

Spain's Child Support Fails the Poor: Actionable Policy Reforms

2026

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Spain's child at-risk-of-poverty rate stands around 29%, among the highest in the EU, and substantially higher than the overall population rate of 19%.
- ▶ The existing cash child support system in Spain fails to reach poor families: it is centered on a non-refundable child tax credit ("*mínimo por descendientes*") that provides higher support per child to higher-income households, leaving as many as 60% of children in poverty without this tax relief.
- ▶ Making the child tax credit refundable or implementing a Universal Child Benefit would fill the gaps of the current system, outperforming the status quo in terms of poverty reduction at the same budgetary cost.
- ▶ More ambitiously, reducing Spain's child poverty to the EU average would cost about 1.3% of GDP yearly, still well below existing estimates of the costs associated with childhood disadvantage (4-5% GDP).

1. Introduction

Spain has one of the highest shares of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in the European Union (EU), reaching 34.6% in 2024. Moreover, child AROPE has been increasing since 2018, despite a context of economic growth and a decreasing overall poverty rate. AROPE is a composite indicator of monetary poverty, very low work intensity and severe material and social deprivation, of which monetary poverty is the leading component for children in Spain. Monetary poverty for Spanish children stood at 29.2% in 2024, the highest in the EU.¹

From both an economic and social standpoint, reducing child poverty yields high returns. Drawing on Heckman's work on early childhood investment, resources directed at children during developmental periods generate the highest long-term returns by preventing future skill gaps and reducing social costs (Heckman, 2006). From a social investment perspective, child benefits represent strategic investments in future workforce productivity rather than mere expenditure, offsetting large socioeconomic costs in the long term (Clarke et al., 2024). Furthermore, Roemer's theory of equality of opportunity underscores that children bear no responsibility for their household's economic circumstances, and therefore child deprivation always violates fundamental fairness

¹ The indicators mentioned in this paragraph are drawn from Eurostat: *ilc_peps01n* (AROPE) and *ilc_li02* (monetary poverty), both of which are accompanied by detailed descriptions and metadata in Eurostat's website.

(Roemer, 1998). From a policy perspective, child poverty is identified by the European Commission as one of the most pressing challenges faced in Spain.² Moreover, the European Parliament is calling for more funding and coordination to combat it.³

In Spain, the provision of cash support for children (hereinafter child support) strongly relies on tax reliefs, with social benefits being highly targeted and playing a smaller role (Hernández et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, this note addresses a key policy question: is Spain's child support well designed to reduce child poverty significantly? We compare the current tax-benefit policy rules against two reform scenarios that have featured prominently in Spain's recent public debate: (1) a Universal Child Benefit (UCB), and (2) making refundable the existing child tax credit ("*mínimo por descendientes*"). Our analysis reveals that the current system is inefficient in reducing child poverty, and that the reform scenarios seem both reasonable from a fiscal standpoint and effective to reduce child poverty. These findings are in line with comparable concurrent studies (Gorjón et al., 2026; Paniagua and Frutos, 2026).

2. Methodology

We employ EUROMOD, the tax-benefit microsimulation model for the EU.⁴ It is a static model simulating actual or hypothetical tax and benefit policy rules, capable of calculating the effects of these rules on household income and government budget. EUROMOD simulates income and consumption taxes, social insurance contributions, and income-related benefits (including family, housing, and social assistance benefits). The model uses microdata from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) matched with Household Budget Survey (HBS) data. In this note we use the most recent wave at the time of writing, EU-SILC 2024, which represents 2023 incomes.

