

# THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

**Gabriela BILEVSKY**, PhD,  
Institute for Economic Forecasting, Romanian Academy,  
g\_bilevski@ipe.ro

**Malina TEMIES**, Ph.D. Student, Valahia University of Targoviste

**ABSTRACT:** *The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the accessibility of health, education and care services for all Europeans. This is also the case for children who have seen their schools closed in several countries and replaced by distance learning. At the same time, they were affected by the negative impact of the pandemic on their families' access to health care. Many families are living in increasingly insecure housing. In 2020, Eurofound gathered extensive data on the lives of Europeans during the pandemic. Based on these data, changes in the accessibility of education, healthcare and housing in the EU27 between 2018 and 2020 have been studied, so that these developments can be taken into account when designing measures to improve living conditions.*

**Keywords:** *Covid-19 pandemic, immigrants, education, poverty*

**JEL Classification:** *H12, O10, O40*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world in 2020 has led to urgent action by governments in an effort to limit the effects. These measures include restrictions on mobility and interaction with others, restricting public transportation, asking people to stay at home except in specific circumstances. Since March 2020, the WHO has declared a global pandemic, and by October 2020, the virus had infected more than 40 million people and claimed more than a million lives worldwide.

Under these conditions, the pandemic poses a particular risk to migrants worldwide. According to the OECD 2020, migrants are at higher risk of infection, especially in countries where jobs are in sectors of the labor market that expose them to risks or are most affected by the ensuing economic crisis. Social integration and inclusion are affected by the difficulty of ensuring social distancing in countries facing a higher risk of spread, with the pandemic being associated with the presence of foreigners in their communities, the arrival of the virus and the deepening of economic problems.

Closing borders meant for some migrants to be blocked in difficult situations due to the economic downturn, while other migrants have been able to benefit from exemptions from travel bans, such as those who are regular cross-border workers, seasonal workers or health professionals. The pandemic has affected the size of migration flows, as well as decisions about when to move to other countries.

## 2. EDUCATION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A concern for many parents during the pandemic when schools were closed was how to organize their childcare duties, and in many cases it was necessary to become substitute teachers for their children. The situation is worrying for migrant children, who may be left behind learning foreign languages and are in families where their parents cannot work from home, so they are deprived of their help. Large differences in living conditions lead to poor school preparation for migrant students .

### ➤ **Social connection and language learning**

One of the difficulties of the pandemic is to maintain social contact when physical meetings and events are canceled and the rules of physical distance are in place. This can be especially difficult for migrants who have not had time to develop an extensive social network in the host country.

In Sweden (Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027), a language learning program has launched an online initiative which establishes virtual meetings between a newcomer and a Swede, helping both the newcomer's need to continue language training and the need for both participants to stay connected to each other.

There are specific factors that affect the ability of children with immigrant parents to succeed in participating in online learning and education systems, as a consequence of disadvantaged environments for migrant pupils. The lack of fluency in the language spoken in the host country can exacerbate the difficulties associated with home schooling. Language barriers are more difficult when teaching is online and there is no parental support. In the context of online learning, without daily contacts with colleagues and few interactions with teachers, learning can be more difficult for students with immigrant parents, as they also have to overcome language barriers to learn the language of the host country. This is a challenge in some countries, where the proportion of students who do not speak the language of the host country is high. On average, almost half (48%) of 15-year-old students with immigrant parents do not speak their residence language (OECD, PISA2018 Database). This proportion was extremely high in Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg and Slovenia.

### ➤ **Impact on the education of immigrant children**

The gradual closure of schools has made online learning opportunities essential for education at all levels. Although schools are better equipped with digital tools than in previous years, access to digital learning opportunities is still not equal, immigrant children are less prepared for this new situation. In countries with a significant number of children with immigrant parents, although there are gaps compared to children with native parents, most have access to a computer and an Internet connection.

Indeed, students with immigrant parents are less likely to have access to a quiet place to study, except for foreign-born students, but at least three out of four immigrant children (OECD, PISA2018 Database) report having access to a quiet place to study at home. Online learning strengthens the role of families in supporting student learning. The majority of students with immigrant parents have parents with lower education, who have lower socio-economic resources and who may have a lower understanding of the education system. Therefore, students with immigrant parents face additional difficulties compared to their peers with native parents.

