



Austerity policy, economic crisis, and child health in European countries

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Photo: Eva Gil Fdez de Sanmamed

Content

- ✓ The “Great Recession” and Government responses (“austerity”)
- ✓ Impact on social determinants and child health inequalities
- ✓ Health crisis of 2020 and its effect (added effect)
- ✓ Limitations
- ✓ Conclusions

BMJ Open Trends in social determinants of child health and perinatal outcomes in European countries 2005–2015 by level of austerity imposed by governments: a repeat cross-sectional analysis of routinely available data

Luis Rajmil,¹ David Taylor-Robinson,² Geir Gunnlaugsson,³ Anders Hjern,⁴ Nick Spencer⁵

BMJ


Rajmil L, et al. *BMJ Open* 2018;8:e022932. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2018-022932

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Open Access

Austerity policy and child health in European countries: a systematic literature review



Luis Rajmil¹, Anders Hjern^{2*} , Nick Spencer³, David Taylor-Robinson⁴, Geir Gunnlaugsson⁵ and Hein Raat⁶

BMC Series blog

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Most severe austerity measures in Europe are associated with worse child health outcomes



Austerity measures implemented by European countries after the crisis may have adversely affected child health and wellbeing. [A study](#) published today in *BMC Public Health* discusses these findings and recommends that governments consider policies that prevent the negative consequences of austerity measures in the time of COVID-19.

Austerity and COVID-19

At the time when we carried out the review, we had not predicted the current COVID-19 pandemic. Early data suggests, unsurprisingly, that the pandemic is impacting the poor and vulnerable most, with stark socio-economic and ethnic inequalities in outcomes. Although there are still many uncertainties regarding the pandemic, it seems that children are less prone to severe consequences of infection compared to adults. However, it is likely that the indirect effects of the pandemic will have profound impacts for child health, particularly poor children, in the long run.



It is likely that the indirect effects of the pandemic will have profound impacts for child health in the long run

In the acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis, key components of preventive child health services have been negatively affected, e.g. immunization. The unintended consequences of lockdown measures and social distancing are disproportionately affecting poor children, increasing hunger, mental health problems and the risk of abuse, neglect and non-accidental injury.

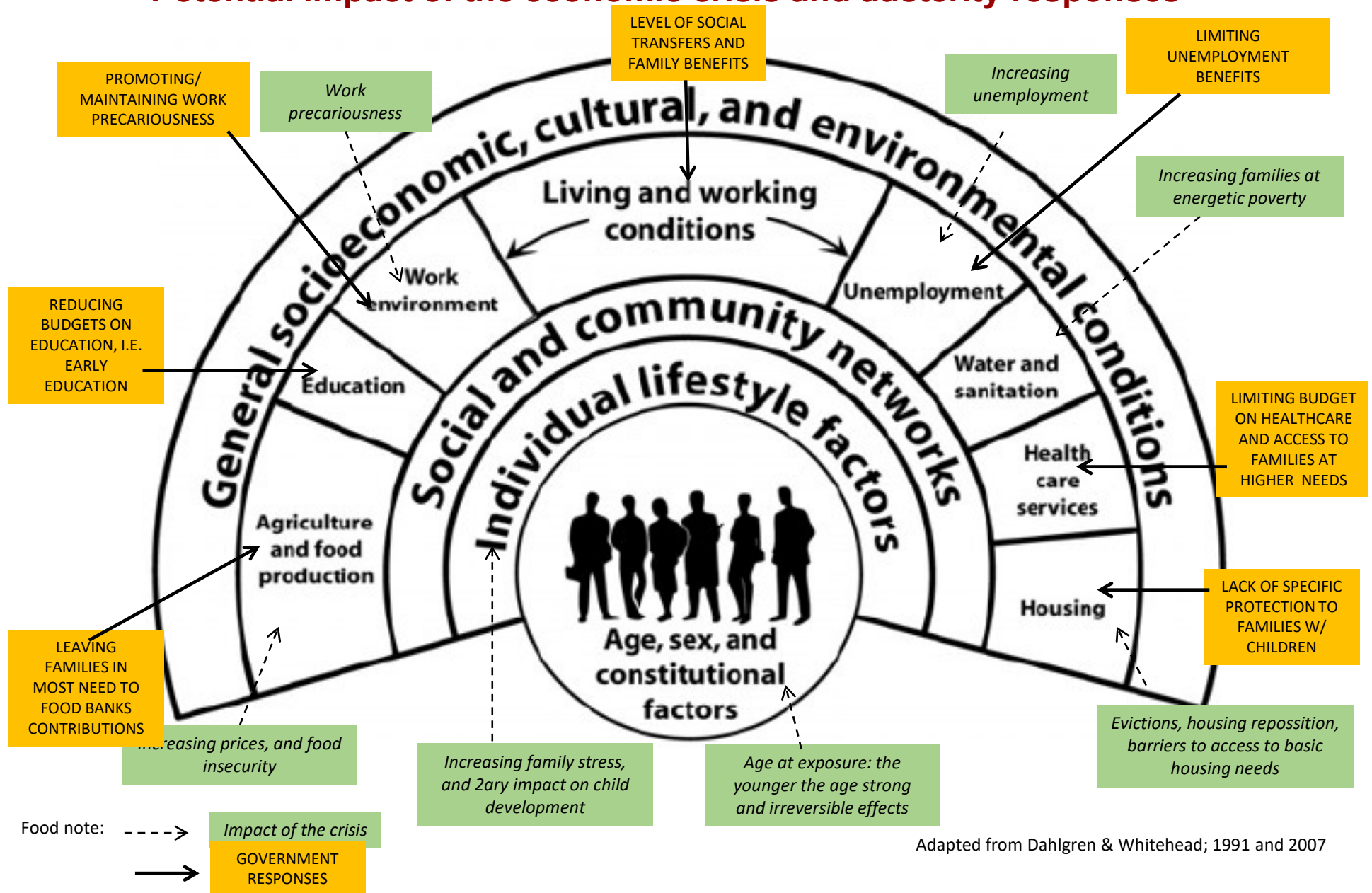


Luis Rajmil (MD, MPH, PhD), Pediatrician and specialist in Epidemiology and Public Health. Retired, he was senior researcher at the Catalan Agency for Health Quality and Assessment (AQuAS, Barcelona, Spain). His research work has been devoted to the health-related quality of life in children and adolescents, and social determinants of health and child health inequalities. He has participated in Spanish, European, and worldwide projects on these subjects. He is member of the International Society for Social Paediatrics and Child Health (ISSOP), and of the International Network for Research in Inequalities in Child Health (INRICH).

