Contents

Poverty and social exclusion in the EU after Laeken-part 1

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Common indicators for social inclusion

At the Nice European Council in December 2000, Heads of State and Government re-confirmed and implemented their March 2000 (Lisbon) decision that the fight against poverty and social exclusion would be best achieved by means of the open method of co-ordination. Key elements of this approach are the definition of commonly-agreed objectives for the European Union (EU) as a whole, the development of appropriate national action plans to meet these objectives, and the periodic reporting and monitoring of progress made.

It is in this context that the Laeken European Council in December 2001 endorsed a first set of 18 common statistical indicators for social inclusion, which will allow monitoring in a comparable way of Member States' progress towards the agreed EU objectives. These indicators need to be considered as a consistent whole reflecting a balanced representation of EU social concerns. They cover four important dimensions of social inclusion (financial poverty, employment, health and education), which highlight the "multidimensionality" of the phenomenon of social exclusion. The present publication provides an overview of the monetary indicators adopted in Laeken, which have all been calculated on the basis of the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). A second publication will present the non-monetary indicators.

15% of EU citizens at risk of poverty

15% of the EU population were at risk of poverty in 1999, i.e. living in households with an "equivalised disposable income" (see methodological notes, page 7) below 60% of the median equivalised income of the country they live in. This figure, calculated as a weighted average of national results (where each country receives a weight that equals its total population), masks considerable variation between Member States – with the share of the population at risk of poverty ranging from 9% in Sweden to 21% in Greece and Portugal (see Figure 1 below and the statistical appendix).
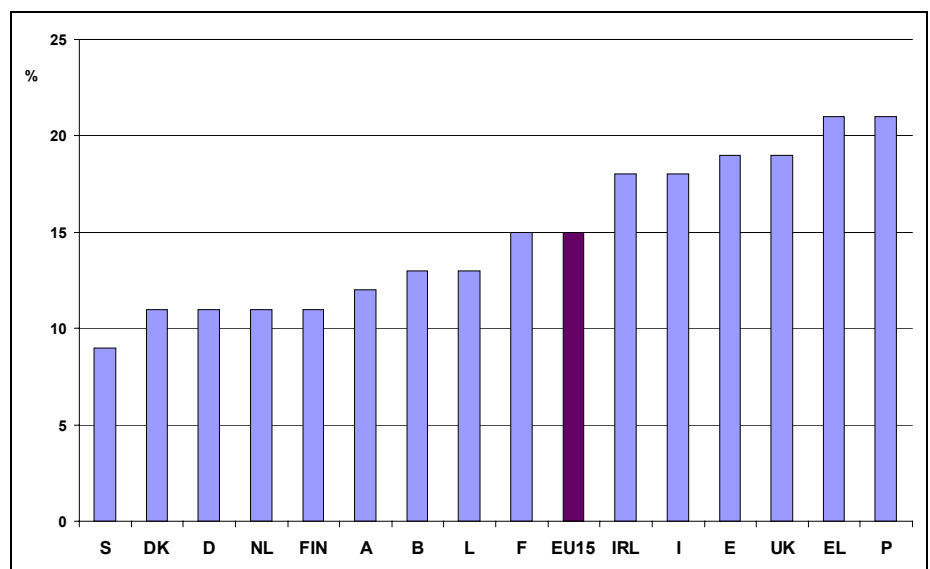

Figure 1: At-risk-of-poverty rate for 1999

Poverty risk is a relative concept

The "at-risk-of-poverty threshold" is fixed, for each country, at 60% of the national median equivalised income. The focus is therefore on the relative rather than absolute risk of poverty: this risk is indeed defined in relation to the general level of prosperity in each country and is expressed on the basis of a central value of the income distribution (a key advantage of the median is that it is not influenced by extreme values, i.e. extremely low or high incomes).

National thresholds are computed for the population as a whole and are expressed in terms of equivalised income to take account of household size and composition. For a given household type, a national threshold can then be converted from "equivalised" into "unequivalised" money by multiplying it by the "equivalent size" of that household (see methodological notes).

To illustrate the relative dimension of this threshold and help understand its actual meaning, Figure 2 shows its monetary value in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS, see methodological notes) for a 2 adults-2 children household for each Member State.

