

# Are the world's richest countries family friendly?

Policy in the OECD and EU

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June 2019

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For readers wishing to cite this document, we suggest the following form:

Yekaterina Chzhen, Anna Gromada and Gwyther Rees (2019), *Are the world's richest countries family friendly? Policy in the OECD and EU*, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence.

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Online ISSN 9789210042598

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Graphic design: Alessandro Mannocchi, Rome

# Are the world's richest countries family friendly?

## Policy in the OECD and EU

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### Abstract

Children get a better start in life and parents are better able to balance work and home commitments in countries that have family-friendly policies. These include paid parental leave, support for breastfeeding and affordable, high-quality childcare and preschool education. This report looks at family-friendly policies in 41 high- and middle-income countries using four country-level indicators: the duration of paid leave available to mothers; the duration of paid leave reserved specifically for fathers; the share of children below the age of three in childcare centres; and the share of children between the age of three and compulsory school age in childcare or preschool centres. Sweden, Norway and Iceland are the three most family-friendly countries for which we have complete data. Cyprus, Greece and Switzerland occupy the bottom three places. Ten of the 41 countries do not have sufficient data on childcare enrolment to be ranked in our league table. There is not enough up-to-date information available for us to compare across countries the quality of childcare centres or breastfeeding rates and policies. There is scope for the world's richest countries to improve their family policies and collect better data.

### Key words

parental leave, breastfeeding, childcare centres, family policy, OECD/EU countries.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dominic Richardson and Olivier Thévenon for reviewing this report. We are also grateful to Pia Britto, Mark Engman, Patrizia Faustini, Gabriel Gonzalez-Bueno Uribe, Jody Heymann, Priscilla Idele, Subajini Jayasekaran, Ji Hye Kim, Kerry McCuaig, Samantha Mort, Chemba Raghavan, Ramya Subrahmanian, Kathleen Sullivan, Aiko Takahashi, Georgina Thomson, Nikita White and Lisa Wolff for their comments on the earlier drafts of this report. We thank Madelaine Drohan for editing the report, Sarah Marchant for production, and Lisa Gastaldin for administrative support.

## Family-friendly policies overview

Family-friendly policies matter because they help children to get a better start in life and help parents to find the right balance between their commitments at work and at home. Yet even some of the world's richest countries fail to offer comprehensive solutions to all families. This report focuses on two key policies: childcare leave for parents and early childhood education and care for preschool children. It reviews these policies in the 41 high- and middle-income countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the European Union (EU), using the most recent comparable data on hand. The analysis includes national breastfeeding rates and policies as well as the quality of preschool education, where comparable indicators are available. It excludes other elements of family policy, such as child benefits or birth grants, to limit the scope of the report to issues that concern the work–family balance.

Policies on maternity, paternity and parental leave can play an important role in supporting families during the first few years of a child's life (*see Box 1 for definitions*). Maternity leave allows mothers to recover from pregnancy and childbirth and to bond with their children. Well-paid, protected leave from work helps female employees maintain their earnings and attachment to the labour market, although leave that is too long<sup>1</sup> can have the opposite effect (Thévenon and Solaz 2013). Leave reserved for fathers, if taken, can promote a more equitable distribution of care in the home and help fathers to bond with their children. Fifteen of the 41 countries have ratified the Maternity Protection Convention (2000) of the International Labour Organization, the most up-to-date international labour standard on maternity protection.<sup>2</sup> It recommends that countries provide maternity benefits for 14 weeks and take other measures to protect women's working conditions.

When parental leave ends, some children attend early childhood education and care institutions. High-quality, preschool education can foster children's socialization and skills development (Sylva 2014) and help parents to reconcile their private and professional roles (Pronzato 2009; Brilli, Del Boca, and Pronzato 2016). One of the targets set out in the Sustainable Development Goals is that by 2030 all girls and boys will have access to "quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education".<sup>3</sup>

Family-friendly policies can support breastfeeding, which leads to better health for both mother and child. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommend that mothers initiate breastfeeding within one hour of birth and that infants be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health.<sup>4</sup> After that, infants should receive nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods while breastfeeding continues until the child is at least two years old. The WHO and UNICEF have jointly launched guidance<sup>5</sup> called 'Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding' for countries wishing to develop a strategy on this issue.

The 41 countries use different combinations of parental leave and preschool education to help working parents to care for their children while remaining employed. The league table ranks each country on four indicators: 1) the duration of paid leave available to mothers (even if the father can take some of it); 2) the duration of paid leave reserved specifically for fathers; 3) the share of children below the age of three in childcare centres; and 4) the share of children between the age of three and compulsory school age attending preschool or childcare centres.<sup>6</sup> A country's overall rank is based on the average of its rank for each of these four indicators.<sup>7</sup> The league table shows the value for each indicator, with its rank in brackets. The column on the far right shows the average rank across the four indicators for countries for which comparable data are available. The column on the far left shows the final league table ranking based on this average rank (*see Figure 1*).

## Box 1: Interpreting the data

This report covers statutory entitlements available nationwide in 2016. It does not include additional provisions within countries that vary across and within regions and employment sectors.

**Maternity leave:** Job-protected leave of absence for employed women, typically starting just before the time of childbirth (or adoption in some countries).

**Paid leave available to mothers:** A combination of maternity leave and paid parental leave that can be used by the mother and is not reserved for the father. Unpaid leave is not included. To account for both duration and generosity of paid leave, it is expressed as the number of weeks of leave multiplied by the payment rate for a mother receiving average earnings for that country. We call this the full-rate equivalent. For example, if a mother is entitled to 20 weeks of maternity leave at 50 per cent of her usual salary, her full-rate equivalent leave is 10 weeks.

Source: OECD Family Database, Table PF2.1.A (updated 26 October 2017). Entitlements in place as of April 2016. See footnotes to Table PF2.1.A for exceptions to cross-country comparability.

**Paternity leave:** Job-protected leave for fathers at the time of childbirth or soon after.

**Paid leave reserved for fathers:** A combination of paid paternity leave and paid parental leave reserved exclusively for fathers. Unpaid leave is not included. As with mothers, full-rate equivalent leave for fathers is expressed as the number of weeks of leave multiplied by the payment rate for a father receiving average earnings for that country. For example, if a father is entitled to 10 weeks of leave at 50 per cent of his usual salary, his full-rate equivalent leave is five weeks.

Source: OECD Family Database, Table PF2.1.B (updated 26 October 2017). Entitlements in place as of April 2016. See footnotes to Table PF2.1.B for exceptions to cross-country comparability.

**Parental leave:** Job-protected leave for employed parents. It usually follows maternity leave. The way parental leave is structured in terms of duration, payment and eligibility varies a lot across countries. Mothers are more likely to take parental leave, even in countries where a portion of parental leave is reserved for fathers (see OECD 2016). Parental leave tends to be longer than maternity leave and is usually paid at a lower rate, if at all.

**Childcare enrolment:** The percentage of children in their age group (under three or between the age of three and compulsory school age, which differs between countries) who attend childcare or preschool education centres. These are formal arrangements that include care organized or controlled by a public or private body. This does not include unstructured care provided by childminders.

Source: Eurostat (last update 23 January 2019; EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions 2016; latest data for 2014 used for Switzerland).

