Federal Public Service
Social Security

EVOLUTION OF THE SOCIAL SITUATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION IN BELGIUM

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

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International comparison

Introduction

According to the latest EU-SILC figures from [Statbel](), in 2023, 18,6% of the Belgian population, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)[1]. This percentage is lower than in the period before the COVID-19 crisis. AROPE fell from 20,0% in 2019 to 18,6% in 2023. This favourable evolution is mainly due to a decrease in the monetary poverty risk (from 14,8% in EU-SILC 2019 to 12,3% in EU-SILC 2023) and in the share of (quasi-) jobless households (12,8% in EU-SILC 2019 versus 10,5% in EU-SILC 2023)[2]. In contrast, the share of people who are severely socially and materially deprived was relatively stable (6,3% in EU-SILC 2019 and 6,1% in EU-SILC 2023).

A more detailed analyses of the recent EU-SILC figures by the FPS Social Security will be published soon. In this current report we focus on the impact of recent trends on the Belgian social situation vis-à-vis other Member States. Given that the EU-SILC 2023 information on the Eurostat website is still incomplete for a large number of countries, we discuss here the evolution until EU-SILC 2022. We will show that the recent trends in Belgium both in terms of poverty and inequality have further improved Belgium's position in an international perspective, which was already above average.

Many of the indicators that we use for this international perspective, are part of the so-called Social Scoreboard. The Social Scoreboard is a set of indicators to monitor the performance of the various EU Member States in the areas of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) as adopted by the European Parliament at the 2017 Göteborg Summit. The box below summarizes the methodology and content of the latest revision (approved by EPSCO in June 2021) of the Social Scoreboard[3].

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1 The [EU-SILC]() survey is a comprehensive initiative within Europe gathering statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC), aiming to *collect timely and comparable cross-sectional and longitudinal data on income, poverty, social exclusion, and living conditions*.

2 The at-risk-of-poverty and quasi-joblessness figures in EU-SILC refer to the preceding year, meaning that EU-SILC 2023 data reflects the conditions of 2022.

3 For more detailed information, including a summary of the main trends (which are logically in line with those set out in this report) for Belgium in this scoreboard, see also the article "*Focus sur les chiffres*" published on our FPS website in May 2023.

Box 1. **The Social Scoreboard**

The Social Scoreboard is a monitoring tool that was created to track the performance of the various EU Member States in the areas covered by the European Pillar of social rights. The Social Scoreboard is a table that shows, by country, the most recent data, trends and progress for a set of main indicators. The data are supplied by Eurostat and, for the majority of indicators, come mainly from the European Union Labour Force Survey (LFS) or the EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC).

The main indicators of the Social Scoreboard serve as an analytical basis for the Joint Employment Report (JER) of the European Commission and the Council, which monitors the situation and the implementation of the employment guidelines in the European Union.

This report provides an overview of the latest social and labour market trends in the EU, the main challenges facing the EU and the follow-up to the 2030 targets, based on the Social Scoreboard. In general, the JER is used by the Ministers for Employment and Social Policy (EPSCO) in the European Union's annual governance cycle (The 'European Semester').

In concrete terms, the Social Scoreboard is based on a list of 17 main indicators structured around three main dimensions :

The 'equal opportunities and access to the labour market' dimension, which includes : adult participation in learning over the last 12 months ; early school leavers ; people with basic or above-basic overall digital skills ; the proportion of young people who are neither in employment nor in education and training ; the employment gap between men and women and the ratio between income quintiles (S80/S20).

In the 'fair working conditions' dimension, the main indicators are : the employment rate ; the unemployment rate ; the long-term unemployment rate and real gross disposable household income per capita.
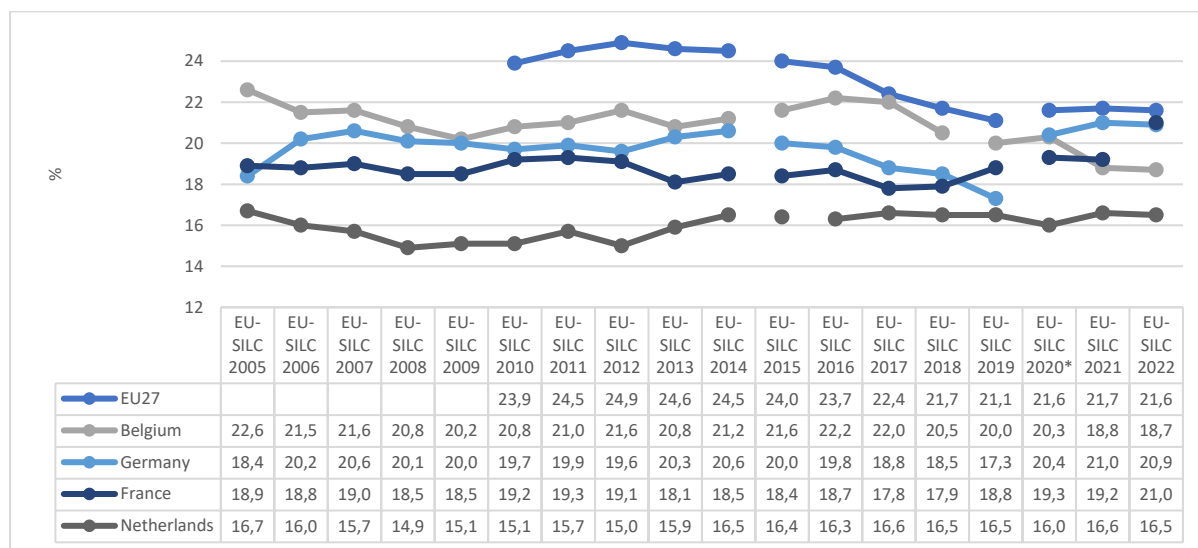
The indicators for the 'social protection and inclusion' dimension are as follows : the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) ; the AROPE for children ; the impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction ; the gap between the employment rate of people with disabilities and that of other people ; the housing cost overburden rate ; the number of children under 3 in childcare facilities ; the (self-declared) unmet need for medical treatment.

These main indicators are analysed using a specific methodology that takes into account levels as well as relative trends. The situation and evolution of the main indicators in the different Member States compared to the previous year are ranked according to their deviation from the respective (unweighted) EU averages. Member States performances are then combined and classified into seven categories on the basis of scores for both levels and changes.

Population at risk of poverty or social exclusion is declining in Belgium and stable in EU

A key indicator of the Social Scoreboard is the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (see box 1). As already mentioned, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in Belgium declined since the COVID-19 crisis. The AROPE indicator decreased from 20,3% in EU-SILC 2019 (incomes 2018) to 18,7% in EU-SILC 2022 (incomes 2021), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. AROPE in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2005-2022[4] (%)

	EU-SILC 2005	EU-SILC 2006	EU-SILC 2007	EU-SILC 2008	EU-SILC 2009	EU-SILC 2010	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2012	EU-SILC 2013	EU-SILC 2014	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
EU27						23,9	24,5	24,9	24,6	24,5	24,0	23,7	22,4	21,7	21,1	21,6	21,7	21,6
Belgium	22,6	21,5	21,6	20,8	20,2	20,8	21,0	21,6	20,8	21,2	21,6	22,2	22,0	20,5	20,0	20,3	18,8	18,7
Germany	18,4	20,2	20,6	20,1	20,0	19,7	19,9	19,6	20,3	20,6	20,0	19,8	18,8	18,5	17,3	20,4	21,0	20,9
France	18,9	18,8	19,0	18,5	18,5	19,2	19,3	19,1	18,1	18,5	18,4	18,7	17,8	17,9	18,8	19,3	19,2	21,0
Netherlands	16,7	16,0	15,7	14,9	15,1	15,1	15,7	15,0	15,9	16,5	16,4	16,3	16,6	16,5	16,5	16,0	16,6	16,5

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note**: break in times series in 2015 due to new definition of AROPE; break in time series in 2020 for EU27 and Germany ; in 2020 and 2022 for France ; in 2016 for the Netherlands and in 2019 for Belgium.