Nick Spencer is Professor Emeritus of Child Health in Warwick Medical, University of Warwick, UK. He has a long-standing interest in the social determinants of child health and has published widely around this theme including a book on 'Poverty and Child Health' and a book on the biopsychosocial determinants of birthweight. He was President of the International Society for

Main determinants of child health.

Potential impact of the economic crisis and austerity responses



Government responses to the Great recession

Economic and social policy evaluated with the *Cyclically Adjusted Primary Balance CAPB*

Difference 2013 - 2009 stratified into tertils

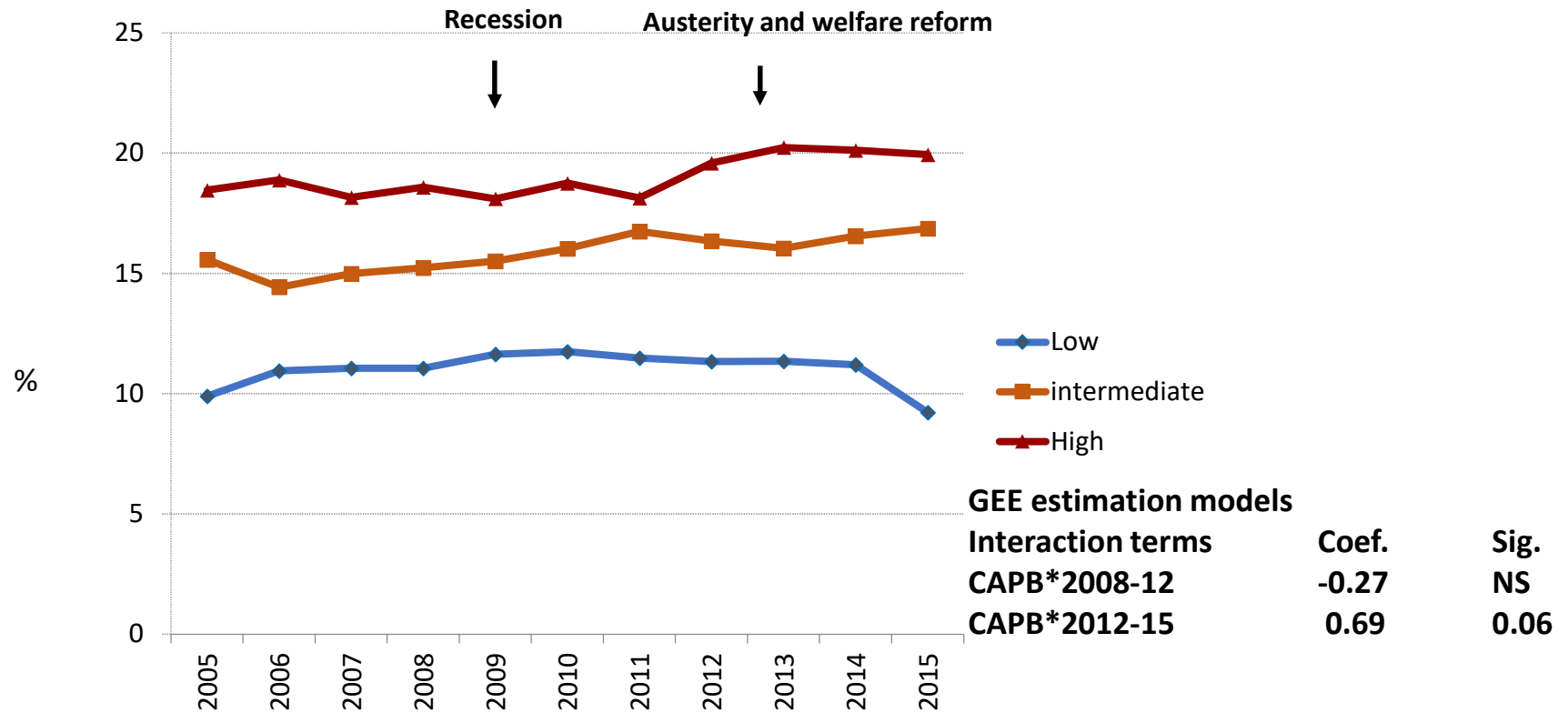
Table 1 Scores of the cyclically adjusted primary balance (CAPB) and stratified according to the level of austerity

Country	CAPB	Level of austerity
Denmark	0.02	Low
Finland	-0.1	Low
Germany	0.08	Low
Norway	0.14	Low
Sweden	-0.43	Low
Austria	0.58	Intermediate
Belgium	0.35	Intermediate
France	0.52	Intermediate
Italy	0.64	Intermediate
Netherlands	0.74	Intermediate
Greece	3.43	High
Iceland	1.75	High
Ireland	1.83	High
Portugal	1.68	High
Spain	1.93	High
UK	0.86	High

The average annual change in the difference between taxes and non-interest spending 2013–2009 would be if the economy were at full employment. Higher score corresponds to higher level of austerity.