FIGURE 1: League Table – Indicators of national family-friendly policies, 2016

Rank	Country	Paid leave available to mothers (weeks, full-rate equivalent)		Paid leave reserved for fathers (weeks, full-rate equivalent)		Childcare enrolment, under 3 (%)		Childcare enrolment, between age 3 and school age (%)		Average rank
		Weeks	(Rank)	Weeks	(Rank)	%	(Rank)	%	(Rank)	
1	Sweden	35	(17)	10.9	(4)	51	(5)	97	(3)	7.25
2	Norway	45	(11)	9.8	(6)	52	(4)	90	(14)	8.75
3	Iceland	16	(30)	7.8	(7)	65	(2)	99	(1)	10.00
4	Estonia	85	(1)	2.0	(18)	30	(16)	93	(8)	10.75
5	Portugal	20	(25)	12.5	(3)	50	(7)	92	(11)	11.50
6	Germany	43	(12)	5.7	(10)	33	(13)	92	(12)	11.75
6	Denmark	27	(20)	1.1	(22)	70	(1)	96	(4)	11.75
8	Slovenia	48	(9)	2.6	(16)	40	(10)	90	(13)	12.00
9	Luxembourg	26	(21)	10.4	(5)	51	(6)	87	(17)	12.25
10	France	19	(26)	5.6	(11)	49	(8)	94	(6)	12.75
11	Austria	51	(8)	6.9	(8)	21	(22)	89	(15)	13.25
12	Finland	41	(14)	5.7	(9)	33	(13)	84	(19)	13.75
13	Belgium	13	(33)	5.0	(12)	44	(9)	99	(2)	14.00
14	Spain	16	(27)	2.1	(17)	39	(11)	95	(5)	15.00
15	Netherlands	16	(27)	0.4	(29)	53	(3)	94	(7)	16.50
16	Lithuania	62	(4)	4.0	(14)	15	(26)	78	(23)	16.75
16	Hungary	72	(2)	1.0	(23)	16	(24)	87	(18)	16.75
16	Latvia	53	(6)	1.1	(21)	28	(20)	82	(20)	16.75
19	Italy	25	(22)	0.4	(29)	34	(12)	93	(10)	18.25
20	Bulgaria	65	(3)	1.7	(20)	13	(27)	75	(25)	18.75
20	Romania	48	(10)	4.7	(13)	17	(23)	61	(29)	18.75
22	Croatia	39	(15)	2.9	(15)	16	(24)	51	(31)	21.25
23	Poland	42	(13)	2.0	(18)	8	(29)	61	(28)	22.00
24	Czech Republic	53	(7)	0.0	(33)	5	(30)	81	(21)	22.75
25	Malta	16	(29)	0.2	(32)	31	(15)	88	(16)	23.00
26	Slovakia	54	(5)	0.0	(33)	1	(31)	77	(24)	23.25
27	Ireland	9	(37)	0.0	(33)	29	(18)	93	(8)	24.00
28	United Kingdom	12	(34)	0.4	(28)	29	(19)	73	(26)	26.75
29	Cyprus	14	(32)	0.0	(33)	25	(21)	79	(22)	27.00
30	Greece	23	(24)	0.4	(29)	9	(28)	56	(30)	27.75
31	Switzerland	8	(38)	0.0	(33)	30	(17)	66	(27)	28.75
	Japan	36	(16)	30.4	(1)					
	Republic of Korea	25	(23)	17.2	(2)					
	Chile	30	(18)	1.0	(23)					
	Canada	27	(19)	0.0	(33)					
	Mexico	12	(35)	1.0	(23)					
	Turkey	11	(36)	1.0	(23)					
	Israel	14	(31)	0.0	(33)					
	Australia	8	(40)	0.8	(27)					
	New Zealand	8	(39)	0.0	(33)					
	United States	0	(41)	0.0	(33)					

Note: A light blue background indicates a place in the top third of the ranking, medium blue denotes the middle third, and dark blue the bottom third. All figures except paid leave reserved for fathers are rounded to the nearest whole number. The blank cells indicate that there are no comparable data available. Countries are ranked on each of the four indicators. Ranks are shown in brackets. Subsequently, the average of their four ranks (column on the far right) is used to calculate the final rank (column on the far left). Only 31 of the 41 countries are ranked because 10 lack comparable data. Source: See Box 1.

## Findings

- **Sweden, Norway and Iceland** occupy the top three places in the league table of national, family-friendly policies. All three countries rank in the top third of the 31 ranked countries on paid leave reserved for fathers and the share of children under the age of three in childcare centres. Norway offers longer paid leave to mothers than Iceland and Sweden, both in terms of actual weeks and in terms of the full-rate equivalent weeks (i.e. adjusted by the rate of payment for a parent on average earnings).
- **Cyprus, Greece and Switzerland** occupy the bottom three places on the league table of ranked countries. They are the only countries that were in the bottom third for three out of four indicators. None of the 31 countries with complete data scored in the bottom third on all four indicators.
- **The United States** is the only OECD country without nationwide, statutory, paid maternity leave, paternity leave or parental leave. Some states offer paid parental leave insurance programmes to eligible workers (Donovan 2018).
- **The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia** have generous leave provisions for mothers but are positioned in the bottom third of the summary ranking because they offer poor access to early childhood education.
- Among the 10 countries with data for two indicators only, **Japan** and the **Republic of Korea** rank highest because of generous leave entitlements for fathers. In practice, very few fathers take this leave (OECD 2016).
- **Chile** and **Canada** offer generous leave to mothers – the equivalent of about half a year of pay. However, in 2016 they offered very little or no paid leave to fathers.
- Countries with shorter paid leave for mothers (but longer leave reserved for fathers) tend to have more children under three in childcare centres.

