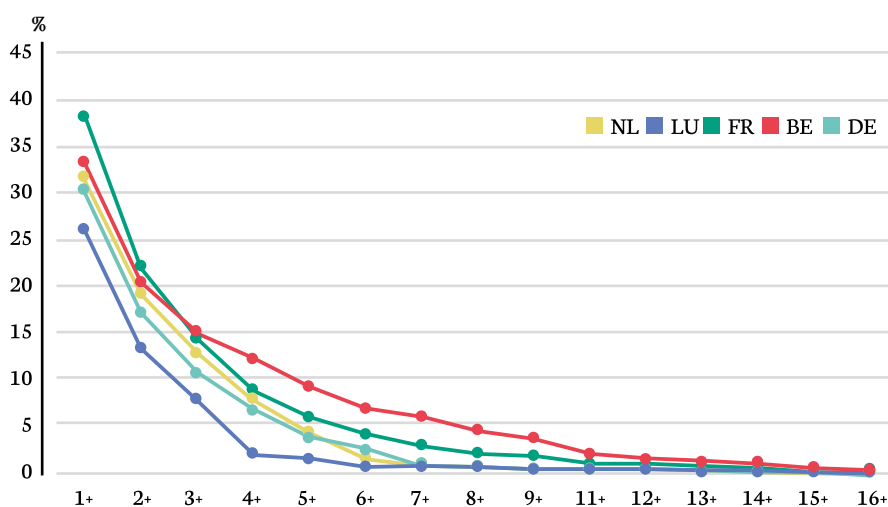
Panel B shows that the relative position of Belgium compared to its neighbouring countries depends on the threshold used. Indeed, using a threshold of 3+ items lacking, Belgium has a child deprivation rate of 15%, which is comparable to the rate in France, higher than in the Netherlands (13%) and Germany (11%) and far higher than in Luxembourg (8%). However, the gap with the neighbouring countries increases when the threshold is set at four or more items (i.e. when we focus on more severe forms of deprivation): for example, 12% of children lack at least four deprivation items in Belgium, although this proportion is extremely low in Luxembourg (2%) and reaches only 7-9% in the Netherlands, Germany and France.

Figure 1: Distribution of the % of children (aged 1 – 15 years) according to the number of items lacked, Belgian Regions, Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Belgium and Germany, 2014

Panel A: Belgium and Regions



Panel B: Neighbouring countries



Source: EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data, authors' computation.  
NB: For the list of country abbreviations, see Appendix 1.

How can we explain the higher rate of child deprivation in Belgium, relative to its neighbours?

In the next charts we investigate the relationship, at the national level, between child deprivation, child poverty (a short cut for child monetary poverty, which signals a relatively low income) and parents' (quasi-)joblessness. Then, we will go a step further and examine the drivers of child deprivation at the child level using the information collected in the survey on the characteristics of the children's parents and household.

Figure 2 compares the child poverty rate and the child-specific deprivation rate in all EU countries and Belgian Regions.

*The EU indicator of child poverty is defined as the proportion of children living in households whose equivalised income is below 60% of the national median household equivalised income.<sup>2</sup> Since the poverty threshold varies from country to country, it is a relative measure of income poverty. The child deprivation rate is the proportion of children lacking at least three items out of the 17 items presented above.*

Figure 3 shows the child deprivation rate (defined above) and proportion of children living in (quasi-)jobless households.

*A (quasi-)jobless household is a household with a 'very low work intensity'; this means that the adults (aged 18-59, excluding students) were effectively at work during at most 20% of the time they could, theoretically, have been in work during the year under review.*

Figure 4 compares the child deprivation rate and child deprivation intensity.

*The child deprivation rate is defined as above: the proportion of children lacking at least three items out of 17. The child deprivation intensity is the average number of items lacked by deprived children, i.e. those lacking at least three items.*

These three charts show that:

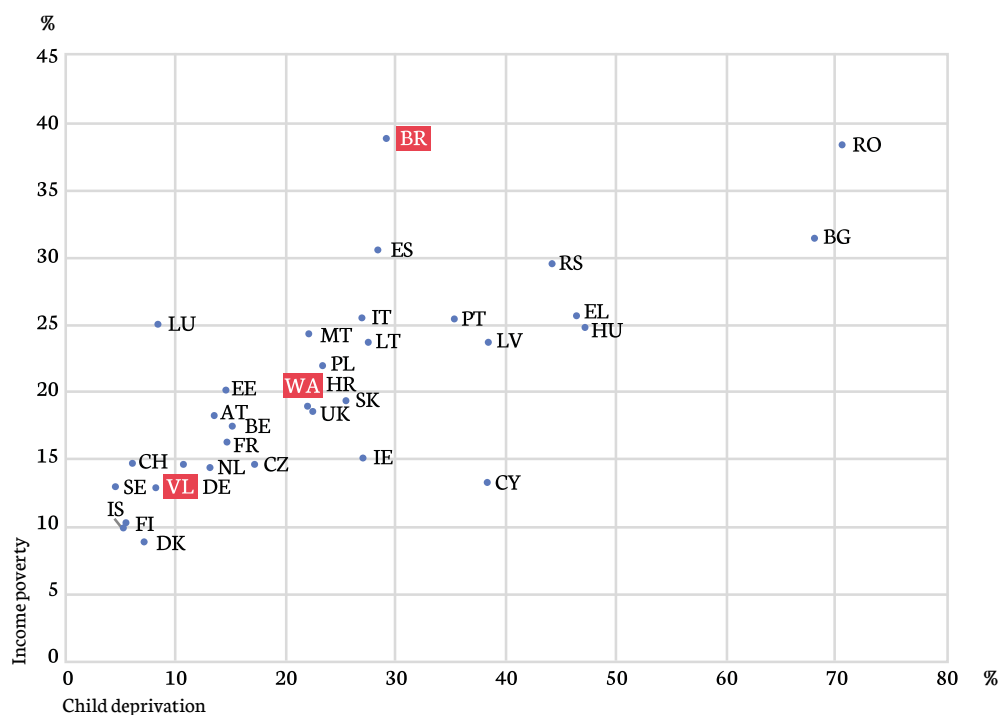
- Flanders is positioned in the group of best performing countries, such as the four Nordic countries, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Switzerland, with the lowest share of deprived children, low levels of child income poverty (except for Luxembourg, where it is as high as 25% according the relative income measure), of (quasi-)joblessness and of child deprivation intensity.
- Brussels occupies an extreme position, with very high levels of income poverty and joblessness. The deprivation rate is close to the level in Spain, Italy or Ireland, but the deprivation intensity (the deprivation level of those lacking at least three items) is high and close to the Hungarian level.

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<sup>2</sup> The equivalised income of a household is a net (disposable) income. It is calculated in three steps: a) all monetary incomes received from any source by any member of the household or the household itself are added up (these include income from work, income from capital, social benefits in cash as well as inter-household cash transfers), and taxes and social contributions that have been paid are then deducted from this sum; b) in order to reflect differences in a household's size and composition, the total (net) household income is divided by the number of "equivalent adults", using the so-called OECD-modified scale, which gives a weight to all members of the household (1 to the first adult, 0.5 to the second and each subsequent person aged 14 and over, and 0.3 to each child aged under 14); and c) finally, the resulting figure, the equivalised disposable income, is attributed equally to each member of the household (adults and children).

- Wallonia shares the deprivation rate of Croatia, Malta, Poland, and the UK. Its level of poverty is intermediate in this group, but it suffers from the highest level of (quasi-)joblessness in the group, as well as the highest level of child deprivation intensity.

