2 Interpreting OECD social indicators

The purpose of Society at a Glance

Society at a Glance 2024 aims to address the growing demand for quantitative evidence on the current state of society, the overall trends, and their possible drivers across OECD countries. One objective is to assess and compare social outcomes that are currently the focus of policy debates. Another is to provide an overview of societal responses, and how effective policy actions have been in furthering social development. This edition of *Society at a Glance* includes a special chapter that analyses the decline in fertility rates that has occurred in many OECD countries.

The indicators are based on a variant of the "Pressure-State-Response" framework that has also been used in other policy areas (United Nations, 1997[1]). This groups indicators into three areas:

- *"Social context"*: refers to general indicators that, while not usually direct policy targets, are relevant information for understanding the social landscape. An example is the proportion of elderly people to working-age people.
- *"Social status"*: describes the social outcomes that policies try to influence. Ideally, the selected indicators can be easily and unambiguously interpreted. As an example, all countries would rather have low poverty rates than high ones.
- *"Societal response"*: provides information about measures and activities designed to affect social status indicators. Examples are governmental policies, but also activities of NGOs, families and broader civil society.

In addition, the framework used in *Society at a Glance* groups social status and societal response indicators according to the broad policy fields they cover:

- "self-sufficiency"
- "equity"
- "health status"
- "social cohesion"

A related OECD publication, *How's Life? Measuring Well-being*, presents a large set of well-being indicators, with an aim to provide an accurate picture of societal well-being and progress. Compared with *Society at a Glance*, *How's Life?* uses a broader set of outcome measures but excludes indicators of policy responses (OECD, 2020[2]). In addition, the special chapter in *Society at a Glance* (Chapter 1 in this volume) provides policy analysis and recommendations.

OECD countries differ substantially in their collection and publication of social indicators. When selecting indicators for this report, the following questions were considered.

- *What is the degree of indicator comparability across countries?* This report strives to present the best comparative information for each of the areas covered. However, the indicators presented are not confined to those for which there is "absolute" comparability. Readers are alerted to the nature of the data used and the limits to comparability.
- *What is the minimum number of countries for which the data must be available?* This report includes only primary indicators that are available for at least two-thirds of OECD countries.
- *What breakdowns should be used at a country level?* Social indicators can often be broken down at a national level into outcomes by social sub-categories, such as age, gender and family type. Pragmatism governs here: the breakdowns presented vary according to the indicator considered, and are determined by what is readily available.

Chapters 2 to 8 describe the key evidence. Some of these indicators are published by the OECD on a regular basis (e.g. *Social Expenditure Database* and *OECD Health Statistics*). Others have been collected on an *ad hoc* basis or involve transformation of existing indicators.

The selection and description of indicators

Risks that Matter

To find out more about people's perceptions of social and economic risks and how well they think their government reacts to those risks, in 2018 the OECD launched a new cross-national survey, the OECD *Risks that Matter* Survey (OECD, 2019[3]). The 2022 survey (the third wave) draws on a representative sample over 27 000 people aged 18-to-64-years-old in 27 OECD countries: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States (OECD, 2023[4]).

The survey questionnaire consists of three main sections covering: risk perceptions and the social and economic challenges facing respondents and their families; satisfaction with how well government performs in providing public services and benefits; and desired policies or preferences for social protection going forward. Most questions are fixed-response, taking the form of either binary-response or scale-response. The questionnaire is conducted in national languages. More via www.oecd.org/social/risks-that-matter.htm.

Table 2.1. List of perception indicators

Social and economic risk perceptions and concerns
Satisfaction with social policies and the government's COVID-19 response
Preferences for government intervention and social policies

General social context indicators

When comparing *social status* and *societal response* indicators, it is easy to suggest that one country is doing badly relative to others, or that another is spending a lot of money in a particular area compared with others. It is important to put such statements into a broader context. General context indicators including *household income, fertility, migration, marriage and divorce* and the *demographic trends*, provide the general background for other indicators in this report (see Chapter 3).

Table 2.2. List of general context indicators

Household income
Fertility
Migration
Marriage and divorce
Demographic trends

Self-sufficiency indicators

Self-sufficiency is an underlying social policy objective. Self-sufficiency is promoted by ensuring active social and economic participation by people, and their autonomy in activities of daily life. A selection of indicators is shown in Chapter 4.

For many people, paid employment provides income, identity, and social interaction. Social security systems are mostly funded by taxes levied on those in paid employment. Promoting higher paid *employment* is a priority for all OECD countries (OECD, 2023[5]). To be *unemployed* means that supporting oneself and one's family is not always possible. *Skills* also play a central role in ensuring people find and keep employment, and are particularly important for young people (OECD, 2023[6]). *Student performance* signals an important dimension of human capital accumulation, measured by OECD PISA towards the end of compulsory education in most countries (OECD, 2023[7]; 2023[8]). Good student performance enables longer-term self-sufficiency, including in paid employment. The number of *expected years after labour market exit* is a societal response, determined by employment options for older people, age of pension eligibility, and self-sufficiency in old age (OECD, 2023[9]).

