This article is part of a Eurostat online publication that focuses on quality of life indicators, providing recent statistics for the European Union (EU). The publication presents a detailed analysis of various dimensions that can form the basis for a deeper analysis of the quality of life, complementing gross domestic product (GDP) which has traditionally been used to provide a general overview of the economic situation and social developments.

This article focuses on the eighth dimension — natural and living environment — of the nine quality of life indicators that form part of a framework endorsed by an expert group on quality of life indicators. Although the environment is usually discussed within the context of sustainability, it is equally important for an individual’s quality of life: Indeed, environmental conditions not only affect human health and well-being directly, but also indirectly, as they may have adverse effects on ecosystems, biodiversity, or even more extreme consequences such as natural disasters or industrial accidents. Many Europeans have become increasingly vocal over their desire to enjoy the benefits that are offered by a high-quality environment, from basic rights such as the provision of clean water to more intangible aspects such as noise-free residential and work environments or easy access to nature and green spaces.

Environmental indicators are relatively abundant; however, from a quality of life perspective, they are often too specific. That said, some environmental indicators may provide valuable information on the quality of life, especially those that analyse an individual’s assessment of their environment. The information presented below combines indicators for self-reported exposure to pollution, grime and noise with data from the European Environmental Agency (EEA) concerning the exposure of urban populations to fine particulate matter (a form of air pollution linked — among other sources — to emissions from diesel engines). Since environmental factors may affect an individual’s choices (for example, deciding where to live), these aspects are also examined from the perspective of potential links between the risk of poverty and exposure to such environmental conditions, bearing in mind that people at risk of poverty often live in areas characterised by environmental issues and that these issues may, in turn, impact on their quality of life, for example, by affecting their health or by decreasing the value of the property in which they live.

Key messages

- In the EU, self-reported exposure to pollution, grime and environmental problems decreased between 2007 and 2016.
- Across most of the EU Member States, people at risk of poverty were more likely to face a higher risk of exposure to pollution, grime and environmental problems than the average for the whole population.
- Between 2000 and 2014, urban populations in the EU became less exposed to particulate matter air pollution.
- In 2014, the exposure of urban populations to particulate matter air pollution was below the level recommended by the World Health Organisation in just seven of the EU Member States.
More than one in six inhabitants in the EU-28 reported a concern over noise pollution from neighbours or from the street in 2016.

In 2016, the issue of noise pollution was particularly evident among people at risk of poverty.

Exposure to pollution, grime and other environmental problems

On average, 14.0% of the EU-28 population declared being exposed to pollution, grime and environmental problems, ranging from 30.3% in Malta to 4.6% in Ireland in 2016.

There is evidence to suggest that environmental problems and pollution are associated with lower levels of subjective well-being. The share of the EU population that reported that they had been exposed to pollution, grime and other environmental problems dropped from 17.1% in 2007 to 14.0% by 2016 (see Figure 1).

This average, however, conceals considerable variations between the different EU Member States. In 2016, Malta recorded by far the highest share (30.3%) of its population reporting that they had been exposed to pollution, grime or other environmental problems, while the next highest shares were recorded in Germany (23.2%) and Greece (19.6%). Several eastern European and Baltic Member States — Latvia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania — together with Luxembourg, Italy and France also recorded rates of exposure to pollution, grime or other environmental problems that were above the EU-28 average (see Map 1). At the other end of the range, the three Nordic Member States, together with Croatia recorded some of the lowest exposure rates to pollution, grime or other environmental problems (within the range of 6.3-7.2% of their populations), while in Ireland, just 4.6% of the population reported being exposed to these types of problem.
Map 1: Population exposed to pollution, grime or other environmental problems, 2016 (% share)

Source: Eurostat (ilc_mddw02)
In 2016, the risk of being exposed to pollution, grime or other environmental problems was higher than the average for the total population among people at risk of poverty (see Figure 2); some 15.6% of the EU-28 population at risk of poverty faced these problems, which was 1.6 percentage points above average.

This pattern of greater exposure to pollution, grime or other environmental problems among the population at risk of poverty was repeated in a majority of the EU Member States. In 2016, these types of risk were particularly prevalent among the population at risk of poverty in Belgium, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, where the share of the population exposed to pollution, grime or other environmental problems was 5.6-7.3 percentage points higher than the average for the total population; relatively large gaps were also recorded in Germany and Luxembourg (differences of 4.1-4.2 percentage points). By contrast, there were eight Member States where exposure to pollution, grime or other environmental problems was lower than average among the population at risk of poverty; this was particularly the case in Romania, Greece and Poland. The different situations among the Member States may reflect, at least to some degree, population distributions across the various territories. For example, in most of western Europe it is common to find people at risk of poverty concentrated in cities (where pollution, grime and other environmental problems may be greater), whereas in some parts of eastern Europe it is more common to find people at risk of poverty living in rural areas (that are generally characterised by lower levels of pollution, grime and environmental problems); for more information and an analysis of population distributions by degree of urbanisation, refer to this article.

