



European Social  
Policy Analysis  
Network (ESPAN)

# Access for children in need to the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee

## Spain

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## Summary

On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation establishing a “European Child Guarantee”, with a view to guaranteeing access to six key services for “children in need”:

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities; at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which low-income children in Spain do indeed have effective (or effective and free) access to these services.

In Spain, the considerable expansion of pre-school education for children aged 0-3 over the past one and a half decades was the result of a number of initiatives aimed at increasing the availability of childcare places, but demand continues to exceed public supply. The salience of the private sector in this domain makes more evident the fact that asymmetrical costs in the public and the private sectors entail substantial access barriers for many children under 3, especially those in less advantaged households. Sub-national heterogeneity affects not only access conditions and barriers but also the quality of the services.

Most/all items in each category of education and school-based activities are not free for low-income children. Only transport and school meals are free by law, and only for children attending school outside their own municipality, regardless of their income. In all other situations, each region sets its own requirements. Some regions provide free access to textbooks and basic material for all students by means of schoolbook banks. Others use schoolbook banks or means-tested schemes for low-income households with income thresholds very close to or somewhat above the poverty line.

Spain is far from guaranteeing free school meals for low-income children. The school meal subsidies targeted at low-income households – providing free school meals or covering a significant part of the cost – are available only in some regions. In others, the thresholds for receiving a free school meal are below the poverty line. In 2020 some 41% of children below the poverty line did not receive canteen assistance. The lack of a canteen service in many schools and the bureaucratic requirements for receiving help are major barriers to accessing free school canteens.

Although the Spanish National Healthcare Service constitutes a comprehensive system (which includes pre- and post-natal care, immunisation, paediatric care, a range of dental care treatments, and access to pharmaceuticals, free at the point of delivery for children), certain social inequities persist. Certain healthcare services are not sufficiently covered (ophthalmological, mental and dental healthcare), and unmet needs among vulnerable children exist, since treatments for those needs are normally paid for out of pocket by families.

Effective access to healthy nutrition is not fully guaranteed for low-income children. Financial barriers severely affected 2.4% of all households with children in 2021 due to their low income. Non-financial barriers are important: mainly the state of health and illness, inadequate eating and living habits, and a lack of family and community support networks.

There are no financial barriers to accessing social rental housing given that at-risk-of-poverty households with children can receive rental allowances. The real problem is the scarce supply of social housing, which was only 1.6% of the total housing stock in 2020.

## Introduction

On 14 June 2021, the EU Member States unanimously adopted the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a “European Child Guarantee” (ECG).<sup>1</sup>

The objective of the ECG is to offset the impact of poverty on children and to prevent and combat their social exclusion. To this end, it is recommended that Member States guarantee for “children in need” (defined as people **under 18** who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion – AROPE):

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities;<sup>2</sup> at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

According to the ECG Recommendation, **effective access** means “*a situation in which services are readily available, affordable, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely manner, and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them*” (Article 3d). **Effective and free access** means “effective access” to the services, as well as free-of-charge provision – either by organising and supplying such services or by providing “*adequate benefits to cover the costs or the charges of the services, or in such a way that financial circumstances will not pose an obstacle to equal access*” (Article 3e).

The Recommendation directs the Member States to prepare action plans, covering the period until 2030, to explain how they will implement the Recommendation.<sup>3</sup> These plans are to be submitted to the European Commission.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which children who are AROPE have effective and free access to four of the six services covered by the ECG and effective access to the other two (see above). Given that the eligibility criterion (or criteria) for accessing those services in individual Member States (at national and/or sub-national level, depending on how the service is organised) is/are not based on the EU definition of the risk of poverty or social exclusion,<sup>4</sup> the report focuses on access for **low-income children** to each of these services, using the national low-income criterion (or criteria) that apply (e.g. having a household income below a certain threshold or receiving the minimum income). Throughout this report, “low-income children” is to be understood as children living in low-income households.

In Spain, all six services covered by the ECG are primarily regulated at sub-national level. For these services, the report seeks to provide a general picture of the (effective/free) access for low-income children in the country. In addition to this general picture, if access differs substantially across the country, it illustrates these geographical disparities by providing an

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the ECG Recommendation is available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L\\_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Recommendation (Article 3f), “school-based activities” means “*learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community*”.

<sup>3</sup> Once they have been submitted to the European Commission, the plans are made publicly available online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

<sup>4</sup> According to the EU definition, children are AROPE if they live in a household that is at risk of poverty (below 60% of median equivalised income; hereafter AROP) and/or severely materially and socially deprived, and/or (quasi-)jobless. For the detailed definition of this indicator and all other EU social indicators agreed to date, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=756&langId=en>. In 2021, EU Member States agreed a target to be reached by 2030: a reduction in the number of people who are AROPE in the EU by at least 15 million, including at least **5 million children**.



example of both a sub-entity in the country that performs well and a sub-entity that performs poorly.

The report is structured by service:

- effective and free access to high-quality ECEC;
- effective and free access to education and school-based activities;
- effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare (e.g. free regular health examinations and follow-up treatment, and access to medicines, treatments and support);
- effective access to healthy nutrition;<sup>5</sup> and
- effective access to adequate housing.<sup>6</sup>

## 1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to ECEC services.

### 1.1 Mapping accessibility and affordability of ECEC

**Table 1.1: Accessibility and affordability of ECEC**

Childcare (usually under age 3)		Pre-school setting (usually age 3 to compulsory school age)	
Accessibility	Affordability	Accessibility	Affordability
NO	NO	ENT-ALL3years	FREE-ALL3years

*Note: "ENT-ALL3years" means a legal entitlement for all children from age 3. "FREE-ALL3years" means free for all children from age 3. "NO" in the affordability column means not free for low-income households. If the information differs between centre-based and home-based care, the information provided applies to centre-based care.*

Table 1.1 synthesises how free pre-school education is an entitlement for all children between the ages of 3 and 6 in Spain, while free childcare for children below 3 is not granted by law.

The latest regulation on childhood education, passed in early 2022,<sup>7</sup> confirmed that ECEC below the age of 6 is voluntary, and the universal right to free publicly financed pre-school provision only starts at the age of 3.

The pre-school cycle is regulated by the central government, and the autonomous communities (hereinafter ACs) complement the basic national regulation with their own laws (introducing considerable variation between regions in these schemes).

Childcare, on the other hand, is the responsibility of the ACs, which regulate the objectives, contents, evaluation, organisation, fees, and requirements of pre-schooling following the minimum requirements related to the curriculum, pupil-teacher ratios, required professional degrees, and school premises defined at the national level. In this sense, the latest education

<sup>5</sup> According to the Recommendation (Article 3g), "healthy meal" or "healthy nutrition" means "a balanced meal consumption, which provides children with nutrients necessary for their physical and mental development and for physical activity that complies with their physiological needs".

<sup>6</sup> According to the Recommendation (Article 3h), "adequate housing" means "a dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, and is available and accessible at an affordable cost".

<sup>7</sup> Royal Decree 95/2022, 1 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3kuC5vU>.

law (Organic Law 3/2020, of 29 December – LOMLOE, which amends The Organic Law on Education – LOE), approved by parliament in December 2020, is aimed at improving childcare, reinforcing its educational and compensatory character. The LOMLOE establishes the objective of a sufficient public supply of affordable, equity-promoting, high-quality ECEC places eight years after the passing of the Law, by promoting free-of-charge ECEC that prioritises children who are AROPE. Before this law is fully implemented, additional reforms have been proposed to the Spanish parliament with the objective of granting free pre-schooling.<sup>8</sup>

There are significant regional differences regarding provision, admission criteria and measures devised to compensate for socio-economic inequalities in access to childcare (León *et al.*, 2023 and 2022). Three childcare admission models can be identified: one based on family income, which promotes access by children from disadvantaged environments (Basque Country, Catalonia, Navarre, and Valencian Community); a second one establishing the parents' labour market status as main admission criterion (Andalusia, Extremadura); and a mixed model focused on work-family reconciliation, but which nonetheless gives some priority to children from low-income households (Madrid, Asturias, Castile and León) (UNICEF, 2021a and 2021b).

