

# Diverse approaches to closing the childcare gap

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# Childcare gap?

**The disjuncture** between the end of leave & access to affordable, high-quality childcare

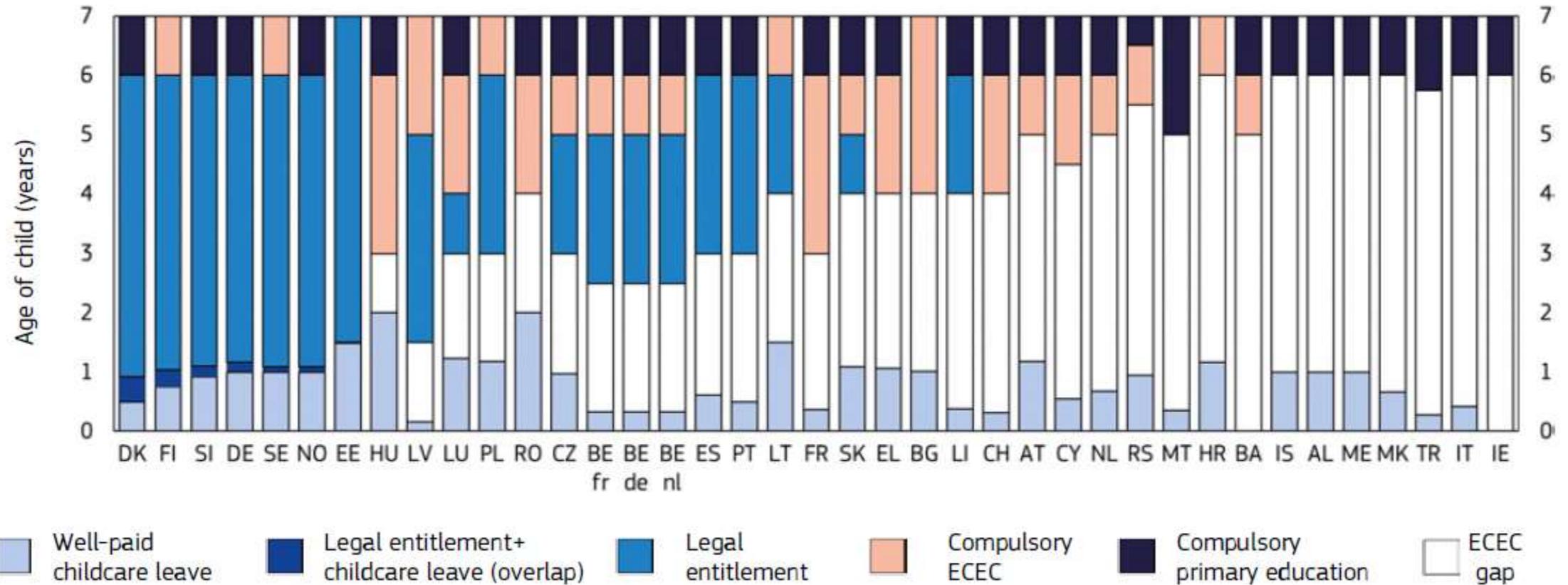
- ## 'A policy coordination failure' (OECD, 2007, 2010; Eurofound, 2010)
- ## **A lack of complementarity & weak integration** between parenting leaves & ECEC

Typically measured as a vacuum between the **end of (well-paid) parenting leaves & the start of a legal entitlement to ECEC** (Moss, 2011; Dobrotić, 2022)

- ## Well-paid leave? Legal entitlement to ECEC?

**Trade-offs** between work and care

**Figure B3: Gap between childcare leave and ECEC place guarantee, 2024/2025**



Source: Eurydice LP&R

**Well-paid leave here with a relatively low threshold!**

# Policy mechanisms producing the childcare gap?

**(1) Parenting leaves design faced with many exclusions:** various inequalities in statutory leave entitlements/**systematic exclusion** of some parents

- ## Normative ideas about the **'ideal' caregiver** & poor accommodation of policies to the lived experiences of diverse parents' situations
- ## A weak recognition of **family diversity** within the leave design (e.g. lone parents, parents faced with disabilities/chronic illness, 'larger' families; Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023)
- ## Leave eligibility is shaped by a complex interplay of factors such as **employment status** (e.g. employee/self-employed/marginally employed), **employment characteristics** (e.g. contribution histories, employment sector, earnings/hours accumulated), **legal residency or citizenship, family situation or sexual orientation** (cf. Dobrotić & Blum, 2019; Kaufmann et al., 2022; Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023)