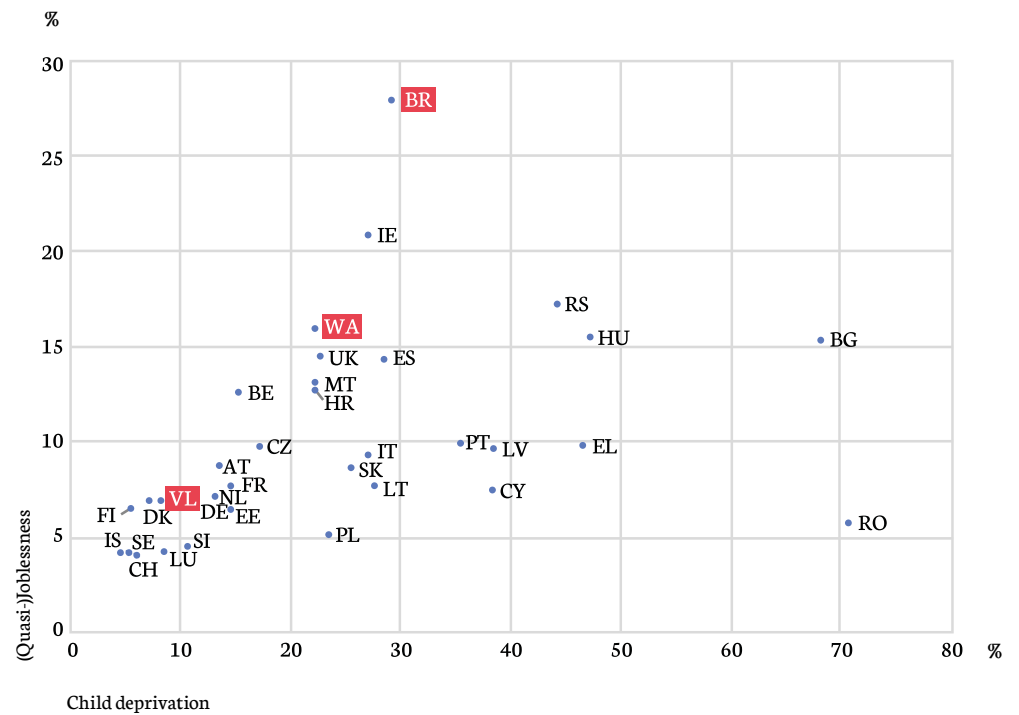
Figure 2: Percentage of children (aged 1 - 15 years) who lack at least three items (out of 17) and proportion of children who suffer from income poverty, EU-28 Member States, non-EU countries covered by EU-SILC and Belgian Regions, 2014



NB: For the list of country abbreviations, see Appendix 1.

Source: Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt (2018) for EU countries. Authors' computation for Belgian Regions, on the basis on EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data. With regard to the inclusion of regional data, see the cautionary note above.

Figure 3: Percentage of children (aged 1 - 15 years) who lack at least three items (out of 17) and proportion of children who live in a (quasi-)jobless household, EU-28 Member States, non-EU countries covered by EU-SILC and Belgian Regions, 2014

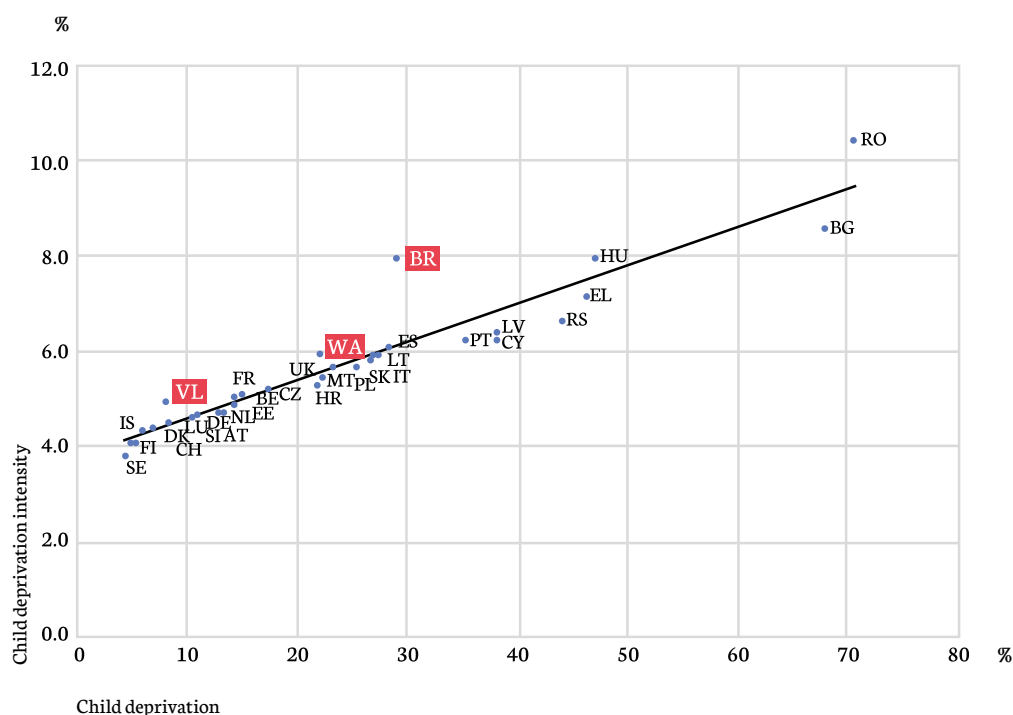


NB: For the list of country abbreviations, see Appendix 1.

Source: Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt (2018) for EU countries.

Authors' computation for Belgian Regions, on the basis on EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data.

Figure 4: Percentage of children (aged 1 – 15 years) who lack at least three items (out of 17) and deprivation intensity (average number of items lacked among those lacking at least three items), EU-28 Member States, non-EU countries covered by EU-SILC and Belgian Regions, 2014



NB: For the list of country abbreviations, see Appendix 1.

Source: Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt (2018) for EU countries. Authors' computation for Belgian Regions, on the basis on EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data.

These charts are based on aggregated data at the macro level. They show the large heterogeneity of national situations in the EU and the ranking of the Belgian Regions in the European league. Countries with similar child deprivation rates may have very different performances in terms of child income poverty, (quasi-)joblessness or child deprivation intensity. This illustrates the potential diversity of deprivation drivers in the EU. In order to better understand the household and institutional determinants of child deprivation, Guio et al (2018) have pursued the analysis at the individual (child) level, using econometric analysis to highlight which household's/parents' characteristics play a significant role in the different EU countries.

### 3. DRIVERS OF CHILD DEPRIVATION IN EU COUNTRIES

This section summarises the main findings of Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt (2018); they analyse the drivers of child deprivation in the EU on the basis of different statistical models.

#### 3.1 Theoretical framework

From a theoretical point of view, the authors identified three sets of variables that can explain children's likelihood of deprivation and/or deprivation intensity:

1. longer-term command over resources;
2. needs and costs;
3. size and composition of the household.

The relationships between these different types of determinants are presented in Diagram 1.

Firstly, the authors explain that children's material well-being depends on how much the household can consume, which in turn depends on its **“command over resources”**.

Although current disposable household income, as measured in the EU-SILC survey, is usually used as a proxy for the level of available resources, it is only one element in a household's resources, which are also determined by previous, current and future income, wealth and ability to borrow and are more difficult to collect. All of these aspects are influenced by educational level, position on the labour market and migration background.

- We can expect education to be correlated with a stronger position on the labour market, with relatively easier access to financial institutions to overcome liquidity constraints and, for younger people, with a higher future return on human capital. Finally, since highly-educated people are often the offspring of highly-educated people, one may conjecture that they may also more often benefit from larger bequests, which contribute to their wealth.
- Ceteris paribus, a non-EU migration background often correlates with a more vulnerable position on the labour market, less inherited wealth, and more difficult access to financial institutions.
- Similarly, (quasi-)joblessness at the household level is likely to indicate a precarious position on the labour market for working age household members, which is a predictor of future unemployment risks and, in addition, may hamper access to financial institutions to overcome liquidity constraints. If (quasi-)joblessness is due to long-term unemployment, it may also imply the erosion of wealth and savings and eventually the building up of debt.

Social transfers in cash are one of the components of household resources and are already included in the income definition used in the survey. However, the type and design of social transfers may also be important to fight against child deprivation. For similar levels of transfers at national level, the degree of pro-poorness of transfers and the adequacy of replacement transfers may influence child deprivation among the poorest.

Secondly, the authors also argue that deprivation is influenced by **needs and costs**: households with equal resources may have different needs and face different costs. Needs notably depend on health status, tenure status, housing costs, etc.