Rajmil L, et al. *BMJ Open* 2018;8:e022932. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2018-022932

Trends in child poverty rates by level of austerity European countries. 2005-2015



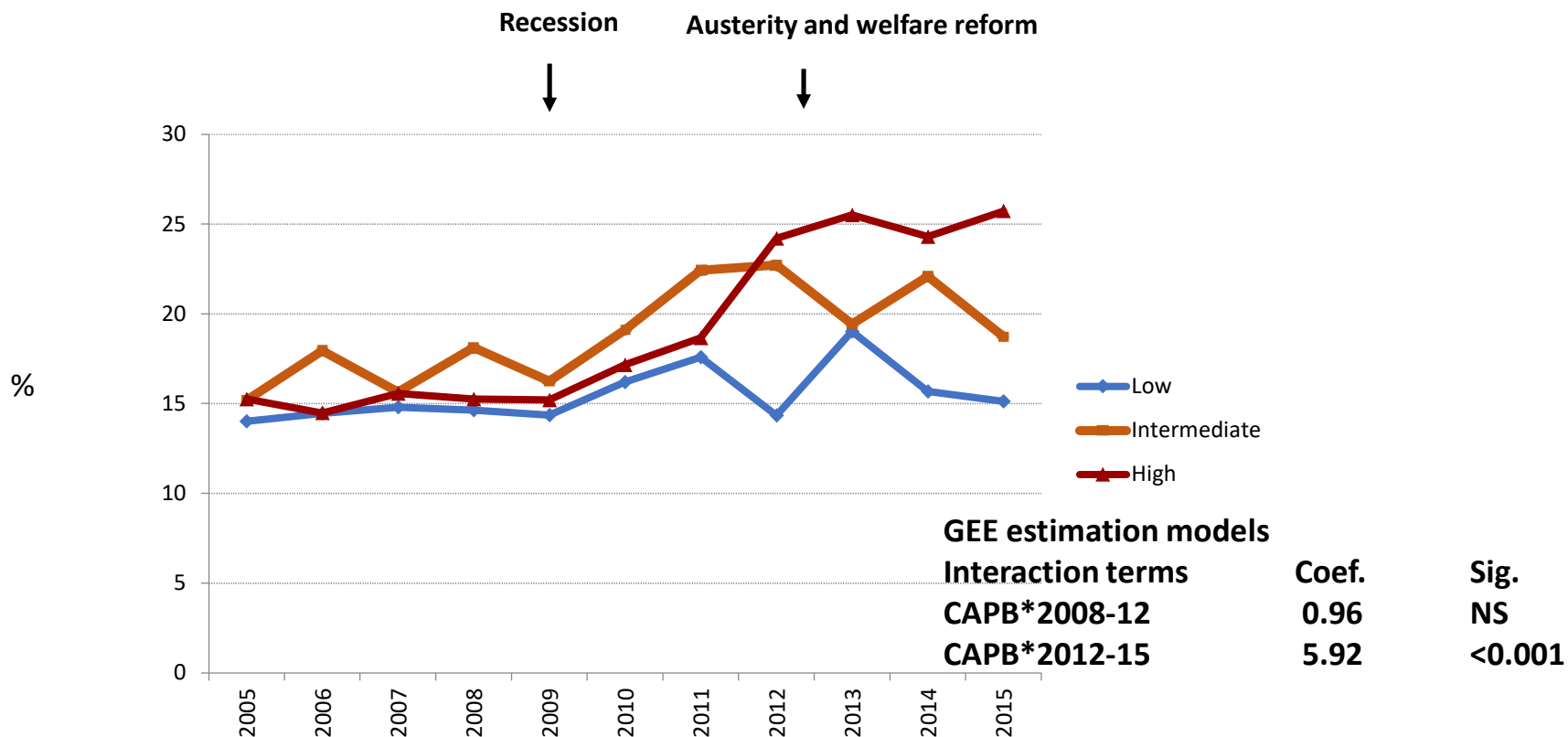
Child poverty rates: percentage of children living in households with income below 60% of the median.

Source of data: European Union-Survey of Income and Living conditions (EU-SILC)

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions>

GEE. Generalised estimated equation of panel data

Trends in severe material deprivation in families with primary education level 2005-2015.



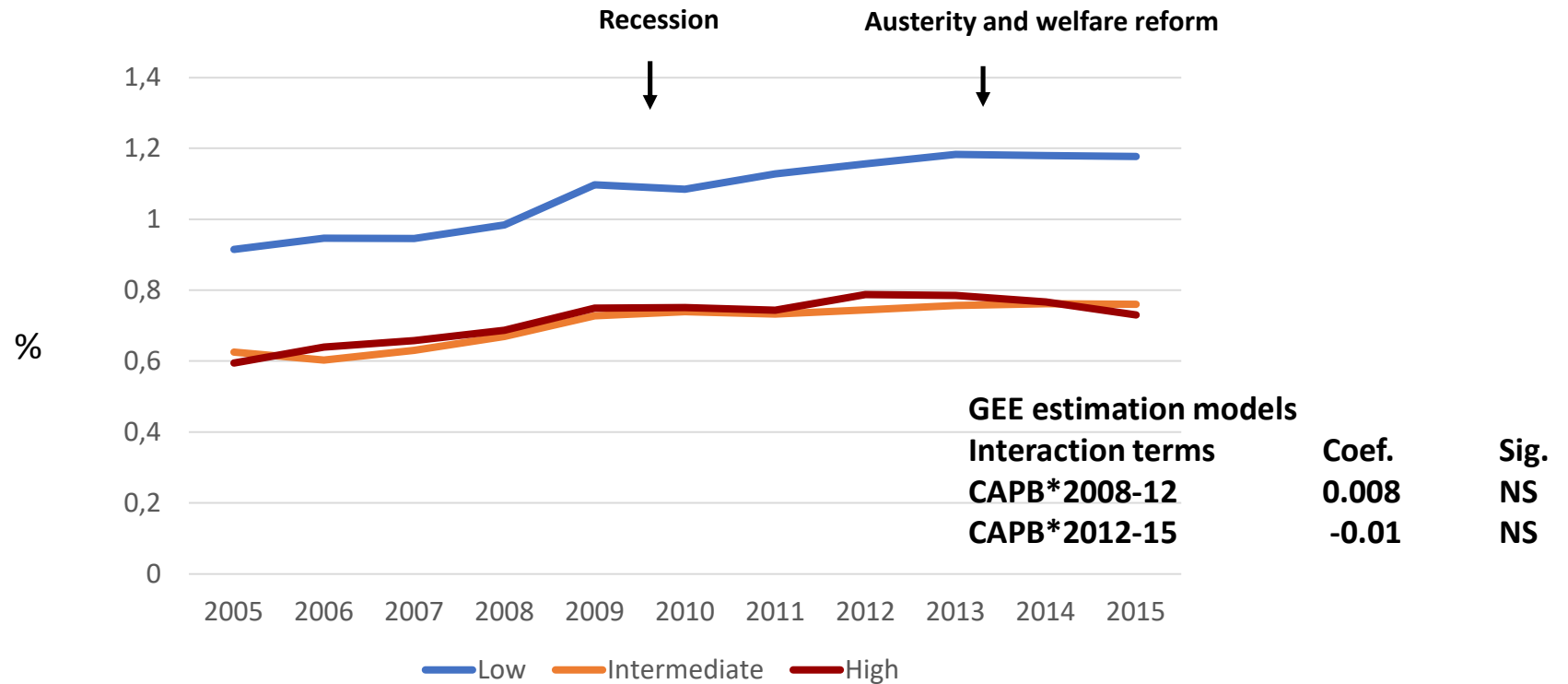
Severe material deprivation: proportion of children under 18 years of age living in families with primary level of education which cannot afford to pay for at least four out of the nine items considered basic.