Values range from 61% of the EU-average in Portugal to 173% in Luxembourg, i.e. a ratio of 2.8 that highlights the differences between national standards of living. Apart from these extreme values, most national thresholds are between 70% and 130% of the EU-mean, which is 15,252 PPS (calculated as a population-weighted average of national thresholds). For a one-person household, the EU-mean is 7,263 PPS per year (see the statistical appendix).
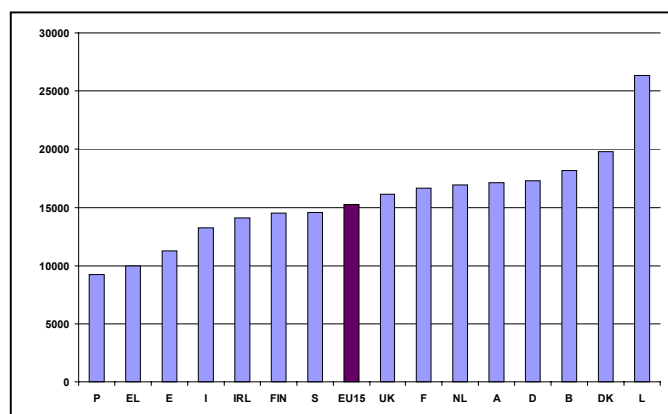

Figure 2: Illustrative value of the at-risk-of-poverty threshold for a 2 adults-2 children household for 1999

The choice of 60% of national median equivalised income is conventional, although statistical considerations have guided this selection. To examine the sensitivity of the risk of poverty to the choice of alternative thresholds, three additional thresholds have been considered: 40%, 50% and 70% of median equivalised income.

At the EU level, the likelihood of being at risk of poverty varied in 1999 from 5% to 23% for thresholds set at 40% and 70% of the median respectively; it is 9% if a 50% cut-off is used (see statistical appendix).

Figure 3 shows national and EU-wide rates of poverty-risk at these three alternative thresholds, expressed as a percentage of the at-poverty-risk rate at 60%.
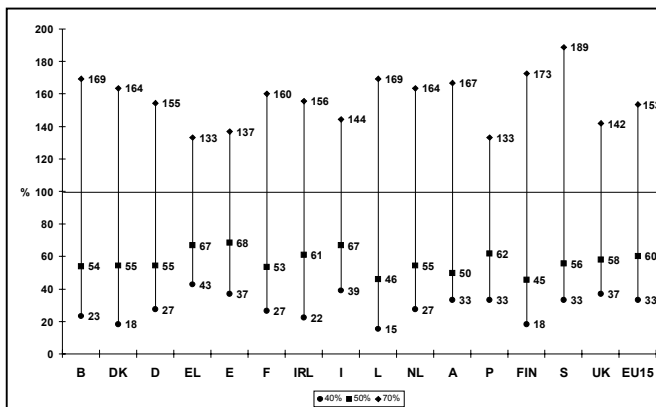

Figure 3: Dispersion around the at-risk-of-poverty threshold 40% 50% 70% for 1999 (in proportion to the 60% rate)

The results displayed in this Figure reflect the shape of the income distribution around the 60% threshold. If a lot of people are located just below (above) the 60% threshold, the 50% (70%) rate will be much lower (higher) than the 60% rate. So, the longer a bar for a given country, the higher the concentration of individuals around the 60% threshold. For example, in Luxembourg and Finland, only around 45% of those who are at risk of poverty at the 60% threshold are also at risk of poverty at the 50% threshold. This means that more than half the people at risk of poverty according to the standard definition have an equivalised income between 50% and 60% of the median equivalised income. By contrast, in Spain, Greece and Italy, a higher proportion of the poor are lying below the 50% (and, though to a lesser extent the 40%) threshold.

This indicator provides a first insight into the depth of poverty. An indicator that explicitly measures how far below the threshold the income of people at-risk-of-poverty is, i.e. "how poor the poor are", is the at-risk-of-poverty gap.