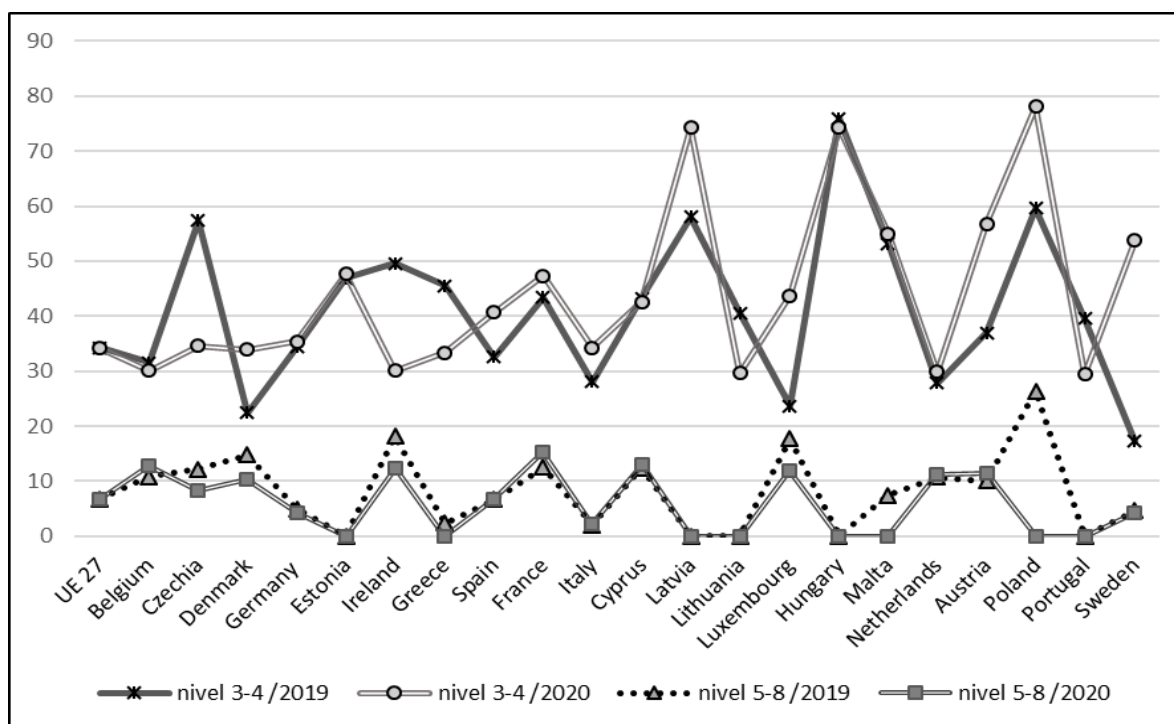
The school environment may involve community support services for children with immigrant parents. Teachers need to develop skills and resources to be able to teach in multicultural and multilingual classes in order to support children from immigrant families throughout education. Promoting interactions between immigrant and native children helps to make the education system more inclusive, by teaching democracy, the role of citizenship in

preventing the attraction to violent extremist movements and encouraging adults' participation in tertiary and non-formal education.

Education enables immigrants to make full use of their skills and abilities for faster and more equitable entry into the labor market. Adapting and understanding the laws, culture and values of the host society by participating in civic orientation courses is necessary for the social integration of immigrants, but also by continuing their studies, thus increasing their level of participation in higher education and lifelong learning.

Young immigrants from the European Union aged between 15 and 24 have an education level of 3-4 (ISCED classification; maximum high school graduate) in a proportion of 34.3% in 2019 and 34.1% in 2020 (Figure 1). The largest share of immigrants at this level of training in 2019 is in Hungary, 76%, but decreasing in 2020 to 74.3%; next is Poland with 59.6% in 2019, but increasing to 78.1% in 2020; closely follows the Czech Republic with 57.3% in 2019, with a sharp decrease to 34.6% in 2020. An increasing percentage is in Austria from 36.9% in 2019 to 56.8% in 2020.

**Figure 1. The level of education of migrant citizens aged 15-24, for the years 2019 and 2020, (%)**



Source: Data processing - Population by level of education and citizenship (%) [edat\_lfs\_9911]

For tertiary education level 5-8 (higher education, doctorate), among young people aged 15-24, there is an average of 6.8% at EU level in the years considered (Figure 1.). The highest percentage of young people in higher education is in Poland, with 26.4%, followed by Luxembourg with 17.7% and Ireland with 18.1% in 2019. In 2020, there is a small change in the geographical orientation of young immigrants with higher education, albeit to a lesser magnitude than in the previous year, for France with 15.2%, followed by Cyprus with 13.1% and Belgium with 12.7%. The fewest young immigrants with a higher education level of 5-8 are in Italy with 2.1%. In these bases there are no data for the year 2020 on tertiary education level 5-8 (higher education, doctorate) for young people aged 15-24 for the States: Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland and Portugal. For Romania and Bulgaria there are no data at any level, for the years studied for this age group.