### 1.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

### 1.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Although all children are entitled to free access to pre-schooling, this entitlement has not been extended to childcare by the law at the national level. Very significant sub-national variation exists regarding the latter.

Non-compulsory free pre-schooling has very high enrolment rates (97.2% at age 5, 96.7% at age 4, and 95.2% at age 3, in the 2021/2022 academic year). These figures had fallen slightly in the two previous academic years due to the pandemic and its profound effects in Spanish society. Around 23% of the total ECEC cost falls on households during the pre-schooling stage, and around 41% during childcare. The actual proportion of the costs assumed by households in both cycles varies significantly depending on families' income, those schooled in private or public centres, and region of residence (in La Rioja, families pay 41.5% of the total cost, while the figure adds up to 60% in the case of Asturias) (Save the Children, 2022a).

All regions (except for Catalonia)<sup>9</sup> have introduced sliding-scale pricing mechanisms, with Madrid being the only region so far that has established free pre-schooling tuition (decree 28/2019). The other regions have a minimum price set for those who meet the requirements, which results in a free or almost free service. The income thresholds vary between regions, but the majority set the free or minimum price using similar income levels, generally referred to as the public multiple effect income indicator (*indicador público de renta de efectos múltiples* – IPREM) (gross income €7,529.76 per year in 2020).<sup>10</sup> Thus, in Galicia families that earn 30-

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<sup>8</sup> The Andalusian parliament submitted a proposal in this direction which will be discussed by the Spanish parliament in the coming months (<https://bit.ly/42iuX69>).

<sup>9</sup> In Catalonia, municipalities have the power to establish their own access and cost criteria, including discounts and pricing. As an example, Barcelona city council introduced a sliding-scale pricing system in 2017 that was aimed at fostering equal opportunities (Navarro-Varas 2019).

<sup>10</sup> If we compare the value of the IPREM (€7,529.76 gross income per year in 2020) and the value of the national AROP threshold for a household consisting of two adults and two children under 14 (€20,024 per year), we

50% of the IPREM (€2,259-€3,765 per year in 2020) have access to free ECEC. Similarly, the service is free in Andalusia for households that have incomes below 50% of the IPREM (€3,765 per year in 2020), and the government of this region announced that ECEC will be free for all children aged 0-3 from the 2023/2024 academic year. Both in Catalonia and in the Valencian Community, the budgets passed by their respective parliaments included guaranteeing free ECEC from 2 to 3 years of age, with Catalonia intending to extend it to childcare in general. In the case of the Basque Country, households with incomes of under €18,000 per year have access to free services (beginning in the 2019/2020 academic year); and in the Valencia region students of families receiving regional income support have free access to ECEC. In general terms, in order to access free ECEC, ACs set income thresholds that are well below the value of the national AROP threshold for a household consisting of two adults and two children under 14 (gross income of €20,024 per year) (Eurostat, EU-SILC<sup>11</sup> At-risk-of-poverty thresholds – EU-SILC and ECHP surveys [ILC\_LI01] downloaded on 1 February 2023).

Lack of data makes it difficult to know precisely the non-take-up rate among all children theoretically entitled to free access to ECEC, or to identify groups of children which are over-represented in the AROPE population but lack free access to these services.

## 1.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to ECEC for low-income children

### 1.2.1 Financial barriers

One of the key challenges to granting access to ECEC to children in disadvantaged households is the lack of universal provision of free-of-charge, or affordable, services. Although action has been taken to increase the provision of public childcare, the lack of emphasis on the need for affordable public services constitutes a key drawback, and economic barriers to access for families in relatively disadvantaged socio-economic positions persist (Vélaz-de-Medrano Ureta *et al.*, 2020).

Given insufficient public investment, and the extensive supply of services through the private sector, the expansion of childcare has been based primarily on models in which families still bear a substantial share of the cost (Save the Children, 2019). This problem is underpinned, in part, by very wide dispersion and heterogeneity in the extent, levels and types of funding that supports ECEC services, and there is significant variation in the degree of stable commitment to this funding among ACs.

The private sector plays a substantial role in the provision of ECEC for children under 3, which entails significant costs for families, as we point out below. While private education is sometimes subsidised, there are also large variations regarding the extent of the cost that is publicly covered, and subsidised private centres constitute a minority in first-cycle pre-school education (Vélaz-de-Medrano Ureta *et al.*, 2020).

The picture is radically different in pre-schooling, which is mainly supplied by either fully public, or publicly subsidised private schools (95.7% of the total in 2019/2020). Nevertheless, there is considerable territorial variation: the highest shares of public enrolment are observed in Castile-La Mancha, Extremadura and Melilla, while the lowest are found in the Basque Country and Madrid (Espinosa Bayal, 2018).

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observe that for this type of family the national AROP threshold would be approximately equivalent to 2.6 times the IPREM.

<sup>11</sup> European Union statistics on income and living conditions.

The average expenditure per child incurred by families on ECEC was €485 in public facilities in the 2019/2020 school year. The figures in respect of subsidised and fully private facilities were €1,352 and €2,692 (INE, 2020). Spain allows a tax deduction of up to €1,000 per year for childcare expenses. Nevertheless, it is only available for working mothers<sup>12</sup> (Agencia Tributaria, 2021), and it proves insufficient to compensate for economic disadvantages. Tax deductions, allowances and benefits for ECEC also exist at the regional level. For instance, low-income households and/or other groups (large families, families with disabilities, and single-parent families) benefit from tax deductions or other reductions in the cost of services in Andalusia, Asturias, Galicia, Madrid, Navarre, the Valencian community, La Rioja and the autonomous city of Melilla. However, these measures are very heterogeneous, sometimes restricted to very vulnerable households, and not available in all ACs (Espinosa Bayal, 2018). In Catalonia families do not directly receive subsidies, but instead it is private nurseries that are subsidised (€328 per student per year, with an additional subsidy of €1,094 if over 25% of the students enrolled in the nursery have a degree of disability of over 65%).

The asymmetrical costs in the public and the private sectors entail substantial access barriers for many children under 3, especially those in less advantaged households. Enrolment rates are highest in the 5th income quintile (where it is the norm). In 2017, 51.9% of children in the 3rd tercile had access to ECEC, whereas this was only the case for 37.2% of children in the 1st tercile. In addition, net childcare costs are unequally distributed: net childcare fees represented 5.5% of the income of dual-earner families, but 13.7% of single-parent families.

According to the module on access to ECEC services of the living conditions survey (INE, 2016), on average 15% of households said that it was difficult or very difficult to pay for childcare. Analysed by income levels, the percentages were 19.7% for the first (lowest) quintile and 28.5% for the second. In single-adult households with at least one child, 32.6% reported having difficulties or great difficulties paying for the service.

### 1.2.2 Non-financial barriers

In addition to financial aspects, substantial territorial heterogeneity in the availability of ECEC places greatly limits access to ECEC for children in disadvantaged households. There are often not enough public places for all the families who need them, which entails further inequalities in access, as some have no option but to use private centres.

Sub-national heterogeneity affects not only access conditions and barriers but also the quality of the services, as regulations regarding ratios, support staff, the personnel's degree of qualification and the educational project developed are diverse (Espinosa Bayal, 2018). So are opening schedules, which can range from 25 to more than 40 hours a week (Vélaz-de-Medrano Ureta *et al.*, 2020). Access to extracurricular activities, crèche options before and after school, and extended schedules – crucial for family-work balance and as a potential socio-economic equaliser – therefore greatly differ depending on the AC of residence.

The considerable expansion of childcare over the past one and a half decades (average attendance rates went from 17.8% in 2007 to 41.4% in 2022) was the result of a number of initiatives<sup>13</sup> aimed at increasing the availability of childcare places. In the 2021/2022 academic year, these figures increased with respect to previous years (to 13.5% for children under 1, 45.1% at age 1, and 63.6% at age 2), after a negative trend initiated in 2019 due to the

<sup>12</sup> Before January 2023, this scheme applied only to mothers. Fathers may access it only in cases where the mother of the child is deceased, or if they have full custody of the child after a divorce (<https://goo.su/9ebrT>). Since January 2023, mothers' contributory and non-contributory benefits can also give access to this tax cut (<https://bit.ly/3NwsBMG>).