Median at-risk-of-poverty gap

In 1999 the median gap (i.e. the difference between the median equivalised income of the poor and the 60% threshold), expressed as a percentage of this threshold, was 22% at EU level. In other words, half of those at-risk-of-poverty had an equivalised income below 78% of the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (i.e. below 78%*60%=47% of median equivalised income). The gap was higher in Greece, Spain and Italy and lower in Luxembourg and Finland (Figure 4).
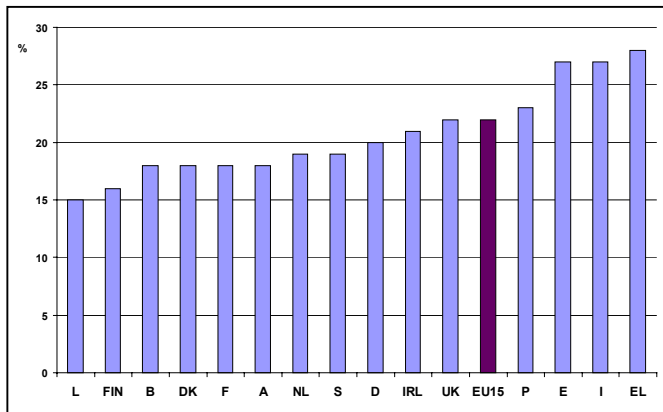
Figure 4: Relative median at-risk-of-poverty gap for 1999

Persistent risk of poverty

The share of the population living on a low income for an extended period of time is of particular policy concern, which is why another measure of poverty risk retained in the Laeken list of indicators for social inclusion is the persistence of this risk. Figure 5 displays 1999 national figures for both this indicator and the standard at-risk-of-poverty rate already discussed above.

9% of the EU population were persistently at-risk-of-poverty in 1999, i.e. had an equivalised income below the 60% threshold in that year but also in at least two of the preceding three years (1996-1998). This average again masks wide variation between Member States, with the persistent-risk-of-poverty rate varying from 5% in Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands, to 14% in Portugal.
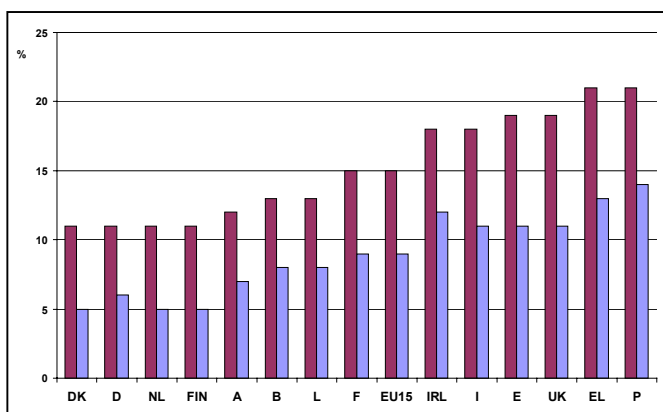

Figure 5: Persistent risk-of-poverty rate for1996-1999 (right) and at-risk-of-poverty rate (left) for 1999

By contrasting both persistent and current poverty risk, Figure 5 shows that in 1999, at EU level, well over half the total number of people at risk of poverty were persistently at risk of poverty. This share was highest in Ireland and Portugal and lowest in Denmark, the Netherlands and Finland.

Changing the risk-of-poverty threshold over time

It is also interesting to calculate the at-risk-of-poverty rates for a threshold that is kept fixed in real terms over the period under examination (1996-1999). To do this, the 1996 threshold is used throughout the period simply by up-rating it for inflation in each year.

Figure 6 compares the standard at-risk-of-poverty rate with this new at-risk-of-poverty-rate "anchored" in 1996.
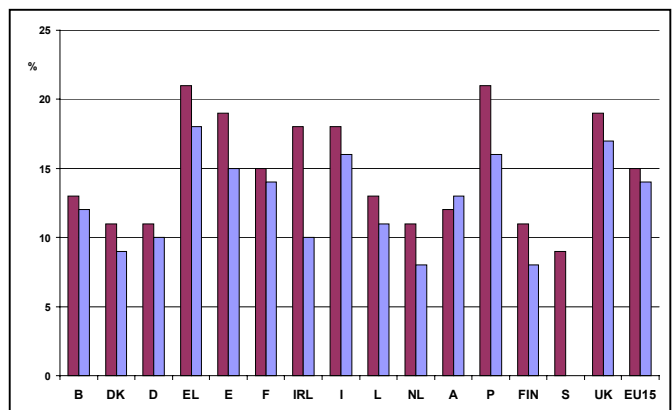

Figure 6: At-risk-of-poverty rate for 1999 (left) and at-risk-of-poverty rate anchored at 1996 for 1999 (right)

Results suggest that this approach does not yield significantly different results for the EU as a whole (1999 threshold: 15%, 1996 indexed threshold: 14%), whereas the difference in some countries is considerable. In Ireland, the indexation approach gives an at-risk-of-poverty rate of 10% (as opposed to 18%) and in Portugal 16% (instead of 21%), which suggests that over the 4-year period considered the rise in median income has been much faster than the inflation rate in these countries.