We compare a baseline policy scenario with two alternatives:

- 1. Baseline scenario:** The Spanish tax-benefit rules in place as of 2023,⁵ including, among others, the "*mínimo por descendientes*", an income tax relief for families with dependent children under 25 years of age.⁶ The legislation defines it as a tax base-reducing allowance of 2,400 EUR per year for the first child, independent of income, which in practice acts as a non-refundable tax credit, generally of 38 EUR/month with increased values for young or additional children.⁷ Hereinafter we will refer to this policy as child tax credit and use the 38 EUR/month value as benchmark comparison with alternative policy scenarios.
- 2. Hypothetical reform scenario introducing a Universal Child Benefit (UCB):** This reform scenario introduces a universal cash transfer per child under 18 years of age, considering different monthly amounts. Simultaneously, the existing child tax credit is removed for those households benefitting from the UCB, keeping it for dependent descendants aged 18 or above. The UCB is taxable and included in the means test

² https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-member-states/country-reports_en. Last accessed 10 March 2026.

³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdfs/news/expert/2026/2/press_release/20260205IPR33623/20260205IPR33623_en.pdf. Last accessed 10 March 2026.

⁴ <https://euromod-web.jrc.ec.europa.eu/overview/what-is-euromod>. Last accessed 10 March 2026.

⁵ This is aligned with the latest EU-SILC data available for EUROMOD. Choosing other years or datasets does not change the conclusions of our analysis.

⁶ Children are considered dependent when living with their parents, receiving less than 8,000 EUR/year and not filing a tax return declaring more than 1,800 EUR of yearly income.

⁷ The mechanism works as follows: (1) The value of the "*mínimo por descendientes*" is pooled together with other family allowances in the so called "*mínimo personal y familiar*"; (2) Instead of reducing the tax base directly, the progressive scale of the income tax is applied to that "*mínimo personal y familiar*"; (3) The result of this operation is deducted from the tax liability, but never turning it negative. Given that in most cases the family allowances fall only on the first band of the progressive scale, taxed at 19%, the actual monthly value of the child tax credit is $19\% \times 2400 / 12 = 38$ EUR/month. Note that both the amounts of the "*mínimo por descendientes*" and the regional part of the minimum tax rate (19% is the sum of national and regional) vary in regions that use their tax competences. Consequently, in 2023 the value of the child tax credit ranged between 35 EUR/month in Extremadura and 43 EUR/month in Catalunya. The relevant legislation is the national law of the personal income tax (<https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2006-20764>, last accessed 10 March 2026) and the specific tax rules approved by the regions (<https://www.hacienda.gob.es/ES/Areas%20Tematicas/Financiacion%20Autonomica/Paginas/libro%20electronico%20tributacion.aspx>, last accessed 10 March 2026).

for the National Minimum Income (“*Ingreso Mínimo Vital*”). This scenario tests the poverty reduction potential and budgetary cost of a universal child support approach.⁸

- 3. Hypothetical reform scenario introducing a Refundable Tax Credit:** A reform that makes the existing child tax credit refundable, meaning that households with insufficient tax liability would be able to deduct the full credit and receive the difference as a cash payment rather than losing it as in the current (baseline) scenario. Such reform targets the instrument also towards low-income families. Like in the UCB scenario, we also simulate different monthly amounts, expressing them as the value of the base tax credit (explained in the baseline scenario). Instead of creating a new instrument, this scenario would modify an existing one, with a mechanism, the refundability, already in place with maternity and large family tax credits. Hence, this represents a simpler policy option in administrative terms compared to a brand-new system such as the UCB scenario.⁹

For the measurement of monetary poverty, we consider a poverty threshold at 60% of the median equivalised income, applying the OECD-modified equivalence scale. We calculate child at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rates as the number of children under 18 years of age below that threshold.¹⁰ We benchmark the poverty-reducing potential of policies by the budgetary cost per percentage point (pp) reduction in the child AROP rate. For the two reform scenarios, we experiment with different amounts, with steps from the budget-neutral level relative to the current baseline to the amount sufficient to reduce the child AROP rate to the EU average.

3. Results

3.1 Baseline

Under the 2023 rules of the Spanish tax-benefit system, the child AROP rate stands at approximately 28% according to EUROMOD baseline simulations, substantially higher than the overall population AROP rate of 19%.¹¹ This high figure has remained persistent for decades, characterized by recurrent child poverty (Cantó and Mercader-Prats, 2002; Gradín and Cantó, 2012; Ayllón, 2013), in a country marked by high unemployment and temporary jobs, as well as inadequate policies to protect children from poverty (Bornukova et al., 2024).