<sup>13</sup> Educa3 Plan; II National Strategic Plan for Children and Adolescents 2013-2016; National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2013-2015; and the LOMLOE, Organic Law 3/2020.

pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, demand for childcare services continues to exceed public supply (according to the statistical database of the Ministry of Education, of the 434,500 places available for children aged 0-3 in the 2021/2022 academic year, around 55.9% were in public centres).<sup>15</sup>

Families in which both parents work have priority access to public ECEC in many ACs, to the detriment of parents in situations of unemployment (Rodríguez-Cabrero *et al.*, 2017). In practice, this option favours work-family balance rather than equity, depending on the allocation of varying weights to each criterion. This conditionality also generates barriers among children with one or both parents in unstable labour market positions. Similarly, participation in ECEC is higher in households where parents have higher levels of education and employment participation (Save the Children, 2019).

Another obstacle that hampers access to ECEC is the lack of flexibility of the public offer (schedules, administrative complexity or family preferences) (Save the Children, 2019).

### 1.3 Free meals provision for low-income children in ECEC

While approximately two thirds of children in pre-school education have a meal at their centre, the highest in all the education levels, a large share of the cost of those meals is assumed by families. Monthly fees for school meals can range from €0 (Asturias, Castile and León) to €118 (Aragón, where the fee also includes other services) (Vélaz-de-Medrano Ureta *et al.*, 2020). In Madrid, one of the first regions to abolish childcare tuition fees in 2019, meals must still be at least partly paid for by families. The estimated share of children in pre-school education benefiting from financial support to cover the cost of meals (totally or partially, based on a combination of requirements including income and household composition and characteristics depending on the eligibility conditions established by ACs and municipalities) is slightly less than 11%, a percentage which is considerably lower than the 32% of children under 6 who were AROPE in 2021 (Eurostat, EU-SILC Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ILC\_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023).

In addition to that, the availability of canteens in pre-school centres varies greatly between ACs: from around 95% of centres in Asturias, Navarra or the Canary Islands, to less than 5% in Valencia (Save the Children, 2022b).

## 2. Education and school-based activities

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to education and school-based activities.

Section 2.1 maps the main school costs in public primary and secondary education, distinguishing between the following:<sup>16</sup>

- compulsory basic school materials (schoolbag, pens, glue, scissors, etc.);
- compulsory school materials (textbooks, school supplies, notebooks, etc.);
- compulsory specific clothing (uniform, sports clothing);
- IT equipment requested by the school;

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<sup>14</sup> <https://bit.ly/3ktA43b>

<sup>15</sup> <https://bit.ly/3nlSJ2n>

<sup>16</sup> Tuition fees charged by private schools are not covered.



- sports equipment or musical instruments requested by the school;
- compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum;
- other compulsory fees or costs; and
- transport costs to or from school.

Section 2.2 briefly describes the cash benefits specifically intended to help meet educational costs.

Finally, Section 2.3 seeks to identify the main barriers that prevent low-income children from having effective and free access to “school-based activities” as defined in the Council Recommendation establishing the ECG (see "Introduction" section). Given that the distinction between these activities and some of the activities covered above – especially the “compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum” – may not always be clear-cut, the focus of Section 2.3 is specifically on school-based activities that are not part of the curriculum.

## 2.1 Mapping the main school costs in public primary and secondary education

**Table 2.1a: School costs of primary education (free for all/low-income children)**

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO

*Note: “NO” means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.*

**Table 2.1b: School costs of secondary education (free for all/low-income children)**

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO

*Note: “NO” means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.*

The only obligation established by the LOE and LOMLOE for the ACs is to provide free school transport<sup>17</sup> and, where appropriate, canteen and boarding services to those who attend school in a municipality other than that of their residence (Article 82) without distinction as to economic situation or vulnerability. Going beyond these compulsory types of aid to cover disadvantaged families depends on the discretion of each regional administration. This has given rise to a significant disparity in the access criteria and costs covered in respect of textbooks, canteen and transport subsidies (different income thresholds, vulnerability indicators, employment status, etc.) (Save the Children, 2018).

With regard to textbooks and basic materials, it is difficult to calculate an average amount due to the large differences that exist between the different ACs. Some regions have already established free access to textbooks for all students (Andalusia, Madrid, La Rioja, Murcia, Valencia, Navarre and Melilla), making textbooks available via book banks operated by

<sup>17</sup> Those who attend school in a municipality other than that of their residence represent a very small proportion of children. That is the reason why we consider NO in Tables 2.1a and 2.1b (most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children).

schools, and promoting a culture of sharing and environmental conscience among students (Guio, Frazer and Marlier, 2021). The Basque Country has a system of free textbooks involving a co-payment by parents (who must cover a quarter of the cost). An increasing number of regions are establishing textbook bank programmes or have some kind of means-tested scheme involving direct support for the purchase of textbooks by low-income households when the school does not have the necessary stock to meet requests (including Aragon, Asturias, Andalusia, the Canary Islands, Extremadura, Valencia, Castile and Leon, and Castilla la Mancha). Some ACs (e.g. Aragon, Asturias, the Canary Islands, Castilla La Mancha, Extremadura, Madrid, Murcia, Valencia, and the Balearic Islands) also offer tax deductions for educational expenses (especially for tuition, the purchase of textbooks, school materials and language teaching).

School uniforms are not compulsory in most public schools, and the support provided for their purchase is usually limited to income tax deductions in a very small number of ACs (Madrid and the Canary Islands). These tax deductions are of limited use to poor families, because they only benefit families with taxable incomes above the tax-exempt threshold (€22,000 gross per year in 2022)

As regards compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, and culture), national statistical information was only collected in the 2014 EU-SILC ad hoc module. According to this survey, the percentage of children aged 4-16 in situations of poverty who were deprived of educational activities reached 30%, while 27% were deprived of school trips and activities that cost money (13% and 11% respectively for the general population) (UNICEF, 2021b). The data on child deprivation at the regional or local level are often scarce and sporadic. Other studies such as that of Save the Children (2022a) estimated that the percentage of children in poverty who were deprived of educational and leisure activities in 2021 amounted to 59.6% in extramural activities, 34.7% without recreational or holiday camps and trips, and 23.6% without extramural activities and camps.

### 2.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

### 2.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

The number of low-income children who benefited from some type of educational assistance or grant (such as for transport, textbooks, school canteens, or special educational needs) in the 2019/2020 academic year (latest available data) was 785,025 in primary education (30.4% of all students in primary education) and 840,373 in secondary education (25.1% of all students in secondary education) (INE, 2020; UNICEF, 2021c)<sup>18</sup> (Eurostat, EU-SILC Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ILC\_PEPS01N]).

The wide disparity in access criteria and costs covered in textbook, canteen and transport subsidies (different income thresholds, indicators of vulnerability, or employment situation) in the ACs makes it difficult to know precisely the non-take-up rate among all children entitled to

<sup>18</sup> These are total figures for all school costs (items: transport, textbooks, school canteens, and special educational needs). If we consider these costs separately, most/all items in each category are not free for low-income children. It is not possible to know what proportion of the 785,025 in primary education and of the 840,373 in secondary education are actually children AROPE. If we assume that all of them are AROPE, which is a strong hypothesis, it means that  $785,025+840,373=1.625.398$  AROPE benefited from some support – that is 62% of the total number of children AROPE under 18 (2,624,000 in 2020).

free access to the service, as well as to identify groups of children that are over-represented in the AROPE population but lack free access to the service.

## 2.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet educational costs

There are cash benefits whose purpose is specifically to help all or only low-income children to meet the above educational costs (when not waived). Some regions offer cash benefits based on means-tested schemes for low-income households. Each region and municipality set its own income requirements for receiving grants for textbooks, transport, and school meals, without a minimum guarantee (Save the Children, 2022). As a result, there is a significant disparity in the access criteria and costs covered (different income thresholds, vulnerability indicators, employment status, etc.), except for clothing or sport or music equipment.