The table below lists the chosen indicators for assessing whether OECD countries have been successful in meeting goals for assuring the self-sufficiency of people and their families.

Table 2.3. List of self-sufficiency indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Employment	Expected years after labour market exit
Unemployment	
Skills	
Student performance	

Equity indicators

Equity is another common social policy objective. Equitable outcomes are measured mainly in terms of people's access to resources.

Equity has many dimensions (Chapter 5). It includes the ability to access social services and economic opportunities, as well as equity in outcomes. Opinions vary as to what exactly entails a fair distribution of opportunities or outcomes. Additionally, as it is hard to obtain information on all equity dimensions, the *social status* equity indicators presented here are limited to inequality in financial resources.

Income and wealth inequalities are natural starting points for considering equity across the whole of society (OECD, 2023[10]). However, policy concerns are often more strongly focussed on those at the bottom end of the income distribution. Hence the use of *poverty* measures, in addition to overall inequality. Consideration of guaranteed minimum income benefits shows financial support and obtainable living standards for low-income families. During periods with high unemployment, cash transfers for working-age people are a major income safety net. The indicator of *unemployment and social safety net benefits* complements the more general measures of income inequality and poverty. All OECD countries have social protection systems that redistribute resources and insure people against various contingencies. These interventions are summarised by public *social spending*

(OECD, 2023[11]) Equity indicators are clearly related to self-sufficiency indicators. Taken together, they reveal how national social protection systems address the challenge of balancing adequate provision with system sustainability and promotion of citizens' self-sufficiency. Having access to quality *affordable housing* is also important to reduce poverty risks, improve equality of opportunity and make growth inclusive and sustainable (OECD, 2024[12]).

Table 2.4. List of equity indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Income and wealth inequalities	Social spending
Income poverty	Unemployment and social safety net benefits
Affordable housing	

Health indicators

Health status is a fundamental objective of healthcare systems, but improving health status also requires a wider focus on its social determinants, making health a central objective of social policy (Chapter 6).

The links between social and health conditions are well-established. Indeed, educational gains, public health measures, better access to healthcare and continuing progress in medical technology, have contributed to significant improvements in health status, as measured by *life expectancy*. *Suicides* give additional information about health and societal challenges. Suicide is a significant cause of death in many OECD countries. The reasons for suicidal behaviour are complex, and there are multiple risk factors that can predispose people to attempt suicide. Mental ill-health, including depression, can increase the risk of dying by suicide, as well as shocks such as pandemics and financial crises. *Health spending* is a more general and key part of the policy response of healthcare systems to concerns about health conditions. *Health and care workforce* can directly impact the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of healthcare services, ultimately influencing population health outcomes. Another health indicator for total population and youth is *Tobacco and alcohol consumption*, both associated with numerous harmful health and social consequences.

Nevertheless, health problems can originate from interrelated social conditions – such as unemployment, poverty, and inadequate housing – beyond the reach of health policies. Moreover, more than spending levels *per se,* the effectiveness of health interventions often depends on other characteristics of the healthcare system, such as low coverage of medical insurance or co-payments, which may act as barriers to seeking medical help. A much broader range of indicators on health conditions and interventions is provided in *OECD Heath Statistics* (OECD, 2023[13]) and in *Health at a Glance* (OECD, 2023[14]).

Table 2.5. List of health indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Life expectancy	Health spending
Suicides	Health and care workforce
Tobacco and alcohol consumption	

Social cohesion indicators

Social cohesion is often identified as an over-arching objective of countries' social policies. While limited agreement exists on its meaning, a range of symptoms signal *lack* of social cohesion. Social cohesion is positively evident in the extent to which people participate in their communities or feel safe (Chapter 7).

Life satisfaction is determined not only by economic development, but also by diverse experiences and living conditions. *Trust in public in institutions* and participation in *voting* are two important measures on how well people trust their country's institutions and participate in society. A measure of *Violence against Women*, encompassing all forms of violence perpetrated against women, is included to highlight the persistently high prevalence of such violence (OECD, 2023[15]; 2023[16]). *Online activities* is another important element of social cohesion indicator, positively, through online connectedness, or negatively, for example through adolescent cyberbullying.

It is difficult to identify directly relevant and comparable response indicators at a country level on social cohesion issues. Policies that are relevant to other dimensions of social policy (self-sufficiency, equity, and health) may also influence social cohesion.

Table 2.6. List of social cohesion indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Life satisfaction	Voting
Trust in public institutions	
Violence against women	
Online activities	

What can be found in this publication

Each of the indicators covered in Chapters 3 to 8 includes page of text and a page of charts, which generally follow a standardised pattern. The choice of the time period over which change is considered is partly determined by data constraints. However, ideally changes are examined: 1) over the last generation, to compare how society is evolving in the longer term; or 2) over the period since the COVID-19 pandemic, so the extent to which recent economic fluctuations are influencing social indicators can be studied.

A "Definition and measurement" box provides the definitions of data used and a discussion of potential measurement issues.

The data underlying each indicator are available on the OECD website, or by clicking on the StatLink at bottom right of each chart (where data for more countries are also available).

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