Some countries have a more equal distribution of income than others

The focus of all the indicators presented so far is on the bottom part of the income distribution. It can also be interesting to look at the relative position of the bottom group with regard to that of the top group.

This can be illustrated by the S80/S20 ratio. For each country, this ratio compares the total equivalised income received by the top income quintile (20% of the population with the highest equivalised income) to that received by the bottom income quintile (20% with lowest equivalised income).

The EU average is 4.6 in 1999, which means that the wealthiest quintile had 4.6 times more income than the poorest. Ratios range from 3.2 in Denmark and Sweden to 6.4 in Portugal.

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S80/S20 is only responsive to changes in top and bottom quintiles. The Gini coefficient allows one to take into account the full distribution of income.

If there was perfect equality (i.e. each person receives the same income), the Gini coefficient would be 0%; it would be 100% if the entire national income were in the hands of only one person. In 1999, the calculated coefficient for the EU was 29%. National Gini coefficients vary between 23% (Denmark, Sweden) and 36% (Portugal). The rankings of national Gini coefficients and S80/S20 ratios are quite similar as can be seen in Figure 7.
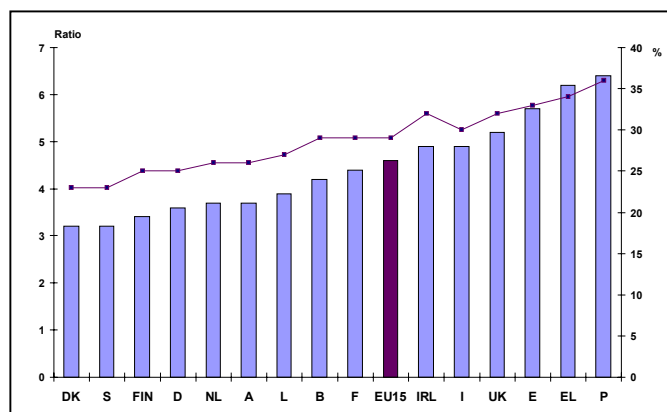

Figure 7: Income share ratio (left hand scale; bars) and Gini Coefficient (right hand scale; line) for1999

Re-distributive effect of social transfers

After having examined the phenomenon of poverty risk and income distribution, it is important to start assessing the role of policy in lifting people out of the poverty risk. ECHP data allow us to look at the re-distributive effect of social transfers (i.e., old-age and survivors' pensions, unemployment benefits, invalidity payments, family allowances…) and their role in alleviating the risk of poverty. However it does not allow us to look at alternative policy measures such as tax credits and tax allowances as well as social transfers in kind.

A comparison between the standard at-risk-of-poverty rate and the hypothetical situation where social transfers are absent, shows that such transfers have an important re-distributive role.

In the absence of all social transfers, the poverty risk for the EU population as a whole would be considerably higher than it is in reality (40% instead of 15%). It can be argued that the prime role of old age (and survivors') pensions is not to re-distribute income across individuals but rather over the life-cycle of individuals. If, therefore, pensions are considered as primary income rather than social transfers, the at-risk-of-poverty rate without all other social transfers is 24%.

Figure 8 compares the different rates after and before social transfers for all the countries in 1999. These rates

are calculated with exactly the same threshold, namely the 60% threshold calculated on the basis of *total* household income, i.e. including all social transfers.

Figure 8: At-risk-of-poverty rate for 1999 before any social transfers (top), after pensions (middle) and after all social transfers (bottom)

To assess more explicitly the effect of social transfers excluding pensions (still considered as primary income), Figure 9 shows the drop of the at-risk-of-poverty rate calculated before and after these transfers for 1999 (expressed as a percentage of the "before transfers" rate). This drop is lowest in Greece (5%: from 22% to 21%), Italy, Spain and Portugal. It is highest in Denmark and Sweden, suggesting a high re-distributive impact of social transfers or a higher level of social expenditure in these countries.

