



PRESS RELEASE

Public sector achievement in 36 countries: A comparative assessment of inputs, outputs and outcomes

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This report answers the question of how the 28 EU Member States plus Canada, the US, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland performed in the various domains of the public sector in the period 1995-2012. We look in detail at education and health, and more broadly at social safety, housing, social security and public administration.

The most recent results for education, health, housing, social security and public administration broadly show the following picture for the Member States of the European Union:

- Northern European countries performed best on average in each of these five sectors, followed by Western European countries.
- Central and Eastern European and Southern European countries performed less well on average in each of these five sectors, with one exception: the performance of Southern Europe on health (life expectancy and infant mortality) was comparable with Western Europe.

The key findings for each sector are set out below.

Europe still lags behind Japan and South Korea on educational achievement in mathematics and language:

- The average maths and language achievements of 15 year-old students in Western Europe, Northern Europe, Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) and North America were comparable in 2012, but substantially worse than in Eastern Asia (South Korea and Japan) and better than in Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe.
- The average performance in maths in the Netherlands fell substantially between 2003 and 2012, while the average performance in language showed little change.
- The achievement gap in maths and language across the 36 countries described in this report is narrowing. This is driven by the fact that achievement in the low-scoring countries is improving faster on average than achievement in high-scoring countries.

- Scientific studies show that the maths and language performance of 15 year-old students is determined by (i) individual characteristics and family socio-economic status; (ii) the quality of teachers and teaching materials; and (iii) institutional characteristics of schools and the education system. Key institutional characteristics are:
 - Exams in which the content is not determined by schools themselves, but by independent external bodies.
 - Monitoring of lessons.
 - Publication of results, so that the performance of individual schools can be assessed by comparing them with regional or national averages.
 - Regulations to ensure that results determine whether students progress to the next year.
 - Autonomy for schools to take decisions on process and staffing policy, but not to determine budget levels or subject content.
 - Promoting competition between schools by admitting private schools into the system alongside state schools. This will require public resources to ensure that less well-off students are also able to choose a private school.

Health differences between countries are narrowing:

- Life expectancy at birth was highest in Japan in 2012, at 83.2 years. In Europe, it was highest in Southern and Western European countries. The lowest life expectancy was found in the Central and Eastern European countries. Life expectancy at birth in the Netherlands was 81.2 years. Life expectancy is rising faster in the poorest performing countries (by an average of six months per year) than in the best-performing countries (two months per year). In the Netherlands it is rising by an average of 2.5 months per year.
- Infant mortality in Europe was lowest in the Northern European countries (an average of 2.7 deaths per 1,000 live births) and highest in the Central and Eastern European countries. Infant mortality in the 28 EU Member States fell from 7.5 per 1,000 live births in 1995 to 3.8 in 2012. The biggest decline occurred in countries where infant mortality was highest. Infant mortality in the Netherlands fell from 5.5 to 3.7 per 1,000 live births.
- Differences in life expectancy and infant mortality between the 36 countries described in this report are reducing. This is because poorer-performing countries have seen a major improvement in the health of their citizens in recent years.
- Differences in health status across countries appear to be explained in part by differences in lifestyle, differences in health spending (as a percentage of GDP) and differences in income per capita.

High crime figures: poorer safety policy or better registration?

- Comparing crime figures across countries is not simple. The only available international data are based on police records. A key problem here is that the number of crimes recorded in a given country may be high either because the number of crimes is high or because a relatively high proportion of crimes are reported or recorded: the safety paradox.
- On average, the countries in this report spent between 1% and 2.5% of their GDP on public order and safety in 2012. Central and Eastern European countries spent the most on average, Northern European countries the least. The lion's share of this spending went on the police (65%), followed by the judiciary (23%) and the prison system (12%).