The most common indicator for setting income thresholds in most ACs is a multiple of IPREM.<sup>19</sup> In Aragon, the threshold equals twice the IPREM for all types of families, in the Canary Islands it is twice the IPREM for families with two to four members, and in Castile and Leon it is 2.68 times the IPREM for families with four members. Other ACs set the income thresholds on a discretionary basis (for four-member families it is €20,000 in Asturias, €22,151.76 in Castilla La Mancha, and €21,054 in Extremadura). In the case of Galicia, the regional government distributes textbooks among children in reverse order to the income of their households. When stocks run out, the schools must guarantee the provision of six textbooks to students whose household income is equal to or below the threshold of €6,000, and four books if their income is between €6,000 and €10,000.

As can be seen, some regions set income thresholds that are very close to the value of the national AROP threshold for a household consisting of two adults and two children under 14 (AROP 2021: €20,024 per year) (Eurostat, EU-SILC At-risk-of-poverty thresholds – EU-SILC and ECHP surveys [ILC\_LI01] downloaded on 1 February 2023). There are no other common conditions in the regions that have to be met apart from low income.

The Andalusian government, in addition to the provision of free textbooks by making schoolbooks available via book banks operated by schools, has approved a school voucher, mainly aimed at vulnerable families to cover the costs of the school year (2022/2023) through a single payment of €100 for students enrolled in primary and compulsory secondary schools, for which the income requirement is less than €15,000 per year for families with fewer than five members. Castile and Leon, for its part, also provides aid for the purchase of digital devices provided that the total family income (in 2020) does not exceed €29,740.20 per year for a family of four people.

The wide disparity in access criteria and costs covered in respect of textbook, canteen and transport subsidies (different income thresholds, indicators of vulnerability, or employment situation) in the ACs makes it difficult to know precisely if these benefits adequately cover the educational costs for low-income children.<sup>20</sup> According to UNICEF (2021b), in 2016 1 in 3 children in Spain (32.1%) lived in households that found it very or moderately difficult to cover the costs of formal education. The costs of education were a greater burden for children in low-income households (50% of households reported finding it difficult), in single-parent

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<sup>19</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>20</sup> As we pointed above, this wide disparity also makes it difficult to know precisely the non-take-up rate among all children entitled to free access to the service, as well as to identify groups of children that are over-represented in the AROPE population but lack free access to the service.



households (40%) and those living in peri-urban areas and medium-sized towns compared with those in cities or rural areas (38% compared with 28%) (EU-SILC, 2016, ilc\_ats07, ad hoc module). Other studies such as that of Save the Children (2018) have estimated that the financial thresholds set for the benefits do not sufficiently cover single-parent families with two or more children or those in situations of poverty with one member without an income.

## 2.3 Main barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities for low-income children

### 2.3.1 Financial barriers

The existing studies/data are not sufficient to address whether the out-of-pocket costs for accessing school-based activities in Spain (i.e. taking account of all financial support available) are a financial barrier for low-income children. Considering the high average expenditure on extracurricular activities (€174 in the 2019/2020 academic year) and various related studies (Lanau, 2021; Save the Children, 2022a) it appears that the most common forms of deprivation among low-income Spanish children are related to the lack of participation and access to extracurricular, social and leisure activities.

According to a survey of 1,187 families with children (Save the Children, 2022a), approximately 24% did not access extracurricular activities for economic reasons. Of those at extreme risk of poverty, 28% did not have access – compared with only 10% if they were at relative risk or not in poverty. The lack of access for economic reasons affected 35% of children whose parents were inactive, and only 21% when they were in full-time employment.

### 2.3.2 Non-financial barriers

The most common forms of material deprivation among Spanish children are related to their lack of participation in social and leisure activities, especially among the most disadvantaged households. Their access to extracurricular and sport activities depends not only on the household income, but also on non-financial barriers such as the degree of co-operation between schools and local communities, and the availability of public services (e.g. spaces for recreational activities) (UNICEF, 2021b; Lanau, 2021).

According to Save the Children (2022a), access to extracurricular activities among the families served by this organisation also depended on their position in the labour market, decreasing significantly when parents were inactive (28%); on the region where they lived (the level of access was significantly lower in the Valencian community or Andalusia, but higher in the Basque Country); and on whether or not they received the minimum living income (*Ingreso Mínimo Vital*).

## 3. Free meals at school

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to at least one free healthy meal each school day.

### 3.1 Mapping free provision of school meals

Spain is far from complying with the ECG approved in June 2021, which commits Member States to guaranteeing free school meals to all children living in poverty. In Spain there is some form of provision targeted at low-income and other disadvantaged groups across the whole country, although entitlements vary substantially by area (Guio, Frazer and Marlier, 2021).

The LOE and LOMLOE establish the obligation to provide free school meals to students in compulsory education who attend an educational centre in another locality, regardless of their economic situation or vulnerability. However, they do not establish the same for those students who, for economic reasons, have difficulties in accessing school canteens. Although it has the competence to establish the basic rules, the central government has not established a common minimum income level to access school canteen support, so that access depends on the criteria and budgetary availability of each AC (Save the Children, 2022b). Whereas the Ministry of Education transfers funding to the regions to finance textbook subsidies or loans, this is not the case with school canteens, which are financed entirely by the ACs and local authorities (except Ceuta and Melilla).

There are asymmetries in access to school canteens between the ACs, in terms of the conditions of access, the requirements for applying for the school canteen service in an educational centre, the economic conditions of the service, and the origin and scope of the budget allocations to be applied to this service (Fundación Profesor Uría, 2022).

Among the regions, there are various forms of canteen support, such as allowances or bursaries, canteen price subsidies or social pricing (Save the Children, 2022b). In the system of allowances or bursaries, the public price of the service is the same for everyone and families can apply for an amount that can be granted to cover all or part of these costs, providing proof of income levels or other socio-economic conditions. In the system of subsidies or exemptions, a public price is established to which a partial or total discount of an exceptional nature is applied for low-income households. In the social pricing system, there is no single public price but a range of progressive fees depending on the declared income level of the families.

### 3.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

In all ACs, falling below a certain level of income in the family unit is the main requirement for accessing school meal subsidies or discounts, although it is not the only criterion. This requirement varies between the 17 ACs and two autonomous cities (Ceuta and Melilla). The most accepted general requirement is to have an annual household income below a threshold which is a multiple of the IPREM (gross income €7,908.60 per year in 2021).

The disparities in the coverage of canteen subsidies between regions are due to the variation in the income limits established in the regulations of each AC to be eligible for these subsidies, the budget allocated to these subsidies and the model for granting them. As each region determines the upper limit of family income required to be able to apply for the assistance, this generates disparities in terms of which families can apply (Educo, 2022a).

Additional criteria (that discriminate positively) taken into consideration in providing access to the free or maximum school meal allowance used by the regions include the following:<sup>21</sup>

- foster care situation;
- gender violence;
- victims of terrorism;
- minimum income or minimum living income;
- being in a situation of social vulnerability (social services),
- refugee or asylum-seeker,
- disability equal to or greater than 33%;
- large family;

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<sup>21</sup> More detail on how each criterion is applied in each region and whether this involves free meals or the maximum allowance can be found in Save the Children (2022b), page 16.

- single-parent family;
- being in a school of high complexity; and
- being in a compensation programme.

### 3.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

According to Save the Children (2022b), in 2020 school meal subsidies only reached 11.2% of students in pre-primary and compulsory education, equal to around one third of AROPE children (33.4%, in 2021) (Eurostat, EU-SILC Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ILC\_PEPS01N]). Coverage ranged between 1.9% of students in pre-primary and compulsory education receiving school meal subsidies in Murcia to 25.2% in the Canary Islands: the only region covering all students who were AROP was the Basque Country (Save the Children, 2022b).

With the exception of a few regions (e.g. Basque Country, Galicia or Extremadura), the household income levels or thresholds established to access maximum support are generally below the poverty line (Save the Children, 2022b). The wide disparity in access criteria and costs covered for school canteens in the ACs makes it difficult to report on the non-take-up rate among all children entitled to free access to the service, as well as to identify groups of children that are over-represented in the AROPE population but lack free access to the service.