## Job-protected leave

### Childcare leave available to mothers

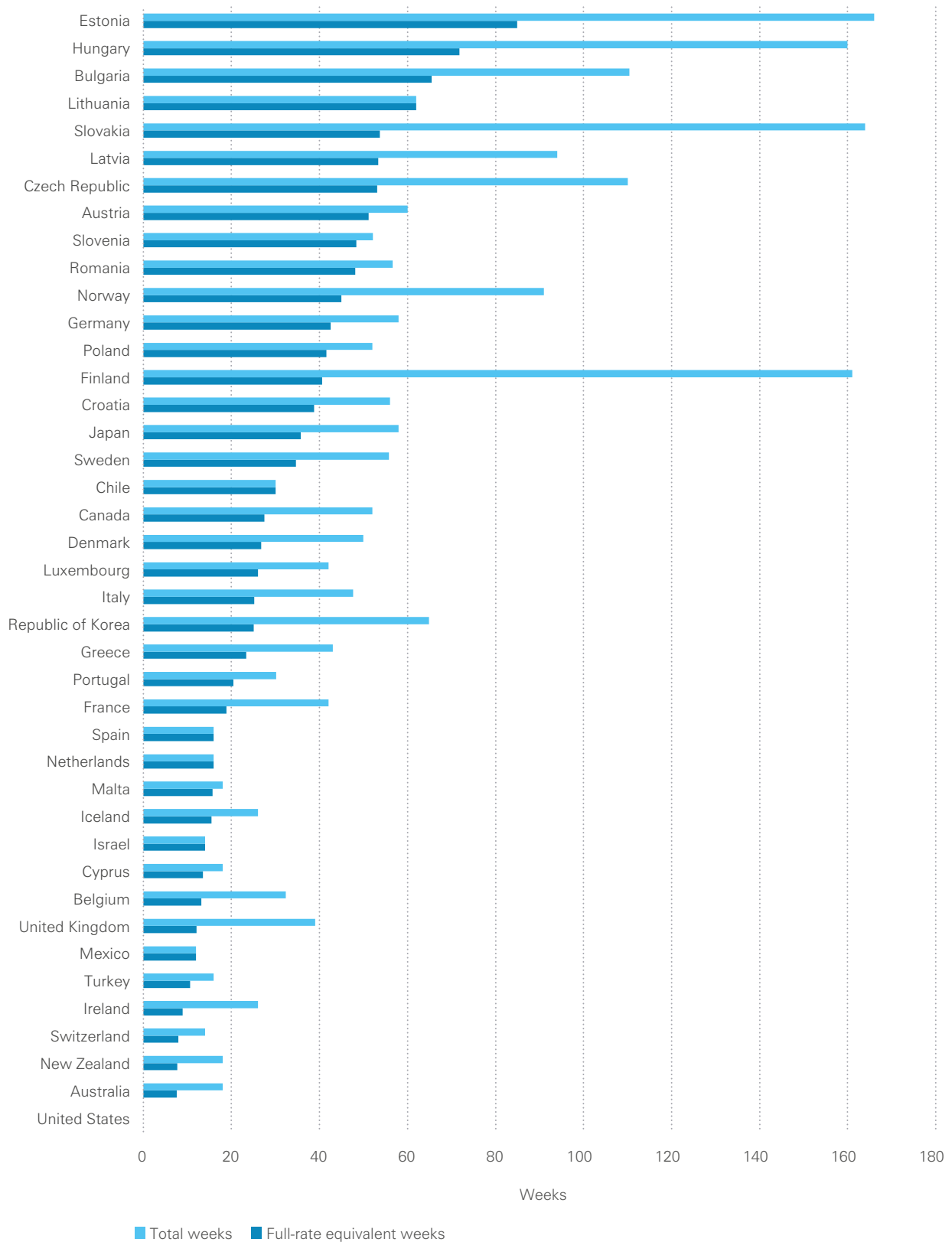
The amount of paid leave for mothers varies widely among the world's richest countries. Estonia offers mothers the full-rate equivalent of 85 weeks in paid maternity and parental leave (*see Figure 2*). (Actual job-protected leave is longer but some of it is paid at a much lower rate). Hungary offers the equivalent of 72 weeks. At the other end of the scale, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and Switzerland offered less than 10 weeks in 2016.

Paid maternity leave, which typically starts just before childbirth, tends to be short, averaging 18 weeks across the OECD and 22 weeks across EU in 2016. In 14 of the 41 countries it is fully paid for an employee on average earnings, although the calculation varies across countries. Some countries pay 100 per cent of the mother's previous earnings up to a cap. Some have no cap. Others have a flat rate.

Parental leave, which usually follows maternity leave, tends to be longer but more poorly paid. Even the countries with the longest full-rate equivalent job-protected leave do not offer women full salary replacement for the total duration of the leave. For example, female employees on average wages in Estonia can take job-protected leave around the birth of a child and continue to receive their full salary until the child is 18 months old (comprising 20 weeks of fully paid maternity leave plus the first 62 weeks of parental leave paid up to a ceiling). The payment then drops to 38 euros per month until the end of parental leave around the child's third birthday. The leave in Hungary is nearly as long but structured differently. The 24 weeks of maternity leave are paid at 70 per cent of previous earnings, followed by parental leave paid at 70 per cent of previous earnings up to a ceiling until the child's second birthday. After that, Hungarian mothers receive a flat-rate benefit of 28,500 HUF (88 euros) per month until the child's third birthday.



FIGURE 2: Paid leave available to mothers (2016)



Source: OECD Family Database Table PF2.1.A (last updated 26 October 2017).

## Childcare leave reserved for fathers

Paternity leave, which begins at childbirth or soon after, is not as widely available as maternity leave. Of the 41 countries surveyed, 26 offer paid paternity leave compared with 40 that offer paid maternity leave. Paid paternity leave tends to be shorter than maternity leave (usually 1–2 weeks) but it is often paid at a higher rate. Sixteen of the 26 countries guarantee 100-per-cent salary replacement for an employee on average earnings. The number of countries offering leave for fathers rises when parental leave, which follows paternity leave, is included. Out of 41 countries, 32 reserve paid leave for fathers either through paternity leave or parental leave (*see Figure 3*). Yet in 14 of these countries, fathers are entitled to two weeks of paid leave or less.

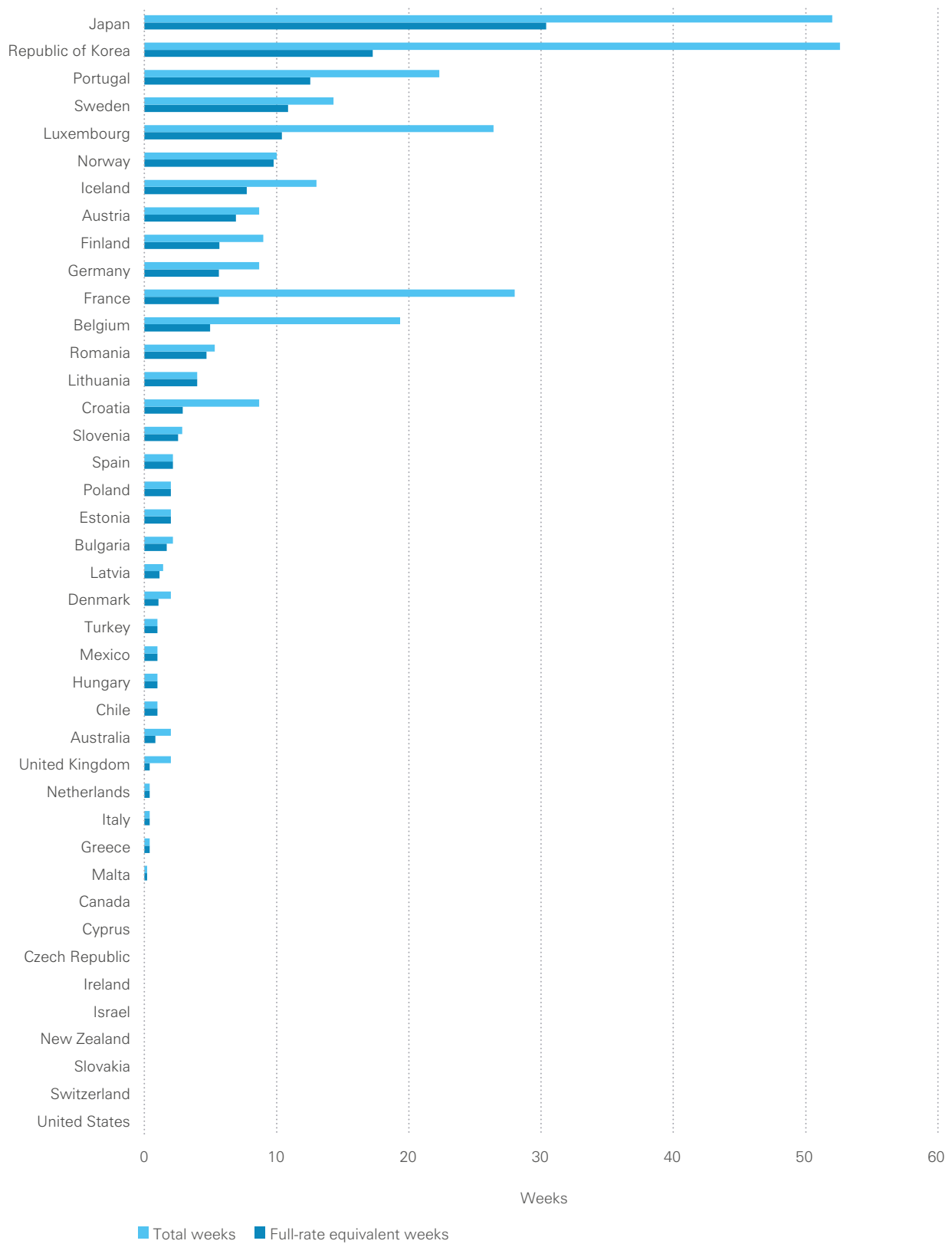
Japan offers the longest entitlement to paid leave for fathers, the full-rate equivalent of 30 weeks.<sup>8</sup> Only 5.14 per cent of eligible fathers took paid leave in 2017, up from 1.56 per cent in 2007. A 2017 survey indicated that 45 per cent of male employees on regular contracts with children under three did not want to take the leave.<sup>9</sup> Another 35 per cent said they would like to use the paternity leave but could not do so. Those who did not take leave cited various reasons, including understaffing, 'unfavourable atmosphere', workload, pay loss and career impediment (*see Figure 4*).