Source of data: European Union-Survey of Income and Living conditions (EU-SILC)

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions>

GEE. Generalised estimated equation of panel data

Trends in pre-school investment by austerity level 2005-2015



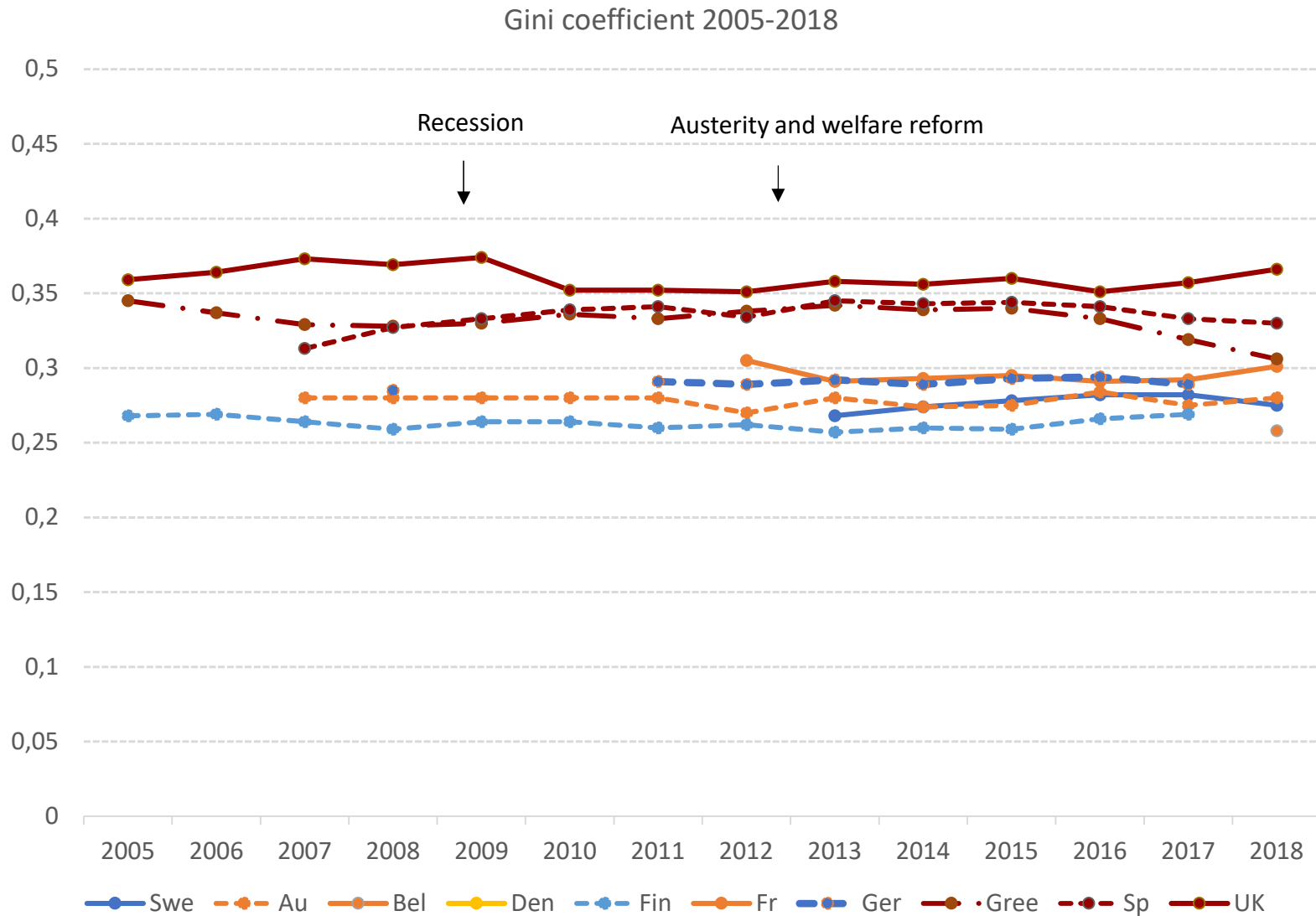
Pre-school investment (0-5 years old): annual percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Source of data: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Family Database <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

No data available for Greece

GEE. Generalised estimated equation of panel data

Income inequalities (Gini coefficient)



Social determinants of child health: child poverty, material deprivation and social inequalities.

Systematic review

Children were significantly less likely to be poor in countries with higher levels of social protection spending in 2008–2013, even after controlling for the socio-demographic structure of the population, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and the working-age unemployment rate

Yekaterina Chzhen. 2017. J Eur Soc Pol (UNICEF)

Comparing AROPE indicators in children in Spain and Portugal. In Spain, the main predictor is unemployment, while in Portugal, it is the level of poverty in the population

Inmaculada Herranz Aguayo, et al. 2015. Soc Ind Res.