Spain’s national child support system consists mainly of a means-tested child benefit, the “*complemento de ayuda para la infancia*” (CAPI),¹² and three tax credits: the aforementioned non-refundable child tax credit, a refundable tax credit for mothers with children below 3 (“*deducción por maternidad*”) and another refundable tax credit for large families (“*deducción por familia numerosa*”).¹³ Of these, the child tax credit accounts for the largest budgetary cost. But since it is not refundable, the poorest households cannot fully benefit from it, given that they have little or no income tax liability. Figure 1 shows this: the child tax credit provides higher average support per child to higher-income households, while households in the lower income deciles receive little or nothing.

⁸ The Spanish Government has recently included the implementation of a UCB of 200 EUR/month per child in their Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030 (https://www.dsca.gob.es/sites/default/files/derechos-sociales/AGENDA_2030_EDSR.pdf, last accessed 10 March 2026).

⁹ See for example the recent recommendations of UNICEF and other NGOs (<https://www.unicef.es/publicacion/informe-sobre-pobreza-infantil-en-espana-2025>, last accessed 10 March 2026).

¹⁰ FGT(0) index, see Foster et al. (1984).

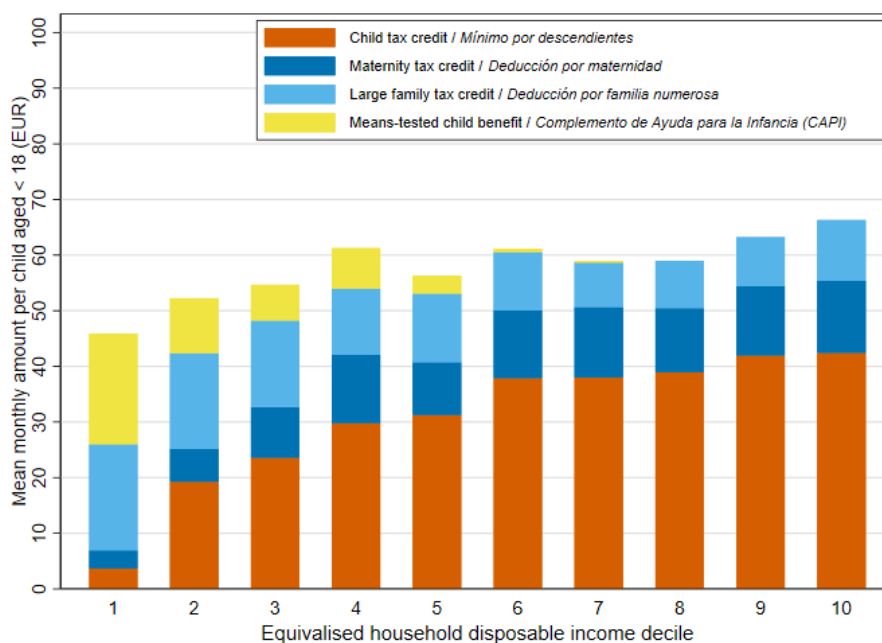
¹¹ AROP rates based on EUROMOD simulations might differ slightly from the official statistics produced by Eurostat, primarily because EUROMOD uses simulated amounts of taxes and benefits instead of the survey-based values in the EU-SILC. However, this does not change the results of our analysis. A detailed description of the possible discrepancies is available here: <https://euromod-web.jrc.ec.europa.eu/resources/indicators/discrepancies>. Last accessed 10 March 2026.

¹² Given the low take-up of the CAPI, which currently stands at 28% (AIReF, 2026), our simulations are calibrated so that the total expenditure and number of recipients approximately match the official figures of 2023.

¹³ Other benefits provided at the time of childbirth are also in place, including parental leave benefits and childbirth benefits for specific family types, such as single parents or large families. A benefit for children with disabilities is also in place. In addition, some regions in Spain provide supplementary regional child benefits and child tax credits.