The Republic of Korea has the second longest leave reserved for fathers, the full-rate equivalent of 17 weeks for an average earner. When the policy was introduced in 2007, very few men decided to go on leave (OECD 2016). In 2011, only 1,402 or less than 2 per cent of eligible men took leave. That changed after the government made payments more generous and launched a national campaign to encourage a better balance between home and work. In 2018, men accounted for 17 per cent of all parents who took leave. However, 60 per cent of Korean working parents still feel uncomfortable asking for leave at work because they fear professional consequences,<sup>10</sup> according to a 2018 Ministry of Welfare report.

Leave reserved for fathers makes up at least one third of all available paid leave in only four countries – Iceland, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Portugal (*see Figure 5*). In Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain and Sweden, the father's share is more than one tenth of the total allocated time. In the remaining 19 countries with some paternal leave, the father's share is no more than one tenth of the total time.

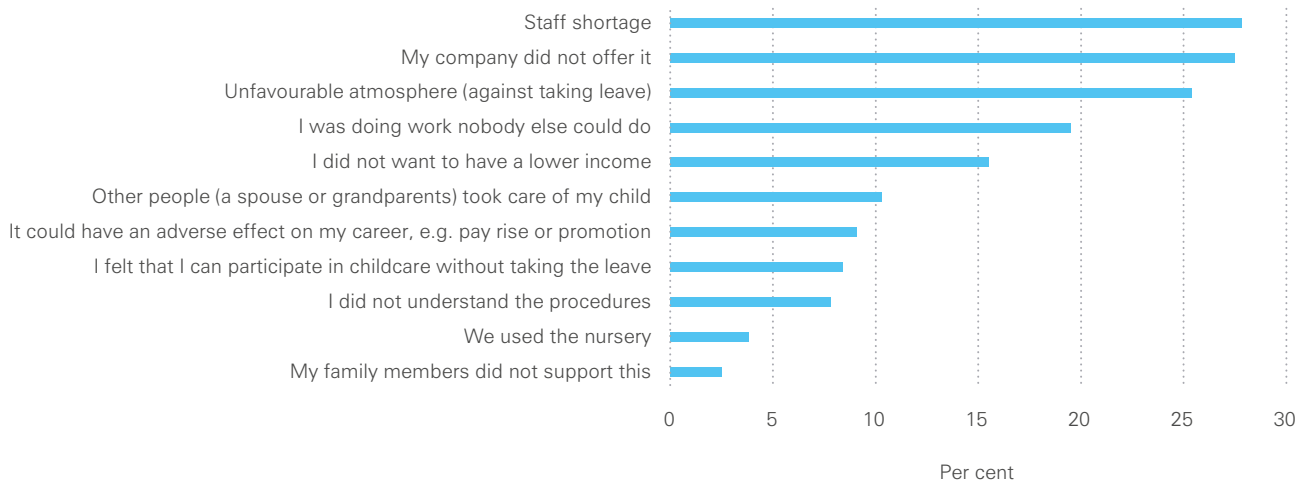
At the time this report was written, some countries were extending paternity leave. For example, Spain increased it to eight weeks starting in April 2019, and plans to extend it to 12 weeks in 2020 and 16 weeks in 2021.<sup>11</sup> In March 2019, Canada introduced dedicated parental leave for the father (or alternative parent) of five or eight weeks, depending on which type of parental leave the couple chose initially. The extra leave is provided on a 'use it or lose it' basis and cannot be shared with the mother.<sup>12</sup> Ireland introduced two weeks of paternity benefit in late 2016, with more generous parental leave entitlements to be phased in in 2019 and 2020.<sup>13</sup>

FIGURE 3: Paid leave reserved for fathers (2016)



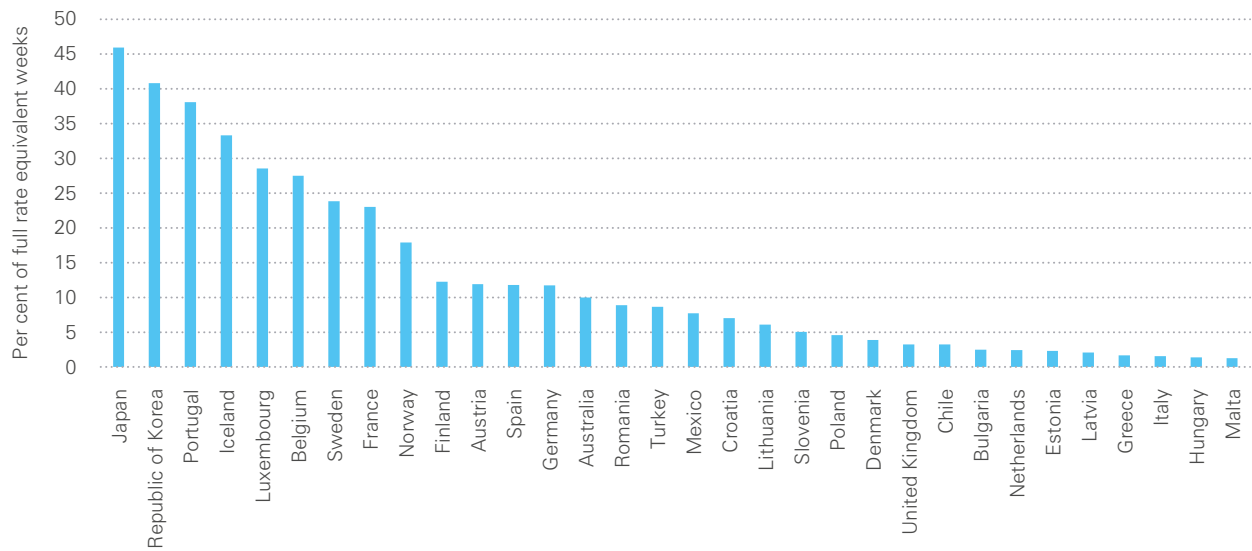
Source: OECD Family Database Table PF2.1.A (last updated 26 October 2017).

