

Summary

The report examines child poverty among immigrant families in Sweden during the period 2012 to 2022. The overall aim is to highlight differences between various origin groups in Sweden and to understand why children of foreign-born parents face a greater risk of being in poverty compared to children with Swedish-born parents. Unlike much previous research, which often treats immigrants as a homogeneous group, this report analyses differences between thirteen distinct origin groups. It also takes into account parents' time spent in Sweden, reasons for residence permits, labour market attachment, education level, and household composition.

Child poverty is defined here not only as a lack of basic material resources but as a situation in which children lack the economic means to participate in society on equal terms. Therefore, the analysis uses both relative measures, which capture a household's position within the income distribution, and absolute measures, which indicate whether a family's income reaches a reasonable minimum living standard.

Major differences between origin groups

The results show clear and substantial differences in poverty levels between groups of different origins. Children with Swedish-born parents generally face a very low risk of living in either relative or absolute poverty. In sharp contrast, a large share of children with backgrounds in Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East and Africa are in poverty. More than eight out of ten children with at least one Somali-born parent are in relative poverty, and nearly half are in absolute poverty. The figures are also high among

children with Syrian and Iraqi backgrounds, while those from EU countries and Finland are much closer to those with Swedish born parents.

Trends over time 2012–22

The analysis of trends over time shows that child poverty in Sweden has changed to some extent, but not in a uniform way across all origin groups. Among children with Swedish background, both relative and absolute poverty have remained stable at low levels throughout the period.

Among groups with foreign background, the pattern varies markedly: for children with origins in Syria, poverty rises sharply up to around 2016–17 and then declines, although levels remain high towards the end of the period. For Iraq and Iran, by contrast, there is a clear downward trend over time – especially for Iraq, where the decline is substantial. Somalia remains at very high levels throughout the period but shows a slight downward trend.

Time in Sweden and economic integration

A key explanation for these differences is how long parents have lived in Sweden. Newly arrived families display very high levels of both relative and absolute poverty, particularly among those with origins in Syria and Somalia. Poverty levels do decrease over time, but differences compared to Swedish-born families often remain even after 25 years in the country. This indicates that economic integration is a long-term process and that some groups face persistent barriers, such as limited access to employment, residential segregation, or discrimination in the labour market.

Refugee status and reason for migration

The report shows that children of parents who have received residence permits as refugees have a significantly higher risk of living in poverty compared to children whose parents migrated for other reasons, such as work or studies. This is particularly evident among

children from Syria, Somalia, and Iraq. One reason is that many refugee families arrive with limited financial resources and without work experience or social networks in Sweden. At the same time, many are settled in neighbourhoods with weak labour markets and limited access to public services, which further hinders their path toward self-sufficiency.

Parental education, employment, and household situation

Employment and education are crucial factors in reducing the risk of child poverty. Children whose parents are employed generally have much better economic conditions, and the differences are particularly striking between households where both parents work and those where neither does. A similar pattern applies to education: children whose parents have only completed compulsory schooling face a much higher risk of living in poverty than those whose parents have post-secondary education.

At the same time, the analysis shows that education and work do not always protect against poverty. Among families with Somali or Syrian backgrounds, poverty remains high even when parents are employed or have upper secondary education. This suggests that other barriers, such as language difficulties, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, discrimination, and low pay in sectors where many immigrants work, also play an important role.

Household structure also matters. Children living with single parents are at a much higher risk of poverty. The same applies to children in large families, where more children mean higher expenses and a greater economic burden, especially in low-income households.

Poverty duration and dynamics

An important part of the report concerns the duration of poverty. It is not enough to know how many are poor at a given moment; we must also understand how long poverty lasts. Persistent poverty is particularly harmful, as it increases the risk of negative outcomes for children's health, education, and future life chances (Adjei 2022;

Lesner 2018). By following children over several years, the study examines both how many experience poverty at a specific point and how long their economic hardship persists.

The results show very large differences between origin groups even when poverty duration is considered. Among children with Swedish-born parents, around 4 percent have lived in relative poverty for four of the past four years. The corresponding share is around 70 percent among children of Somali origin and between 40 and 60 percent among those with roots in Syria, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East. The pattern is similar for absolute poverty, though the overall levels are lower.

Understanding the differences: results from the decomposition analysis

To understand why these disparities, arise and persist, the report applies a decomposition analysis using the Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) method. This analysis makes it possible to assess how much of the poverty gap between children with Swedish and foreign background can be explained by socioeconomic factors such as education, employment, and family structure, and how much remains unexplained.

Taken jointly, these factors explain a considerable proportion of the observed disparities for certain groups. For instance, much of the poverty differential between children of Swedish-born parents and children of non-European-born parents is attributable to differences in parental education, labour-market attachment, and family structure. Nevertheless, significant differences in child poverty remain even after these factors are taken into account. This suggests that structural barriers, such as discrimination in the labor and housing markets (Ahmed & Hammarstedt 2008; Carlsson & Rooth 2007), difficulties in accessing information and services, and the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, also influence certain groups' ability to achieve economic integration.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, child poverty among immigrant families is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a question of immigrant background alone. It is largely about how well different groups succeed in achieving economic integration, and how structural conditions shape their opportunities to do so. This also means that effective measures must be adapted to the specific needs and circumstances of different groups. For some, the priority is to improve access to work and education; for others, the key lies in combating discrimination and strengthening opportunities for full participation in Swedish society.

The report concludes with a policy discussion highlighting that the substantial disparities in child poverty between origin groups require more than minor adjustments to current systems. The factors underlying child poverty in immigrant families are complex and relate to the functioning of the labour market, the design of the welfare state, and how different groups are treated in society. The most important explanation for the differences is parents' establishment in the labour market, which means that policy must prioritize measures that strengthen opportunities for employment and self-sufficiency. This is particularly relevant for groups that face significant barriers to labour market entry, such as limited recognition of foreign qualifications, weak language skills, and discrimination. At the same time, the results show that employment alone is not always sufficient, as many immigrant parents are concentrated in low-wage and insecure jobs. Addressing child poverty therefore also requires measures that improve job quality and reduce the prevalence of temporary and unstable employment contracts

The policy discussion further shows that the welfare state plays a central role in mitigating economic vulnerability. Unemployment insurance benefits and child allowances have declined in real terms, meaning that these supports no longer provide the same protection against poverty as they once did. This is particularly consequential for families in weak economic positions and for groups with low labour market attachment. When benefit levels lag behind wage and cost developments, more children risk living in economic hardship, even in households where parents are employed. This underscores

the need to review benefit levels and indexation in key social benefits to families to ensure that they continue to function as an effective safety net.

In addition to welfare benefits, the report highlights the importance of interventions directed specifically at children. Subsidized extracurricular activities, school-based initiatives such as free breakfast, and access to nutritious school meals can reduce social exclusion and help compensate for resource differences between households.

Finally, the report emphasizes the importance of improved data collection and monitoring to support evidence-based policymaking. More detailed and coordinated data on children's living conditions, family resources, and the effects of different reforms are essential for tracking developments over time and identifying groups at risk of long-term poverty.