Figure 9: Impact of social transfers (excluding pensions) on the at-risk-of-poverty rate before transfers for 1999

More about the *Laeken indicators*…

As mentioned above, in total eighteen indicators were agreed at Laeken, grouped into ten primary indicators to cover the most important elements identified as leading to social exclusion, and eight secondary indicators to describe other dimensions of the problem. They now form a key basis for EU policy-making in the social area, given that Member States will include them from 2003 onwards in their National Action Plans on social inclusion that will be submitted every second year. They will also be used by both Member States and the Commission in their Joint Report on Social Inclusion as from 2003.

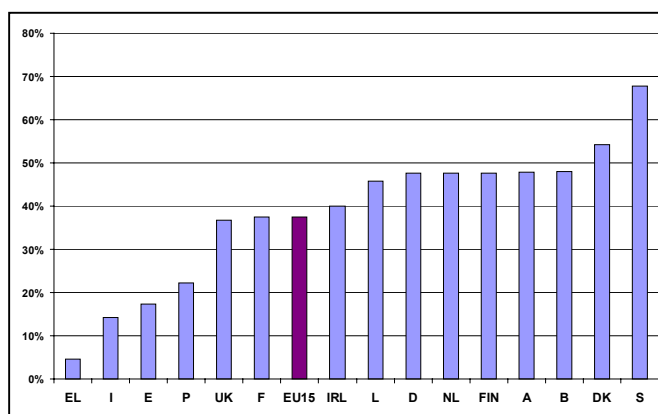Member States will also be encouraged to supplement these common indicators in their National Action Plans on social inclusion with a third level of indicators to reflect specific national circumstances and to help interpret the primary and secondary indicators; these indicators need not necessarily be harmonised at EU level. For example, even though there is not yet a proposal for common indicators on housing, an important agreement has been reached on a common approach to be followed for this key area: Member States will also be invited to report on decent housing conditions, housing costs and homelessness in their National Action Plans on social inclusion as from 2003.

The 18 Laeken indicators were proposed by the Indicators Sub-Group of the EU Social Protection Committee that met for the first time in February 2001, and in which Eurostat is an active participant. They take account of in-depth methodological research commissioned by the Belgian Presidency of the EU for this specific purpose (see Atkinson T., Cantillon B., Marlier E. and Nolan B., 2002, *Social Indicators: The EU and Social Inclusion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford). The report on indicators for social inclusion prepared by the Social Protection Committee and endorsed in Laeken can be found on the web-site of Directorate General *Employment and Social Affairs* of the European Commission (www.europa.eu.int).

This year, the Indicators Sub-Group is planning to refine and develop the agreed list of indicators further, to include extra dimensions recognised as relevant for social inclusion, and to expand the geographical coverage to Candidate countries (a similar analysis for the Candidate countries will be published shortly).

The present publication focused on the nine Laeken income indicators (see definitions in table below); a second report will discuss the remaining nine indicators. Indicators in this report were only provided at the level of the total population and for the latest data available (ECHP, 1999). The full series of data according to the breakdowns agreed in Laeken (by age and gender, activity status, household type and tenure status) can be found on the Eurostat New Cronos website, (Theme 3, Domain "ILC").

It should be noted that the work of the Indicators Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee to establish the Laeken indicators has built on the European Commission's exercise launched in the year 2000 to agree a list of structural indicators in the field of social cohesion for inclusion in the annual Commission Report to the Spring European Council. The structural indicators on social cohesion that the Commission will use in its 2003 *Spring report* are a selection of the Laeken indicators, thereby ensuring full consistency between the different processes.

