

## Childcare use measures in Europe: comparing estimates across surveys

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In March 2002 the European Council established targets to improve the employment of parents, particularly mothers of young children. The so-called Barcelona Targets aimed at increasing female labour market participation and gender equality through the promotion of measures to ease work-life balance (European Union 2018), such as increasing childcare services. Childcare provision is also one of the key elements of the European Child Guarantee, the European Union flagship initiative to reduce child poverty (UNICEF 2021). Indeed, quality childcare is associated with positive outcomes for children in terms of developmental and educational outcomes.

European researchers often rely on the European Union Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) to analyse childcare strategies and the effects of access to childcare and childcare use on parental and child outcomes (Plantenga and Remery 2017; Lancker and Horemans 2018; Cebrian et al. 2019). They have found childcare use and intensity to vary across countries as a result of differences in childcare policy as well as household preferences (Abrassart and Bonoli 2015; Ünver, Bircan, and Nicaise 2021). However, others have raised concerns about the reliability of EU-SILC data on childcare arrangements. For instance, Keck and Saraceno (2011) in a study comparing information on public and private childcare market services in the EU-SILC against official statistics find discrepancies which they associated with insufficient sample size in some childcare categories for many countries, as well as conceptual misspecifications. In a study using SHARE data Meil et al., (2018) deduce that the SILC underestimates grand-parenting in Spain. While recognizing the value of EU-SILC data on childcare Keck and Saraceno (2011) expose that the data may pose serious problems to country comparability, for example. Indeed, surveys aimed at capturing the same phenomenon should produce similar estimates. In contrast, results that are very different or inconsistent raise concerns about the validity of the results or the survey instrument.

This paper compares EU-SILC estimates for formal (market) and informal (family, friends) childcare use from four countries (Spain, Italy, France and Belgium) against that of existing national surveys collected in the same year. In doing so we update and extend Keck and Saraceno's (2011) analysis to informal and family care. Additionally, since childcare arrangements tend to vary with age, we provide separate analyses for three age groups: 0-3, 4-6 and 7-12.

### *Methods:*

RQ. Are the EU-SILC estimates for childcare use and family care consistent with those of alternative sources of information? If not, how can those differences be explained? Do differences vary by age group?

For each country we calculate comparable estimates of household childcare using the EU-SILC and an alternative survey conducted in the same year. For Spain we use the 2018 'Encuesta de Fecundidad' (EF) for 2018. For Belgium we use the Gender and Generations Survey (GSS) wave 1 (2010). For France we use the GSS wave 2 (2008). Finally, for Italy, we use GSS wave 2 for year (2007). These alternative surveys are widely used for the estimation of fertility trends and collect detailed information on childcare use, among other topics.

The surveys use different approaches to collect childcare use information. We build comparable indicators that reflect whether children in the household receive non-parental care and which formal and informal childcare options are used. Note that not all childcare options can be matched for all surveys.

#### *Initial Findings:*

We find substantial differences in reported childcare use in all four countries. This affects both formal and informal childcare estimates. In terms of the proportion of households reporting using any form of childcare (vs. parental childcare only) discrepancies vary with age and are generally larger for older children. Consistency between surveys is strongest in Belgium while the largest differences are observed in France and Spain.

There are also differences when comparing specific childcare options. For example, in the Spanish case, the starker differences are found for after-school activities. According to the EF in 65% of household with children aged 7 to 12 the children take part in afterschool activities. This compares to only 3% using after-school care centres in the SILC. Part of the difference is likely to do with the questionnaire wording. The wordings "centro de cuidado de niños" (After-school care centre) and "extrascolares" (extracurricular activities) evoke different settings. While extracurricular activities are common in Spain, after-school care centres, less so. Furthermore, the SILC questionnaire specifies to only include out of school activities where those are *primarily* used for childcare.

The comparison of surveys also offers different estimates of informal childcare. For instance, in Italy the SILC estimates that 38% of households with 0-3 year olds receive care from relatives or friends, compared to 82% in the GSS. Differences in the proportion of children who report being cared by grandparents or other family members suggest an effect of question design (e.g. days vs hours, relatives in general vs grandparents) on childcare estimates.

#### *Implications:*

In recent decades many European states have increased their investment in childcare provision as a strategy to expand employment opportunities for young mothers and to reduce child poverty. Accurate measures of childcare use are essential so that policy makers can track progress (including towards the Barcelona Targets) and make evidence informed decisions. Our comparison of childcare estimates for Spain, Italy, France and Belgium across two surveys indicates that these produce very different estimates. This finding is consistent with previous research by Keck and Saraceno (2011) highlighting the limitations of EU-SILC indicators for formal childcare arrangements. Differences in childcare use estimates may be due to differences in survey and question design across surveys. The size of the differences varies by country and age group, suggesting estimates are not consistently biased. The findings raise concerns about an overreliance on the EU-SILC for the analysis of childcare in Europe. To date effects of the questionnaire and survey design on childcare use estimates are not fully understood. Care is needed in interpreting childcare use estimates for both formal and informal care provision.

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