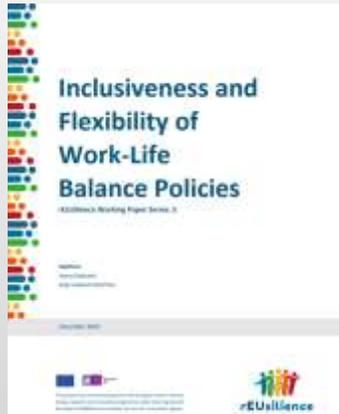
**TABLE 2: ACCESS TO PAID PARENTING LEAVES BY STATUS GROUPS (2023)**

	Belgium			Croatia			Poland			Spain			Sweden			UK			
	ML	PtL	PL	ML	PtL	PL	ML	PtL	PL	ML	PtL	PL	ML	PtL	PL	ML	PtL	PL	
Employee	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	-*	[++]	++	++	++	++	++	-*
Self-employed	+	+	-	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	-	[++]	++	++	++	-	-	-
“Short” contracts	+/-	-	-	+/-	-	+/-	n/a	-	+	++	++	-*	[+/-]	+/-	+/-	-	-	-	
Unemployed	+	-	-	+/-	-	+/-	n/a	-	+	++	++	-	n/a	-	+	+/-	-	-	
Inactive	-	-	-	+/-	-	+/-	n/a	-	+	-	-	-	n/a	-	+	-	-	-	
Students	-	-	-	+/-	-	+/-	n/a	-	+	-	-	-	n/a	-	+	-	-	-	
Same-sex parents	++	++	++	+/-	+/-	+/-	-	-	-	++	++	-*	[++]	++	++	++	++	++	-*

**Notes:** ML= maternity leave; PtL=paternity/co-parent leave; PL=parental leave; ++ Eligible; + Eligible, but right to less generous scheme (e.g. shorter leave period and/or lower benefit); +/- Eligible, but with additional conditions (e.g. activity “test”, longer residency period in a country, formal right of parental care); – Not eligible; n/a Not applicable (maternity leave is subsumed under parental leave scheme); [ ] The benefit can be exercised through parental benefit days; \* Only unpaid leave is available.

**Sources:** Dobrotić (2023a); Duvander and Löfgren (2023); Fusulier and Mortelmans (2023); Kurowska et al. (2023); Meil et al. (2023); O’Brien et al. (2023).

Source: Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis (2023)



# Policy mechanisms producing the childcare gap?

(1) **Parenting leaves design faced with many exclusions:** various inequalities in statutory leave entitlements/systematic exclusion of some parents

(2) **Absence of well-paid leaves** (e.g. ceilings, flat-rate payments for parental leave, unpaid leaves)