- The risk of being arrested and the risk of detention are negatively associated with nationally recorded crime levels. Due to the lack of comparability of recorded crime, it cannot be assumed that this is a causal relationship. On the other hand, scientific studies do show in general that the risk of arrest – particularly where it is visible – has a deterrent effect.
- Detention can temporarily prevent convicted perpetrators from committing new crimes; it can also have a deterrent effect on other potential offenders. However, the evidence on reducing recidivism among detainees is not convincing. Simple detention without an individual treatment programme does not result in less recidivism and can even be counter-productive.
- People in countries with higher recorded crime rates generally have more trust in the police and the legal system. This may mean that higher crime rates are partly due to a greater willingness by citizens to report incidents to the police.

Housing: gradual narrowing of differences between EU Member States:

- In the housing sector, this report looked at housing quality, the degree to which dwellings provide sufficient space, and affordability. Within Europe, the Northern European countries performed best on average in these areas in 2012, although the difference compared with Western Europe was not large. Southern Europe and particularly Central and Eastern Europe did notably less well. At individual country level, Sweden, Norway, Ireland and Luxembourg performed best, while Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania and Portugal did least well.
- In most cases, countries improved their performance between 2007 and 2012. The differences between European regions narrowed.
- Several factors limit the comparability of the figures, but a higher aggregate score for the dimensions quality, space and affordability is generally associated with a higher income. Dwellings are mainly produced via 'the market', with government policy generally limited to taking corrective actions where necessary. People's housing situation is also influenced by the behaviour of households (e.g. through family ownership) and is partly historically determined (e.g. by the ratio of rented to owner-occupied homes).

Northern Europe performs best on social security:

- The principal objectives of social security are to combat poverty and protect citizens against economic deficits. On that basis, this report looks at poverty, the share of young people not in work, long-term unemployment and the gap between income before and after retirement.
- Within Europe, the Northern European countries performed best on average. This means that they had a low percentage of people in poverty, as well as a low proportion of young people not in work and a low long-term unemployment rate. The gap between income before and after retirement was also narrow in these countries. Northern Europe is followed by the countries of Western Europe; the countries of Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe performed less well.
- In the period 2005-2011, poverty rates rose in most Western European countries, but fell in the majority of Northern European and Central and Eastern European countries.
- Long-term unemployment has increased in most countries in recent years. The strongest increases occurred in a number of Southern European and Central and Eastern European countries, as well as in Ireland.

Northern Europe also does best on public administration:

- In the public administration sector, this report looks at the influential World Bank indicators for 'good governance'. These indicators measure the quality of six components of public administration based on the opinions of experts, business leaders and citizens.
- The average performance on good governance was highest in Northern Europe in 2013, followed by Oceania (Australia and New Zealand), Western Europe, North America and Eastern Asia (Japan and South Korea). Central and Eastern Europe and Southern Europe performed less well.
- The quality of public administration declined in the countries of Southern Europe (except for Malta), Western Europe (except for Switzerland) and North America between 1996 and 2013. By contrast, the quality of public administration improved in Central and Eastern Europe (except for Hungary and Slovenia) and in Japan and Korea. Northern Europe and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) recorded stable high scores throughout the period.
- The quality of the public administration increases as countries are more affluent, where press freedom is greater and where everyone has access to the civil service apparatus.

These are the principal findings from the SCP publication *Public sector achievement in 36 countries: A comparative assessment of inputs, outputs and outcomes*, which was published on Friday, 18 December 2015. This publication follows earlier editions in 2004 and 2012. It was co-financed by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. The results presented in this report will be used inter alia during the Dutch presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2016.

SCP publication 2015/33, *Public sector achievement in 36 countries: A comparative assessment of inputs, outputs and outcomes*. Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, ISBN 978 90 377 0741 0, price €46.00.
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More information:

Benedikt Goderis, tel. +31 (0)70 340 6115, e-mail: b.goderis@scp.nl
General questions: SCP Communications Officer: Irma Schenk,
tel. +31 (0)70 340 5605, e-mail: i.schenk@scp.nl