From a European perspective this trend is remarkable. The EU27 average has been quite stable since 2019. In some countries including Germany and France, the AROPE is on the rise since the health crisis. For example, in France, 18,8% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2019; anno 2022, this is 21,0%.

The consequence of these divergent trends is that the ranking of Belgium vis-a-vis its neighbouring countries has changed. In 2019, the AROPE in Belgium (20,0%) was higher than in France (18,8%), Germany (17,3%) and the Netherlands (16,0%). In 2022 only the Netherlands (16,5%) still has a lower risk of poverty or social exclusion than Belgium (18,7%). The AROPE is higher in both in Germany (20,9%) and France (21,0%). Belgium fares better than its neighbours in terms of poverty or social exclusion and towards its target within the European Pillar of Social Rights framework to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2030.

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4 2005-2014: old definitions of AROPE, QJH and SMD (see box 1 in part 1 of the Monitoring Report) ;

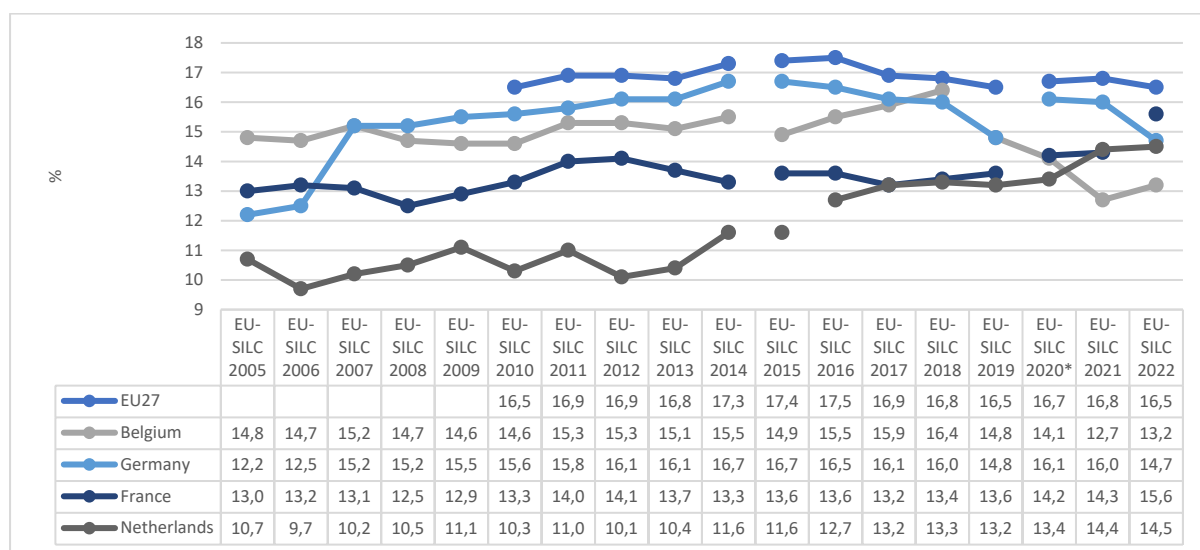From 2015 : new definitions of AROPE, QJH and SMSD (see box 1, part 1) ;

Year 2020 is followed by an asterisk because the results of the BE-SILC 2020 are difficult to compare to those of the previous and next years because of the impact of COVID-19 on the fieldwork.

For a summary of the methodological section of part 1 of the April 2022 Monitoring report, see annex 1.

The at-risk-of-poverty rate in Belgium is lower than in its neighbouring countries

The figures below compare the evolution of the three components of the AROPE-indicator for Belgium, its neighbouring countries and the EU average. The stability of the AROPE in the EU is driven by stability in the at-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP), the degree of severe material and social deprivation (SMSD) and the share of quasi-jobless households (QJH). Similarly, the decline in AROPE in Belgium since 2019 is driven by a decrease in two of the three sub-indicators over the period 2019-2022.

Figure 2. AROP in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2005-2022 (%)

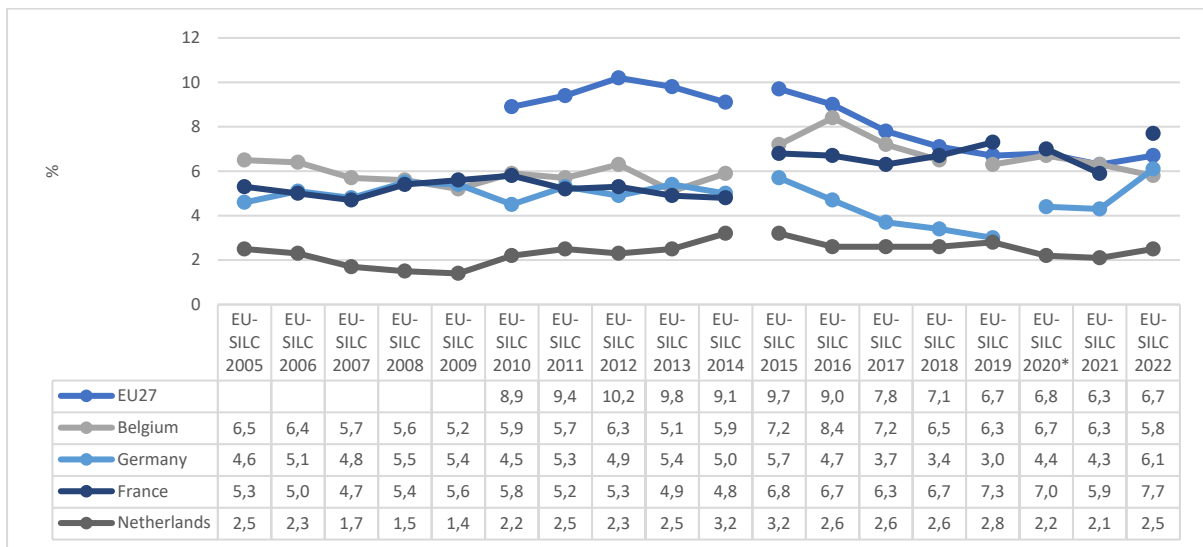|	EU-SILC 2005	EU-SILC 2006	EU-SILC 2007	EU-SILC 2008	EU-SILC 2009	EU-SILC 2010	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2012	EU-SILC 2013	EU-SILC 2014	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
EU27						16,5	16,9	16,9	16,8	17,3	17,4	17,5	16,9	16,8	16,5	16,7	16,8	16,5
Belgium	14,8	14,7	15,2	14,7	14,6	14,6	15,3	15,3	15,1	15,5	14,9	15,5	15,9	16,4	14,8	14,1	12,7	13,2
Germany	12,2	12,5	15,2	15,2	15,5	15,6	15,8	16,1	16,1	16,7	16,7	16,5	16,1	16,0	14,8	16,1	16,0	14,7
France	13,0	13,2	13,1	12,5	12,9	13,3	14,0	14,1	13,7	13,3	13,6	13,6	13,2	13,4	13,6	14,2	14,3	15,6
Netherlands	10,7	9,7	10,2	10,5	11,1	10,3	11,0	10,1	10,4	11,6	11,6	12,7	13,2	13,3	13,2	13,4	14,4	14,5

Source : EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note:** break in time series in 2020 for EU27 and Germany ; in 2020 and 2022 for France ; in 2016 for the Netherlands and in 2019 for Belgium.

The most striking trend for Belgium is the decline in the AROP, which is an indicator for monetary poverty, in EU-SILC 2022 compared to EUSILC 2019 (Figure 2). Thanks to substantial government efforts, many households seemed to have been safeguarded from large income losses during the COVID-19 crisis, especially in the lowest income deciles (as already discussed in the 2021 report). Based on the EU-SILC 2022 (incomes 2021), the AROP in Belgium (13,2%) is lower than in France (15,6%), Germany (14,7%) and the Netherlands (14,5%). Moreover, according to the EU-SILC 2022 figures, there are only a handful of countries in the EU that have a lower poverty risk than Belgium.

Also in terms of the SMSD, Belgium's position improved compared to its neighbours. In 2022, 5,8% of the population is severely materially and socially deprived in Belgium, which is more than in the Netherlands (2,5%) but less than in the other neighbouring countries or the EU average (6,7%).