### **3. PROTECTION OF MIGRANT ADULTS AND CHILDREN**

In the context of the pandemic, in 2020, the protection of immigrants and asylum seekers, minors and other vulnerable groups remains an important area of policy and legislation at national and EU level. To this end, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum set out further actions in the context of protection, stressing that the reform of EU rules on asylum and repatriation strengthens the guarantees and standards of protection under EU legislation for immigrant children. The best interests of the child are paramount in all decisions concerning immigrant children and ensure that the child's right to be heard is respected. The development of private sponsorship programs and humanitarian aid schemes are done to create safe channels of protection for those in need. New partnerships with third countries in the field of migration governance aim to increase the protection of the rights of immigrants and refugees.

An important trend at the national level has been the protection and care of unaccompanied minors, including the opening of new reception facilities, as well as the adaptation or expansion of existing utilities to better meet their needs.

In Belgium, additional places have been created for unaccompanied boys who are at least 17 years old and who meet the minimum criteria for autonomy.

Bulgaria has sought to improve the best interests of the child in response to concerns raised by national courts - by providing a lawyer as a legal representative for unaccompanied minors during the asylum procedure, instead of a representative of the local municipality.

Private and community sponsorship programs have emerged as a clear action related to the resettlement of refugees from third countries. A relocation program in Germany, based on the community sponsorship model, has been operationally implemented by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF).

The main objectives of the program are to increase reception capacity and to create a shared responsibility for the state and civil society in receiving resettled refugees. The program is run in cooperation with the government and religious organizations and includes groups of at least five volunteers who serve as "mentors" and are committed to finding housing for supported refugees and covering housing costs for two years, as well as providing support extended for one year, thus improving the general conditions of integration.

Belgium, for example, has changed its policy and banned the detention of minors based on the principle of the best interests of the child, while Italy has introduced greater rights for detained minors, such as introducing a possibility for third-country nationals in custody to remain connected with the outside world during detention and allowing detainees to lodge complaints about their condition. Moreover, Italy reduced the maximum detention period from 180 to 90 days. Lithuania has introduced an obligation to regularly review the grounds for detention of a third-country national (at least every three months). Luxembourg has focused in particular on minors, setting up an Advisory Committee on the best interests of unaccompanied minors in November 2020. An unaccompanied minor has the right to be heard by the Commission and anyone who can contribute to a better understanding of the case may be invited by the Commission in an advisory capacity (The Annual Reports on Migration and Asylum 2020).

### **4. THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE AT-RISK-OF-POVERTY RATE FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN**

Poverty of children, who are defined as people aged 0-17, is an unfortunate phenomenon encountered both by children whose parents are citizens of the country of residence and by children who have at least one parent who has foreign nationality. There is

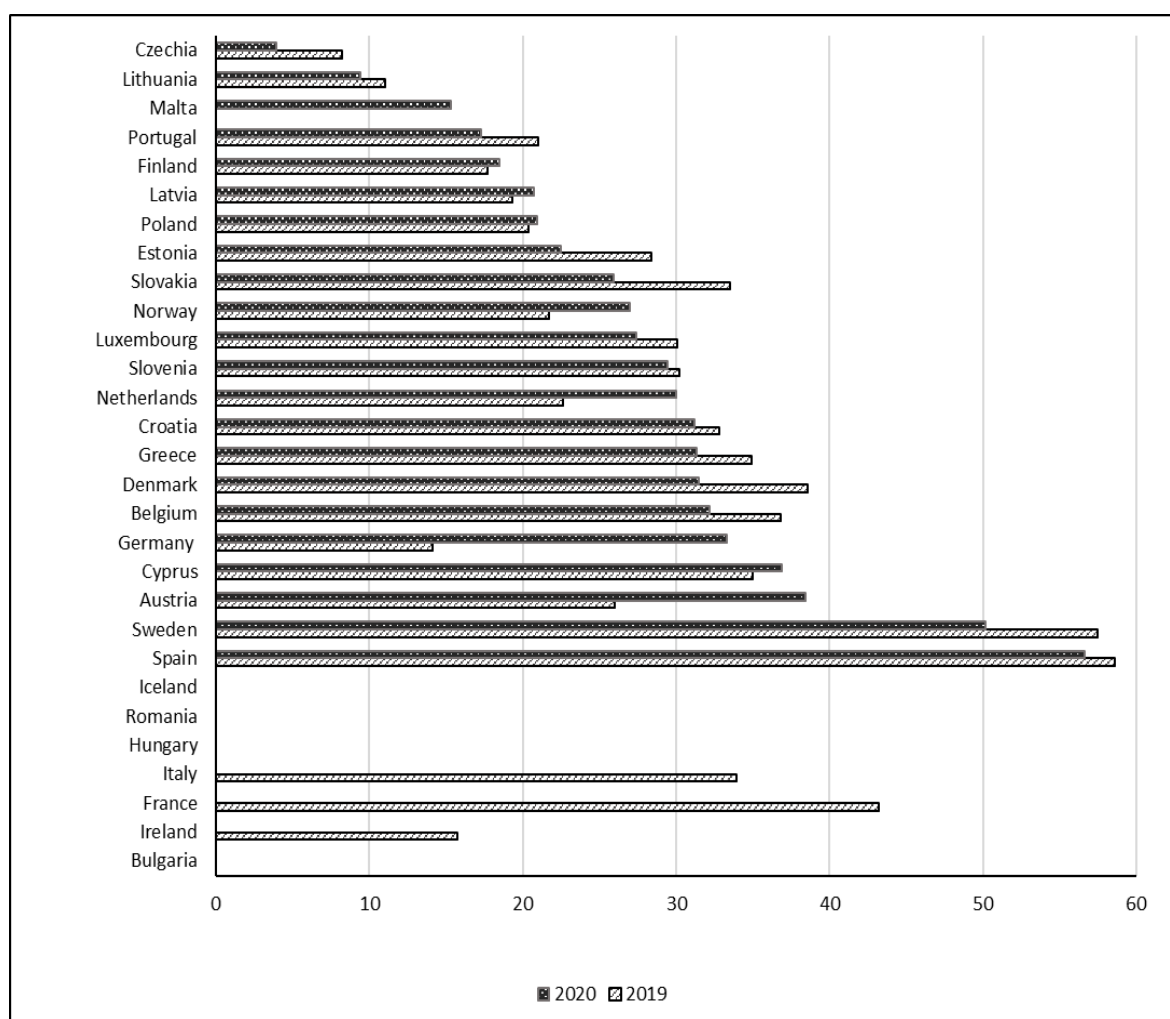
no distinction between parents who are citizens of another EU Member State and parents who are not EU citizens.