FIGURE 4: Reasons for low take-up of paternity leave in Japan (2017)



Notes: N=1,648 (men on regular contracts who have a child under three and who did not take the leave). Percentages do not sum to 100 per cent because respondents could choose more than one reason.  
 Source: prepared using the Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting Report 2018.

FIGURE 5: Share of father's part in the total leave



Source: calculated as the sum of the full-rate equivalent leave available to the mother and that reserved for the father using the OECD Family Database Table PF2.1.A (last updated 26 October 2017).

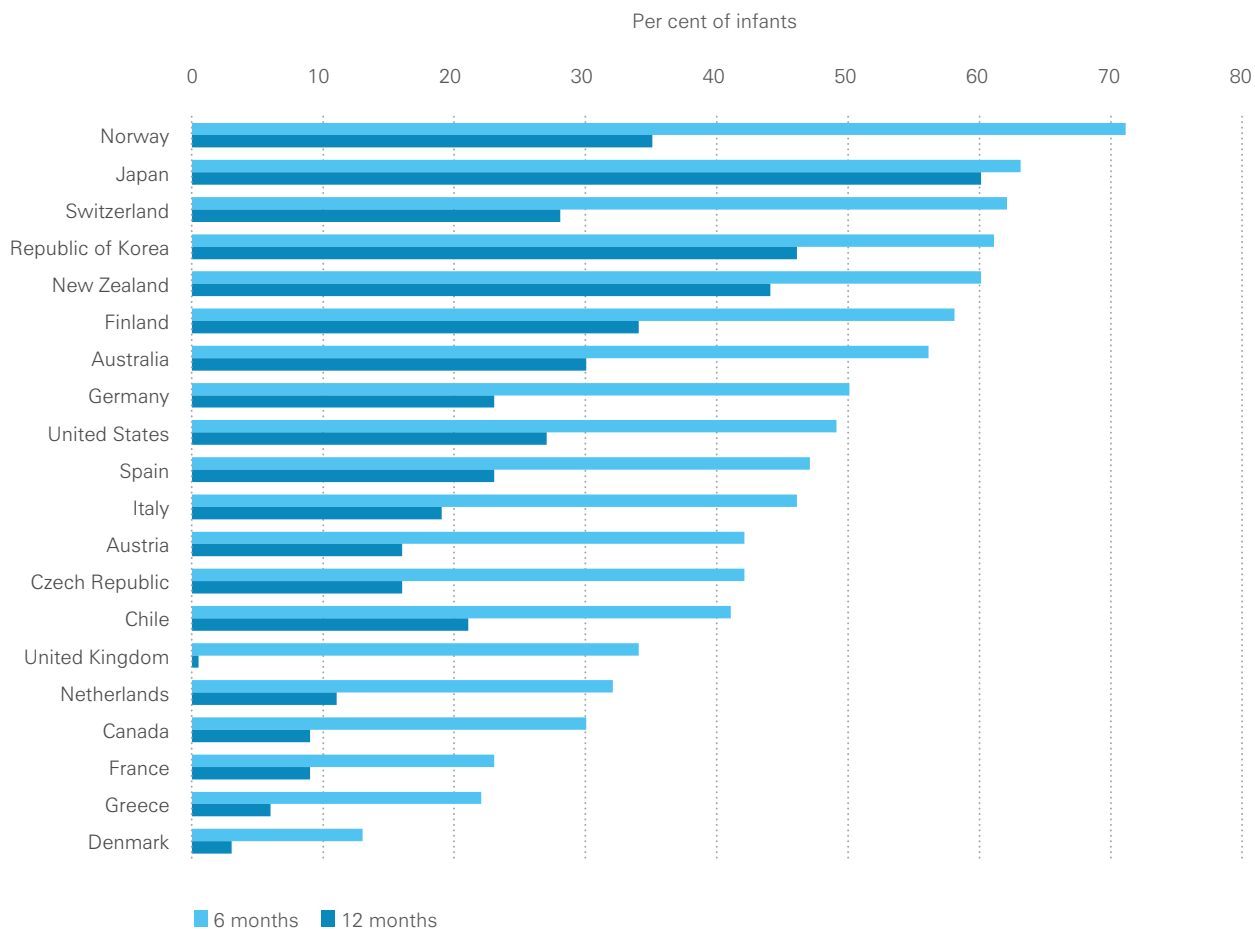
## Breastfeeding rates and policies

Breastfeeding has substantial immediate and longer-term health benefits for children (Gartner et al. 2005). Yet it is difficult to find estimates that are up-to-date and accurate for all high-income countries.<sup>14</sup> The available data suggest that high-income countries have comparatively low breastfeeding rates. The World Health Organization<sup>15</sup> reports that between 2006 and 2012, only 25 per cent of infants in the European region were fed only on breast milk in their first six months. This is the lowest rate globally and compares unfavourably with 43 per cent in South-East Asia. More recent estimates by UNICEF<sup>16</sup> show the rate of exclusive breastfeeding is above 50 per cent in South Asia and in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Figure 6 uses data published in *The Lancet* in 2016 showing the proportion of infants who are breastfed (not necessarily exclusively) at six and 12 months for 20 countries in the OECD or EU (Victora et al. 2016). The light blue bars show the percentage of infants being breastfed at six months and the dark blue bars denote the percentage who are still being breastfed at 12 months. Norway had the highest rate at six months, but Japan had the highest at 12 months. The lowest rates were 13 per cent in Denmark at six months and 0.5 per cent in the United Kingdom at 12 months (some of these data date back to 2003). Evidence from the US suggests that mothers tend to stop breastfeeding in the first year of the child's life because they think that breastmilk no longer satisfies their infants (Li et al. 2008). There are sizeable differences within high-income countries, with better-educated mothers most likely to breastfeed their children.<sup>17</sup>

The WHO guidelines (2017) on breastfeeding provide 12 evidence-based recommendations on protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding in facilities that provide maternity and newborn services. Yet, the guidelines do not discuss how to support breastfeeding in the community or workplace. Working is not necessarily incompatible with breastfeeding; however, new mothers need breastfeeding breaks, places to pump and store milk or quality childcare near their places of work (Heymann, Raub, and Earle 2013, 398). All but seven of the 41 EU/OECD countries – Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Malta and the United Kingdom – guarantee breastfeeding breaks at work until the child is at least six months old,<sup>18</sup> according to the World Policy Analysis Centre.

FIGURE 6: Rates of breastfeeding at six and 12 months



Source: Victora et al. (2016). Data relate to: 2003 (Switzerland); 2005 (Czech Republic); 2006 (Austria and New Zealand); 2006–2008 (Netherlands); 2007–2008 (Greece); 2009 (Japan); 2005–2010 (United Kingdom); 2010 (Australia and Finland); 2011 (Spain and the United States); 2011–2012 (Canada); 2012 (Chile and Republic of Korea); 2012–2013 (France); 2013 (Denmark, Italy and Norway) and 2014 (Germany).