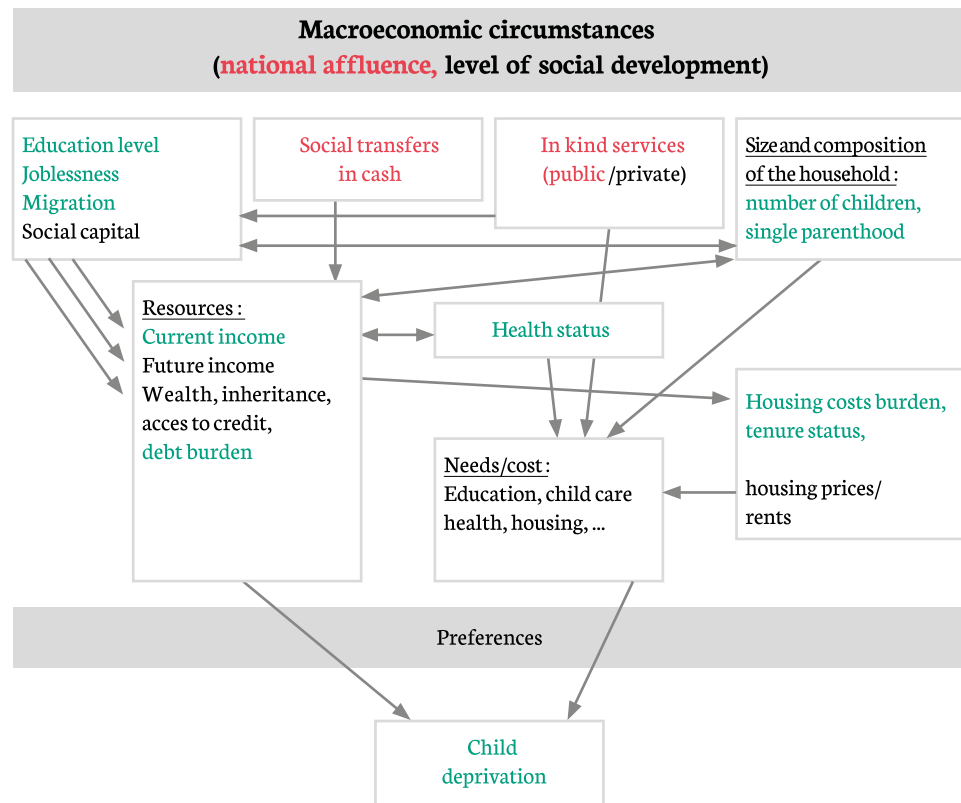
The third set of explanatory factors mentioned above (**size and composition of the household**) influences both the level of resources, the probability of (quasi-) joblessness and the costs faced by the household. For example, single parent households are more vulnerable economically (because they have fewer possibilities for employment risk pooling across adults in the household than households with more than one adult). Single parents also face more difficulties in reconciling working life and family life and therefore are more likely to opt for part-time employment or inactivity. From a needs/costs perspective, single parents face fixed costs (housing, childcare costs, etc.) which generally represent a higher share of their household resources than households with more than one adult.

Furthermore, similar levels of resources and needs do not necessarily lead to similar deprivation levels. **Individuals' preferences** come into play and influence people's consumption (one can argue that preferences are shaped, to a certain extent, by resources level, education, cultural background, etc.).

Diagram 1 shows that some relationships go both ways: for example, one may conjecture that there are interactions between the educational level of parents, the activity status of the parents, their cultural background on one hand and the size and composition of the household on the other hand, and these work both ways. Health influences the work intensity and wage level and is influenced by the general level of resources.



Diagram 1: Determinants of child deprivation



When performing their econometric analysis with regard to the situation of children, Guio et al were not able to analyse the impact of each determinant, due to insufficient data availability. The variables in green in Diagram 1 are available at the individual (child) level in the dataset. Important factors that influence both the household's command over resources and its needs are not available in the micro dataset. This is true, for instance, for in-kind support from family/friends as well as a direct measure of wealth. Household's consumption of public in-kind benefits is "proxied" by national social spending in kind. Only the national amount of spending is available, not the distribution of these services among children (the amount received by each household in the dataset is unknown). In Diagram 1, variables highlighted in red are available at the macro level. Those in black are not available at all.

Diagram 1 does not include one important element, which may impact on the econometric results: the difficulty of measuring both income and deprivation (and possibly other explanatory variables). It is, for example, difficult to measure self-employment income in surveys, or income from capital. Similarly, it might not be easy to collect reliable information on child deprivation due to the parents' possible feeling of shame to admit that their children lack essential items, or to adaptive preferences (people living a long period in poverty may lower their expectations and declare that they do not need an item that they cannot afford). Some of these difficulties are taken into account in the empirical model.

### 3.2 Empirical results

Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt's results show that the three most powerful predictors of child deprivation in the majority of EU countries are: housing cost burden, household income and the parents' level of education. Their results also show that the impact of the household-level variables differs strongly across countries. In the richest countries, the relative impact of the variables related to household needs/costs is the largest, whereas in the most deprived countries, the impact of household resources is generally greater. This means that countries not only differ in terms of socio-economic *composition*, but also in terms of the impact of each variable on the child deprivation risk. For example, the percentage of (quasi-)jobless households differs between countries, but the impact of (quasi-)joblessness on deprivation-risk also differs. This is an important result, to which we will return later, and which helps us better understand the situation in the Belgian Regions.

Their results also show that, once personal characteristics are taken into account (e.g. household income), the national level of affluence (GDP) also matters. This means that in the richest countries, vulnerable groups with *similar* characteristics are better protected than in the poorest countries. This is another important result, which deserves further investigation. This result holds when the regional level of affluence is taken into account, rather than the national level (results not published in Guio et al. but available on demand). The fact that the GDP of a country/region reduces child deprivation, when individual household income and other micro-drivers are controlled for, is not necessarily to be expected a priori. It seems that national GDP correlates with "hidden" contextual factors, not available from the dataset, such as the average level of household wealth, between-households support in kind, the quality and affordability of education, childcare, healthcare and public transport systems. In other words, national/regional GDP proxies the "level of social development" of societies, and child deprivation correlates negatively with the "level of social development". This is another important conclusion to which we will return later.

Once the national level of affluence and differences in household income are taken into account, the explanatory power of the average level of social spending and of the pro-poorness of social transfers is limited, except for the level of *in-kind* social benefits. This is unsurprising, since cash transfers are already included in household income concept used; this does not mean that social spending on cash transfers is unimportant to fight deprivation. This simply means that once cash transfers are taken into account, social transfers in kind are also important to fight against child deprivation.

## 4. MODELLING CHILD DEPRIVATION IN THE BELGIAN REGIONS

Belgium is not only characterised by a high level and intensity of child deprivation. There is also a compositional element: for instance, Belgium and the Belgian Regions are exceptional with regard to the proportion of deprived children living in (quasi-) jobless households. A priori, the fact that a comparatively large proportion of deprived children live in (quasi-)jobless households might be explained by a combination of two factors: (1) *the risk of deprivation* for children living in (quasi-)jobless households is severe in Belgium and its Regions, when compared to other countries; (2) *the share of children* living in (quasi-)jobless households is comparatively large in Belgium and its Regions, as highlighted in Figure 3.

When comparing Belgium with other countries, a simple bivariate analysis indicates that for (1) *the risk of deprivation* is high for children in (quasi-)jobless households with children, compared to non-(quasi-)jobless households with children, and (2) that *the share of children* in (quasi-)jobless households is high (we return to this below with some data).

To assess the specific *regional risks of deprivation* associated with characteristics of the households in which children live, we use the methodology developed by Guio, Marlier, Vandenbroucke and Verbunt (and summarised in Section 3) to explain regional differences in child deprivation in Belgium. We compared different model specifications to ensure that our conclusions are robust, and in this section, we present only the simplest model (all other results are available on demand).

In Table 2, we present the results of a (negative binomial) model, explaining the *number* of deprivations (ranging from 0 to 17) of a child in function of the characteristics of the household in which they live. In a few words, this type of model helps understanding the impact of each characteristic on the number of deprivations suffered by the child, once the impact of the other characteristics is taken into account (i.e. “other things being equal”). The impact of each characteristic is measured by comparing the difference in deprivation risk between a group suffering from a risk factor (e.g. (quasi-) joblessness) and a reference group (e.g. those not suffering from (quasi-)joblessness).