According to European Union statistics (Eurostat Database), in the EU-27, approximately one in five children whose parents are citizens of the country of residence, representing 15.9% of the total, were in 2019 at risk of poverty. At the same time, this share for children with at least one immigrant parent is more than twice as high, at 35.8%.

As can be seen in Figure 1.2., there are no statistical reports for this indicator from countries such as Bulgaria, Iceland, Hungary, Romania, and for 2020 there are no records for Switzerland, Italy, France, Ireland.

In 2020, the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate for children with immigrant parents (Figure 1.2) was recorded in Spain with 56.6% and Sweden with 50.2%, but decreasing compared to 2019 (respectively 58.6% in Spain and 57.5% in Sweden). The next countries with the highest rates of poverty risk for children with immigrant parents are in France with 43.2% and Italy with 33.9% in 2019. In 2020 there is an increase of over 10% compared to 2019 in Austria and Germany with poverty risk rates of 38.4% and 33.3% respectively. The lowest rates of at-risk-of-poverty for children with immigrant parents were in Lithuania and the Czech Republic, with rates of 9.4% and 3.9%.

**Figure 2. Impact of the pandemic on the at-risk-of-poverty rate for migrant children aged 0-17 (%)**



Source: Data processing on the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children aged 0-17 - eurostat database [ILC\_LI33]

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

There are specific factors that affect the ability of children with immigrant parents to succeed in participating in online learning and education systems, as a consequence of disadvantaged environments for migrant pupils

Young immigrants from the European Union aged between 15 and 24 have an education level of 3-4 (maximum high school graduate) in a proportion of 34.3% in 2019 and 34.1% in 2020.

For tertiary education level 5-8 (higher education, doctorate), among young people aged 15-24, there is an average of 6.8% at EU level in the years considered.

For Romania and Bulgaria there are no data at any level, for the years studied for this age group

According to European Union statistics, in the EU-27, approximately one in five children whose parents are citizens of the country of residence, representing 15.9% of the total, were in 2019 at risk of poverty. At the same time, this share for children with at least one immigrant parent is more than twice as high, at 35.8%.

In 2020, the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate for children with immigrant parents was recorded in Spain with 56.6% and Sweden with 50.2%,

The lowest rates of at-risk-of-poverty for children with immigrant parents were in Lithuania and the Czech Republic, with rates of 9.4% and 3.9%.

## REFERENCES

1. Action Plan of Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, <https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/integration>;
2. Asylum trends report 2021, <https://www.easo.europa.eu>;
3. EU Migrant integration statistics 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>;
4. New pact migration and asylum 2019-2024, <https://ec.europa.eu>;
5. OECD/EU (2018), Settling In 2018: Indicators of Immigrant Integration, OECD Publishing, Paris/European Union, Brussels, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264307216-en>;
6. Raport final IIR 2019, <http://migrationcenter.ro>;
7. Reducing COVID 19 transmission and strengthening vaccine uptake among migrant populations in the EU/EEA , <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/covid-19-migrants-reducing-transmission-and-strengthening-vaccine-uptake>;
8. The Annual Reports on Migration and Asylum 2020; [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/annual-reports-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/annual-reports-migration-and-asylum_en);