## Relationship between leave and ECEC entitlements (April 2025)

Country	Child's age (months) at:			Gap (in months) between:	
	(a) end of leave	end of <b>well-paid</b> leave (b) <sup>1</sup>	start of ECEC universal entitlement (c) <sup>2</sup>	TOTAL LEAVE (c)-(a)	WELL-PAID (c)-(b)
Austria	24	14.2	▪ 5 years: OB & PT	36	45.8
Belgium	51	4.2	▪▪ 2.5 years	No gap	25.8
Bulgaria	36	12.1	▪ 4 years: OB	12	35.9
Croatia	36	14	▪ 6 years: OB & PT	36	58
Cyprus	13.5	6.5	▪ 4,7 years: OB	42.5	49.5
Czech Republic	36	11.6	▪ 3 years: OB at 5	No gap	24.4
Denmark <sup>2024 data</sup>	11.1	11.1	▪▪ 6 months	No gap	<b>No gap</b>
Estonia	36	17.8	▪▪18 months	No gap	<i>!No gap!</i>
Finland	36	12.4	▪▪ 9 months	No gap	<b>No gap</b>
France	36	3	▪ 3 years: OB	No gap	33
Germany	84	14	▪▪1 year	No gap	<i>!No gap!</i>
Greece	22.7-72	6.4-12.7	▪ 4 years: PT	25.3-no gap	35.3-41.6
Hungary	36	24	▪▪ birth: OB at 3	<i>!No gap!</i>	<i>!No gap!</i>
Ireland	24.3	..	▪▪ 32 months: PT	7.7	..
Italy	16	5	..	No ECEC entitlement	
Latvia	37.9	1.9	▪▪ 19 months	No gap	17.1
Lithuania	36	18	..	No ECEC entitlement	
Luxembourg	14.8	14.8	▪ 1 year: PT; OB at 4	No gap	<b>No gap</b>
Malta	12.2-76.2	4.2	▪▪ 3 years	No gap	<b>No gap</b>
Netherlands	16	8.4	▪ 4 years: PT	32	39.6
Poland	50.2	14.2	▪ 3 years	No gap	21.8
Portugal	36	6	▪ 3 years	No gap	30
Romania	24	24	▪▪ Birth	<i>!No gap!</i>	<i>!No gap!</i>
Slovakia	36	13	▪ 5 years	24	47
Slovenia	13.2	13.2	▪▪ end of Par. leave	No gap	<b>No gap</b>
Spain	39.7	6.2	▪ 3 years	No gap	29.8
Sweden	18	13	▪▪ 12 months	No gap	<b>No gap</b>

# Policy mechanisms producing the childcare gap?

- (1) **Parenting leaves design faced with many exclusions:** various inequalities in statutory leave entitlements/systematic exclusion of some parents
- (2) **Absence of well-paid leaves** (e.g. ceilings, flat-rate payments for parental leave, unpaid leaves)
- (3) Weak attention to **legal entitlement to ECEC + other design elements** (e.g. how affordable are services, hours?)

**TABLE 2. ENROLMENT RATES IN CHILDCARE AND PRE-SCHOOL**

		Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
<b>Enrolment in childcare and pre-school (%)</b>	Childcare (0-2 y.o)	57	20	13	41	48	45
	Pre-school (3-5 y.o)	98	72	88	97	95	100
<b>Average usual weekly hours in ECEC</b>	Childcare (0-2 y.o)	32	38	34	28	31	20
	Pre-school (3-5 y.o)						

**Source:** Own elaboration from OECD Family Database, 2020 or latest available. Average usual weekly hours in ECEC are not available for pre-school (3-5 y.o.).



Source: León & Cerrillo (2023)

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- (1) **Parenting leaves design faced with many exclusions:** various inequalities in statutory leave entitlements/systematic exclusion of some parents
  - (2) **Absence of well-paid leaves** (e.g. ceilings, flat-rate payments for parental leave, unpaid leaves)
  - (3) Weak attention to **legal entitlement to ECEC + other design elements**
- + Policy practice of **siloes policy making**
- ## Different roots of two policies (fragmentation, limited coordination & coherence)
  - ## Some positive sights (e.g. the revised Barcelona targets – 2022/C 484/01 make some effort to bridge traditionally siloes policy domains, but not yet materialised in concrete policy instruments/practices; Dobrotić & Uzunalioglu, forthcoming)

# What if we move from an ‘average’/’typical’ family?

## **Precarious workers?**

Not only weak leave policy eligibility, but also access to ECEC when there is no legal entitlement

## **Families having heavier care responsibilities?**

Very weak or limited recognition in policy design (e.g. larger families vs families with a child with a disability or serious illness) + very different approaches (in most cases, low valorisation of care)

## **Lone parents?**

Very limited recognition in policy design

## **Migrants?**

Very limited attention to various legal statuses that serve as a means of exclusions

...

# How to close the childcare gap?

A **universal right** to paid statutory parenting leaves

*„It is emphasised that **leave policy should be conceived from a wider perspective**, not only as “employment policy – as job-protected entitlements to leaves from paid work for care work” (Doucet, 2021, 228), but **as a right to care**, providing time to care to all parents regardless of their position on, for example, the labour market or in the family.” (Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023)*

All parents should be granted **access to well-paid leave**

All children should have a right to high-quality ECEC, with **legal entitlement to ECEC** being a crucial policy mechanism

Leave policy & ECEC designs should **recognise & acknowledge** the additional needs of some families

**Other ideas?**