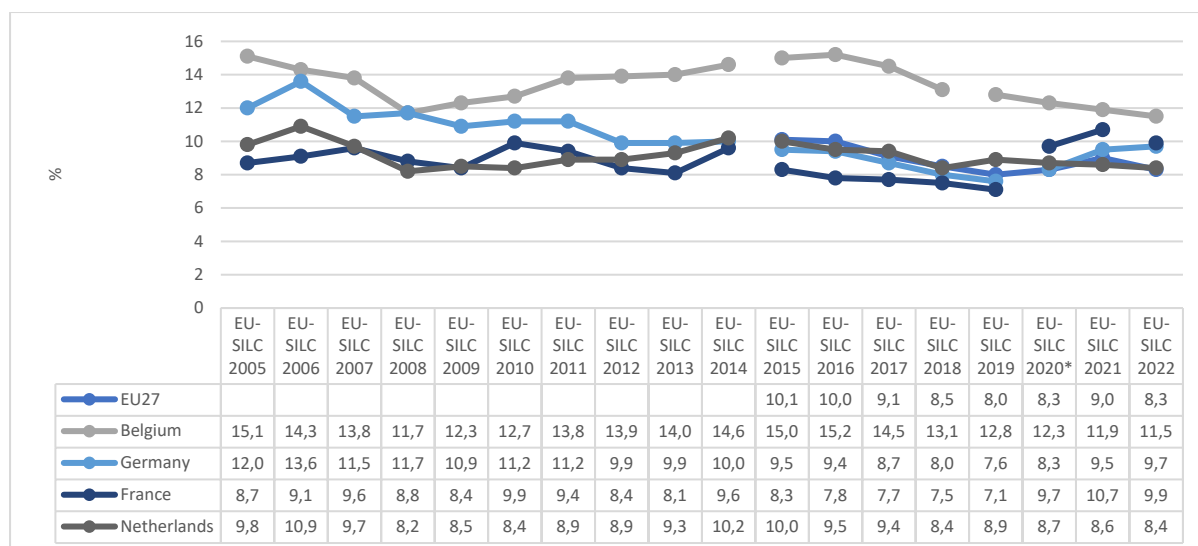**Figure 3.** SMSD in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2005-2022 (%)

	EU-SILC 2005	EU-SILC 2006	EU-SILC 2007	EU-SILC 2008	EU-SILC 2009	EU-SILC 2010	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2012	EU-SILC 2013	EU-SILC 2014	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
EU27						8,9	9,4	10,2	9,8	9,1	9,7	9,0	7,8	7,1	6,7	6,8	6,3	6,7
Belgium	6,5	6,4	5,7	5,6	5,2	5,9	5,7	6,3	5,1	5,9	7,2	8,4	7,2	6,5	6,3	6,7	6,3	5,8
Germany	4,6	5,1	4,8	5,5	5,4	4,5	5,3	4,9	5,4	5,0	5,7	4,7	3,7	3,4	3,0	4,4	4,3	6,1
France	5,3	5,0	4,7	5,4	5,6	5,8	5,2	5,3	4,9	4,8	6,8	6,7	6,3	6,7	7,3	7,0	5,9	7,7
Netherlands	2,5	2,3	1,7	1,5	1,4	2,2	2,5	2,3	2,5	3,2	3,2	2,6	2,6	2,6	2,8	2,2	2,1	2,5

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note:** break in time series in 2020 for EU27, Germany and France ; in 2016 for the Netherlands and in 2019 for Belgium.

...but Belgium remains behind in terms of the share of quasi-jobless households

Nevertheless, the number of quasi-jobless households remains a clear weakness of the Belgian welfare state. Their share declined from 12,8% in 2019 to 11,5% in 2022, but this is still well above the EU27 average (8,3%) and above the levels in France (9,9%), Germany (9,7%) and the Netherlands (8,4%) (Figure 4).
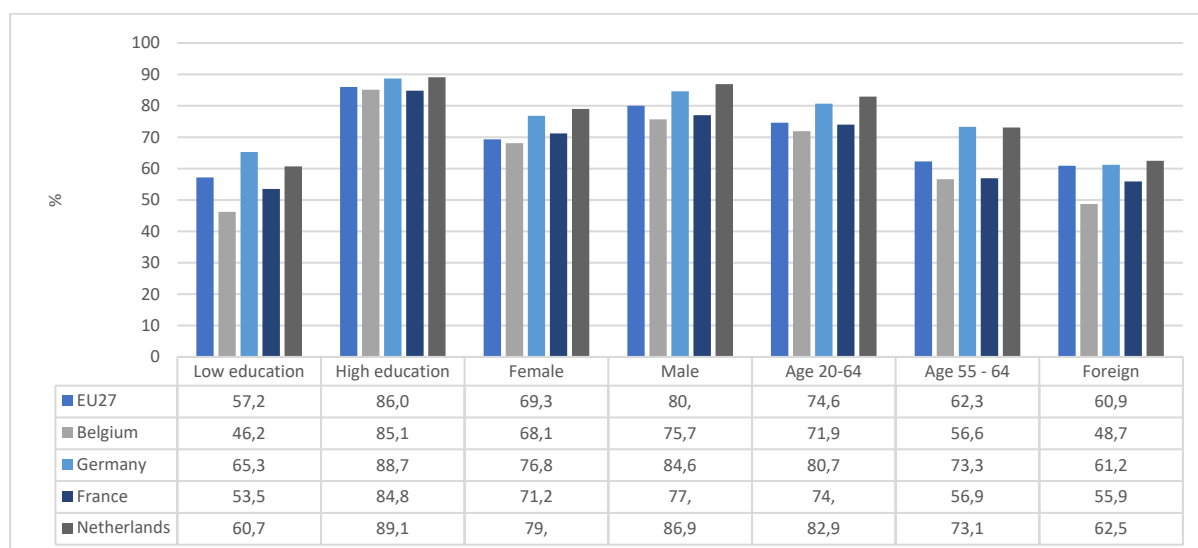
Figure 4. QJH in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2005-2022 (%)

	EU-SILC 2005	EU-SILC 2006	EU-SILC 2007	EU-SILC 2008	EU-SILC 2009	EU-SILC 2010	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2012	EU-SILC 2013	EU-SILC 2014	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
EU27											10,1	10,0	9,1	8,5	8,0	8,3	9,0	8,3
Belgium	15,1	14,3	13,8	11,7	12,3	12,7	13,8	13,9	14,0	14,6	15,0	15,2	14,5	13,1	12,8	12,3	11,9	11,5
Germany	12,0	13,6	11,5	11,7	10,9	11,2	11,2	9,9	9,9	10,0	9,5	9,4	8,7	8,0	7,6	8,3	9,5	9,7
France	8,7	9,1	9,6	8,8	8,4	9,9	9,4	8,4	8,1	9,6	8,3	7,8	7,7	7,5	7,1	9,7	10,7	9,9
Netherlands	9,8	10,9	9,7	8,2	8,5	8,4	8,9	8,9	9,3	10,2	10,0	9,5	9,4	8,4	8,9	8,7	8,6	8,4

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note:** break in time series in 2020 for EU27 and Germany ; in 2020 and 2022 for France ; in 2016 for the Netherlands and in 2019 for Belgium.

The high proportion of quasi-jobless households indicates the problematic access to the labour market for specific groups. In Belgium, the employment rate of the general population (aged 20 – 64) continued to increase in 2021 and 2022, peaking at 71,9% in 2022. This increase is however not experienced in the same way by everyone. Figure 5 shows employment rates by age groups, education level and country of citizenship.