Our model compares the impact of the different explanatory variables in Wallonia and Brussels grouped together on one hand (because the sample size in Brussels would be too small if regressed separately), and in Flanders on the other hand. For each entity, we provide in the second column the coefficient and in the third column, we test whether this coefficient differs significantly from zero (i.e. if the variable has a significant impact on child deprivation). In the last column, we test whether the impact of each characteristic differs between Regions.

The results confirm the impact of the variables linked to “longer-term command of resources” and “household needs”, as assumed in Diagram 1. In particular, our results show that:

1. Household income is the main determinant of child deprivation in all Regions. If we compare the coefficients between Regions, our results show that the impact is significantly stronger in Flanders (last column). An additional euro better protects against deprivation in Flanders.
2. Living in a (quasi-)jobless household increases child deprivation, even when income is controlled for. The impact does not differ significantly between Wallonia/Brussels and Flanders. This risk suffered by children living in (quasi-)jobless household is high in all three Regions.
3. The educational level of the parents also strongly influences the intensity of child deprivation, even when other household characteristics are taken into account. People with low levels of education are more likely to suffer from deprivation than those who have reached an upper educational level. The negative impact of low education is less important in Flanders. We can explain this regional difference (although this hypothesis would need further examination) by the fact that less well-educated people suffer from more volatility of income and are more likely to suffer more frequent and longer unemployment spells in Wallonia and Brussels, where the unemployment rate is higher. They therefore accumulate fewer savings, erode their resources and their expected future income is lower.
4. For similar income levels, households with self-employed member(s) tend to suffer from fewer deprivations. As explained above, this may be partly explained by the difficulty of correctly measuring income from self-employment in surveys such as EU-SILC, or by the challenge of distinguishing between personal and professional assets and costs for the self-employed. In Flanders, the situation of the self-employed is better than in the other two Regions.
5. Living in a single-parent household increases child deprivation, even once other differences are taken into account. Living alone with children constitutes a risk factor per se. As explained above, this may be due to higher fixed costs (housing, childcare costs, etc.) which generally represent a higher share of these household's resources than in households with more than one adult. For similar levels of income, single-parent households may also suffer from more income volatility over time (because they cannot rely on income from another adult).
6. The variables related to debt or housing cost burden appear to be important predictors of child deprivation in all Regions. Debt burden has a larger impact in Flanders.
7. Tenants face a higher risk of deprivation than home-owners.
8. Non-EU migrants are not more likely to suffer from deprivation than native or EU migrants, once other characteristics are taken into account.
9. When household members suffer from chronic health problems, the deprivation risk of children increases, as this has an impact on costs.

These results show that the impact of a few variables differs between the Regions: the protective impact of income is greater in Flanders, and the negative impact of low education is greater in Wallonia and Brussels.

Table 2: Results of the negative binomial model, Belgian Regions, 2014

	Coefficient in WA/BR	Is the impact significant in WA/BR?	Coefficient in VL	Is the impact significant in VL?	Is the difference between WA/BR and VL significant?
Income	-0.0705	yes	-0.1235	yes	yes
(Quasi-)jobless household (reference: not (quasi-)jobless)	0.3043	yes	0.2654	yes	no
Primary, lower secondary education (reference: higher education)	0.8051	yes	0.2932	yes	yes
Upper secondary education (reference: higher education)	0.6253	yes	0.07596	no	yes
Self-employed (reference: no self- employed member in the household)	-0.3592	yes	-1.4786	yes	yes
Single parent (ref: other households with children)	0.1592	yes	0.3716	yes	no
Heavy housing cost overburden (reference: not a burden)	1.2473	yes	1.3875	yes	no
Slight housing cost overburden (reference: not a burden)	0.4919	yes	0.8007	yes	no
Number of children	0.0226	no	-0.0539	no	no
Non-EU migrant (reference: native, EU migrant)	0.0084	no	0.1303	no	no
Tenant (ref: home owners, rent-free)	0.8026	yes	0.5604	yes	no
Heavy debt burden (ref: not a burden)	0.3491	yes	0.9858	yes	yes
Bad health (ref: no adult with bad health in the household)	0.3921	yes	0.1814	yes	no

NB: In bold, coefficient significantly different from zero ( $p < 0.1$ ).

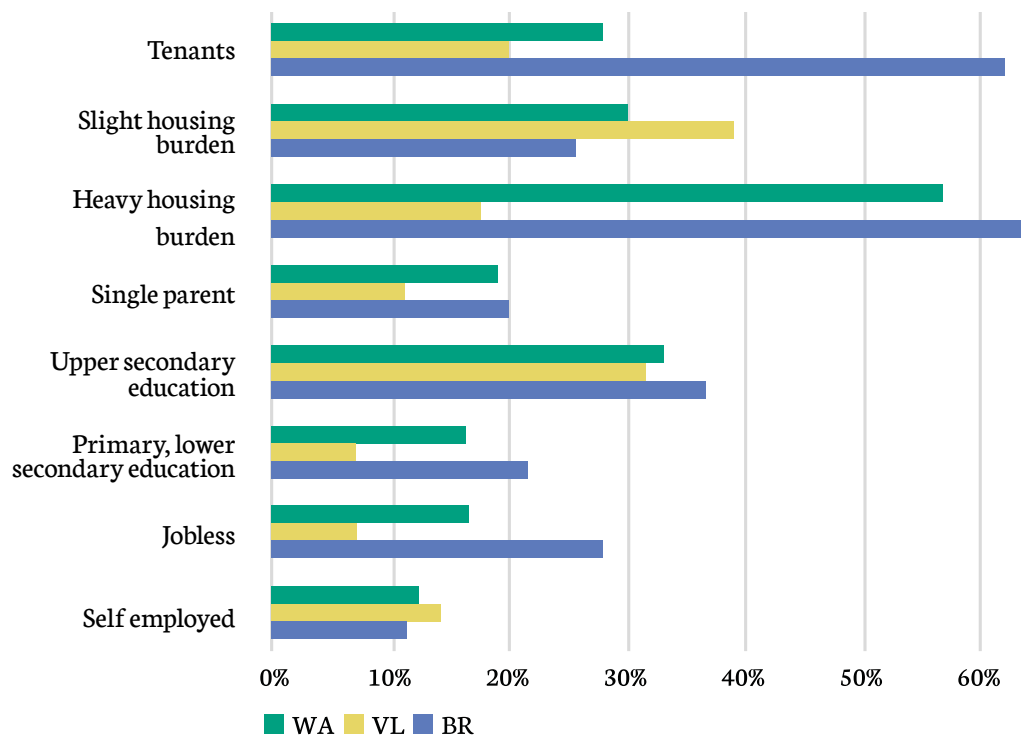
Reading note: Children living in (quasi-)jobless households face a higher risk of child deprivation than children living in other non-(quasi-)jobless households, both in WA/BR and in VL. The negative impact of (quasi-)joblessness is similar in WA/BR and in VL.

Source: EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data, authors' computation.

The total impact of all risk factors on regional child deprivation depends on the impact of each risk factor and the occurrence of these risk factors in each region, as explained above.

The foregoing analysis concerns specific deprivation risks. Figure 5 informs us about the occurrence of these risk factors in each region. It shows that in Brussels and Wallonia, all the at-risk groups are overrepresented compared to in Flanders.

Figure 5: Percentage of children (aged 1 - 15 years) living in each risk group, Belgian Regions, 2014



Source: EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data, authors' computation.