Spending on benefits in kind was found to be more efficient for curbing child poverty than spending on cash benefits, even after controlling for unemployment, family structure, the general standard of living, as well as welfare institutional configurations

Mikael Nygård, et al. 2019. Soc Ind Res

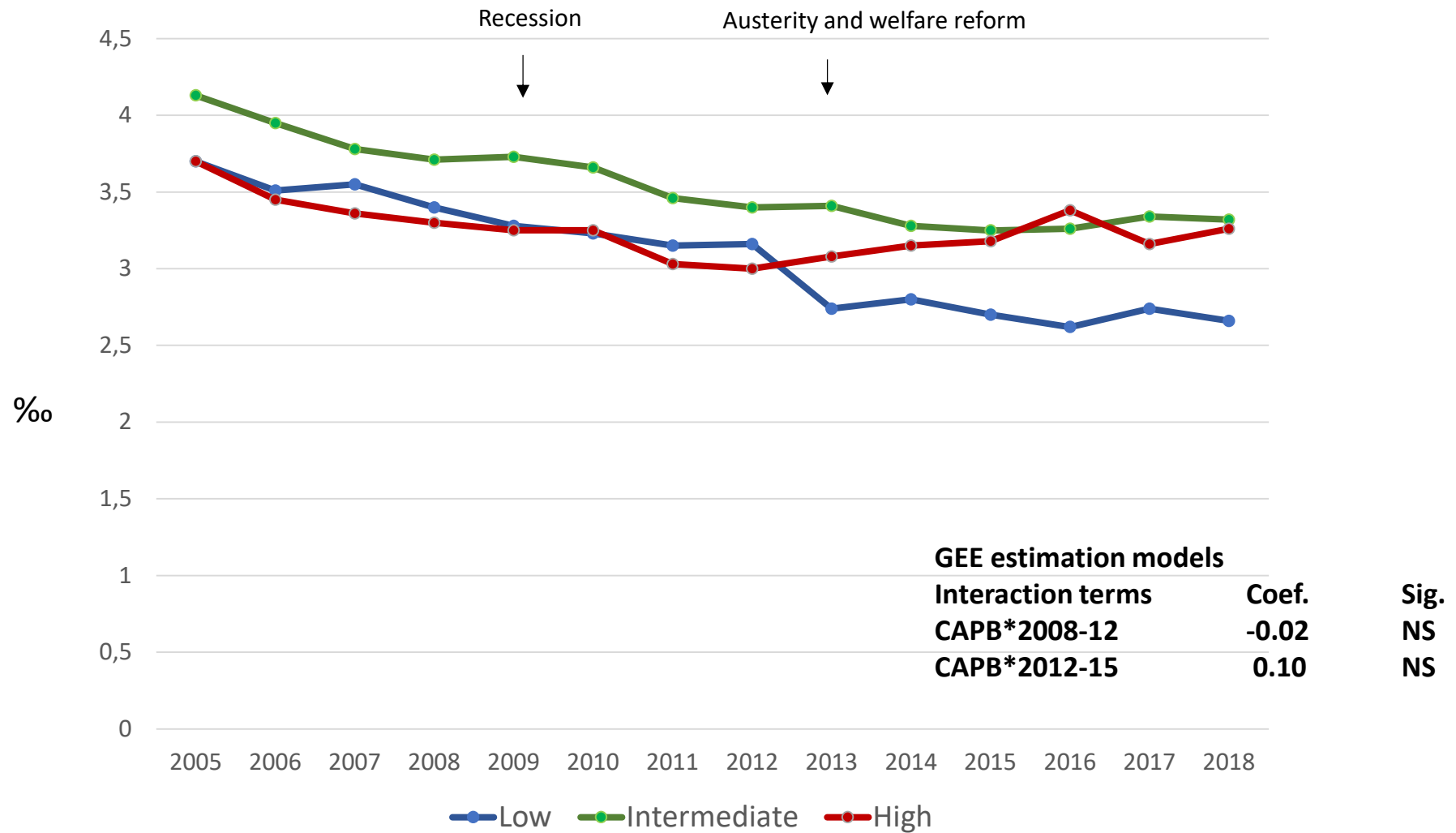
Both children deprivation and vulnerability in Iceland were higher in 2014 than 2009 although only the latter was statistically significant

Kolbeinn Hólmar Stefánsson, et al. 2017. Child Ind Res

Governmental responses in Iceland gave prominence to redistribution through taxes and the social protection system

Geir Gunnlaugsson. 2015. Arch Dis Child.