According to our simulations, the total budgetary cost of the current child tax credit for dependants under 18 years of age is 2,604 EUR million per year in foregone tax revenue, and reduces the child AROP rate by 0.8 pp. This corresponds to a cost of 3,255 million EUR per pp reduction.¹⁴ However, the child tax credit does not reach the households where child poverty is concentrated. Our estimates indicate that approximately 60% of children in poverty do not benefit from the child tax credit, and up to 20% are left without any support from any of the instruments of Figure 1. This motivates the two hypothetical reform scenarios described in Section 2.

Figure 1: Distribution of the main national child support instruments across income deciles (households with children only)



Source: Own calculations based on EUROMOD simulations and EU-SILC data

3.2 Universal Child Benefit Scenario

The UCB scenario explores the poverty-reduction frontier by replacing the child tax credit with a universal benefit, varying the monthly amount from 38 EUR per child under 18 years of age (budgetary neutral in relation to the baseline) to 340 EUR (which would reduce the child AROP rate right under the EU average of 19.3%, lifting the budget neutrality condition). Figure 2 shows the distribution of child support under the budget-neutral implementation of the UCB, while Table 1 presents key results for selected benefit levels.

The UCB helps fill gaps in the existing child support system by increasing it for low-income families. First, owing to its taxable nature, the benefit is larger for low-income families than for high-income ones. Second, even a budget-neutral reform replacing the child tax credit with an UCB of 38 EUR/month per child reduces child AROP by about 0.6 pp (equivalent to 50,000 children). Third, the cost per AROP pp reduction of the UCB shows a gradual upward trend as benefit levels increase, ranging from approximately €1,900 million to €2,300 million per pp of child AROP reduction. This indicates slightly diminishing marginal returns, as the cost of achieving additional poverty reduction increases at higher benefit scales. Fourth, the cost of AROP reduction with the UCB is substantially smaller than with the child tax credit at any amount in Table 1, indicating a higher efficiency.

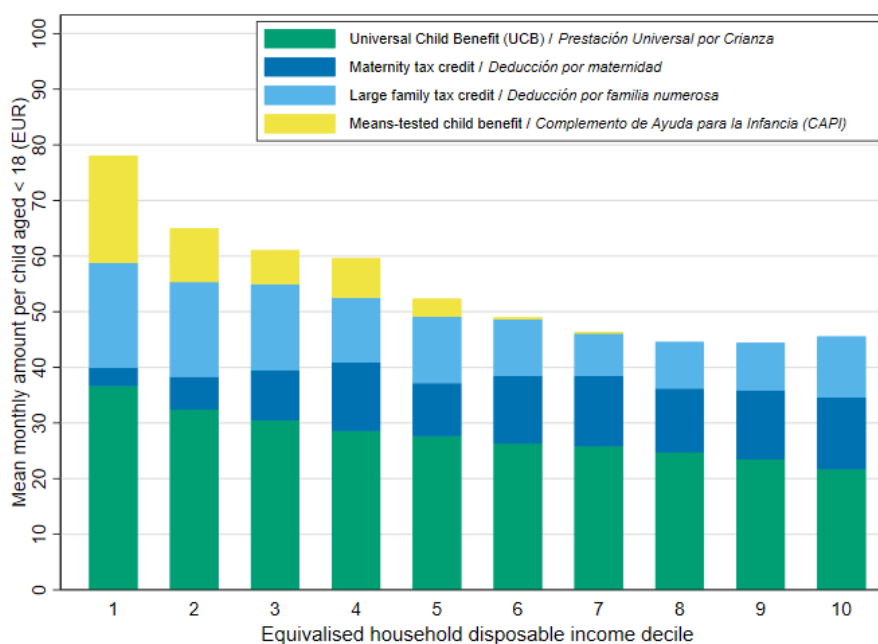
The coincidence of the budget-neutral value of the UCB (38 EUR/month) with the base value of the tax credit for the first child (described in section 2) is incidental but helps to understand how the reform works across the income distribution. In the baseline scenario, the default tax reduction for the first child ranges between 0 (families with zero gross tax liabilities) to 38 EUR/month¹⁵ (families with sufficient tax liabilities to absorb the full

¹⁴ We discuss the cost of the child tax credit for dependants under 18 years of age, and not its full cost covering dependants aged up to 24, because child poverty refers to underaged children only.