Figure 5. Difficulty for specific groups to access the labour market: employment rate for specific groups in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2022 (%)

	Low education	High education	Female	Male	Age 20-64	Age 55 - 64	Foreign
EU27	57,2	86,0	69,3	80,	74,6	62,3	60,9
Belgium	46,2	85,1	68,1	75,7	71,9	56,6	48,7
Germany	65,3	88,7	76,8	84,6	80,7	73,3	61,2
France	53,5	84,8	71,2	77,	74,	56,9	55,9
Netherlands	60,7	89,1	79,	86,9	82,9	73,1	62,5

Source: LFS, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note:** population aged 20 - 64 for educational attainment and sex and country of citizenship. Foreign : non-EU27 countries (from 2020) nor reporting country. Definition differs in France for 2022.
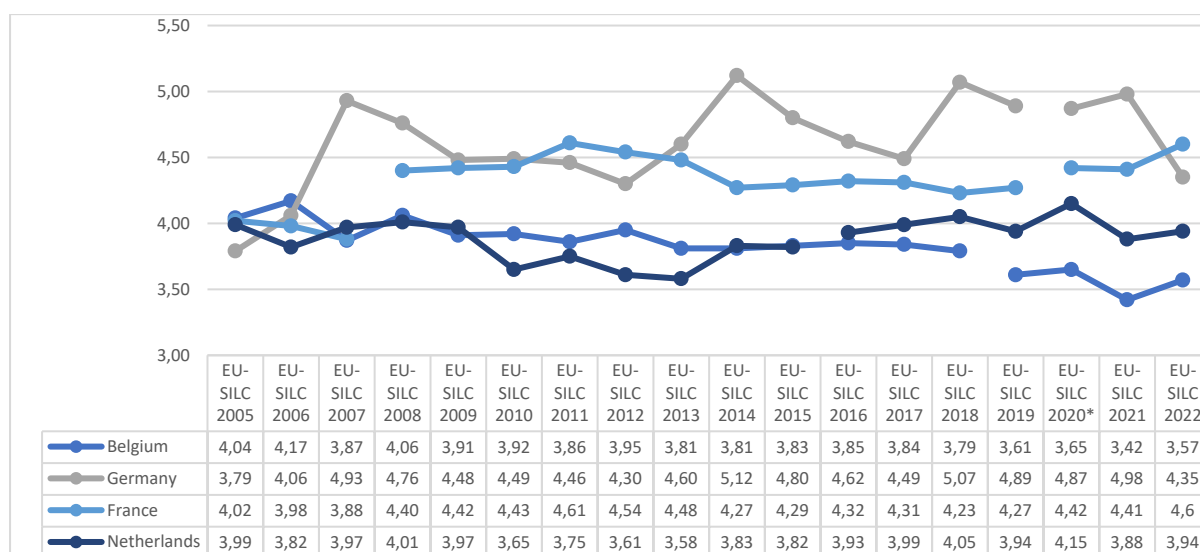
While the employment rates for the middle and high levels remain close to the European average, this is not the case for those with a low educational attainment, where there is a gap of more than ten percentage points (an employment rate of 46,2% in Belgium against 57,2% for the EU average). Figure 5 allows us to point out that low-skilled people in particular are finding it difficult to access the labour market. In addition, the employment rate for the elderly (despite the fact that it is rising) and for foreigners is also substantially below the average for our neighbours and the EU average.

Belgium is doing well in terms of measures of inequality

Graphs 2, 3 and 4 have shown that the Belgian welfare state performs well in terms of poverty and deprivation but is characterized by high shares of quasi-jobless households. Another positive point is that Belgium is also doing better than its neighbours when it comes to income inequality.

Two commonly used measures of inequality, the Gini coefficient and the income quintile share ratio, both tell the same story: the levels of these two indicators remain well below those of our neighbours and the EU average.

Figure 6. **Income quintile share ratio (S80/S20) in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2005-2022 (%)**

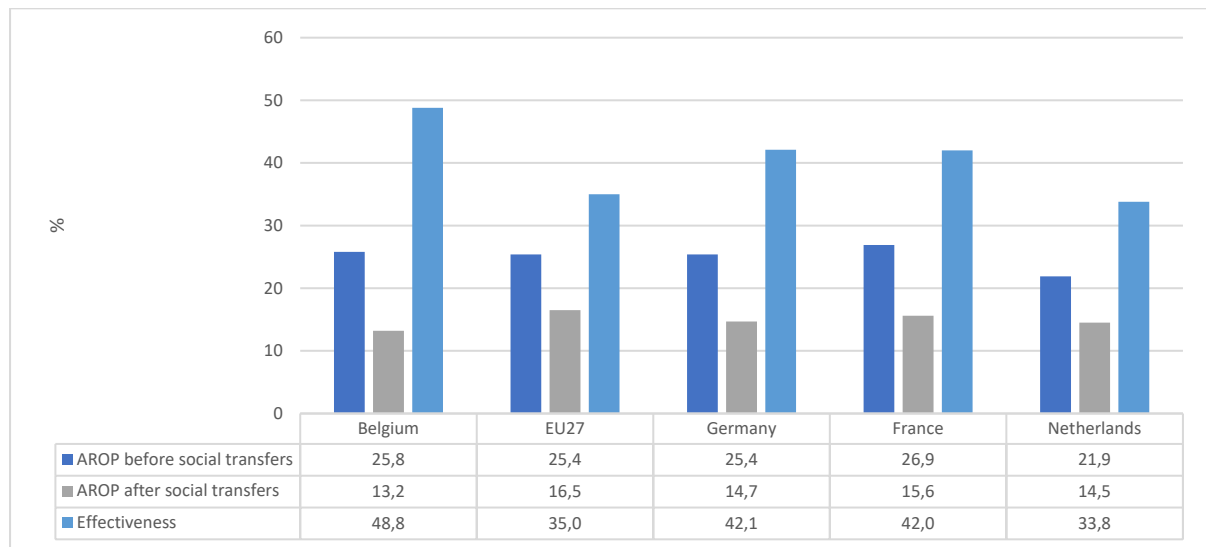|	EU-SILC 2005	EU-SILC 2006	EU-SILC 2007	EU-SILC 2008	EU-SILC 2009	EU-SILC 2010	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2012	EU-SILC 2013	EU-SILC 2014	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
Belgium	4,04	4,17	3,87	4,06	3,91	3,92	3,86	3,95	3,81	3,81	3,83	3,85	3,84	3,79	3,61	3,65	3,42	3,57
Germany	3,79	4,06	4,93	4,76	4,48	4,49	4,46	4,30	4,60	5,12	4,80	4,62	4,49	5,07	4,89	4,87	4,98	4,35
France	4,02	3,98	3,88	4,40	4,42	4,43	4,61	4,54	4,48	4,27	4,29	4,32	4,31	4,23	4,27	4,42	4,41	4,6
Netherlands	3,99	3,82	3,97	4,01	3,97	3,65	3,75	3,61	3,58	3,83	3,82	3,93	3,99	4,05	3,94	4,15	3,88	3,94

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note:** break in time series in 2020 for EU27 and Germany ; in 2020 and 2022 for France ; in 2016 for the Netherlands and in 2019 for Belgium.

Figure 6 shows that the income quintile share ratio in Belgium (3,57) remains below the Netherlands (3,94), Germany (4,35), France (4,6) and the EU average (4,74). The Gini coefficient (not in the figure) is up to 24,9 for Belgium while it is at 26,3 in the Netherlands, 28,8 in Germany, 29,8 in France and up to 29,6 at the EU level.

Figure 7 shows that the median at-risk-of-poverty gap, indicating how far people at-risk-of-poverty are below the poverty line, is also lower in Belgium than in the EU27 average and in our neighbouring countries.