## 3.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children

### 3.2.1 Financial barriers

Although there are differences between ACs, the general trend is that households with an income up to 2.5 times the IPREM (€19,772 in 2021) have to pay only 25% of the cost of lunches; households with incomes up to 3 times the IPREM (€23,725.80) have to pay 50% thereof (Guio, Frazer, and Marlier, 2021).

The price of the daily menu can also amplify economic inequalities in the access to the canteen service for children and adolescents. The canteen service regulations in each region establish a maximum fixed price which, in the 2020/2021 school year, ranged from €3.50 to €6.50, with the average price being €4.60. There were significant differences between the maximum prices set in each AC, with the Balearic Islands and Catalonia establishing maximum prices of between €6.33 and €6.50 per menu and other regions establishing a maximum price of around €5 (Educo, 2022a). There are no studies that have analysed whether the out-of-pocket cost of such a meal is a financial barrier for low-income children.

According to Educo's economic estimates (Educo, 2022a), developing universal school meals in primary education would imply additional annual funding of €1,664 million (i.e. an increase in investment of €1,472 million – 0.13% of GDP). This would be a manageable increase given that spending on social protection for families and children in Spain is 1.3% of GDP, well below the EU average (2.3%) (Eurostat).

The destination of European structural funds for the period up to 2027 is currently being programmed, with the aim of reducing the financial barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children. Among these funds is the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), which will now form part of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). These FEAD resources in Spain used to finance direct food distribution to families, an

approach with potentially stigmatising effects, and which is being rethought towards more inclusive options such as the school canteen (Alto Comisionado, 2019a and 2019b). It remains to be confirmed how much funding can be allocated from this fund to ensure free school meals as a right for all children in situations of poverty.

### 3.2.2 Non-financial barriers

In addition to financial barriers, the following non-financial barriers stand out (Educo, 2022a).

- The lack of a school canteen service in many educational centres. Although school canteens are a service offered within the framework of compulsory education, there are no public data from the Ministry of Education or the regional education departments on the number of canteen places offered by each school, the canteen budgets, the price of the menus, their composition or the type of management – making it difficult to compare regions. Some 17.8% of public primary schools do not have a school canteen available for their pupils. The lack of a canteen service varies from region to region, reaching 60% in some ACs.
- Cultural and work-related differences between families with regard to mealtime traditions (proximity of the family to the school, family working hours and the possibility of reconciliation, etc.) also affect students' canteen attendance in the different regions.
- The access to meal allowances and bursaries is also limited by the bureaucratic requirements established in each AC. Thus, in many cases, an administrative barrier to accessing this service materialises: the difficulty for families to obtain the income report necessary to apply for meal allowances at the precise moment of need. This situation, as well as other limitations related to urban tax debts or a lack of documents, is also responsible for the differences in the access to canteen grants displayed on the territorial map. According to Educo (2022b), in a survey carried out in April 2022 among families with children in primary education in public schools, the high percentage of families who responded that they did not apply for the bursary because they did not know how to do so (9.5%) stands out. This issue appears to affect the lowest income groups in particular, in which this percentage rose to 13.51%. The lack of historical data makes it impossible to know whether the digitalisation of the application for these allowances has had an impact on the number of applications.

## 4. Healthcare

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to healthcare, focusing on vaccinations, care from a general practitioner (GP) or infant nurses, specialist care, dental care (not orthodontics) and prescribed medicines.

### 4.1 Mapping the provision of free healthcare services and products

**Table 4.1: Healthcare costs (free for all/low-income children)**

Vaccination	GP	Infant nurses	Specialist care	Dental care (not orthodontics)	Prescribed medicines
ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL (0-15)	ALL

Note: "ALL" means that all services/products in the category are free for all children.

The Spanish National Health System (*Sistema Nacional de Salud – SNS*) is a comprehensive system including all people residing in the country, regardless of their status with respect to the social security system,<sup>22</sup> their legal status,<sup>23</sup> their age or their level of wealth.<sup>24</sup> Fully financed through general taxation since the early 2000s, it covers a large majority of health-related needs free of cost at the point of accessing the services.

As Table 4.1 synthesises, general healthcare services are free for children in Spain. This includes pre- and post-natal care, immunisation for a wide range of illnesses, paediatric care, a relatively wide range of dental care treatments for minors until age 15 (children aged 16 and over, just like adults, have access to a very limited range of dental care treatments such as tooth removals, cavity fillings, and basic orthodontic treatments), and access to pharmaceuticals.

Evidence has shown that, in countries with universal coverage like Spain, there are no significant social inequities in the use of these health services according to vulnerability. Some studies have shown, nevertheless, that certain social inequities persist. Living in families with a higher level of parental education or having double healthcare coverage have been identified as the main predictors of visiting a specialist and a dentist. According to data provided by the EU SILC 2017, in Spain only 0.3% of children had experienced lack of access to medical examinations or treatments in the previous 12 months. However, if assessed from a household income perspective, 0.8% of children from families who were below the national AROP threshold experienced healthcare inaccessibility, in comparison with 0.1% of children from families who were above the threshold.

#### 4.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

#### 4.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Not applicable: access is free for all children.

## 4.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet healthcare costs

Cash benefits to help meet healthcare costs are not needed because all services/products above are (mostly) free.

Certain healthcare services are not sufficiently covered by the SNS (ophthalmological, mental and dental healthcare). As a result, unmet needs among vulnerable children exist, since treatments for those needs are normally paid for out of pocket by families.

Children living in less affluent families are more likely to report non-regular utilisation of dental services than children from more affluent backgrounds (Reda *et al.*, 2018). To respond to this situation, the government passed the “National Oral Health Plan” (*Plan Nacional de Salud Bucodental*) in June 2022,<sup>25</sup> aimed at expanding the coverage of dental healthcare treatments for minors under 15. For more specialised dental care not covered by the SNS for children

<sup>22</sup> 1088/89 Royal Decree extending access to the SNS to people without resources, <https://bit.ly/3NyxLrz>.

<sup>23</sup> 4/2000 Foreigners Law, <https://bit.ly/3p5zXNe>.

<sup>24</sup> 33/2011 General Public Health Law, <https://bit.ly/3LS3WRO>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://bit.ly/3EGb13J>



under 15, as well as for dental care for minors aged 15-17, ACs and municipalities have deployed an uneven and unequally developed range of schemes which respond to some of those situations, while leaving a set of needs unattended.

### 4.3 Non-financial barriers to effective and free access to healthcare

Other dimensions that may hinder the effective and free access of low-income children to high-quality healthcare are related to the general situation of stress experienced by the SNS after the financial cuts and the organisational reforms introduced following the financial crisis of the early 2010s, followed by the exceptional circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which greatly affected the healthcare system, notably primary care services. The increase in waiting times, and the increasing difficulties in receiving treatment, may particularly affect low-income children, who cannot turn towards the private insurance schemes increasingly acquired by more affluent families (Moreno-Fuentes, 2022).

As an example, the prevalence of non-regular utilisation of dental services is higher among children with a migrant background (51.8%) than Spanish-born children (35.4%). The average number of visits (overall population level) to an oral health professional in the previous three months varied from 2.12 and 2.10 in Madrid and Catalonia, to 1.50 and 1.33 in Extremadura and Ceuta. Regarding the presence of dental health problems, the overall prevalence among Spanish children was 31.1%, and 36.4% among children with a migrant background. Moreover, children of Spanish origin also showed a lower prevalence of caries (9.29%) than children with a migrant background. These figures confirm the existence of significant social inequities in the utilisation of dental health services and show how the limited set of dental care services offered by the SNS to children represents a barrier for access and contributes to inequalities among vulnerable groups (Rodríguez-Alvarez *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, ACs provide standard mental health services (access to paediatric psychologists) within the treatments offered by the SNS. However, the development of child mental health services is quite different across regions. Data from the national health survey showed that 1 in 100 children had some form of mental health problem in 2017 (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2017). This survey found that 1.8% of children had a conduct disorder, 0.6% had anxiety or depression, and 0.6% had a less common disorder (e.g. autism spectrum disorder). While the evidence suggests that childhood mental health difficulties are becoming more common, vulnerable children are especially affected by this situation, especially regarding conduct disorders among boys, and eating disorders among girls.