## Early childhood education and care

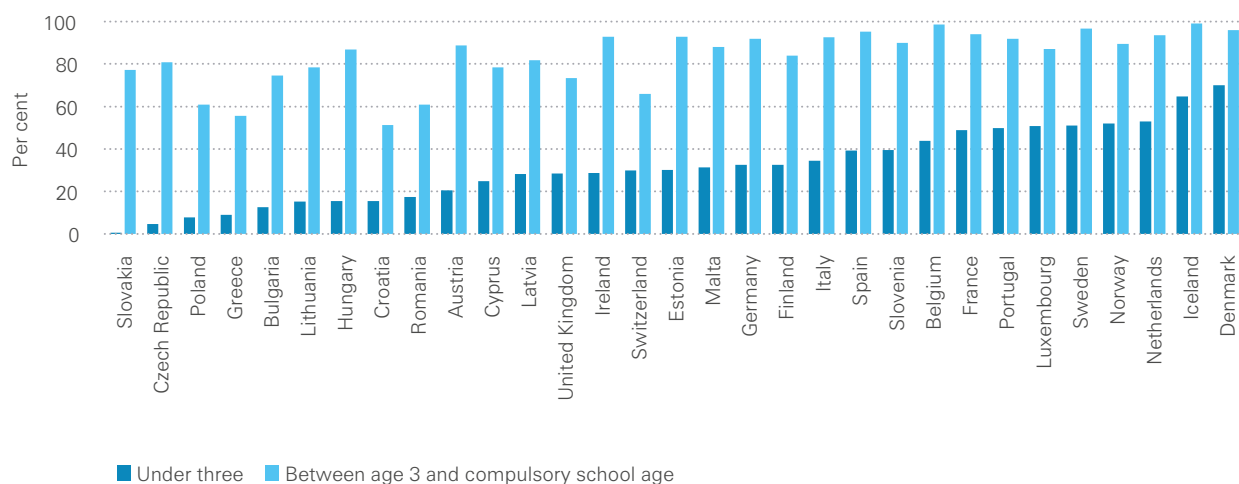
Children often have their first experience of education in a childcare centre. High-quality centres can offer children valuable social learning opportunities and enable parents to effectively balance work and family life in the child's early years. Studies (primarily in the US) suggest that early childhood education and care experiences have long-term benefits (Reynolds et al. 2007; Schweinhart et al. 1993), particularly for children from lower-income families and children whose parents left education relatively early (Heckman and Raut 2016). A recent report by UNICEF argues that universal access to early childhood learning and care can help to reduce educational inequalities in the longer term (UNICEF Office of Research 2018).

### Levels of enrolment

The majority of preschool children aged three and older attend education and care centres across the 31 European countries for which comparable statistics are available. This ranges from 51 per cent in Croatia to 99 per cent in Belgium and Iceland. In every country, children under the age of three are much less likely to attend such centres than their older peers. Less than one in 10 children under the age of three do so in the Czech Republic, Greece, Poland and Slovakia. Enrolment rates for children younger than three exceed 50 per cent in only six countries: Luxembourg and Sweden (51 per cent), Norway (52 per cent), Iceland (65 per cent) and Denmark (70 per cent).

This pattern is not necessarily surprising given that infants are likely to be looked after by a parent (usually the mother) at home while on childcare leave. Countries with shorter paid leave for mothers tend to have more children under three in childcare centres (*see Figure 7*). While the relevant target set out in the Sustainable Development Goals does not require that all preschool children attend early childhood education and care centres, it does say that all children should have access to them. However, in some countries the end of paid childcare leave does not coincide with the start of entitlements to affordable childcare in centres, leaving many families with young children struggling to fill this gap.

FIGURE 7: Enrolment for children under three and those between three and compulsory school age

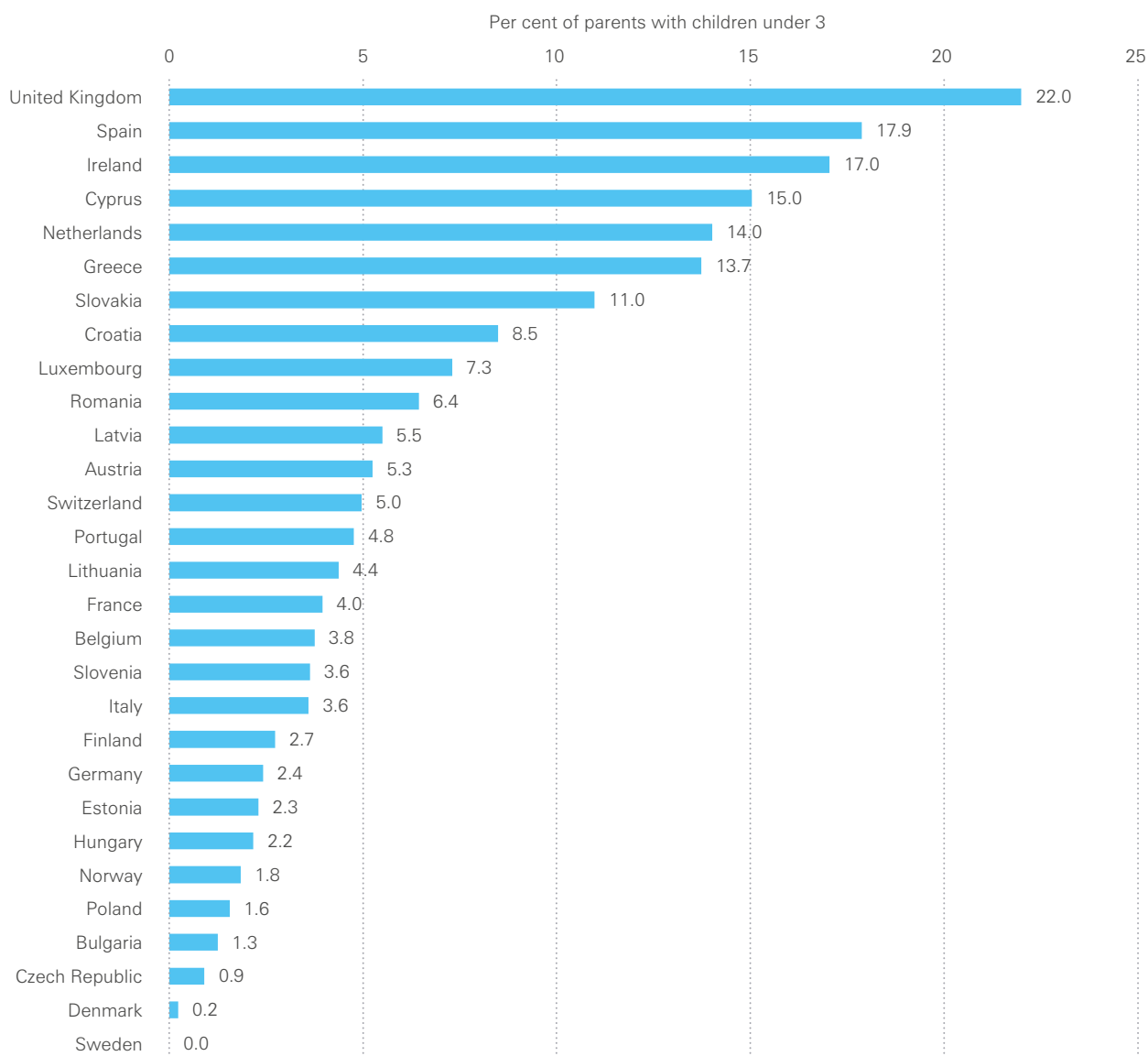


Source: Eurostat (last update 23 January 2019; EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions 2016; latest data for 2014 used for Switzerland).