Table 3 compares the composition of the deprived child population in each region, for different levels of deprivation severity: the composition of the child population is the result of the combined impact of the share of the child population living in risk groups (Figure 5) and the impact of this risk on deprivation (as shown by the regression results in Table 2). This shows that the proportion of children living in (quasi-)jobless households among deprived children is high, in particular in WA/BR. Among children suffering from at least three deprivations, 54% live in (quasi-)jobless households. In Figure 6, we compare this figure for the European countries and this shows that Belgium (in particular WA/BR) is exceptional compared to other countries in this respect. There is no other country where children living in (quasi-)jobless households make up such a large proportion of the group of children in deprivation. This is a result highlighted in our previous papers on child poverty and deprivation in Belgium, co-authored with Julie Vinck (see Guio, Vandenbroucke and Vinck, 2015; Vandenbroucke F., Vinck J., Guio A-C, 2014). This situation is mainly due to the high proportion of

(quasi-)joblessness in the populations of Wallonia and Brussels (as confirmed in Figure 5) and to the high deprivation risk of children living in (quasi-)jobless households in all three Regions (as shown by the regression results in Table 2). The proportion of deprived children living in (quasi-)jobless households in Flanders is not negligible (41%), despite the lower proportion of (quasi-)joblessness in the total population (Figure 5). We attribute this high risk in all three Regions to the fact that most minimum benefits do not lift beneficiaries above the poverty threshold in Belgium. This will be discussed in the next section.

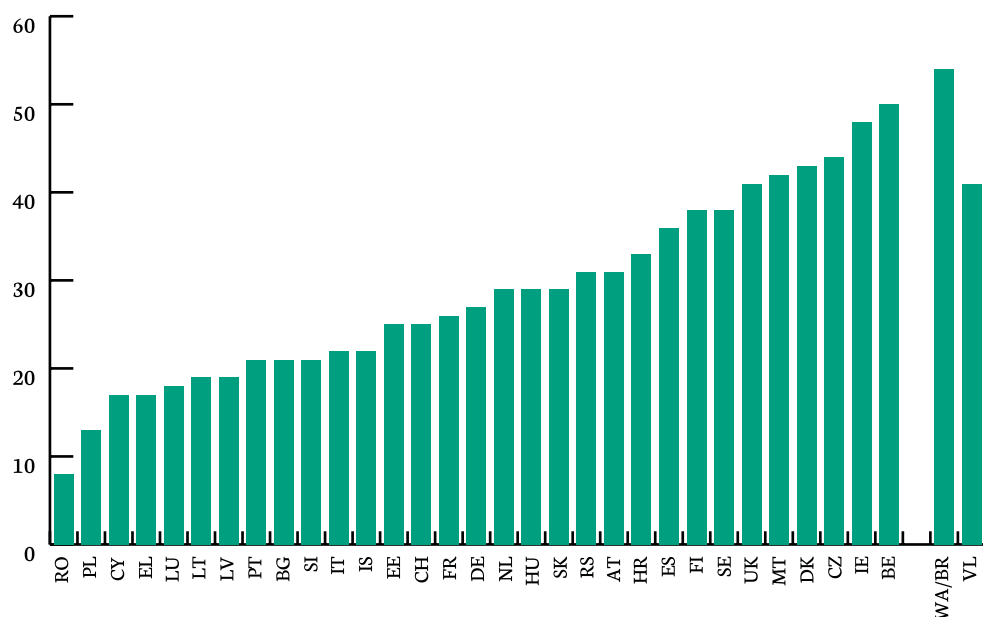
Table 3: Percentage of children suffering from severe deprivation (5+ items), from standard child deprivation (3+ items) and lacking fewer than 3 items and living in specific risk groups, Belgian Regions, 2014

Variable	Children not deprived (< 3 items)		Children suffering from standard deprivation (3+ items)		Children suffering from severe deprivation (5+ items)	
	VL	WA/BR	VL	WA/BR	VL	WA/BR
(Quasi-)jobless	4%	10%	41%	54%	57%	64%
Edu primary - lower secondary	5%	10%	33%	46%	32%	50%
Edu upper secondary	30%	36%	44%	38%	47%	37%
Bad health	5%	8%	29%	30%	40%	31%
Heavy debt burden	4%	23%	31%	31%	33%	33%
Housing costs: burden heavy	15%	53%	57%	82%	76%	84%
Housing costs: burden slight	40%	32%	35%	17%	20%	14%
Tenant	16%	26%	70%	78%	83%	83%
Single parent	9%	15%	45%	36%	51%	36%
Migrant	14%	20%	39%	36%	36%	38%

Source: EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data, authors' computation.

Reading note: among children lacking fewer than three items in Flanders, 4% were living in (quasi-)jobless households. This percentage rises to 57% among children lacking at least five items.

Figure 6: Percentage of deprived children (lacking at least three items) living in (quasi-) jobless households, EU-28 Member States, non-EU countries covered by EU-SILC and Belgian Regions, 2014, %



Source: EU-SILC 2014 cross-sectional data, authors' computation.

Reading note: 54% of deprived children live in (quasi-)jobless household in WA/BR.



## 5. FURTHER REFLECTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The results summarised in Section 3 show that the macroeconomic and policy context influences child deprivation in two ways. It influences the extent to which certain observable factors of risk (observable household characteristics) influence child deprivation but also, apparently, the degree of deprivation in a country that cannot directly be explained by characteristics observable in the households of the country. For example, low income, (quasi-)joblessness or low parental education affect the deprivation risk differently, depending on the country. Also, *ceteris paribus*, people in countries/regions where the level of affluence is lower have a higher risk of deprivation than in more affluent countries. The extent of needs and costs faced by households is also a crucial factor in explaining differences in deprivation within and between countries/regions. Health costs, housing costs (especially for tenants) and other costs not directly measured in our model have a large impact, especially in the richest EU countries. The results also show that in-kind social services mitigate the risk of deprivation.

Our results in Section 4 show that the internal structure of child deprivation in Belgium is exceptional compared to that of other European countries and that (quasi-)joblessness is an important driver of child deprivation, especially in Wallonia and Brussels, but also in Flanders. Indeed, despite the lower proportion of children living in (quasi-)jobless households in Flanders, 41% of deprived children live in (quasi-)jobless households – since (quasi-)jobless people face a higher risk of deprivation in all Belgian Regions. The fact that the situation is better in Flanders than that in Wallonia and Brussels must not be a reason for complacency in Flanders: other evidence, notably the indicators gathered by Kind en Gezin, indicate a steadily increasing share of material and non-material deprivation in households with new-born children in Flanders.

In Section 2 (Figure 1), we showed another worrisome result: the severity of deprivation in Belgium is higher than in neighbouring countries. As Table 3 below shows, these neighbouring countries differ in terms of general level of affluence (GDP per capita and median income), (quasi-)joblessness, social spending in cash and in kind, family cash transfers, the adequacy of social benefits and the degree to which they target the poorest. Luxembourg shows the most favourable macro-economic conditions: it has the highest level of affluence, the lowest proportion of (quasi-)jobless households, a high level of social benefits (in cash and in kind), even though they are distributed very universally (62% of social transfers go to people below the median income i.e. the poorest 50% of the population). In Luxembourg, the adequacy of the minimum income is also relatively high – it represents 50% of median income – even though it is insufficient to lift beneficiaries above the poverty threshold. The average minimum salary is also the highest among this group of countries.

The Netherlands, Germany and France have similar levels of prosperity to Belgium. Both Germany and the Netherlands have a low proportion of (quasi-)jobless households due to specific labour market policies. The minimum wage is also lower in these countries than in Belgium. In the Netherlands, cash transfers benefit the poorest the most: three quarters of total social transfers go the poorest 50% segment of the population compared with 66% in Germany. Our measure even underestimates the extent to which social transfers benefit low-income households with children in the Netherlands, given the important role played by support measures through the tax system.