Figure 7. Relative median poverty risk gap in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2011-2022 (%)
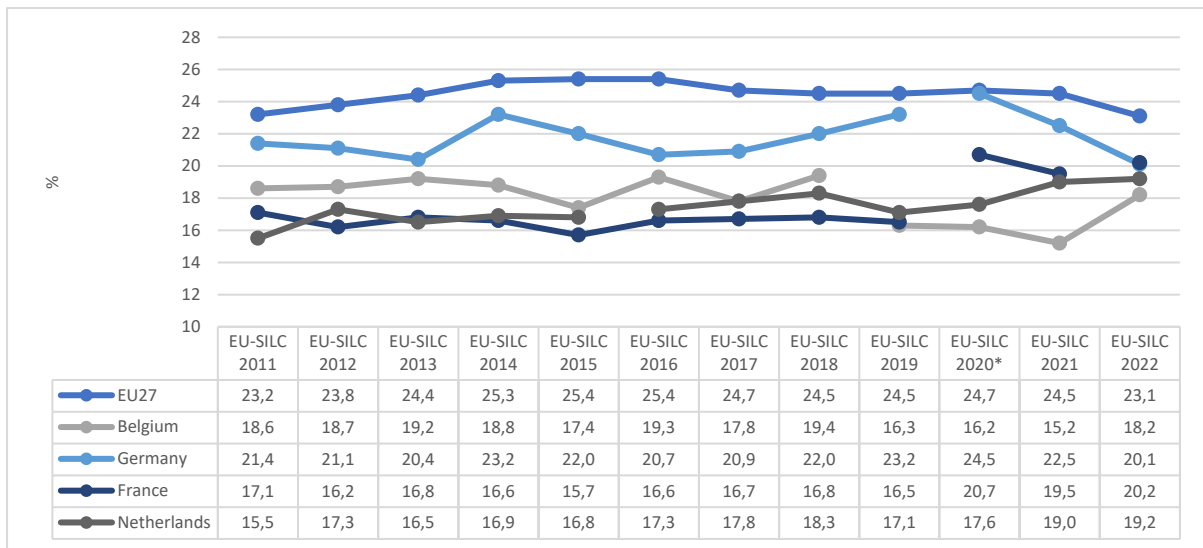
	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2012	EU-SILC 2013	EU-SILC 2014	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
EU27	23,2	23,8	24,4	25,3	25,4	25,4	24,7	24,5	24,5	24,7	24,5	23,1
Belgium	18,6	18,7	19,2	18,8	17,4	19,3	17,8	19,4	16,3	16,2	15,2	18,2
Germany	21,4	21,1	20,4	23,2	22,0	20,7	20,9	22,0	23,2	24,5	22,5	20,1
France	17,1	16,2	16,8	16,6	15,7	16,6	16,7	16,8	16,5	20,7	19,5	20,2
Netherlands	15,5	17,3	16,5	16,9	16,8	17,3	17,8	18,3	17,1	17,6	19,0	19,2

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note:** break in time series in 2020 for EU27 and Germany ; in 2020 and 2022 for France ; in 2016 for the Netherlands and in 2019 for Belgium.

… and in terms of the general effectiveness of social transfers

The relatively low poverty rates, discussed above, are the result of a very effective system of social transfers. This may be evident from a comparison of poverty risks before and after social transfers based on the EU-SILC 2022. As already discussed, after social transfers , Belgium has one of the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rates (cf. AROP) in Europe.

Figure 8. Effectiveness of social transfers in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, EU-SILC 2022 (%)

	Belgium	EU27	Germany	France	Netherlands
■ AROP before social transfers	25,8	25,4	25,4	26,9	21,9
■ AROP after social transfers	13,2	16,5	14,7	15,6	14,5
■ Effectiveness	48,8	35,0	42,1	42,0	33,8

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. Calculations "effectiveness" FPS Social Security.

Figure 8 shows that before social transfers, poverty rates in Belgium are very close to those in France and Germany and a lot higher than in the Netherlands. In Belgium, the poverty rate drops from 25,5% to 13,4% thanks to income support. The difference between poverty risks before and after social transfers can be expressed by an effectiveness indicator (effectiveness = (pre-transfer AROP - post-transfer AROP)/pre-transfer AROP). In Belgium the effectiveness of the social transfer system is 48,8%, while in France and Germany it is around 42% and in the Netherlands only 34%.

Figure 9. Effectiveness of social transfers in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2019-2022 (%)

	Belgium	EU27	Germany	France	Netherlands
EU-SILC 2019	41,7	32,4	36,2	42,1	38,3
EU-SILC 2020*	44,9	33,2	34,6	46,2	36,8
EU-SILC 2021	53,3	37,1	40,3	46,4	36,6
EU-SILC 2022	48,8	35	42,1	42	33,8
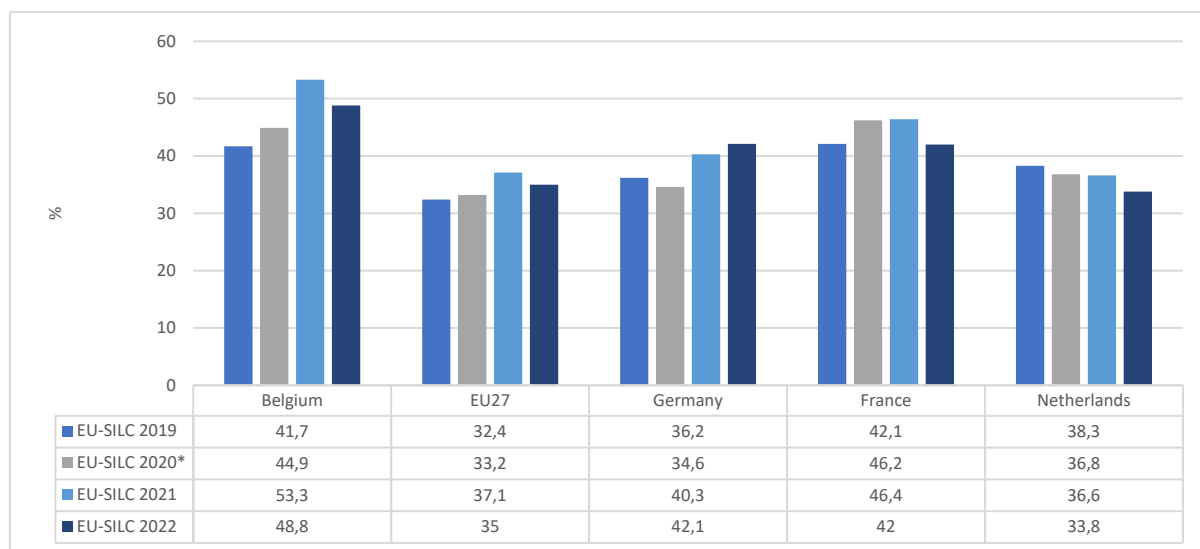
Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat, Statbel. Calculations "effectiveness" FPS Social Security. **Note:** break in time series in 2020 for EU27 and Germany ; in 2020 and 2022 for France.

Moreover, in the Netherlands effectiveness is systematically decreasing over the last years, while Belgium has substantially invested in the effectiveness of its income protection system, especially during the COVID period. Figure 9 shows that Belgium made progress between 2019 and 2022 when it comes to the effectiveness of social transfers. It improved from 41,7% in EU-SILC 2019 to 48,8% in 2022 (incomes 2021), while in the Netherlands it has dropped from 38,3% to 33,8%.