Infant mortality by level of austerity. European countries 2005-2018

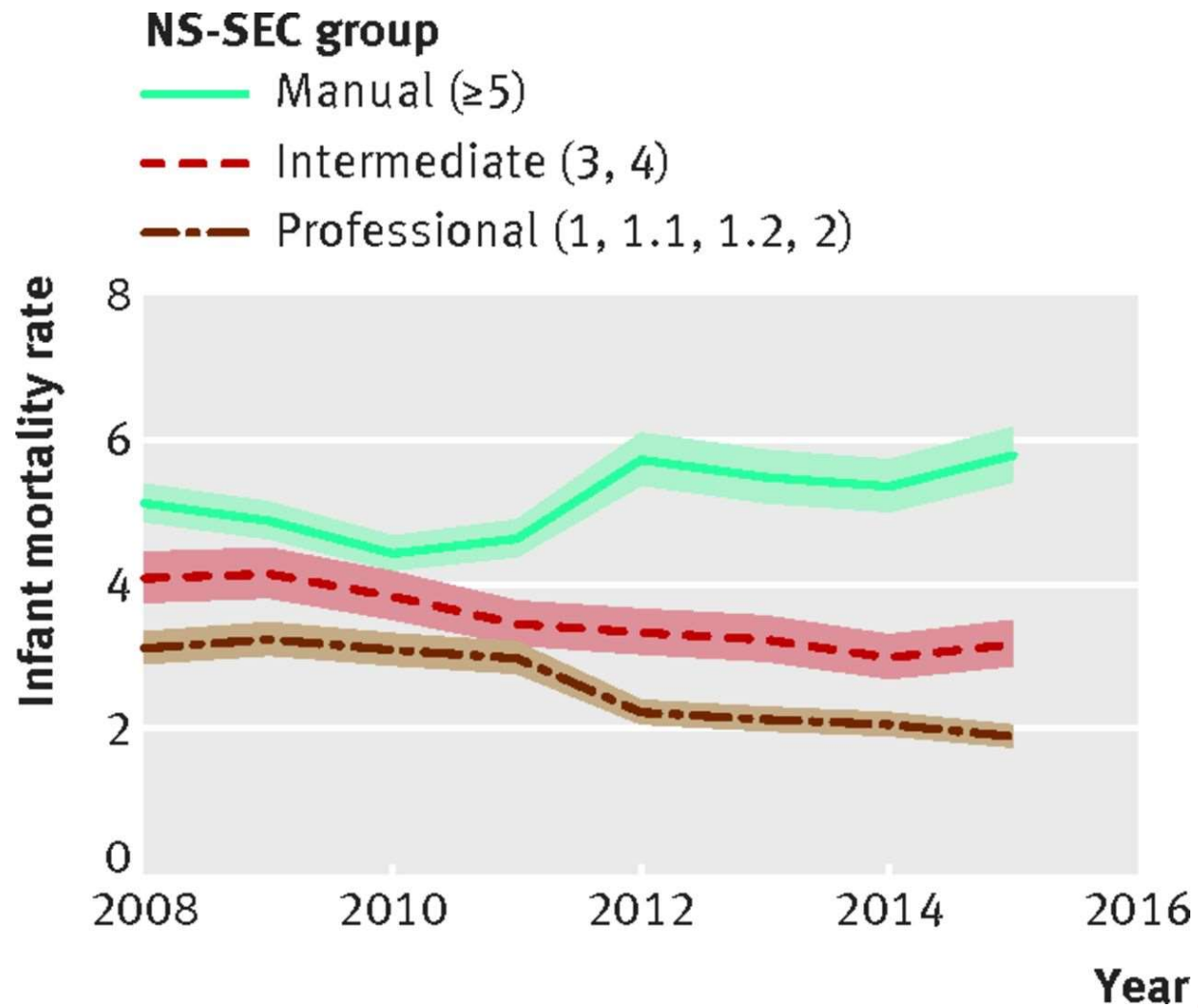


Infant mortality rate: The number of deaths of children aged less than one in a given year per 1000 live births

Source of data: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Family Database <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

GEE. Generalised estimated equation of panel data

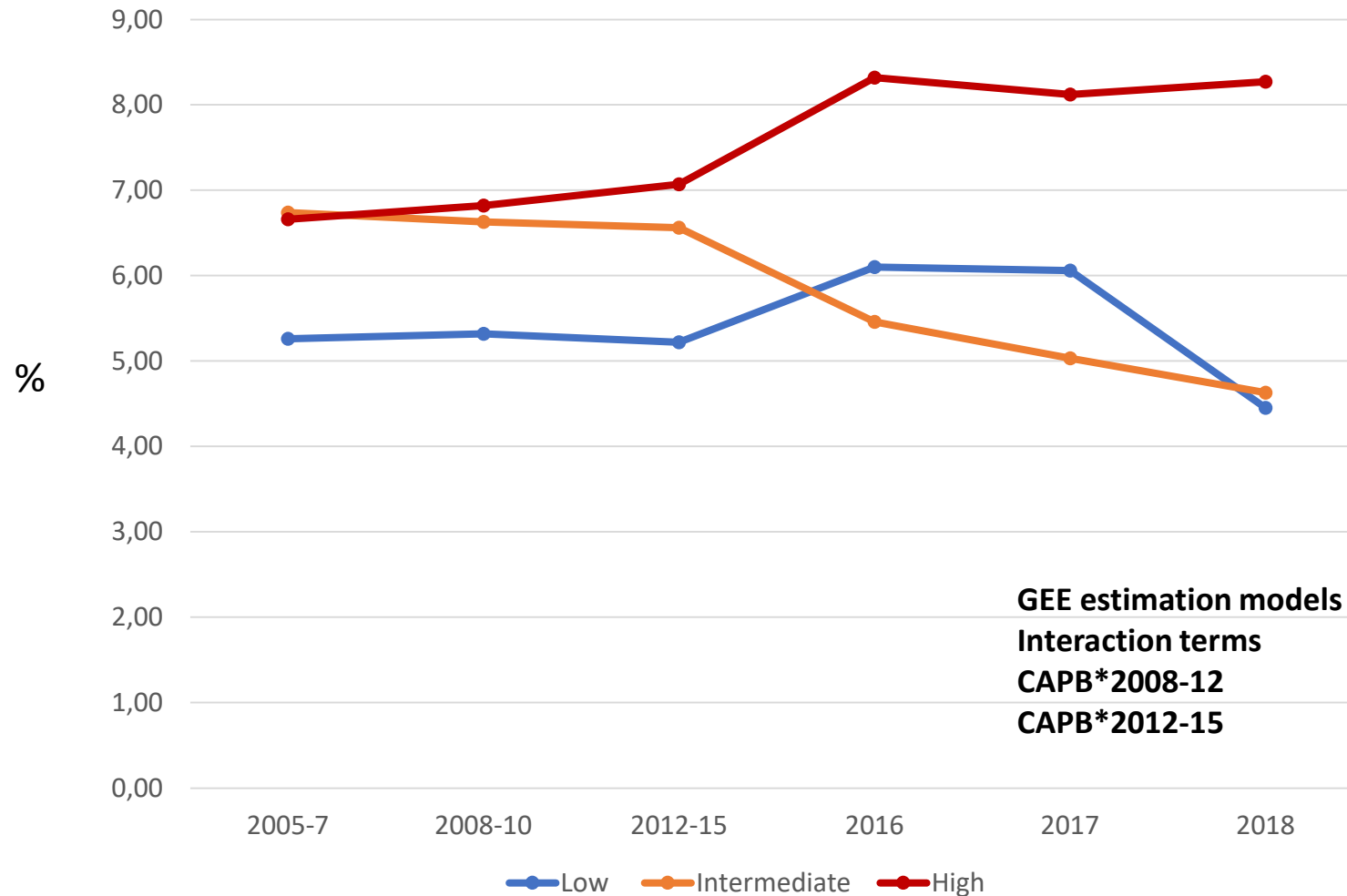
Fig 1 Infant mortality rate (95% confidence interval) by socioeconomic classification, 2008-15.