## Barriers to accessing early childhood education and care

Parental preferences, cultural norms and the availability of family members to provide informal care account for some of the differences across countries in enrolment rates for children under the age of three. The availability and affordability of formal services are also important factors. In many countries, parents of children under the age of three say that the cost of childcare is the main reason for not making more use of childcare centres (see Figure 8). Affordability is a key barrier for 22 per cent of parents in the United Kingdom who say they have an 'unmet need' for childcare. Almost 18 per cent of parents with an unmet need in Spain agree, as do more than 10 per cent of parents in five other countries. In the Czech Republic, Denmark and Sweden, less than 1 per cent of parents say that affordability is an issue.

FIGURE 8: The percentage of parents with children under three years old who say that affordability is the main reason for not making (more) use of formal childcare services



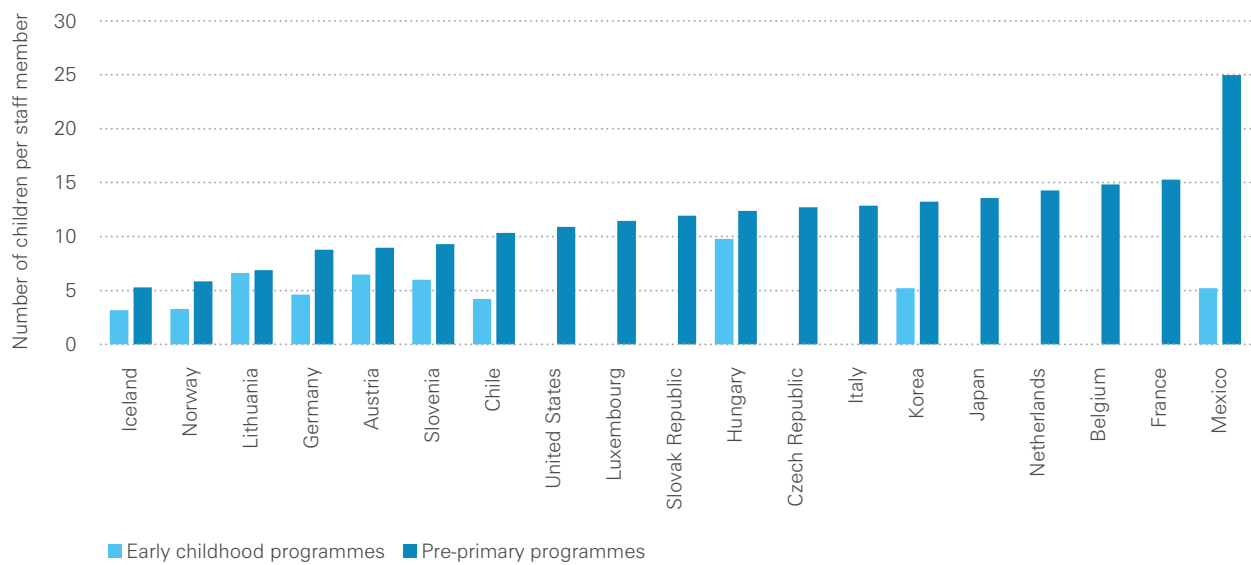
Source: EU-SILC 2016 user database (last updated 2018). Adults with children under three in the household, who say that they have an unmet need for formal childcare services.



## Quality of childcare

Measuring the quality of childcare is challenging, especially in cross-country comparisons. The proportion of staff to children is one of the indicators most often used to compare formal childcare quality.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, country coverage for this indicator is often limited. Some data are dated. Figure 9 shows the ratio of staff to children in pre-primary programmes for 19 OECD countries in 2015 (OECD 2018). The ratio ranges from five children per staff member in Iceland to 25 children per staff member in Mexico.

FIGURE 9: Child–staff ratios in early childhood education and care (2015)



Notes: Staff includes teachers as well as teaching assistants.  
Source: OECD Education at a Glance, 2018

## Conclusions and recommendations

Family-friendly policies can help parents with their caring responsibilities, regardless of their work situation. Yet even the world's richest countries fail to offer comprehensive solutions to all families. Some countries do better than others in guaranteeing paid job-protected leave to mothers and fathers and ensuring children have access to affordable care and preschool education. Others lag far behind.

This report reviewed family-friendly policies in 41 countries that are part of OECD or the EU using four country-level indicators: duration of paid leave available to mothers; duration of paid leave reserved specifically for fathers; the share of children below the age of three in childcare centres; and the share of children between the age of three and compulsory school age attending preschool or childcare centres. The league table is based on the average rank across the four indicators. Breastfeeding rates and the quality of services provided in childcare centres are also important factors to consider in assessing whether governments are pursuing family-friendly policies. However, there are not enough complete, comparable and accurate data on either to be able to include them in the league table.

Iceland, Norway and Sweden occupy the top three places in the league table of family-friendly policies. Cyprus, Greece and Switzerland take up the bottom three places among the 31 countries with data on all four indicators. No country ranks consistently high or low on all four indicators. This suggests that there is room for improvement, even among the more family-friendly countries.

Countries could improve their policies as follows:

- Provide statutory, nationwide paid leave to both mothers and fathers, where it is lacking.
- Remove barriers to the take-up of childcare leave, especially those faced by fathers.
- Enable all children to access high-quality, age-appropriate, affordable and accessible childcare centres irrespective of their personal or family circumstances.
- Fill the gap, where it exists, between the end of parental leave and the start of affordable and accessible childcare in centres so that children can continue their development without interruption.
- Ensure that mothers can breastfeed both before and after they return to work by providing such things as guaranteed breastfeeding breaks, places to pump and store milk and quality childcare nearby.
- Build the capacity of health professionals to provide breastfeeding support in hospitals and communities.
- Collect more and better data on all aspects of family-friendly policies so that programmes can be monitored, policies compared, and countries held accountable.

## Case study: Parental leave in Iceland

Iceland fundamentally reformed its parental leave in 2000, giving fathers their own right to leave for the first time and extending the total leave shared by both parents from six to nine months. The father's non-transferable share of leave started at one month. It was extended to three months in 2003. Today, the first six months of leave are equally divided between two parents. The remaining three months of leave can be freely divided. The primary motivation for the new law was the child's right of access to both parents.<sup>20</sup> The law also sought to help women and men reconcile work and family life.