Figure 10. Expenditure on social protection benefits, Belgium, neighbouring countries and EU-27, 2011 – 2022 (% of GDP)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Early estimates 2022
EU27	27,0	27,4	27,7	27,6	27,3	27,3	26,8	26,7	26,8	30,2	28,7	27,2
Belgium	28,6	28,4	28,8	28,8	28,6	27,7	27,2	27,3	27,3	31,2	28,6	27,9
Germany	27,5	27,6	27,9	27,8	28,1	28,4	28,3	28,4	28,8	31,5	30,6	29,2
France	30,9	31,4	31,9	32,1	31,9	32,0	31,7	31,4	31,2	35,1	33,4	32,2
Netherlands	28,2	28,8	29,1	28,8	28,1	28,0	27,6	27,1	26,9	29,3	27,9	
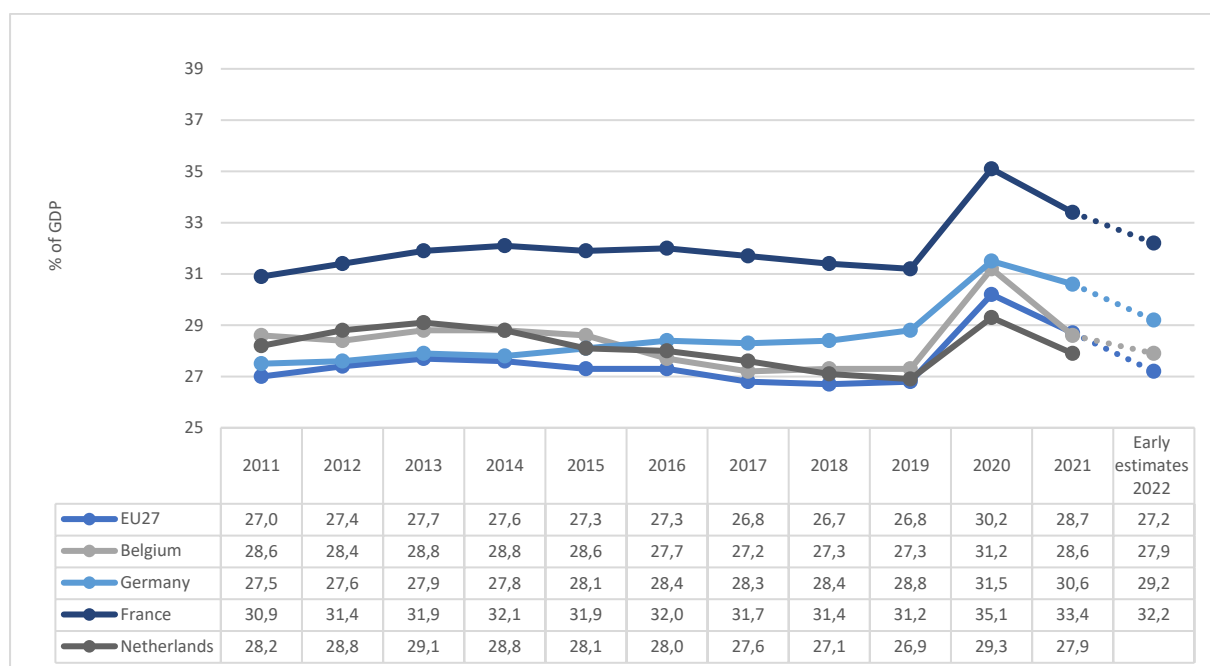
Source: ESSPROS, Eurostat. **Note:** provisional for EU27 between 2017 and 2021 and in 2021 for Belgium, Germany and France. Early estimates for 2022. There are no early estimates for the Netherlands.

It is often pointed out that this high level of effectiveness comes with high social spendings in Belgium. But as shown in Figure 10, which presents the expenditure on social protection benefits[5] as a percentage of GDP, social expenditures are below those of France and broadly at a similar level as Germany and The Netherlands. The data for 2022 are not yet available (we displayed "early estimates"[6] in figure 10) and those for 2021 remain provisional, but even if we remain cautious, we can see that the Belgian level is just above the European level but not above its neighbours levels, despite performing better in terms of effectiveness. The rise in social spending since 2020 corresponds to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the efforts made by European countries to tackle it.

Figure 11. At risk-of-poverty rate for the population living in (quasi-)jobless households, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2015-2022 (%)

	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
EU 27	64,2	65,2	65,5	66,8	65,7	64,4	62,2	61,9
Belgium	60,0	65,0	67,6	71,7	63,9	59,8	56,8	60,0
Germany	72,9	70,7	71,4	71,4	68,7	56,9	52,0	51,0
France	65,0	58,9	63,5	65,0	62,6	67,4	66,4	68,1
Netherlands	49,9	60,0	60,6	61,4	63,3	69,3	76,0	78,4
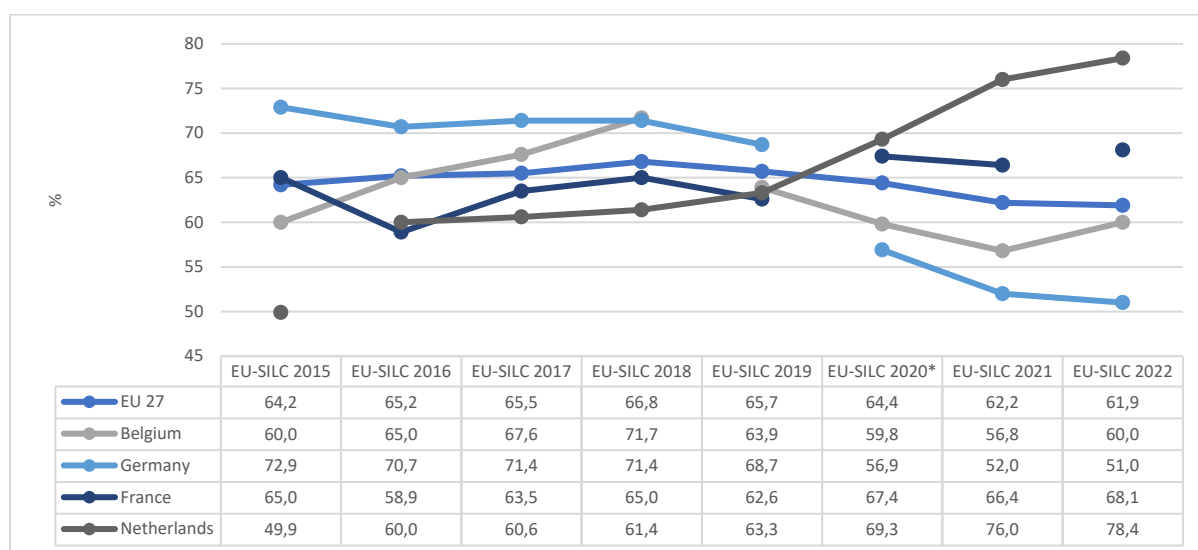
Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat, Statbel. **Note:** Break in time series in in 2016 for the Netherlands ; in 2019 for Belgium ; in 2020 for Germany ; in 2020 and 2022 for France. Population aged less than 65.

Figure 11 illustrates the at-risk-of-poverty rate of individuals in quasi-jobless households, serving as another indicator of the effectiveness of social transfers. The increased adequacy of social protection is supported by a decline in the at-risk-of-poverty rate for individuals in these households. Specifically, their at-risk-of-poverty rate decreased from 63,9% in EU-SILC 2019 to 56,8% in EU-SILC 2021. Following an increase to 60% in Belgium in EU-SILC 2022, the EU-SILC 2023 data show a further decrease to 52,6% (not in graph 11). At the EU27 level, a similar trend is observed with a general decline in at-risk-of-poverty rates of quasi jobless households. However, the trend in the Netherlands clearly deviates from the general pattern: income poverty among the quasi jobless households increased from 60% in EU-SILC 2016 to 78,4% in EU-SILC 2022.
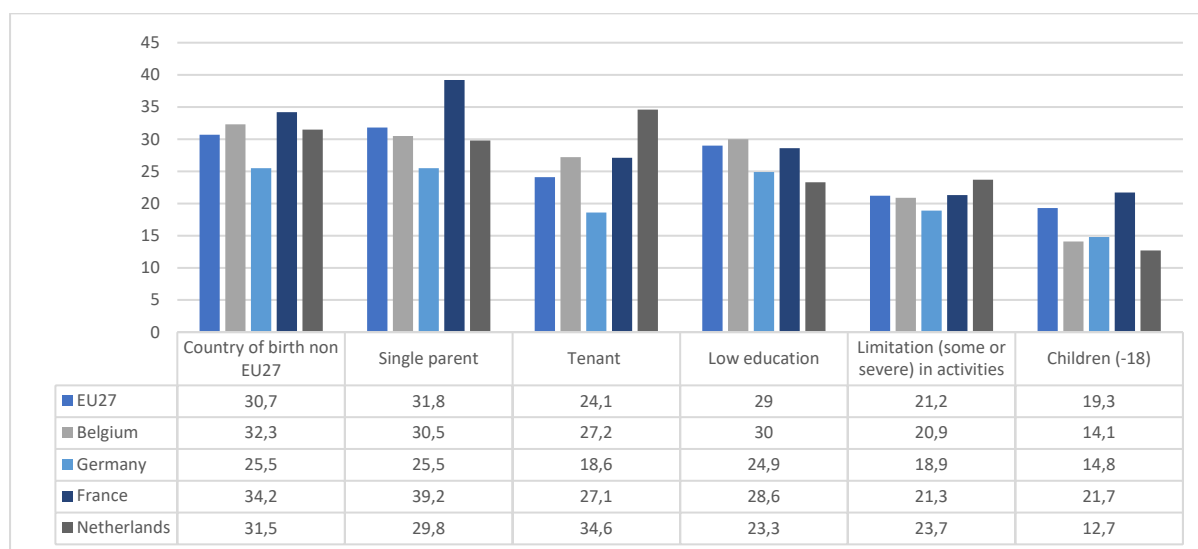
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5 It should be noted that Figure 10 shows expenditure on social protection benefits and not total social expenditure, to be consistent with the early estimates. Total social protection expenditure consists of expenditure on social protection benefits, administration costs and other expenditures. Nevertheless, the expenditure on social protection benefits makes up the lion's share of total social protection spending, and a focus on only social protection benefits does not change the overall conclusions. More information here.