Table 3: Macroeconomic and social variables in Belgium and neighbouring countries, 2014-5

Country	GDP per capita (1000 PPS)	Median equivalised income (1000 PPS per child)	Jobless households (% of child population)	Total social benefits (in PPS per head)	Cash social benefits (in PPS per child)	In-kind social benefit (in PPS per head)	Family cash social benefits (% of GDP)	Average gross cash benefits (1000 PPS per child)	Pro-poorness of cash social benefits (bottom 50, child population)	Adequacy of minimum income (% of median income)
Belgium	33.00	19.63	12.70	6.35	3.43	2.92	2.20	71.33	38.08	1493.89
Germany	34.60	18.35	5.00	7.44	3.69	3.75	3.10	66.27	54.09	1450.31
France	29.60	18.34	10.30	6.76	3.32	3.43	2.50	71.82	38.73	1388.68
Luxembourg	74.50	24.23	4.30	9.76	5.23	4.53	3.50	62.52	49.16	1597.17
The Netherlands	36.00	18.17	7.10	5.36	2.12	3.24	0.90	74.08	50.07	1421.71

*Note: The degree to which cash social benefits help the poorest is measured by the share of these transfers that is distributed to the lowest five deciles of the pre-tax-and-transfer distribution. Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) convert the amounts expressed in a national currency to an artificial common currency that equalises the purchasing power of different national currencies (because price levels are different, including for those countries that share a common currency). Source: Eurostat and OECD.*

Compared to Belgium, the Dutch example proves that it is possible both to have fewer children in (quasi-)jobless households and to grant better protection for these households' income (Vandenbroucke, 2017). It is no coincidence that activation has been high on the Dutch agenda for many years. Activation and assistance have been part of a decidedly decentralized framework in which local government has a major role to play. This experience is not to be 'copied' *per se*, but it may nevertheless hold some lessons for Belgian decision makers. For instance, because of their large scale, the capacity for policy-making among Dutch municipalities is also strong. In Belgium, the Regions have been given more and more competences in recent decades. In 2015, Belgium devolved labour market policy to its three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), marking an important step in this process. At the same time, a growing portion of Belgian social policy has also been *de facto* decentralized to local government. This decentralization by stealth is the result of the increasing relative importance of social assistance in income support for non-employed persons (the

“leefloon” or “revenu d’intégration”), which is managed by our towns and communes. Unfortunately, there is no debate about how this new, decentralized landscape can successfully fight poverty and exclusion on the labour market, nor on how the communes’ policy capacity can be reinforced and embedded in networks (De Wilde et al, 2016). This is not to say that there has been no attempt to coordinate policies against poverty between the federal and regional levels (see the Inter-federal Plan against Child Poverty, 2014-2015), or that local networking has not been encouraged, including financially, both at the federal and Flemish regional levels. At the moment, however, the follow-up of these initiatives is unclear (at least to us).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, weaknesses in terms of governance (or, at least, untapped potential) add to a persisting structural problem, notwithstanding successive policy initiatives to boost employment: at the moment of writing, the European Labour Force Statistics (LFS) indicate that, in 2017, there was no EU member state with a higher share of children in jobless households (as defined in LFS<sup>4</sup>) than Belgium.

Simultaneously, comparable simulations of the net income of vulnerable ‘household types’ show that income support for such households is structurally mediocre in Belgium, compared to many other countries. Consider, for instance, a single parent with two children, who is either employed on a minimum wage or unemployed: traditionally, the Belgian tax and benefit system does not add much ‘net support’ to the minimum wage when the single parent is working, whilst social assistance and child benefits are too low to prevent poverty when the parent is out of work.<sup>5</sup> Hence, in order to be effective and have a lasting effect, policies need to tackle the root causes of child poverty, both with regard to the financial protection of households with children and with regard to their integration in the labour market. At the start of the next legislature (2019), the federal government, the regional and community governments need to develop a master plan with regard to child deprivation, based on a thorough, evidence-based and non-dogmatic evaluation of existing policies.

Our analysis highlights the crucial challenge that has to be addressed in such a master plan: *how can we simultaneously increase the employment prospects and the standard of living of low-skilled and single parents and their children?* The solutions lie at the crossroads of tax and benefit policies and policies relating to childcare, housing, training and activation. They require structural changes in the ‘hard’ policies implemented by the federal and regional governments. The effectiveness of these solutions will be enhanced if federal, regional and local initiatives are coordinated and serve the same overarching objectives. At the same time, in order to reach out to all the children at risk of poverty and to address their many and multidimensional needs, efficient networking must be organized between local authorities and the actors in the fields of housing, childcare,

<sup>3</sup> We refer to worries expressed by the Senate Report on Child Poverty. The federal government provided temporary funding for local networks against child poverty. These resources are not structural, and it is unclear whether they will be continued. The Flemish government transferred the resources invested in an existing scheme of support for local networks against child poverty to the Gemeentefonds (the fund supporting municipal budgets); we do not know how their use is monitored (Belgian Senate, 2015-2016, p. 89).

<sup>4</sup> The notion of ‘jobless households’ used in LFS differs from the notion of ‘(quasi-)jobless households’, i.e. households with very low work intensity, which we used in our analysis and which is based on EU SILC.

<sup>5</sup> See Figure 1 in Cantillon, Marchal and Luigjes (2017). Admittedly, these simulations did not take into account the impact of the federal tax shift and the reform of child benefits; they are based on the MIPI database for 2013.

education, health, sports, culture and leisure.<sup>6</sup> To say that networking is important is not very original; but additional tangible efforts are needed to make such networking a structural and lasting feature of our policies. Local government – and within this the CPAS – acts at a crucial level that has an impact on a whole series of aspects (housing, mobility, education, ...), which influence family life and thus also childhood poverty.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they are confronted with ever-growing and diverse needs. In order to remain as the spearheads of local social policy, they must benefit from sufficient financial and human resources. The CPAS can also learn from each other: exchanges of practical experience can help both evaluate and strengthen local policy.

In the remainder of this section, we will briefly elaborate – without pretending to exhaust the subject – on the most important questions to be addressed on the basis of our empirical analysis of child deprivation.

### 1. How can we **increase the employment prospects** of single and low-skilled parents?

- a. In addition to tailor-made efforts with regard to the activation and training of single parents and low-skilled workers, there is still scope for improvement in the tax and benefit schemes that affect the labour market opportunities of low-skilled people and their incomes. The federal government has implemented a tax shift to reduce both wage costs for employers and the income tax on earned income. The impact of this tax shift is a matter of debate, notably because the tax cut for middle-income earners has a significant budgetary effect that is not compensated. However, micro-simulations suggest a positive impact on the labour market participation of low-income individuals; moreover, these simulations signal that (future) full budgetary compensation of the tax shift – depending on how it is implemented – might hurt the purchasing power of low-income households, notably when they are (quasi-)jobless or retired.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the challenge is not only to avoid such regressive effects when closing the budgetary gap, but also to strengthen tax and benefit measures that focus on low-skilled individuals. The objective must be to further reduce wage costs for these workers and increase their net income when they work, without affecting the purchasing power of (quasi-)jobless households.

<sup>6</sup> It goes without saying that the mobilisation against poverty should not be limited to what government and actors in the public or subsidised sectors can do. Employers, whether or not they are part of the social economy, can thus also play a role and have an HR policy that supports those workers who have experienced poverty or live with insecure income. Their HR processes and support policies can be completed by measures that fight poverty. Knowledge of the social map may enable more precisely target orientation to be made when the problem goes beyond the company's possibilities. This also contributes to more sustainable employment of vulnerable workers.

<sup>7</sup> This observation is well illustrated by the Recommendations drawn up by the Walloon Network for the Fight against Poverty during the recent local elections.

<sup>8</sup> Capéau et al. (2018).

- b. The regular private market offers more opportunities than we currently use in Belgium, but the policy motto that “the market” should accommodate everyone is naive. We should invest more in jobs in the social economy (subsidised employment, neighbourhood services, etc.).<sup>9</sup> An important question, therefore, is whether regional budgets for social economy initiatives can be increased. (The activation of social assistance beneficiaries through mechanisms that prolong ‘Articles 60-61’, which became a regional competence in 2015, also remains very important within this framework.)
- c. Universal access to affordable child care to facilitate the employment of single parents: additional investment in these services and a sufficiently flexible regulatory framework should permit long waiting lists to be reduced. (Additional ideas with regard to child care are set out below).