'Income' must be understood as equivalised disposable income. It is defined as the household's total disposable income divided by its "equivalent size", to take account of the size and composition of the household, and is attributed to each household member.	
Primary Indicators	**Definition**
At-risk-of-poverty rate after transfers	The share of persons with an income below 60% national median income. Breakdowns by age and gender, by most frequent activity status, by household type, by tenure status + At-risk-of-poverty threshold (illustrative values)
Inequality of income distribution	S80/S20 income quintile share ratio: Ratio of total income received by the 20% of the country's population with the highest income (top quintile) to that received by the 20% of the country's population with the lowest income (lowest quintile).
Persistent risk-of-poverty rate (60% median)	The share of persons with an income below the risk-of-poverty threshold in the current year and in at least two of the preceding three years. Gender breakdown + total
Relative median at-risk-of-poverty gap	Difference between the median income of persons below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold and the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, expressed as a percentage of the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Gender breakdown + total
Secondary Indicators	
Dispersion around the risk-of-poverty threshold	The share of persons with an income below 40%, 50% and 70% national median income.
At-risk-of-poverty rate anchored at a moment in time	For a given year (in this publication: 1999), the "at-risk-of-poverty rate anchored at a moment in time (here: 1996)" is the share of the population whose income in that given year is below a risk-of-poverty threshold calculated in the standard way (here for 1996) and then up-rated for inflation (here, the period concerned is 1996-1999, but the inflation rate to be applied is that for the period 1995-1998 because the income reference year in the ECHP is the year prior to the survey)
At-risk-of-poverty rate before transfers	At-risk-of-poverty rate where income is calculated as follows: 1. Primary income, i.e. income excluding all social transfers 2. Primary income plus old-age and survivors' pensions 3. Total income, i.e. including all social transfers Gender breakdown + total
Gini coefficient	The relationship of cumulative shares of the population arranged according to the level of income, to the cumulative share of the total income received by them.
Persistent risk-of-poverty rate (50% median)	The share of persons with an income below the 50% risk-of-poverty threshold in the current year and in at least two of the preceding three years. Gender breakdown + total

Statistical appendix

1999	EU15	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL
At-risk-of-poverty rate (%)								
After social transfers (60% threshold)	15	13	11	11	21	19	15	18
Before social transfers (income including pensions)	24	25	24	21	22	23	24	30
Before social transfers (income excluding pensions)	40	40	34	40	38	39	41	37
40% threshold	5	3	2	3	9	7	4	4
50% threshold	9	7	6	6	14	13	8	11
70% threshold	23	22	18	17	28	26	24	28
At-risk-of poverty threshold (PPS)								
One adult household	7,263	8,659	9,414	8,236	4,753	5,347	7,944	6,721
2 adults -2 children household	15,252	18,184	19,769	17,296	9,981	11,229	16,682	14,114
Relative median at-risk-of-poverty gap (%)	22	18	18	20	28	27	18	21
Persistent risk-of-poverty rate % (60% threshold)	9	8	5	6	13	11	9	12
Persistent risk-of-poverty rate % (50% threshold)	4	3	1	3	8	6	3	5
At-risk-of-poverty rate anchored at 1996 (%)	14	12	9	10	18	15	14	10
Income distribution (income quintile share ratio)	4.6	4.2	3.2	3.6	6.2	5.7	4.4	4.9
Gini Coefficient (%)	29	29	23	25	34	33	29	32

1999	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
At-risk-of-poverty rate (%)								
After social transfers (60% threshold)	18	13	11	12	21	11	9	19
Before social transfers (income including pensions)	21	24	21	23	27	21	28	30
Before social transfers (income excluding pensions)	41	41	35	39	39	33	43	42
40% threshold	7	2	3	4	7	2	3	7
50% threshold	12	6	6	6	13	5	5	11
70% threshold	26	22	18	20	28	19	17	27
At-risk-of poverty threshold (PPS)								
One adult household	6,305	12,532	8,067	8,158	4,400	6,921	6,942	7,694
2 adults -2 children household	13,241	26,317	16,941	17,132	9,240	14,534	14,578	16,157
Relative median at-risk-of-poverty gap (%)	27	15	19	18	23	16	19	22
Persistent risk-of-poverty rate % (60% threshold)	11	8	5	7	14	5	:	11
Persistent risk-of-poverty rate % (50% threshold)	6	2	2	3	8	2	:	5
At-risk-of-poverty rate anchored at 1996 (%)	16	11	8	13	16	8	:	17
Income distribution (income quintile share ratio)	4.9	3.9	3.7	3.7	6.4	3.4	3.2	5.2
Gini Coefficient (%)	30	27	26	26	36	25	23	32

: No information available

Source: Eurostat, ECHP-UDB, version December 2002

Notes: Data for Spain are provisional: The Spanish National Statistical Institute will revise the weights applied to the data for the next ECHP data releases. The EU averages are calculated as a weighted average of national results (where each country receives a weight that equals its total population).