¹⁵ Since the value varies across regions, the real maximum would be that of Catalunya, 43 EUR/month.

tax reduction). In the UCB hypothetical scenario, the amount ranges from 38 EUR/month (for families that had 0 tax reduction) to 19.4 EUR/month (for families facing the highest marginal tax rate, 49%).¹⁶ This shift of the distributional pattern drives the higher efficiency of the UCB scenario at the same cost.

Figure 2 Distribution of the main national child support instruments across income deciles in the UCB scenario, at budget neutral level (households with children only)



Source: Own calculations based on EUROMOD simulations and EU-SILC data

A UCB of 200 EUR/month per child, as proposed by the Spanish Government in their Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030, would reduce child poverty from 28.0% to 22.5% at an annual cost of 10,670 EUR million (0.71% of 2023 GDP).¹⁷ More ambitiously, a 340 EUR/month per child UCB would reduce the child AROP rate to 19.2%, roughly the EU average of 19.3%, at a cost of 19,433 EUR million (1.30% of 2023 GDP).

Table 1: Impact of the Universal Child Benefit at selected monthly amounts

Amount (EUR/month/child)	Child AROP (%)	Child AROP reduction vs baseline (pp)	Net cost vs baseline (EUR million)	Net cost vs baseline (% 2023 GDP)	Cost AROP reduction (EUR million/pp)
0 (Baseline)	28.0	-	-	-	3,255
38 (*)	27.4	0.6	-24	0.00	1,936
100	25.4	2.6	4,139	0.28	2,005
200	22.5	5.5	10,670	0.71	2,133
300	20.1	7.9	16,838	1.12	2,247
340 (**)	19.2	8.8	19,433	1.30	2,301

Source: Own calculations based on EUROMOD simulations and EU-SILC data

Note: The baseline scenario consists of the 2023 policy rules in Spain, and it is described in section 2. Child AROP reduction and net cost are calculated against it. Cost of AROP reduction is calculated by comparing budgetary impact and AROP rates of each scenario against a hypothetical scenario without the policy.

(*): This amount roughly corresponds to a budget neutral reform.

(**): This amount would reduce child AROP to roughly the EU average.

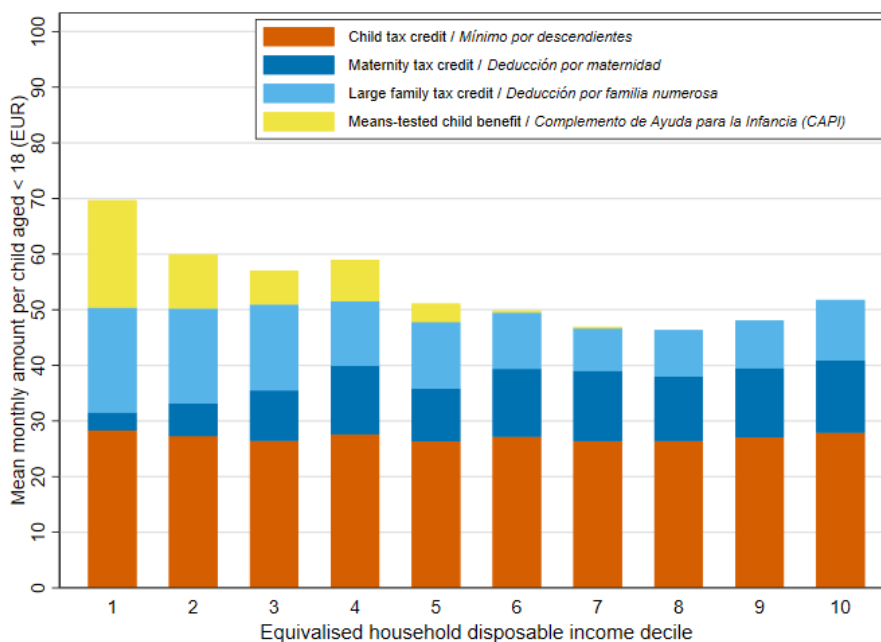
¹⁶ Since the maximum marginal tax rate varies across regions, the real minimum would be that of Comunitat Valenciana: 38*54%=17.38 EUR/month.