## 5. Healthy nutrition

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to healthy nutrition.

### 5.1 Main barriers to effective access to healthy nutrition

The preamble to the Spanish constitution of 1978 states that its objective is to “ensure a decent quality of life for all”. However, there is no constitutional right to healthy food. Since the economic and financial crisis of 2008 and its social impact in Spain, the guarantee of the right to healthy food for children, promoted by European institutions, public administrations and NGOs for children, has been gaining ground. An important advance to ensure adequate nutrition is the 2011 law on Food Safety and Nutrition.

Children in Spain are aware of the importance of healthy nutrition. According to UNICEF 2020-2021 Barometer (2022), 3 out of 4 children and adolescents considered food to be important; 54% were concerned about obesity and overweight; and 74.8% were aware of the recommendations on what to eat, although only 58.6% followed them.<sup>26</sup>

A UNICEF study (UNICEF, 2021c) included two indicators on healthy nutrition that are part of the European (SILC) and National Statistics Institute (INE) indicators:

- children in poverty who cannot afford to eat fresh fruit and vegetables at least once a day; and
- children in poverty who cannot afford at least one meal of meat, poultry or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every two days.

The first indicator is a specific objective of the Spanish government's "State Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee 2022-2030" (*Plan de Acción Estatal para la Implementación de la Garantía Infantil Europea*) (MDSA2030, 2022); the second is mentioned but is not an immediate objective of the plan. Similarly, the plan identifies childhood overweight above 85% of body mass index as a nutrition indicator, but it is not an explicit objective of the action plan.

Tentatively following these indicators, we turn firstly to their quantification, complemented by recent survey data; and secondly, to an analysis of the financial and non-financial barriers that hinder or limit the access to healthy food.

In 2021 in Spain, 1.8% of households with children under 16 in situations of material deprivation could not eat fresh fruit or vegetables on a daily basis. In the case of households in the first income quintile, this percentage increased to 5.6% (6.4% in 2014). Children living in such households who could not eat meat, chicken, fish or their vegetarian equivalent on a daily basis represented 2.4%, increasing to 7.2% in the case of children in the first income quintile (8.8% in 2014).<sup>27</sup>

A fairly accurate quantification of the child population with healthy nutrition problems has been carried out by the Nina Carasso Foundation (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González, 2022) based on the FAO's Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES),<sup>28</sup> recognised by different international organisations (such as the WHO and UNICEF), as a basis for progress towards the UN's second sustainable development goal ("zero hunger"). According to this research, 13.3% of all households in Spain (2.5 million households, which is equivalent to 6.2 million people) were in a situation of food insecurity (mild, moderate and severe). A total of 3.3% and 1.9% of households were in a situation of moderate and severe food insecurity respectively (a total of 970,000 households or 2.4 million people). Taking into account the weight of households with children (43% of all households in Spain) the result was that total food insecurity affected 2,518,664 households, of which 1,070,000 were households with children

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<sup>26</sup> Not all research and action plans use the same indicators of healthy nutrition, although there is broad agreement on these. The system of indicators depends, inter alia, on the focus of the nutrition analysis. For example, the UNICEF Deep Dive (UNICEF, 2021a, 2021b and 2021c) uses a system of mixed health (low birthweight and excess body weight) and nutritional indicators (daily consumption of fruits and vegetables; consumption of meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent at least every other day). The government's 2022-2030 plan only includes a reduction by 2030 of the percentage of children who cannot consume fruit and vegetables on a daily basis among its targets. However, the consumption of meat or fish and its vegetarian equivalent is not among its targets. The plan does include the consumption of meat and/or fish, excess weight above 85% of the body mass index and the healthy nutrition habits index for school children aged 6-9 as indicators of the child guarantee system, although not as implementation targets.

<sup>27</sup> Some 2% of foreign children of EU origin and 2.7% of children of non-EU origin are in this situation in terms of fruit and vegetable consumption; in terms of meat or fish consumption, these percentages are 2.7% (EU foreigners) and 9.4% (non-EU foreigners) respectively.

<sup>28</sup> For information on the FIES, see: <http://bit.ly/3EHUexg>.

(approximately 1,656,000 people) – 662,747 households were in a situation of mild food insecurity, 266,715 in moderate food insecurity, and 153,563 in severe food insecurity. These last two groups can be considered as the most directly affected by food issues in 2021.

### 5.1.1 Financial barriers

The most serious cause of food insecurity is a lack of financial resources, or monetary poverty. Monetary poverty affects situations such as: having suffered hunger (2.9%), not eating for a whole day (1.4%), having run out of food (4.2%) or having eaten less than what people thought they had to eat (6.0%).<sup>29</sup> These situations are structural rather than cyclical, owing to socio-occupational factors, such as the fact that job insecurity (unemployment or temporary work) affects 9% of all household members, rising to 16% among households suffering from moderate and severe food insecurity (Moragues-Faus *et al.*, 2022).

In relation to the indicators considered above, the results of the aforementioned study are relatively similar to those of the INE. That is to say, the lack of economic resources means, according to the aforementioned research, that: (a) 3.1% of households in Spain cannot afford to eat meat or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) at least every other day; a percentage that rises to 20.3% of households in a situation of food insecurity (511,288 households, of which 217,210 are households with children) and 32.7% of households in a situation of moderate or severe food insecurity (319,607 households, of which 137,439 are households with children); and (b) similarly, 4% of all households in Spain cannot consume at least five daily servings of fruit or vegetables. This situation affects 26% of households in situations of food insecurity (654,852 households, of which 278,200 are households with children). This nutritional habit, which is due to a lack of resources, would affect 18% of households with children in moderate insecurity (119,294 households) and 38.7% thereof in moderate and severe insecurity (162,647). This evidence referring to the general population is confirmed by sectoral studies such as the one carried out in 2021 by Save the Children-Spain (SCE) among children directly attended by this organisation.<sup>30</sup>

### 5.1.2 Non-financial barriers

These types of barriers are related to three situations: the state of health and illness of the people suffering from low income; inadequate eating and living habits; and, finally, the lack of family and community support networks.

With regard to health barriers, the aforementioned survey by the Nina Carasso Foundation found that one fifth of households in a situation of food insecurity (20.6%) accumulated more than one health problem, such as obesity, chronic illness or disability (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González, 2022). Excess weight or overweight affected 28% of households, whether exclusively overweight (13%) or accompanied by other limitations or illnesses. In around 33% of low-income households, at least one member suffered from some kind of chronic illness.

Nutritional habits (not eating fruit and vegetables, overconsumption of meat) and lifestyle habits (physical exercise) are two mixed barriers as they depend on both income and health

<sup>29</sup> Out of a total of 1,070,000 households with children experiencing food insecurity (mild, moderate and severe), it can be estimated from the Nina Carasso Foundation study that 31,030 households had gone hungry; 44,940 households had gone without food; 90,950 households had gone without enough food; 14,980 households had not eaten for a whole day; and 64,200 households had eaten less than they wished.

<sup>30</sup> According to Save the Children (2022a), 39.6% of children and adolescents served by this organisation were overweight, which was a significantly higher proportion than in the population as a whole (27.2% among children aged 4-16, according to the 2017 national health survey). The majority of children attended by this organisation (58%) did not consume fresh fruit or vegetables at least once a day, while 37% did not have an adequate consumption of meat, poultry or fish (or its vegetarian equivalent).



education and sport, practices that are learned from school. In the UNICEF Barometer 2020-2021,<sup>31</sup> 68% of school children reported healthy physical activity for their age (57% for children from low-income households and 74% for children from high-income households). Similarly, research on childhood obesity (Gasol Foundation, 2019)<sup>32</sup> highlighted the importance of physical exercise in combating overweight and obesity. According to the Gasol Foundation 14.2% of adolescents in Spain had a high body mass index and 8.3% had high abdominal obesity, which is caused not only by a lack of exercise<sup>33</sup> but also by an inadequate diet.<sup>34</sup>

The support of family and community networks plays an important role in healthy eating, both in terms of eating habits and support in cash or in kind. Children living in unstable households, in poverty and with poor social relations, face barriers such as access to adequate information on healthy lifestyles and healthy ways of eating. With regard to this, the Nina Carasso survey shows that 7.3% of households in Spain received food aid, a proportion that reached 33.1% in the case of those suffering from food insecurity (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González, 2022). Based on this percentage, it can be estimated that around 139,000 households with children in a situation of moderate and severe food insecurity receive family benefits (equivalent to 347,500 people). The neighbourhood and friendship networks also help with food (2.2%), which in the case of households with children in a situation of food insecurity reaches 12.2%, or approximately 51,274 households (128,000 people). Finally, associative networks contribute (1.5%) to the healthy nutrition of households suffering from food insecurity.