David Taylor-Robinson, and Ben Barr BMJ
2017;357:bmj.j2258



Low birth weight by level of austerity. European countries 2005-2018



GEE estimation models

Interaction terms

CAPB*2008-12

Coef.

0.11

Sig.

NS

CAPB*2012-15

0.25

0.004

Low birth weight: live births weighing less than 2500 grs divided by the total number of live births

Source of data: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Family Database

<http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

GEE. Generalised estimated equation of panel data

Child health and healthcare services

Systematic review

Perinatal and child health indicators

LBW and preterm birth increased in Greece.
Zografaki et al. 2018. Eur J PH.

Only a few indicators worsened in Iceland (i.e. small for gestational age 2% to 3.4%)
Gunnlaugsson 2015. Arch Dis Child.

A reduction in welfare benefits during the recession in Ireland was associated with a significant increase in the risks of asthma and atopy
Reinhard et al. 2018. Am J Epi.

Child health and healthcare services

Systematic review

Mental health and disabilities

- ✓ 32 European countries. A survey to professionals and families of disabled children carried found a decline in quality of services for disabled children by most family and many professional across Europe. Austerity measures were reported to have impacted significantly on families with disabled children.
Horridge et al. 2018. Dev Med Child Neurol.
- ✓ Scotland: A survey to providers and carers. Carers reported widespread reductions in both the level and quality of services they received from social work, education, the voluntary sector, health and professions allied to medicine. There was a move from preventative to crisis work, not receiving the help they needed
Stalker et al. 2014. Child Care Pract.

Preventive services

- ✓ Public Health Expenditure fell by 2% in Italy. Fixed models estimate that each 1% reduction in per-capita public health expenditure was associated with a decrease of 0.5 percentage points in MMR vaccination coverage,
Toffolutti et al. 2018. Eur J PH.


Pandemic, SARS-CoV-2, social determinants and child health

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Review

BMJ
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Role of children in the transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic: a rapid scoping review

Luis Rajmil 





Open access

Editorial

BMJ
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Wider collateral damage to children in the UK because of the social distancing measures designed to reduce the impact of COVID-19 in adults

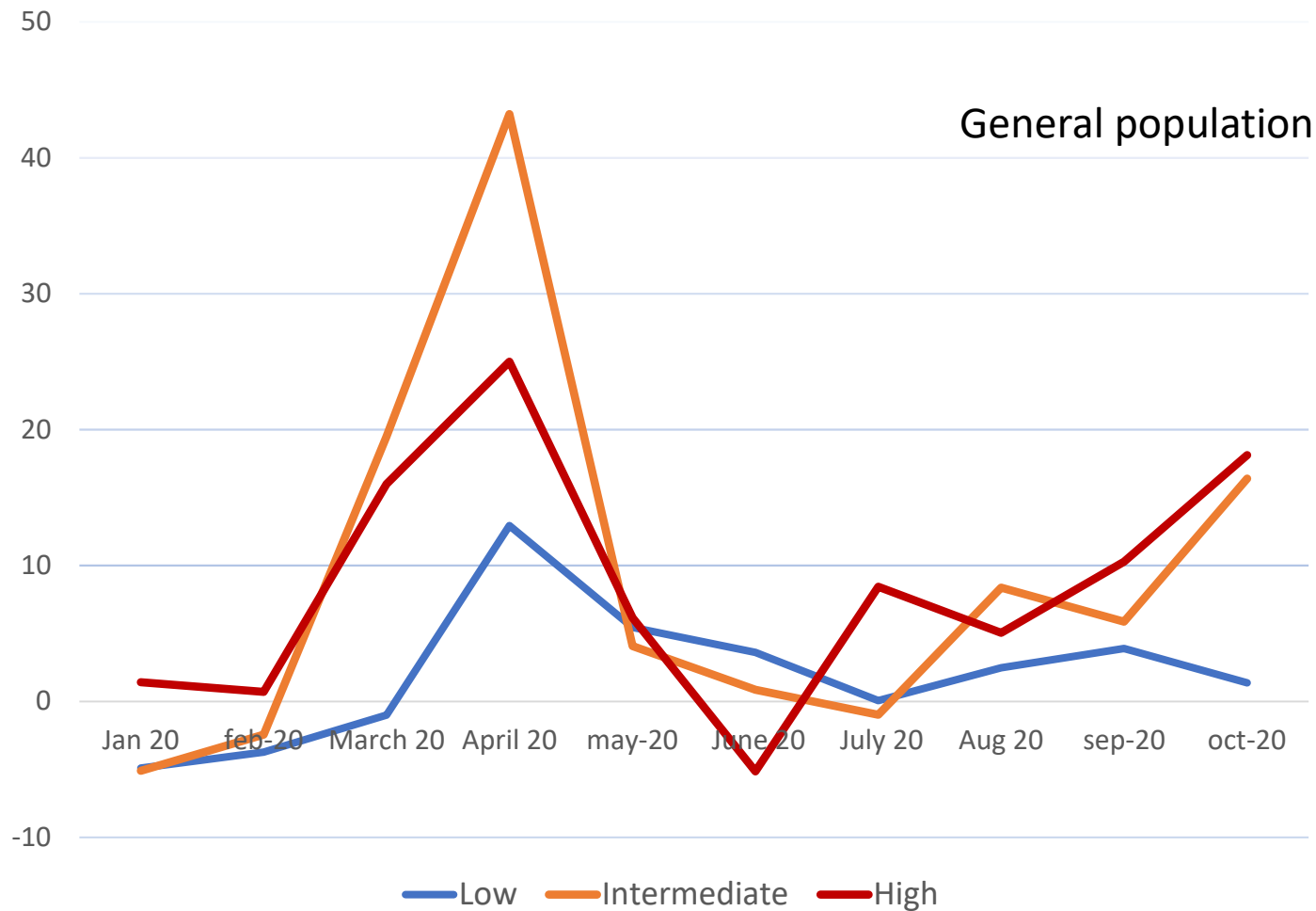
Esther Crawley ¹, Maria Loades ^{1,2}, Gene Feder,³ Stuart Logan,⁴ Sabi Redwood,⁵ John Macleod^{2,5}

Pandemic, SARS-CoV-2, social determinants and child health

Confinement / closure of schools...