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➤ ESSENTIAL INFORMATION – METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

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Data used

Figures presented in this publication come from the December 2002 version of the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) users' database (UDB). This is considered to be the best source of comparable data currently available.

The ECHP is a survey based on a standardised questionnaire. It involves annual interviewing of a representative panel of households and individuals, covering a wide range of topics: income (including the various social benefits), health, education, housing, demographics and employment characteristics. The longitudinal structure of the ECHP makes it possible to follow up and interview the same households and individuals over several consecutive years. The general impact of attrition rates over time has been reasonably low. The ECHP, like other households surveys, does not cover persons living in collective households, homeless persons or other difficult to reach groups. Furthermore, there are concerns about data quality for those at the lower end of the income distribution.

The first wave of the ECHP was conducted in 1994 in the then twelve EU Member States, on a sample of some 60,500 households (about 170 000 individuals). Austria joined the project in 1995 and Finland in 1996. The original samples were designed to achieve a high degree of national representativity. Even though Sweden is not taking part in the ECHP, comparable micro data from the Swedish survey on living conditions are included in the ECHP user's database from 1997 onwards. For the UK there is a break in series between 1996 and 1997. Until 1996, data from the original ECHP survey was used. From 1997 onwards, data from the national panel was transformed and used as the ECHP. For Germany, there is a break in the series between 1994 and 1995. From 1995 onwards, an additional sample of immigrants was added to the survey sample. In consequence, indicators calculated for years including 1994 are not consistent with those using data for 1995 and subsequent years. This particularly applies to the at-persistent-risk-of-poverty rate. The available data for Finland and France only permit adjustment for social transfers on a gross basis, which may affect the accuracy of the at-risk-of-poverty indicator before social transfers.

The current version of the ECHP UDB differs from previous versions in some aspects: In addition to the updating of income data by some countries, two methodological aspects have been substantially revised: a) an improved weighting procedure is applied to the ECHP data; in order to avoid extreme weights; and b) a new method to adjust for 'within household non-response' is used. The impact of these two substantial modifications in the production of the ECHP UDB is twofold. Firstly, the micro-data contain now less extreme weights and better income information. Secondly, there are some major changes in the estimates of important indicators based on the ECHP. These methodological changes can be regarded as a major revision and an improvement in the accuracy of ECHP estimates and will therefore be kept until the end of the ECHP. Please note that the Spanish Statistical Institute will revise the weights in the next releases.

Disposable Income

Data on income from the ECHP relate to the year immediately preceding the survey (e.g. 1998 for wave 6 conducted in 1999), whereas the household composition and the socio-demographic characteristics of household members are those registered at the moment of the survey. Household's total disposable income is taken to be total net monetary income received by the household and its members at the time of the survey interview – namely all income from work (employee wages and self-employment earnings), private income from investment and property, plus all social transfers received directly including old-age pensions, net of any taxes and social contributions paid. However, no account is taken of indirect social transfers, loans interest payment, transfers paid to other households, receipts in kind and imputed rent for owner-occupied accommodation. The last component in particular can have a significant impact for certain countries. In order to reflect differences in household size and composition, the income figures are given per "equivalent adult". In other words, the total household income is divided by its equivalent size using the so-called "modified OECD" equivalence scale. This scale gives a weight of 1.0 to the first adult, 0.5 to any other household member aged 14 and over and 0.3 to each child. The resulting figure is attributed to each member of the household, whether adult or children. The equivalent size of a household that consists of 2 adults and 2 children below the age of 14 is therefore: 1.0+0.5+(2*0.3) = 2.1.

Purchasing Power Parities (PPP) and Purchasing Power Standards (PPS)

PPPs are a fictitious currency exchange rate, which eliminate the impact of price level differences. Thus 1 PPS will buy a comparable basket of goods and services in each country. For ease of understanding they are scaled at EU level. In consequence the PPS can be thought of as the Euro in real terms.

The detailed methodology of the monetary Laeken indicators presented in this publication is available on the Eurostat CIRCA website or from the authors on request.

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