## 5.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy nutrition

There are two programmes in Spain to support healthy nutrition, as follows.

First and foremost, the FEAD programme 2014-2020. This programme is funded to the tune of 85% by the EU and 15% by the Spanish state.<sup>35</sup> The distribution is managed by two major organisations – the Spanish Federation of Food Banks (*Federación Española de Bancos de Alimentos* – FESBAL) and the Spanish Red Cross (*Cruz Roja Española*) on behalf of the Spanish Agricultural Guarantee Fund. The distribution of food is carried out by around 6,000 local organisations. The FEAD beneficiary population, in the case of the group under the responsibility of the Red Cross, has been divided between nationals (60%) and foreigners (40%). Beneficiaries are defined as those people, families, households or groups that are in a situation of economic poverty, as well as the homeless and other people in special situations of vulnerability: 96% of the beneficiaries were AROP in 2017 and 90.2% lived in a situation of extreme poverty, some 73% of beneficiaries lived in households with children; 49% were unemployed, mostly long term, and 39% received regional minimum income benefits. Children

<sup>31</sup> Survey of a sample of 8,000 children aged 11-17 in 109 schools.

<sup>32</sup> The Gasol Foundation's PASOS Report was based on a survey of 3,887 children aged 8-6 in 247 schools in spring 2019.

<sup>33</sup> The PASOS Report indicated that overweight affected 20.8% of the population aged 8-16 in 2019, and obesity 14.6% thereof. These indicators had risen slightly since the 1999-2000 study conducted by EnKid (in 1999, the overweight rate was 20.4% and the obesity rate was 13.6%). Moreover, only 36.7% of the population aged 8-16 complied with the WHO recommendation of at least an hour of moderate or vigorous physical activity per day.

<sup>34</sup> Only 15.9% of the population aged 8-16 reported consuming at least four portions of fruit and/or vegetables a day. In this regard, the Gasol Foundation stated that: "*Eating habits are deteriorating among children and adolescents and it is necessary to take strong measures to promote the consumption of healthy food and the achievement of a high level of practice of the Mediterranean diet*".

<sup>35</sup> Between 1988 and 2013, the food programme was 100% funded by the European Commission.

under 16 living in beneficiaries' households were AROP (98.7%), mostly severe poverty (Red Cross, 2018). This situation had hardly changed four years later, in 2021.

During the 2014-2020 period, the FEAD indirectly helped to ensure the feeding of children during the holidays (Alto Comisionado, 2019a). However, as the High Commissioner for Combating Child Poverty pointed out, it would be necessary to invest some resources of the European fund during the next 2021-2027 budget period to guarantee the specific needs of vulnerable children, including help through schools, so as to ensure the provision of a breakfast, food and/or snack to the most disadvantaged children (Alto Comisionado, 2019b).<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, there is a programme entitled “emergency aid” provided by local authorities. This is a package of aid aimed at the low-income population suffering from severe material deprivation (especially in respect of food, clothing, rent, and housing utilities). The existing information does not allow a breakdown of the expenditure on food. In 2022, the expenditure on this programme was €272 million, covering 1.6 million beneficiaries, with an average annual expenditure per beneficiary of €173.<sup>37</sup> This programme has covered 40% of the population suffering from severe material deprivation (Asociación Estatal de Directivos y Gerentes en Servicios Sociales, 2022).

## 6. Adequate housing

This section describes the situation regarding the effective access for low-income children to adequate housing.

### 6.1 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Housing allowances

Article 47 of the Spanish constitution recognises the right to decent and adequate housing. However, when analysing the application of this right in public housing policies, especially in relation to the needs of children in situations of poverty and social exclusion, it is necessary to highlight three conditioning factors that limit its scope and effectiveness:

Firstly, from the perspective of the design of public policies, both the UNICEF-Europe reports referring to Spain (UNICEF, 2021b and 2021c) and the government's plan for implementing the ECG (MDSA2030, 2022) point out that, with the exception of unaccompanied minors, there are no policies and programmes as such in the field of housing aimed at the child population in situations of poverty and social exclusion. Both state and regional programmes target the general population or vulnerable groups that are not always in a situation of poverty (such as victims of gender-based violence, families at risk of eviction or people with disabilities).

Secondly, from an implementation perspective, the management of financial aid (allowances) and housing policies are a competence of the ACs, which can modulate the aid to households in their housing plans. In addition, local authorities can intervene in housing by collaborating with the ACs or on their own initiative in the case of large cities or metropolitan areas. Given the dispersion of the information on the implementation of housing programmes at the territorial level, in this report we analyse only state-wide measures and programmes.

<sup>36</sup> The new phase of the FEAD is within the Multi-annual Financial Framework 2021-2027. It combines the provision of food or material assistance with social inclusion measures, to which at least 2% of the ESF Plus will be dedicated, with the objective of reaching 4% at the EU level.

<sup>37</sup> There are wide regional disparities in the annual expenditure per beneficiary, with a minimum of €73 in Andalusia and a maximum of €3,622 in Murcia.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the structural reality framing the development of housing policies in Spain (Olea *et al.*, 2019), until recently in a context that UNICEF (2021b) described and assessed as follows: “*The housing situation in Spain has deteriorated in recent decades (...) Public housing represents a very small share of Spain’s housing stock, while an expanding real-estate market has seen rent increases clearly out-pace rising salaries. Many Spanish families now spend a large share of their income on housing, which reduces their capacity to meet many other costs, including those affecting children’s well-being*”. Housing has become the most important social determinant of social exclusion, even above employment (Ayala *et al.*, 2022), a reality confirmed by social organisations in the fight against poverty between 2008 and 2018 (EAPN, 2020; FOESSA, 2022).

These conditioning factors allow us to understand the limits to the effectiveness of direct and indirect aid for financing rent, as well as for accessing public social housing, especially when we consider that the population under 18 is not the direct recipient of allowances, but rather the household in which they live.

The Spanish State Plan for Access to Housing 2022-2025<sup>38</sup> (Ministerio de Transportes, Movilidad y Agenda Urbana, 2021) includes the programmes described below. It should be noted that none of them mentions children and adolescents as direct beneficiaries, but rather the household or its representative. This limits the possibility of rigorously assessing the impact of the programmes.

- The “Allowance for habitual and permanent rental housing” programme for tenants of habitual housing with a maximum duration of five years. The income limit is as follows: 3 times the IPREM for a couple or single-parent family with one or two children;<sup>39</sup> 4 times the IPREM in the case of large families in general, people with disabilities and victims of terrorism; and 5 times the IPREM for large special families (five or more children) and people with severe disabilities. The rent allowance is 50% of the rent with a limit of €600 per month or €300 in the case of renting a room. In exceptional cases the limit is €900 per month or €450 in the case of renting a room.<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that some ACs require an income below a certain threshold to qualify for social rent, for example in the Basque Country. In other cases, such as in the Madrid region, the income limit is 3.5 times the IPREM; in addition to help with rent, aid is granted to avoid paying the common expenses of the residential building.<sup>41</sup>
- The “Allowance to victims of gender violence, people subject to eviction from their habitual residence, homeless people and other particularly vulnerable people” programme. This programme aims to solve the immediate housing problems of very vulnerable people. It runs for a maximum duration of five years, does not require income conditions and the grants amount to €600 per month, exceptionally €900 per month, along with grants for housing maintenance costs and basic utilities up to a limit of €200. This programme does not explicitly protect children who are homeless or living

<sup>38</sup> Available at <http://bit.ly/3Sxw26h>.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 10. In 2021, 60% of the median equivalised income for one adult and two children under 14 equalled €15,256 per year (i.e. 1.93 times the IPREM). Taking into account these AROP indicators and their equivalent in the IPREM, the result is that three times the IPREM (€23,724.20) maximum income level for the two types of households mentioned above is higher than the AROP indicator, although they are relatively close to it.