6 Early estimates are preliminary data, that are subject to revision and may be adjusted once more comprehensive core system data is obtained : Early estimates - Eurostat (europa.eu).

But poverty among at-risk groups is relatively high

Although the overall poverty in Belgium is below the EU average, this is not true for all risk groups. We have shown how Belgium performs well in terms of AROPE and AROP, as well as in terms of measures of inequality and the effectiveness of social transfers, but for some at-risk groups, the situation in Belgium is certainly no better than in other Member States.
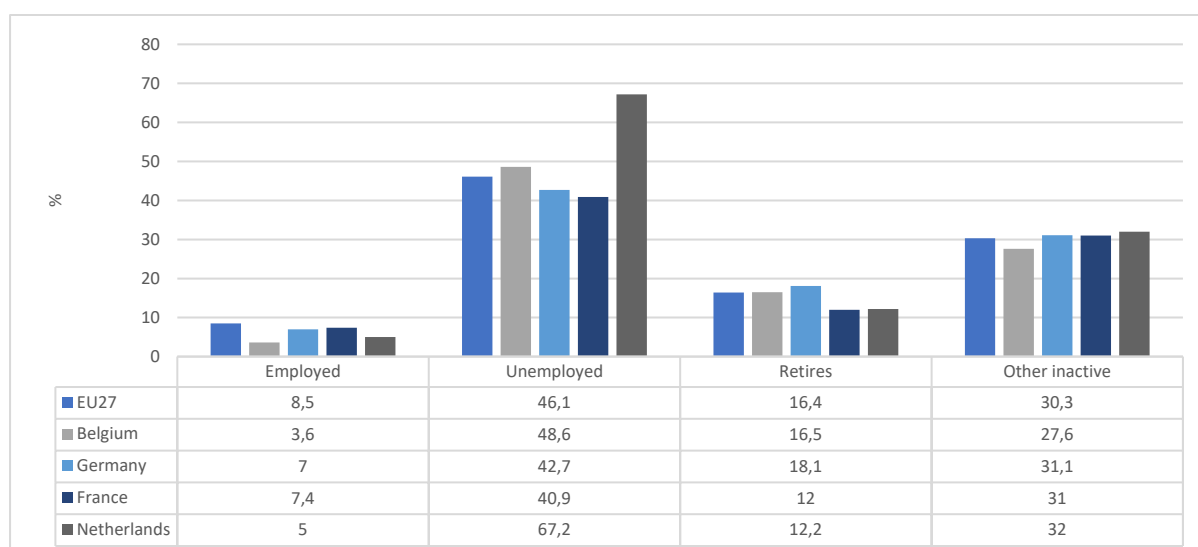
Figure 12. AROP by risk groups in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2022 (%)

	Country of birth non EU27	Single parent	Tenant	Low education	Limitation (some or severe) in activities	Children (-18)
EU27	30,7	31,8	24,1	29	21,2	19,3
Belgium	32,3	30,5	27,2	30	20,9	14,1
Germany	25,5	25,5	18,6	24,9	18,9	14,8
France	34,2	39,2	27,1	28,6	21,3	21,7
Netherlands	31,5	29,8	34,6	23,3	23,7	12,7

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Notes:** population aged 18 – 64 for unemployed, other inactive, country of birth, tenants and low education ; population aged 16 – 64 for limitation in activities.

Figure 12 shows the at-risk-of-poverty rate for certain sub-groups identified as being more at risk. As a reminder, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for the total population is 13,2% in Belgium (EU-SILC 2022). Risk groups with much higher poverty rates are non-EU27 migrants, single parents, individuals with a low education, tenants, those with long-standing limitations in usual activities due to health problems (which is used as a proxy for people with a disability) and, to a lesser degree, children. This is also true in other countries but tenants and non-EU27 migrants are facing a higher poverty risk in Belgium, compared to the EU average. Also notice that although the overall at-risk-of-poverty rate in the Netherlands (14,5%) and Germany (14,8%) is higher than in Belgium, the above risk groups in these countries generally face lower poverty risks than in Belgium.

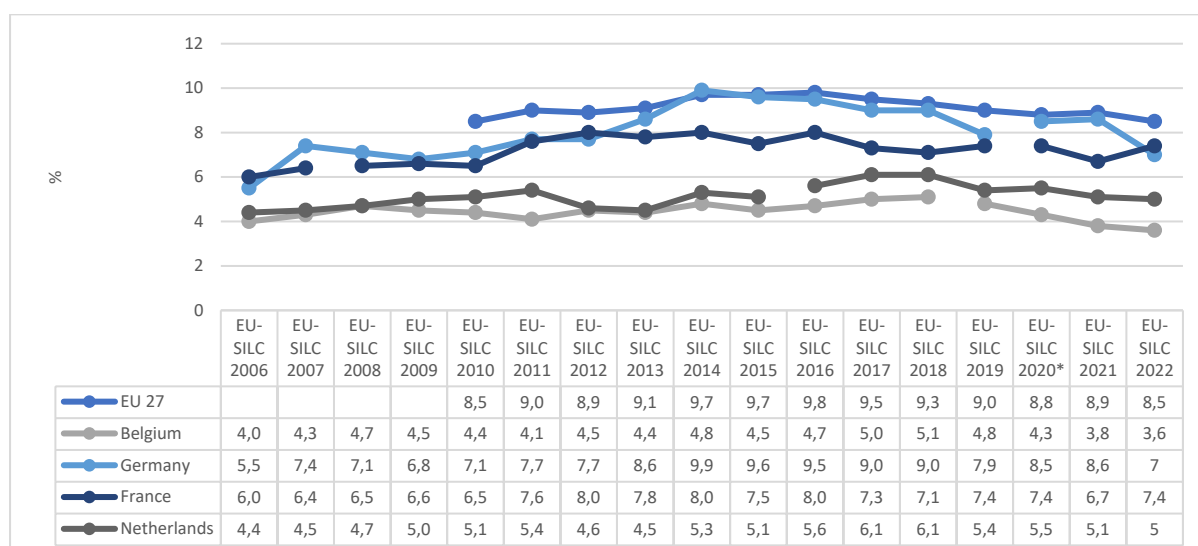**Figure 13.** AROP by activity status in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2022 (%)

	Employed	Unemployed	Retires	Other inactive
■ EU27	8,5	46,1	16,4	30,3
■ Belgium	3,6	48,6	16,5	27,6
■ Germany	7	42,7	18,1	31,1
■ France	7,4	40,9	12	31
■ Netherlands	5	67,2	12,2	32

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Notes:** population aged 18 - 64 and 65+ for retirees. 'Employed' consist of the employees and the self-employed : for these two groups the poverty rates may evolve differently.

Figure 13 shows the AROP according to activity status. The observation that poverty risks in Belgium are relatively low mainly concerns the employed, and to a much lesser extent the other inactive (cf. not unemployed or retired).

This finding is very much related to the low degree of in-work poverty in Belgium. Only 3,6 % over the employed in Belgium are poor; the EU average amounts to 8,5% (Figure 14).