Urban population exposure to air pollution

In 2014, the EU-28’s urban population was potentially exposed to 22.5 μg/m³ of PM10, slightly above the WHO target set at 20 μg/m³.

Particulate matter consists of very small floating liquid and solid particles in the air. They are a form of air pollution and originate from a variety of sources that are linked to the burning of fossil fuels, for example, diesel engines, wood stoves or coal-powered energy plants. Exposure to particulate matter over the medium to long-term can be dangerous for an individual’s health, in particular for respiratory and cardiovascular systems, potentially leading to heart and/or lung diseases, as these particles are small enough to be carried into the lungs.
internal organs where they can lead to inflammation.

According to the OECD, research has shown that the concentration of air pollutants, such as particulate matter, may adversely affect life satisfaction and subjective well-being. While an aggregate measure for total air quality is not yet available, the concentration of fine particulates in the air is considered as an adequate proxy.

The concentration of particulate matter (defined here as those whose diameter is less than 10 micrometres or 10 μm), hereafter referred to as PM10 in the air has been a focus for environmental policymakers over several decades. Council Directive 1999/30/EC relating to limit values for sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and oxides of nitrogen, particulate matter and lead in ambient air was the first legislation to set EU targets for limiting the amount of pollutants in the air; it included an upper limit of 40 micrograms of PM10 per cubic meter of air (40 μg/m³), which was later confirmed by Directive 2008/50/EC on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe. In its 2005 update to Air quality guidelines, the World Health Organisation reviewed the scientific evidence available and considered its implications in the form of a set of revised guidelines for selected air pollutants; it set a guideline of 20 μg/m³ for PM10.

On average, the urban population of the EU-28 was potentially exposed to 28.7 μg/m³ of PM10 in 2000. The level of this air pollutant fluctuated in the period prior to the global financial and economic crisis and peaked at 30.2 μg/m³ in 2006. Thereafter the risk of exposure to particulate matter in the EU-28 generally followed a downward path, except for an increase in 2011. By 2014, the EU-28’s urban population was potentially exposed to 22.5 μg/m³ of PM10. While this figure remained above the WHO target of 20 μg/m³, it did mark an overall fall of 21.6% when compared with PM10 concentrations in 2000.

Figure 3: Exposure of the urban population to particulate matter, EU-28, 2000-2016 (micrograms per cubic metre; μg/m³) Source: Eurostat (tsdph370)

Figure 4 provides a comparison of the situation between 2004 and 2014 concerning the potential exposure of urban populations to air pollution. In 2014, there were seven EU Member States where this form of air pollution was below the WHO’s threshold of 20 μg/m³; they were Finland, Ireland, Sweden, Estonia, the United Kingdom, France and Denmark, with the lowest concentration of PM10 recorded in Finland (13.7 μg/m³). By contrast, concentrations of particulate matter were more than double the WHO target in the urban areas of Bulgaria (41.2 μg/m³); Poland and Cyprus were the only other Member States to record potential exposure to
levels above 30 μg/m$^3$.

A comparison between 2004 and 2014 reveals that there was generally a fall in the potential exposure of urban populations to PM10 across the EU Member States. The only sizeable increase in this form of air pollution was recorded in Hungary, where PM10 concentrations rose by almost one fifth; there were also small increases in Poland and Finland, while there was no change or almost no change in Lithuania and Denmark. On the other hand, the potential exposure of urban populations to particulate matter fell at a rapid pace in several Member States. This was particularly the case in Romania where this type of air pollution was reduced by more than half (-54.7 %), while PM10 concentrations fell by 41-45 % in Slovenia, Greece and Portugal and by 29-35 % in Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy.

![Figure 4: Exposure of the urban population to particulate matter, 2004 and 2014](micrograms per cubic metre; μg/m$^3$)Source: Eurostat (tsdph370)

**Noise pollution from neighbours or from the street**

17.9 % of the EU-28 population declared being exposed to noise pollution from neighbours or the street in 2016, 5.1 pp lower than in 2007

Noise pollution is formally defined as exposure to ambient sound levels that are beyond usual comfort levels. It can have serious direct as well as indirect health effects, for example, leading to hypertension, high stress levels, sleeping disorders and, in extreme cases, tinnitus or hearing loss. The information that follows is based on self-reported disturbance from noise originating from neighbours or the street; it provides one measure of the impact that noise may have on an individual’s quality of life.