¹⁷ See [Estrategia de Desarrollo sostenible 2030 revisada | Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030](#).

3.3 Refundable Child Tax Credit Scenario

The refundable child tax credit reform represents a more uniform intervention. By making the existing child tax credit refundable, low-income families who currently cannot benefit (due to insufficient tax liability) would receive the child tax credit as a cash transfer. The amounts received would be the same as those received by similar families in the highest deciles, acting in practice as a non-taxable non-means-tested benefit. In this reform scenario, we vary the base amount from 25 to 165 EUR/month. Figure 3 shows the distribution of child support under the budget-neutral implementation of the refundable child tax credit, while Table 2 summarises the results for selected amounts.¹⁸

Figure 3 Distribution of the main national child support instruments across income deciles in the Refundable Child Tax Credit scenario (households with children only)



Source: Own calculations based on EUROMOD simulations and EU-SILC data

Making the child tax credit refundable improves its distributional impact. The reform is almost budget-neutral at 25 EUR/month (a cost of 25 EUR million), reducing the child AROP rate by 0.3 pp. As in the UCB scenario, a reduction in child poverty can be achieved at no budgetary cost. With an amount similar to the non-refundable child tax credit in place in 2023, 38 EUR/month, the reform reduces child poverty by 0.9 pp at a budgetary cost of 1,751 EUR million. As the monthly amount increases, the refundable tax credit steadily reduces child poverty, reaching 19.3% (EU average) at 165 EUR/month with a cost of 20,307 EUR million (1.36% of 2023 GDP).

Compared to the UCB reform, this scenario is less efficient in terms of child poverty reduction per euro spent. The reason is twofold: (1) the taxable nature of the UCB allocates higher amounts to lower income families, while the refundable tax credit is allocated uniformly; (2) part of the additional expenditure of the refundable child tax credit goes to dependent children 18 or above and below 25. This explains why the refundable child tax credit requires additional public spending to reduce child AROP to the EU average (20,307 EUR million or 1.36% of 2023 GDP, vs 19,433 EUR million or 1.30% of 2023 GDP).¹⁹ However, the efficiency of the two reforms shows opposite patterns, with the marginal cost of poverty reduction declining as the refundable child tax credit scales up.

¹⁸ The amounts shown in the table are computed as 19% of the allowance for first child, as explained in section 2. Increased values for additional and young children and differentiated regional values are also changed proportionally in relation to the baseline.

¹⁹ Note that the UCB scenario operates at larger amounts per child than the refundable tax credit scenario. This happens because each euro added to the UCB is received in full only by families who do not pay personal income tax, while the richest families receive about half of that value due to its taxable nature. On the contrary, each value added to the refundable credit is a minimum value received by all families independently of their income, and it is paid also for some children up to 25. Furthermore, higher values are provided for young children. Finally, given that the tax credit is the result of applying the progressive scale to a tax allowance, high values may partially move to the second tax band.

Importantly, both scenarios would be more efficient from a child poverty reduction perspective than the baseline policy scenario, where higher amounts are allocated to higher income families.