2. How can we improve the **standard of living** of poor households with children?

- a. The standard of living of households with children depends, on one hand, on their employment perspectives and what they can earn when employed (see above), and on the other hand, on the adequacy of income replacement benefits when they are not employed. For the latter, it is important that income replacement benefits are upgraded regularly; this holds both for social assistance benefits (*leefloon/revenu d’intégration*) and minimum unemployment and invalidity benefits. In recent years, there has been a strong emphasis on the risk of moral hazard in the realm of unemployment insurance, which has led to a more encompassing activation approach and measures regarding access to benefits and their evolution. Concern with moral hazard should not diminish other concerns, such as adequate protection against poverty
- b. However, as well as earned income and/or income replacement benefits, the standard of living of households with children also depends on child benefits and on costs related to housing, energy and water, childcare and education, sports, leisure and culture. Working, even full-time, may not be sufficient to preclude child deprivation, depending on the parents’ hours of work, salary and the number of dependants in the household. This is particularly the case for single-parent households. The analyses and initiatives taken by the King Baudouin Foundation for instance highlight the role of energy costs, but also signal that it is above all the increase in housing costs that has put pressure on household budgets in recent years<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is also underscored in the Belgian Senate Report (2015-2016), p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> King Baudouin Foundation (2017).

- c. Child benefit systems have been reformed in the Regions. The new systems are characterized by a universal flat rate complemented by social supplements targeted at vulnerable families. In terms of poverty, the impact of the reforms seems to be neutral in Wallonia but positive in Flanders (when the additional investment in school grants is taken into account).<sup>11</sup> This new model can be seen as a step towards targeted universalism and reduces inactivity traps, notably in Flanders (where additional positive dynamic effects are expected when the reform is implemented, thanks also to administrative improvements that will enhance take-up). The long-term impact on child poverty crucially depends on the total amount targeted to poor families. The question confronting the new regional governments in 2019 is therefore to know which additional, targeted measures can be taken during the new legislature in the field of child benefits and/or school grants, in order to enhance financial support for poor families.
- d. The role of housing policies and public services is crucial and this will be discussed in the following sections.

3. What initiatives should be taken to tackle urgent needs in the field of **housing**, both to support low-income tenants in the private sector and to provide more social housing?

Substantial support for vulnerable tenants is increasingly necessary<sup>12</sup> and this implies initiatives being taken in both the private rental market and the social housing rental sector. For the private rental market, we refer the reader to the Senate's recommendations in its report on child poverty, in which it states that "Social housing agencies (SVK/AIS) must cover the whole country" (Senate Report, p. 130), for everyone to have access. Regional governments can develop instruments to encourage private landlords to make their property available to the SVK/AIS. In addition to increasing housing supply, additional resources are also necessary to guarantee quality coaching for SVK/AIS tenants. On the other hand, the Senate report also indicates that "housing benefits for renters with the most pressing housing needs must be increased and this with very strict conditions. Here, we refer in particular to single parents who are most at risk of poverty, and to the provision of an additional amount per child" (Senate Report, p. 130). It is important to ensure that each eligible person can effectively benefit from housing benefits; this implies removing a whole series of obstacles that prevent people from exercising their rights in this domain.

<sup>11</sup> See Guio, Vinck, Van Lancker (2017) for an evaluation of the impact in Wallonia and Van Lancker, W., Vinck J., & Cantillon B. (2016) and Decoster & Vanheukelom (2017) for an evaluation in Flanders.

<sup>12</sup> Dewilde and Pannecoucke (2018) show that the association between low income and housing deprivation is greater in Flanders and in Belgium than in other countries and is also increasing in Flanders.

In addition to this policy of support for the private rental market, the supply of social housing should be substantially increased. This is in fact a structural element in preventing poverty, as well as a way of ensuring that various aspects of the right to housing are respected, such as the quality of the housing, its safety and financial accessibility.

4. How can **public social services** better protect poor children from the negative and potentially long-term impact of deprivation ?

Public social services play a key role that is both preventative and remedial in influencing the mechanisms that can improve equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, by developing the capabilities of each child and young person and supporting parents in their educational role. This implies, in particular, ensuring that:

- a. **Childcare services** are both of good quality and accessible (in terms of location, geographical coverage, particularly in underprivileged neighbourhoods, flexibility of opening hours and costs) to all social groups, whether the parents are working or not, for the sake of the child's well-being. Data regarding the uptake of these services show an under-representation of underprivileged children and the children of immigrants. It is important to work on both financial and non-financial (cultural, linguistic, administrative, operational etc.)<sup>13</sup> barriers to access.

Rules for priority access for disadvantaged groups are important and these exist in Flanders. In the French-speaking Community, such rules are foreseen to be introduced as part of the bill on reform of the care sector. However, the Senate Report on child poverty rightly remarks that, as long as there are waiting lists, the impact of such priority rules is bound to be limited.

Physical accessibility and affordability are important criteria that are stressed in the EU Proposals for Quality Framework on Early Childhood Education and Care<sup>14</sup>. This European Framework also insists on the importance of services that encourage participation, strengthen social inclusion and embrace diversity. This requires a collaborative approach to promoting the benefits of early childhood education and care, involving local organisations and community groups. The European Framework also implies that staff should be trained to help parents and families to value these services and to assure them that their beliefs and cultures will be respected.

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<sup>13</sup> On this subject, see Pavolini E. and Van Lancker W. (2018), Schepers et al. (2017), ONE (2013), and the research funded by the King Baudouin Foundation in 2013 on the expectations of poor parents regarding care services (Crépin et Neuberg, 2013); see also the Senate Report on Child Poverty.

<sup>14</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)

The transition from childcare to pre-primary education also merits particular attention. The involvement of parents at this stage is of crucial importance for the child's development and for the well-being of the parents. It is essential, especially for vulnerable families, that parents are recognized, with their own particular concerns, questions and personal expectations. Preventative family support, childcare and pre-primary education can work together to facilitate these various transitions (family – childcare – pre-primary education), certainly if they are well-embedded in local communities.

- b. Ensuring that services relating to **culture, sports and leisure facilities are accessible to everyone** by fighting cultural and financial barriers to access;
- c. **Health** services must be able to help the most vulnerable children and protect their health from the harmful effects of poverty. This requires the availability of quality healthcare available for all, including the most vulnerable. The problem of affordability is also crucial here <sup>15</sup>.

5. What do we expect from **education** and how can schools become true 'broad schools', offering opportunities to every child or young person, based on their accessibility and roots in the local community?

Everyone would agree that schools have a crucial role to play both in breaking the vicious circle of poverty (in other words, as a driver of social mobility) and in fighting the short-term consequences of child poverty..

Since the risk of poverty is much higher among children whose mother left school without qualifications, from a preventative perspective our first priority is to reduce the number of youngsters leaving secondary education without any qualifications. Social inequalities have a pervasive effect on all aspects of a child's performance in our education system and so impede the role of the school in upward social mobility, as successive waves of PISA results sadly show; space precludes us from elaborating here on this crucial challenge, which raises many pedagogical and organizational issues.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Data from the EU-SILC research show a strong social gradient in Belgium in the field of access to healthcare, with a high proportion of people with low incomes having to postpone treatment for reasons of cost; [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unmet\\_health\\_care\\_needs\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unmet_health_care_needs_statistics)

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Guio et Baye (2016); De Witte en Hindriks (2018), and many other publications. For a recent survey of trends in Flemish education, see Franck and Nicaise (2018).



Our focus in the remainder of this section is on the role schools can play in tackling child deprivation in the short term and in supporting a basic level of well-being for all children.<sup>17</sup> The Flemish Community and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation differ with regard to the interaction between their education, health and welfare sectors and the role schools themselves play. Hence, one should avoid a one-size-fits-all set of policy recommendations with regard to the role of schools. Nevertheless, a general precondition for schools to be successful in tackling the multifaceted reality of child deprivation is that they become ‘broad schools’ (‘brede scholen’, as they are coined in Flanders), embedded in and supported by local partnerships and networks. Up to now, this movement towards ‘broad schools’ has had more traction in the Flemish Community than in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. With due caution regarding the risk of ‘one-size-fits-all’ solutions and without pretending to be exhaustive, we think that the following issues need to be tackled in schools:

- a. **Nutritional deprivation.** It is crucially important that children can enjoy a complete and healthy meal each day. We all know of the difficulties raised by the idea that schools should provide free and healthy meals to their children on a universal basis. However, the idea should not be discarded too easily: it at least merits serious debate. In Sweden, Finland, Estonia and the Czech Republic, all children in compulsory education are given a free meal, irrespective of their parents’ income. It is interesting to observe how Finland justifies the importance of such a policy “Finland provides free school meals to all pupils from nursery school to upper secondary education every school day, as guaranteed by legislation dating from 1948. Free school meals in Finland are seen as an investment for the future and aim to preserve and improve children’s health, well-being and learning. The school meal is used as a pedagogic tool for teaching table manners, food culture and healthy eating habits, as well as for increasing the consumption of vegetables, fruit and cereals and skimmed or low-fat milk.”<sup>18</sup> Experiments are seeing the light of day in Belgium too. In the French-speaking region, 78 pre-primary schools with underprivileged pupils (differentiated learning schools) have provided free school meals since the start of the 2018 academic year, following a call for projects for the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. We can but hope that this project will be extended to all schools and all levels of school education because targeting just the pre-primary education level is insufficient.