In 2007, close to one quarter (23.0 %) of the EU-28 population reported exposure to noise pollution that was beyond their comfort levels (see Figure 5). This share fell almost continuously between 2009 and 2016 and by the end of the period under consideration it was 5.1 percentage points lower, at 17.9 %.
Across the EU Member States, the share of the population reporting noise from neighbours or from the street ranged from no more than 1 in 10 persons in Ireland (7.9%), Croatia (8.5%) and Bulgaria (10.0%) up to more than one fifth of the population in Romania (20.3%), Portugal (23.1%) and the Netherlands (24.9%) and more than one quarter of the population in Germany (25.1%) and Malta (26.2%).

People at risk of poverty were more likely to suffer from noise. In the EU-28, more than one fifth (20.9%) of the population at risk of poverty in 2016 was subjected to noise from neighbours or from the street; this figure was 3.0 percentage points higher than the average share for the total EU-28 population. This pattern was repeated in the majority of the EU Member States, with the only exceptions being Romania, Greece, Croatia and Poland (note that a relatively high share of people at risk of poverty in these Member States are living in rural areas). By contrast, in western Member States it was more common to find poverty concentrated in cities and this may explain, at least to some degree, why the share of the population reporting noise was some 7.1-9.6 percentage points higher among people at risk of poverty than the average for the whole population in the Netherlands, Denmark, Luxembourg, Belgium, Germany and France.
Figure 6: Population reporting noise from neighbours or from the street, by income situation, 2016 (% share)
Source: Eurostat (ilc_mddw01)

Source data for tables and graphs

- Quality of life — Natural and living environment

Data sources

Most of the data used in this article are derived from EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC). An individual’s quality of life is predominantly affected by inherently local environmental factors: as such, an effective analysis of the quality of life can be provided through surveys that collect information based on self-reporting of subjectively perceived environmental issues, rather than aggregated measures of environmental conditions (air pollution or emissions).

Although not covered here, note that as of 2013, EU-SILC extended its coverage of this topic by providing measures of self-reported satisfaction with recreational and green areas and self-reported satisfaction with the immediate living environment (see the EU-SILC ad-hoc module for 2013).

Urban population exposure to air pollution by particulate matter was a sustainable development indicator (SDI). It was used for the assessment of progress towards the objectives and targets of the EU’s Sustainable Development Strategy. It is also a resource efficiency indicator and was chosen as a lead indicator for the resource efficiency scoreboard which is used to assess progress towards the objectives and targets of the Europe 2020 flagship initiative on resource efficiency.

Context

The natural and living environment dimension of the quality of life framework refers to environmental aspects that impact on an individual’s quality of life. Environmental conditions affect human health, well-being and other quality of life aspects, both directly, for instance through pollution, and indirectly, for example, by having an impact on property prices which could in turn affect an individual’s economic prosperity. At the same time, growing environmental awareness means that an increasing share of the EU’s population values their rights to access (often intangible) environmental resources.
The EU’s seventh Environment Action Programme (7th EAP) provides guidance for the EU’s environment policy through to 2020, as well as a more long-term vision through to 2050. Its key objectives are to: protect, conserve and enhance the EU’s natural capital; turn the EU into a resource-efficient, green and competitive, low-carbon economy; while safeguarding EU citizens from environmental pressures that present a risk to health and well-being. Within its action programme the EU has committed to considerably reduce noise pollution: for example, by changes to the way that cities are designed or reducing noise at source. The Environmental Noise Directive (Directive 2002/49/EC) is the EU’s main policy instrument to assess and manage environmental noise; it does not apply to noise from domestic activities, created by neighbours, at work places or inside means of transport.

Other articles
- Air pollution statistics - emission inventories
- Living conditions in Europe - housing quality
- Quality of life indicators (online publication)

Main tables
- Income and living conditions (t_ilc), see:
  - Material deprivation (t_ilc_md)
    - Environment of the dwelling (t_ilc_mddw)
- Sustainable development indicators, see:
  - Goal 3 — Good health and well-being (sdg_03)
  - Goal 11 — Sustainable cities and communities (sdg_11)
  - Goal 12 — Responsible consumption and production (sdg_12)
  - Goal 13 — Climate action (sdg_13)

Database
- Income and living conditions (ilc), see:
  - Material deprivation (ilc_md)
    - Environment of the dwelling (ilc_mddw)
  - EU-SILC ad-hoc modules (ilc_ahm)
    - 2014 — Material deprivation (ilc_mdm)
    - 2013 — Personal well-being indicators (ilc_pwb)
    - 2012 — Housing conditions (ilc_hcm)
Dedicated section

- Quality of life
- Sustainable development indicators

Publications

- Quality of life in Europe - Facts and Views

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