Table 2: Impact of Refundable Child Tax Credit at selected monthly amounts

Amount (EUR/month/child) (*)	Child AROP (%)	Child AROP reduction vs baseline (pp)	Net cost vs baseline (EUR million)	Net cost vs baseline (% 2023 GDP)	Cost AROP reduction (EUR million/pp)
(Baseline)	28.0	-	-	-	3,255
25 (**)	27.7	0.3	25	0.00	3,163
38 (***)	27.1	0.9	1,751	0.12	3,058
50	26.5	1.5	3,352	0.22	2,914
100	23.8	4.2	10,266	0.69	2,725
150	20.6	7.4	17,861	1.19	2,588
165 (****)	19.3	8.7	20,307	1.36	2,514

Source: Own calculations based on EUROMOD simulations and EU-SILC data

Note: The baseline scenario consists of the 2023 policy rules in Spain, and it is described in section 2. Child AROP reduction and net cost are calculated against it. Cost of AROP reduction is calculated by comparing budgetary impact and AROP rates of each scenario against a hypothetical scenario without the policy.

(*): These amounts are computed as 19% of the allowance for the first child, as explained in section 2. Increased values for additional and young children and differentiated regional values are also changed proportionally in relation to the baseline.

(**): This amount roughly corresponds to a budget neutral reform.

(***): This is generally the amount of the non-refundable child tax credit in place in 2023.

(****): This amount would reduce child AROP to roughly the EU average.

4. Conclusions

This note analyses alternative reform scenarios of the Spanish child support system in order to increase its efficiency from a budgetary and poverty reduction perspectives. The analysis suggests that child poverty could be significantly reduced through cost effective reforms of the tax-benefit system. The key findings are:

- 1. The current child tax credit is inefficient.** The existing non-refundable child tax credit fails to reach the poorest families, missing as many as 60% of children in poverty. Households without sufficient tax liability receive no benefit, creating a pro-rich pattern. The budgetary cost of the non-refundable child tax credit is 2,604 EUR million per year, and removing it entirely would lead to an increase in child AROP of 0.8 pp. This corresponds to a cost of 3,255 EUR million per pp reduction.
- 2. Making the child tax credit refundable would represent a cost-effective reform.** Making it refundable at its current budgetary cost (25 EUR/month) would reduce the child AROP rate by 0.3 pp compared to the existing system. This reform would not require new policy instruments, but only modifying an existing one with a mechanism, the refundability, already in place with the maternity and large family tax credits - thus facilitating its administrative implementation.
- 3. A Universal Child Benefit offers greater potential.** The UCB scenario suggests that the child AROP rate could be reduced by 0.6 pp at no cost, with a monthly taxable amount of 38 EUR per child. A UCB of 200 EUR/month per child, a value proposed by the Spanish Government, would reduce child poverty from 28.0% to 22.5% at an annual cost of 10,670 EUR million (0.71% of 2023 GDP).
- 4. Both the refundable tax credit and the Universal Child Benefit reforms outperform the status quo.** The current child tax credit achieves little in poverty reduction for its cost, at 3,255 EUR million per pp reduction in the child AROP rate. The cost of a refundable child tax credit would range from about 3,200 to 2,500 EUR million per pp, depending on the monthly amount, and the UCB reform would represent a more efficient system amounting to circa 1,900 to 2,300 EUR million per pp. In sum, redirecting the resources of the current system of child support to the alternatives discussed here would generate better results in terms of child poverty reduction.

5. **Reducing child poverty in Spain to the EU average costs 19,433 EUR million per year, or 1.30% of 2023 GDP.** This scenario corresponds to a 340 EUR/month per child taxable UCB. Alternatively, a refundable child tax credit of 165 EUR/month would also bring the child AROP rate down to the EU average at a cost of 20,307 EUR million (1.36% of 2023 GDP), an efficiency slightly inferior to the UCB. Notably, this remains substantially lower than the economic costs associated with childhood disadvantage, estimated at 4-5% of Spain's GDP (Cantó et al., 2023; Clarke et al., 2024).

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Authors

Cruces, Hugo
Bornukova, Kateryna
Hernández, Adrián
Picos, Fidel

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CONTACT INFORMATION

European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC)
Contact: Hugo Cruces
E-mail: hugo.cruces@ec.europa.eu

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