<sup>17</sup> Guio et Baye (2016) propose a comprehensive set of policies, with a view to providing ‘a foundation of basic well-being for *all* children’, irrespective of their background or origin.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.edu.fi/yleissivistava\\_koulutus/hyvinvointi\\_koulussa/kouluruokailu/kouluruokailun\\_historiaa](http://www.edu.fi/yleissivistava_koulutus/hyvinvointi_koulussa/kouluruokailu/kouluruokailun_historiaa)

- b. **Deprivation regarding educational support.** The ideal school is one that does not have to rely on either the parents or external organisms for educational support. Thanks to good teacher training, the school should be able to guarantee each child equal opportunities to succeed that were independent of the child's cultural background and the family's living conditions. Teacher training could contribute to this. It is a question of developing the appropriate competencies to provide (from pre-primary education onwards) quality support for children from underprivileged backgrounds: approaching diversity in a positive manner, reducing inequalities in mastering the language, setting out the challenges of learning and establishing relationships of confidence with parents who are less familiar with the education system. Today, families are not prepared for the demands of educational support they are required to provide at home. Not only do families not have the same skills for coaching their children, but the privatisation of educational support is an additional element in the socio-economic duality of education, which widens the gap between those who can and those who cannot afford to invest in additional teaching support. It is thus essential to reinforce public educational support, ensuring that it is sufficient, of quality and free.
- c. **Deprivation relating to school material and school trips.** This means ensuring free availability of the educational material needed to attain achievement targets in primary education and that the price of school materials is limited in secondary education.

This challenge applies to all sectors of education, but it is of particular importance for technical and professional education, where the cost of material is high. The cost of school trips also raises questions and demands further consideration, with regard to the educational value of these initiatives and the potentially prohibitive and exclusionary role of cost for certain students. In the Flemish Region, the so-called "Maximum Bill" principle has tackled the problem of extra-curricular activities in primary schools and local experiments are under way to limit the expenses borne by parents during secondary education.<sup>19</sup> These experiments should be broadened to a Community-wide approach. In the French-speaking region, the Pact for Excellent Education has announced an objective of progressively reducing these costs. It is envisaged to extend free provision as a priority in pre-primary education, to be followed at primary school level and then in secondary education, in function of the type of expenses (firstly, so-called "educational" expenses and other "non-educational" expenses). It is obviously important that this policy intention is implemented.

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<sup>19</sup> We refer to the policy implemented in the provincial network of education in Antwerp.

- d. **Cultural deprivation.** Good quality extracurricular activities should be provided on the school premises. Artistic, cultural and sporting development as part of extracurricular activities would ideally complete the basic skills developed during obligatory school time and would ensure greater equality between pupils. The concept of the ‘broad school’ mentioned above is particularly important in this respect, through working with other local actors to create a broader environment of learning and life skills around the school.
6. The development of **Children’s Houses** (*Huizen van het Kind*) is an important asset in the Flemish Community . These institutions connect actors and policies committed to providing support for families. They can thus play an important role in preventing and tackling child poverty, and in improving the performance of social services.<sup>20</sup> Further development of these *Huizen van het Kind* is very important with a view to achieving the objectives set out in this section. In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the ONE has been implementing a mobilisation plan under the title of *Précarité, Périnatalité et Enfance* (Deprivation, Perinatality and Childhood) 2015-2018, which foresees the creation of Children’s Houses as places of dialogue and integration around projects focused on children, with particular attention for underprivileged children and concern for the most vulnerable children as part of the collaboration between the worlds of teaching and health at school. It is essential that this is implemented.
7. Non-take up of available social services and benefits remains a challenge, as does the participation of vulnerable parents in their children’s education. Local government must be able to reach out proactively to poor families with children and address their problems in an integrated way, in cooperation with the Children’s Houses, the local education community, the childcare sector and social services in general (cf. the example of *brugfiguren* or ‘bridge persons’ deployed in a number of Flemish communities, which build bridges between families and schools). This proactive approach is labour intensive and communes that develop such policies must be given support: Regional governments should consider subsidy mechanisms for those communes that invest in outreach to poor families with children and thus enhance the efficacy of service delivery. Such subsidy mechanisms could serve as the cornerstone of an “alliance to fight child poverty” formed by local and regional/ community government and based on a shared vision in relation to objectives and instruments.

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<sup>20</sup> KOALA is one such example, a local partnership for future families and families with children up to 3 years old/ KOALA is an acronym for Kind en Ouder Activiteiten voor Lokale Armoedebestrijding (Local activities for Children and Parents in the Fight against Poverty) and includes a range of activities focused on children and parents that enjoy an additional subsidy. KOALAs have been set up in the Flemish Community since March 2018 and the additional subsidy has enabled an extra 500 places to be made available.

Belgium has ratified the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which implies a clear public responsibility with regard to the protection of children's rights. This should motivate the implementation of a coordinated masterplan, including all levels of government, at the beginning of the next legislature. Child deprivation will only be reduced if it is a top priority for all members of governments at all levels. This is why the implementation of a masterplan to fight child deprivation should be the responsibility of the prime/first ministers at each level of government. Wallonia followed this route during the current legislature with two consecutive anti-poverty plans (focused on poverty among the whole population – not just child poverty) under the responsibility of the Minister-President.<sup>21</sup> However, the budget and the reforms developed in these plans need further expansion if they are to address more ambitiously the problem of poverty/deprivation in Wallonia. The same holds true for the first inter-federal plan to fight child poverty (2014-2015)<sup>22</sup> and for the federal and regional plans against poverty developed to date.<sup>23</sup> It is only by working on ambitious masterplans against child poverty, which cover the full range of competencies and with the investment of sufficient resources that we can hope to attain success in the fight against poverty.

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21 <http://cohesionsociale.wallonie.be/actions/lutte-contre-la-pauvret%C3%A9>

22 [http://www.mi-is.be/sites/default/files/documents/plan\\_national\\_lutte\\_pauvrete\\_infantile\\_0.pdf](http://www.mi-is.be/sites/default/files/documents/plan_national_lutte_pauvrete_infantile_0.pdf)

23 Federal plan against poverty ([http://www.miiis.be/sites/default/files/documents/plan\\_federal\\_de\\_lutte\\_contre\\_la\\_pauvrete\\_2016-2019\\_0.pdf](http://www.miiis.be/sites/default/files/documents/plan_federal_de_lutte_contre_la_pauvrete_2016-2019_0.pdf)), Vlaams Actieplan Armoedebestrijding (<https://armoede.vlaanderen.be/?q=vlaams-actieplan>)

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## Appendix 1: list of country abbreviations

BE	Belgium	NL	The Netherlands
BG	Bulgaria	AT	Austria
CZ	Czech Republic	PL	Poland
DK	Denmark	PT	Portugal
DE	Germany	RO	Romania
EE	Estonia	SI	Slovenia
IE	Ireland	SK	Slovakia
EL	Greece	FI	Finland
ES	Spain	SE	Sweden
FR	France	UK	The United Kingdom
HR	Croatia		
IT	Italy		
CY	Republic of Cyprus	Other (non-EU) EU-SILC countries	
LV	Latvia	IS	Iceland
LT	Lithuania	RS	Serbia
LU	Luxembourg	CH	Switzerland
HU	Hungary		
MT	Malta		







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