- ✓ Increasing the digital divide
- ✓ Rising child poverty and social inequalities
- ✓ Increased violence and abuse
- ✓ Worse mental health
- ✓ Increased obesity / changes in eating habits and physical act.
- ✓ Changes in access to protection and health services
- ✓ Probable long term effects

Excess mortality (monthly) by level of austerity (14 Eu countries) - 2020



Causal review

- ✓ Consistency
- ✓ Temporality
- ✓ Alternative explanations
- ✓ Biological plausibility



Policy responses with lack of child and family protection to economic and/or health crises are associated with poorer child health through increasing inequalities

Limitations

- ✓ Difficulties in establishing comparisons by country
Specific cases such as Iceland
- ✓ Accuracy and validity of the analyzed indicators
- ✓ Few studies have focused on the social determinants of child health and social inequalities

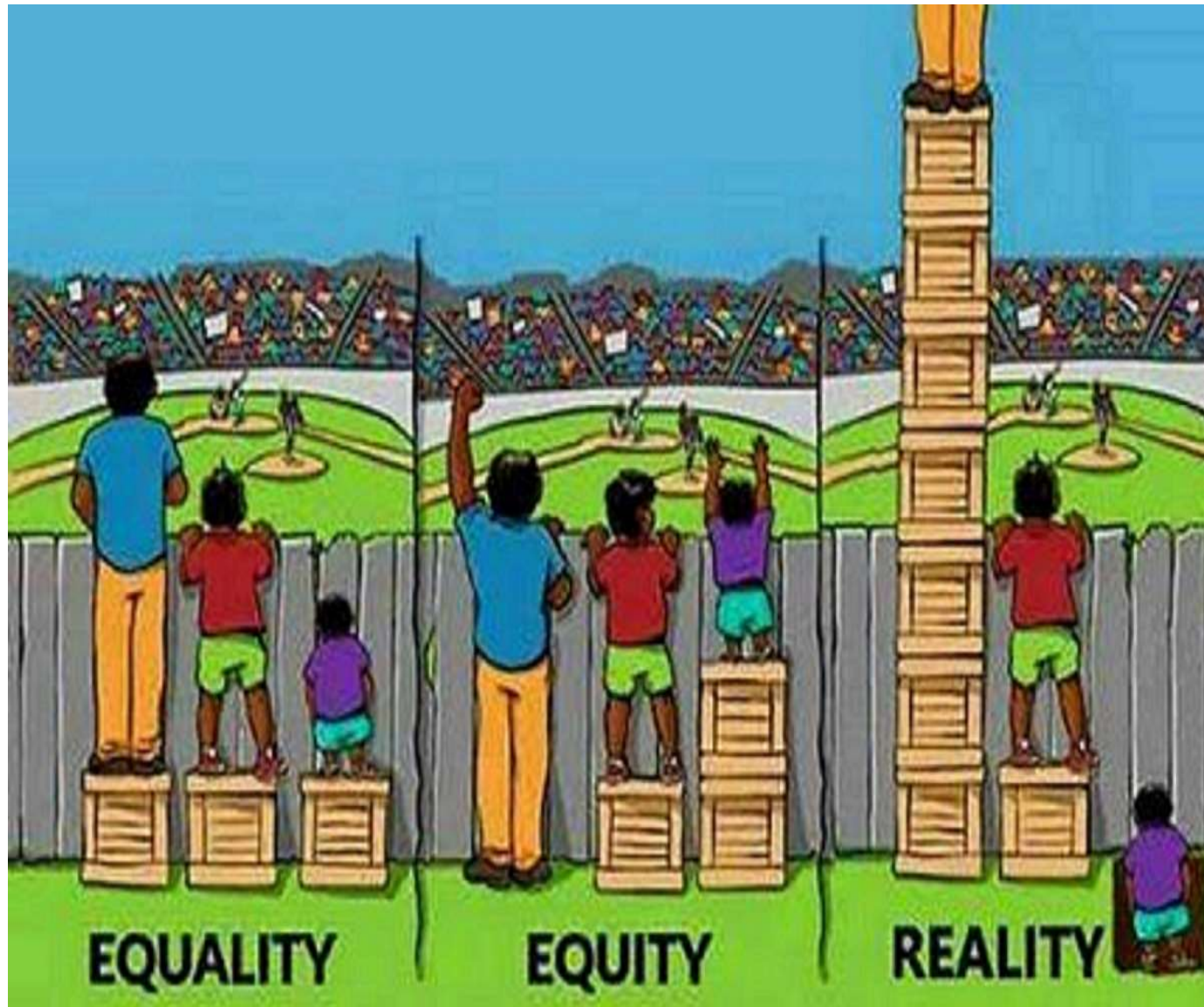
Conclusions

- ✓ The child population has shown a significant worsening of socio-economic indicators since the beginning of the Great Recession, more pronounced in countries that have applied more austerity
- ✓ "Austerity" measures have exacerbated the economic crisis
- ✓ Evidence suggests that policies of structural counter-reforms and budget cuts are part of the problem and not the solution
- ✓ In countries that implement these policies, the trend of indicators is in the opposite direction to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusions

- ✓ COVID-19 has caused a health and economic impact by worsening the previous situation with an increase in social inequalities of the child population
- ✓ Measures taken to deal with the pandemic cause collateral damage to the child population that is perhaps greater than what is intended to prevent it
- ✓ Countries that are in a worse situation before the pandemic and that had applied more cuts to public health / education / social services are finding it more difficult to cope with the health crisis.

Thank you



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