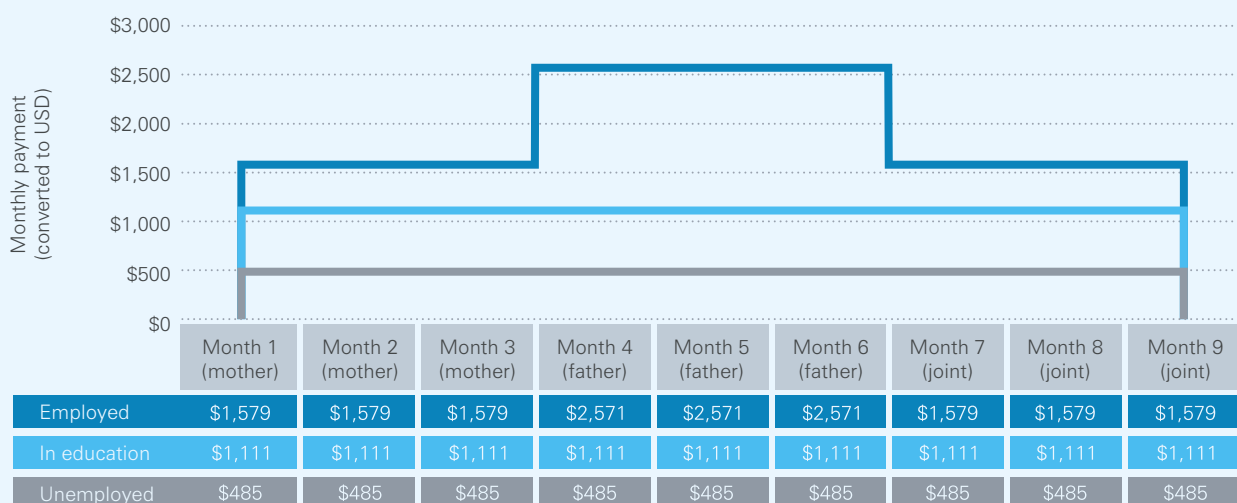
Under the new law, all parents have the right to parental leave, regardless of their employment status. Parents not in employment qualify for statutory monthly grants: ISK 59 137 (\$485) for the unemployed and ISK 135,525 (\$1,111) for those in education. The self-employed and employees who worked for at least six months prior to taking leave receive 80 per cent of their salary.<sup>21</sup>

There are large gender pay gaps in Iceland. The median work income for women was only 61 per cent of that for men in 2017. This translates into large gaps in parental leave payments. An employed woman paid the median female wage receives only \$1,579 per month while on leave compared to the \$2,571 received by her male counterpart paid the median male wage (*see Figure 10*). Mothers tend to take longer leave than fathers because of the gender pay gap and the high proportion of mothers breastfeeding in Iceland.

Until the economic crisis of 2008, 90 per cent of all fathers used their right to paternity leave. By 2016, the share of fathers taking leave dropped to 74 per cent. Those who do take paternity leave are taking fewer days than before. Last year, 50 per cent of Icelandic men who took leave chose to take less than three months, compared to just 23 per cent in 2008. The take-up of leave by fathers in Iceland is still high by international standards.

There are still institutional gaps worth bridging. Iceland is the only Nordic country that does not provide an institutional arrangement between the end of the statutory entitlement to parental leave (nine months) and the beginning of preschool when a child is about two. This means parents must make their own arrangements for childcare. Even so, 65 per cent of children under the age of three were in childcare centres in 2016, one of the highest rates in Europe and second only to Denmark.

FIGURE 10: Average leave payments for parents in three life situations (employed, unemployed, in education), Iceland, 2017



Notes: Simulation of typical leave payments in Iceland: first three months taken by the mother (Icelandic law specifies that the mother should take the leave first), payments calculated as 80 per cent of a median female income. The next three months taken by the father (and calculated as 80 per cent of median male income). The last three months are simulated using the median salary for a woman because mothers use most of the shared right to the final three months.

Source: Authors' calculation. Payment for people in employment based on gender-specific income from work for 2017 issued by Statistics Iceland (2018). Payment for people not in employment based on regulations specified by the Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave, No. 95/2000 (Ministry of Welfare of Iceland, 2016).

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## Endnotes

- 1 Thévenon and Solaz (2013) show that the effect of paid leave duration on female employment turns from positive to negative at around two years of leave across OECD countries; however, they caution that this estimate must not be over-interpreted.
- 2 <https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/maternity-protection/lang-en/index.htm>. [Accessed 5 July 2019]
- 3 <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata?Text=&Goal=4&Target=4.2> [Accessed 5 July 2019]
- 4 [https://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/exclusive\\_breastfeeding/en/](https://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/exclusive_breastfeeding/en/) [Accessed 7 May 2019]
- 5 <https://www.who.int/nutrition/bfhi/ten-steps/en/> [Accessed 7 May 2019]
- 6 The leave indicators are entitlements (not reflecting take-up), while the childcare indicators are outcomes (i.e. enrolment rates). We do not have comparable data on take-up of leave or on the availability of affordable and accessible childcare places.
- 7 To provide an example, Sweden was ranked 17th, 4th, 5th and 3rd on the four indicators in the table, giving it an average rank of 7.25, which was the best average (smallest number) of all the countries. Norway was ranked 11th, 6th, 4th and 15th, given it an average rank of 9, which was the second best, and so on. We adopted this approach because it is more transparent than, for example, using standardized scores to create the rankings.
- 8 The Japanese childcare leave (育児休業制度) is not something which can be used “only by the father”: it is a non-transferable entitlement to be used by both parents (similar to the leave policy in Iceland. See: Case Study 1).
- 9 <http://www.gender.go.jp/public/kyodosankaku/2018/201806/pdf/201806.pdf>
- 10 <https://qz.com/1335909/number-of-south-korean-men-taking-paternity-leave-jumps-66-in-2018/>
- 11 Article 12.2 of RD-Ley 6/2019, de 1 de marzo (published in Official State Gazette, BOE in Spanish, on March 7), applicable from 1 April 2019.
- 12 <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2018/09/new-five-week-parental-sharing-to-start-in-march-2019.html> (last visited on 3 May 2019).
- 13 [https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/employment\\_rights\\_and\\_conditions/leave\\_and\\_holidays/parental\\_leave.html](https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/employment_rights_and_conditions/leave_and_holidays/parental_leave.html)
- 14 The situation is different in many low- and middle-income countries as data are available through the Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys and Demographic and Health Surveys.
- 15 <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Life-stages/maternal-and-newborn-health/news/news/2015/08/who-european-region-has-lowest-global-breastfeeding-rates>
- 16 <https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/infant-and-young-child-feeding/>
- 17 See Victora et al. 2016, p.478 for references.
- 18 This includes paid maternity leave, where available. For example, if a mother is entitled to three months of post-birth paid maternity leave and three months of breastfeeding breaks once she returns to work (six months total), she is entitled to breastfeeding breaks until the child is at least six months old. See <https://www.worldpolicycenter.org/policies/are-mothers-of-infants-guaranteed-breastfeeding-breaks-at-work>.
- 19 Other indicators of quality include: (a) the system design and organization of services, including accreditation, and health and safety regulations; (b) practice within early childhood education and care settings, including interactions and relationships, the role of play, and the integration of care and education; and (c) child outcomes, including the child’s social, emotional, mental, physical skills and benefits to family and community (see: *Innocenti Report Card 14*).
- 20 Article 2 of the Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave.
- 21 With those who do not meet the criterion qualifying for minimum payment.

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Online ISSN 9789210042598

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