Figure 14. In-work poverty among the employed (18-64) in Belgium, EU27 and neighbouring countries, 2006-2022 (%)

	EU-SILC 2006	EU-SILC 2007	EU-SILC 2008	EU-SILC 2009	EU-SILC 2010	EU-SILC 2011	EU-SILC 2012	EU-SILC 2013	EU-SILC 2014	EU-SILC 2015	EU-SILC 2016	EU-SILC 2017	EU-SILC 2018	EU-SILC 2019	EU-SILC 2020*	EU-SILC 2021	EU-SILC 2022
EU 27					8,5	9,0	8,9	9,1	9,7	9,7	9,8	9,5	9,3	9,0	8,8	8,9	8,5
Belgium	4,0	4,3	4,7	4,5	4,4	4,1	4,5	4,4	4,8	4,5	4,7	5,0	5,1	4,8	4,3	3,8	3,6
Germany	5,5	7,4	7,1	6,8	7,1	7,7	7,7	8,6	9,9	9,6	9,5	9,0	9,0	7,9	8,5	8,6	7
France	6,0	6,4	6,5	6,6	6,5	7,6	8,0	7,8	8,0	7,5	8,0	7,3	7,1	7,4	7,4	6,7	7,4
Netherlands	4,4	4,5	4,7	5,0	5,1	5,4	4,6	4,5	5,3	5,1	5,6	6,1	6,1	5,4	5,5	5,1	5

Source: EU-SILC, Eurostat ; Statbel. **Note:** break in time series in 2019 for Belgium ; in 2016 for the Netherlands ; in 2020 for Germany and in 2008 and 2020 for France. 'Employed' consist of the employees and the self-employed : for these two groups the poverty rates may evolve differently.

Conclusion

In this report, we analysed the recent evolutions in terms of poverty and inequality in Belgium, compared to our neighbouring countries and the EU average. The main conclusion is that the improvement we observe in Belgium since 2019 is rather exceptional. While in Belgium the share of the population at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion is falling, mainly due to an improvement in the at-risk-of-poverty rate and the share of quasi-jobless households, the evolution in other countries is rather stable. The result is that Belgium has considerably improved its position in the international ranking, certainly in terms of the at risk-of-poverty rate. Both the at-risk-of-poverty rate and income inequality in Belgium are very low in an international perspective. This is largely due to the effectiveness of the Belgian welfare system. The reduction of monetary poverty through social transfers is much higher than in Germany, France or the Netherlands.

Nevertheless, an important weakness of the Belgian welfare state remains the high proportion of quasi-jobless households and the difficult access of certain groups to the labour market. In addition, there are also at-risk groups in Belgium with extremely high poverty rates, higher often than in the same high-risk groups in neighbouring countries. This applies, for example, to non-EU migrants, tenants and individuals with a low education. The poverty risk is also relatively high among unemployed and retired people in Belgium.

Annex 1 : Methodological clarifications

There are important **methodological notes** concerning the data sources used and their interpretation. In the previous report[7], we discussed the 2021 changes in key indicators measuring the at risk of poverty or social exclusion; as well as the two important changes in the BE-SILC that happened in 2019 concerning the weighting procedure and the switch to fiscal administrative data for the majority of the income variables. These caused a break in series in 2019.

We also addressed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the fieldwork of EU-SILC 2020. The measures that have been taken to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic, have had a substantial impact on the data collection (e.g. a change from face-to-face interviews to interviews by telephone, or a potential bias in the realised sample due to the (un)availability of certain households[8]). This means that the results of SILC 2020 are difficult to compare to those of SILC 2019, but also to those of SILC 2021. In order to highlight this difficulty, an asterisk (or a '*') will be used in the graphs and tables. This also means that we will mainly focus on the evolution between 2019 and 2022.

It should also be noted that due to the massive use of temporary unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, the SILC 2021 category "unemployed" includes the long-term unemployed, as well as people who have been temporarily unemployed for more than 6 months and who generally live in less precarious conditions, making a direct comparison of the at-risk-of-poverty of the unemployed based on EU-SILC 2021 and 2022 difficult.

Finally, in a more general way, the usual considerations and limitations regarding sample-survey data apply. Indeed, a statistical error rate should be taken into account when interpreting the value of an indicator and some population groups are not included in the sampling framework. This should be borne in mind when looking at the data and linking the results to policy measures.

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[7] Federal Public Service Social Security, *The evolution of the social situation and social protection in Belgium 2021*, see pages 1 to 6: https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/sites/default/files/content/docs/en/publications/silc/silc-analysis-social-situation-and-protection-belgium-2021-en.pdf.

[8] For more information, see the methodological note from Statbel regarding the effect of COVID-19 on the SILC fieldwork : https://statbel.fgov.be/en/methodological-note-covid-19.

Annex 2 : Glossary

In this section, we list certain definitions available on the website of Eurostat for some of the indicators and terms frequently used in this report[9].

At risk of poverty or social exclusion, abbreviated as **AROPE**[10], corresponds to the sum of persons who are either at-risk-of-poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. People are included only once even if they are in more than one of the situations mentioned above. The AROPE rate is the share of the total population which is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. It is the main indicator to monitor the EU 2030 target on poverty and social exclusion and was the headline indicator to monitor the EU 2020 Strategy poverty target. The AROPE indicator has been modified in 2021 according to the new EU 2030 target, adjusting the SMD and the QJH.

The **at-risk-of-poverty rate**[11] is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfer) below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers.

The **at-risk-of-poverty rate before social transfers** is calculated as the share of people having an equivalised disposable income before social transfers that is below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold calculated after social transfers. Pensions, such as old-age and survivors' (widows' and widowers') benefits, are counted as income (before social transfers) and not as social transfers. This indicator examines the hypothetical non-existence of social transfers.

Disposable income[12] : includes all income from work (employee wages and earnings from self-employment); private income from investment and property; transfers between households; all social transfers received in cash including old-age pensions.

Equivalised income[13] is a measure of household income that takes account of the differences in a household's size and composition, and thus is equivalised or made equivalent for all household sizes and compositions. It is used for the calculation of poverty and social exclusion indicators.

Material deprivation[14] is defined as the enforced inability (rather than the *choice* not to do so) to pay unexpected expenses, afford a one-week annual holiday away from home, a meal involving meat, chicken or fish every second day, the adequate heating of a dwelling, durable goods like a washing machine, colour television, telephone or car, being confronted with payment arrears (mortgage or rent, utility bills, hire purchase instalments or other loan payments).

The **material deprivation rate** is an EU-SILC indicator that means the inability to afford some items considered by most people to be desirable or even necessary to lead an adequate life. The indicator distinguishes between individuals who cannot afford a certain good or service, and those who do not have this good or service for another reason, e.g. because they do not want or do not need it. It was one of the components that defined the at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) according to the Europe 2020 strategy.

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9 These are therefore the exact definitions given by Eurostat and available at : Category:Living conditions glossary - Statistics Explained (europa.eu).

Statbel also provides a glossary with a series of definitions associated with SILC, available at : https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/households/poverty-and-livingconditions/plus.

10 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_(AROPE).

11 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:At-risk-of-poverty_rate.

12 Available at :

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Disposable_income.

13 Available at :

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Equivalised_income.

14 Available at :

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation.

Severe material deprivation rate is defined as the enforced inability to pay for at least four of the considered items.

The **severe material and social deprivation rate** (SMSD) is an EU-SILC indicator adopted by the Indicators' Sub-Group (ISG) of the Social Protection Committee (SPC), that distinguishes between individuals who cannot afford a certain good, service or social activities. It is defined as the proportion of the population experiencing an enforced lack of at least 7 out of 13 deprivation items (6 related to the individual and 7 related to the household).

The **work intensity**[15] of a household is the ratio of the total number of months that all working-age household members have worked during the income reference year and the total number of months the same household members theoretically could have worked in the same period.

A **jobless household**[16] is defined as a household in which no working-age adult is employed.

The **quasi-jobless** indicator measures the absence of employment at the household level. It concerns people from 0-64 years living in households where the adults (those aged 18-64, but excluding students aged 18-24 and people who are retired according to their self-defined current economic status or who receive any pension (except survivors pension), as well as people in the age bracket 60-64 who are inactive and living in a household where the main income is pensions) worked a working time equal or less than 20% of their total combined work-time potential during the previous year. Households composed only of children, of students aged less than 25 and/or people aged 65 or more are excluded from the indicator calculation.

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15 Available at :

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Persons_living_in_households_with_low_work_intensity.

16 Available at :

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Jobless_households.