<sup>40</sup> The type of housing can be public or private. The ACs and the public or related agencies (e.g. the Asset Management Company for Assets Arising out of Bank Restructuring – *Sociedad de Gestión de Activos Procedentes de la Reestructuración Bancaria*, SAREB) can receive aid per square metre to facilitate access to rental housing.

<sup>41</sup> Basque Country: <http://bit.ly/3mcDyr6>; Madrid: <https://bit.ly/41x8ZN2>.

in households suffering eviction. The municipal social services receive applications and decide the eligibility conditions.

- The “Allowance to tenants of permanent housing in the event of supervening vulnerability” programme. Beneficiaries are natural persons holding a habitual and permanent residence for rent in a situation of supervening vulnerability that is required within the two years prior to the application for the benefit. The income limit once the applicant is considered vulnerable is 3 times the IPREM. However, before being recognised as a vulnerable tenant, the income cannot be higher than 5 times the IPREM and between 5.5 and 6 times the IPREM in the case of large families (three or four children), and more than 6 times the IPREM in the case of special families (five children or more) and people with a degree of disability equal to or greater than 33%. The assistance amounts to €900 per month, up to 100% of the rent. It is required that the contribution towards the rent is 30% or more of the net income of the cohabitation unit and that their income has been reduced by at least 20% within the two years prior to the application. This programme has a maximum duration of two years.

## 6.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Social housing

The State Plan for Access to Housing 2022-2025, supported by component 2 of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, linked to Next Generation EU, has launched two types of housing access programmes: programmes to increase the supply of rental housing, and programmes to improve the accessibility and eradication of substandard housing.

- Programme to increase the public housing stock. This programme is aimed at the acquisition of housing by regional governments and public enterprises, as well as by social economy enterprises for social renting for a period of at least 50 years.<sup>42</sup> The beneficiaries are households with incomes below 3 times the IPREM (i.e. €23,724 – above the AROP 2021 rate of €20,024 for households with two adults and two children and €15,256 for one adult and two children under 14). These can be modified by the monitoring commission of the central government and the ACs. No other conditions apply.
- Programme for the promotion of temporary accommodation, co-housing models, inter-generational housing and similar modalities. It involves the acquisition of new or rehabilitated housing by public administrations and companies, social economy organisations and NGOs to be rented for a period of at least 20 years. The final beneficiaries are households with incomes below 5 times the IPREM (almost twice the AROP indicator for a household with two adults and two children and 2.6 times the same indicator for a household with one adult and two children). The rent payment is €8 per square metre of housing and inter-related space. The price is then updated using the consumer price index.
- Programme to make the housing provided by the SAREB or public agencies available for permanent rental housing to tenants with incomes below 3 times the IPREM. The duration of the programme is five years and rental prices range between €150 and €350 per month. If necessary, grants of up to a maximum of €8,000 are available for renovation work, up to a limit of 75% of the investment.
- Programme to promote the provision of housing for rental as affordable social housing by the ACs and municipalities. The tenants’ income cannot be higher than 5 times the

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<sup>42</sup> Subsidies of up to 60% of the investment cost and up to €7,000 for habitability works.

IPREM. The financial assistance is the difference between the social rental price (never higher than €400 per month) and the market price agreed by the central government and the ACs. The housing units must be rented out for a minimum period of seven years.

- Programme of financial aid for the eradication of degraded areas, slum and substandard housing. The beneficiaries are the people or organisations that undertake the execution of the works. The amounts vary according to the type of work and is a lump sum: up to €5,000 per dwelling for the adaptation of housing (limit of 80% of the investment); up to €15,000 per dwelling for rehabilitation (limit of 80% of the investment); up to €50,000 per dwelling for purchase or new construction (limit of 80% of the investment); up to €5,000 per year (maximum five years) per living unit for re-housing; and up to 80% of the cost of demolition work for the dwelling in poor condition or substandard housing.

## 6.2.1 Mapping the provision of social housing

Access to social housing for households with children who are AROP is facilitated in Spain on the basis of relatively favourable income limits.<sup>43</sup> As for the household income limit for access to social housing, the general eligibility criterion, as mentioned above, is having an income no higher than 3 times the IPREM (gross income €23.724 in 2021) for a household unit of two adults and two children or one adult and two children, increasing in the case of large families (three children or more or two if one of them suffers from a disability) to 5 times the IPREM. This criterion is favourable to households in situations of poverty if we take into account that it not only benefits the recipients of welfare benefits (as in the case of the minimum living income in 2021 for a household with two adults and two children, which amounts to €13.076 per year, 1.6 times the IPREM), but also households with incomes up to the AROP limit.

In Spain, 26.7% of households live in rented housing and 73.3% in owner-occupied housing. The population in a situation of severe housing deprivation living in rental housing in 2020 reached 34.8% (Eurostat, EU-SILC, ILC\_MDSDO6) – 36.5% with rental at market prices and 34.3% at reduced prices or social housing. 42.4% of this same group lived in housing provided by public and private institutions.<sup>44</sup> The percentage of households AROP suffering from housing cost overburden in 2021 reached 39.2% (Eurostat, EU-SILC, ILC\_VHO 07A). Within this group, the housing cost overburden for rental housing at market prices was 59%, and 16% in the case of rental housing at reduced prices.

## 6.2.2 Main barriers to effective access to social housing

### 6.2.2.1 Financial barriers

As noted above, there are no financial barriers to accessing social rental housing for households below the AROP threshold, facilitating the access of large families and families with children with disabilities. But there are barriers for households with children with incomes between 60% and 100% of the median income who are not eligible for public rental housing

<sup>43</sup> The social housing stock is defined as all publicly owned housing for social renting or limited renting: <https://bit.ly/3kDVIBE>. This stock represents 64% of all social housing in Spain. The rest of the social housing is for rent to buy, for sale and other forms of housing transfer.

<sup>44</sup> Obviously, housing exclusion also occurs in situations of severe housing deprivation and overcrowding and cost overburden. In 2021 (Eurostat, EU-SILC, ILC\_MDHO6A), 14.9% of households (AROP rate) were in a situation of severe housing deprivation (6.2% of the total population); 19.3% of households (AROP rate) were in a situation of overcrowding (9.6% of the total population). Similarly, 39.2% of households (AROP rate) suffered from housing overcrowding (13.2% in the population as a whole).



subsidies. The fact that they are not AROP does not mean an adequate ability to pay rent (Ayala *et al.*, 2022).

### 6.2.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Regarding social housing supply, Spain's chronic problem is the low supply compared with other EU countries. Public housing represents only 1.6% of the total housing stock (Ministerio de Transportes, Movilidad y Agenda Urbana, 2020) whereas the EU average is almost 10%. In 2020, Spain only had approximately 290,000 public housing units available for social renting (180,000 units offered by the ACs and 110,000 by local authorities). Since the economic crisis of 2008, the supply of private rental housing, both individual and, above all, corporate, has increased. On its side, the supply of public social housing has begun to take off since the 2018-2021 housing plan and, recently, with the 2022-2025 plan.

The non-financial barriers include, on the one hand, the aforementioned low supply of social rental housing, with variations between ACs and local authorities. For 2019 (the latest year for which information is available), social rental housing accounted for only 8% of the total housing built in Spain. This barrier is a consequence of the low investment in social housing over time.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, there are administrative barriers and waiting times, sometimes long, to gain effective access to social housing. This implies the existence of a *de facto* ineligible population, the size of which is unknown (Nogueira López, 2020).

## 6.3 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Other measures

There are no measures other than those described in Sections 6.1 and 6.2 at national level.

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<sup>45</sup> Between 2007 and 2017 the average investment in social housing in Spain was 0.15% of GDP, while the EU average was 0.43%. In other words, the average expenditure per inhabitant on social housing in 2017 was €35, the EU average €148.

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The EU Open Data Portal (<http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data>) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, both for commercial and non-commercial purposes.

