

Limited Choices:

Housing and support for people with intellectual disabilities

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by Ebba Olsson



Overview

Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) guarantees the right to live independently in the community. This study examines housing and support for people with intellectual disabilities in Europe using survey data from the Inclusion Indicators 2025 by Inclusion Europe. Quantitative data from 33 countries and qualitative responses from 15 countries were analysed to identify key challenges. The findings show continued reliance on family and institutions, limited housing alternatives, inadequate support, financial barriers, regional inequalities, and weak monitoring systems. Overall, a significant gap remains between the right to independent living and everyday practice.

Introduction

Everyone wants to have their own place to live. This can be a place for themselves. Or a place to share with friends or family. It can take many

forms, but what matters is that it is a place of one's choice.

The right to live independently and be included in the community is established in the CRPD. Article 19 recognises the right of people with disabilities to choose where and with whom they live and to access services and support in the community. All European countries and the European Union (EU) have ratified the CRPD (OHCHR, 2006; OHCHR, 2025).

However, research shows that adults with intellectual disabilities in Europe often do not live in their own place of their choice. Many continue to live with their families long after their peers move out of the family home, and many others live in institutions (Inclusion Europe, 2024).



To understand why so many people with intellectual disabilities lack access to independent living, this study investigates the housing and support situation for people with intellectual disabilities in Europe by examining survey data from organisations representing people with intellectual disabilities and their families. The study aims to answer the following question: what challenges do people with intellectual disabilities in Europe face today in accessing housing and support?

Background

Across Europe, people with intellectual disabilities have historically been excluded from community life. During the twentieth century, large institutions became a common way of providing “care” and “housing” (Tøssebro et al., 2025). These are places where people live isolated from the community, with little control over decisions about their own lives, and where organisational rules are prioritised over individual needs (Šiška and Beadle-Brown, 2020). Institutions still exist in many parts of Europe today, despite being incompatible with the right to live independently and despite deinstitutionalisation reforms aimed at closing institutions and developing community-based housing and support (Šiška and Beadle-Brown, 2021).

Another common living arrangement for adults with intellectual disabilities, both historically and today, is living with parents or other family members. This is often the result of limited availability of housing and support services (Inclusion Europe, 2024). While living with family can be a meaningful choice for some people when other options are available, previous research shows that personalised support arrangements often provide better opportunities for choice and control (Evensen et al., 2024; Fullana et al., 2025). When living with family is the only available option, it can place heavy demands on families and limit social inclusion for both people with intellectual disabilities and their relatives (Fernández-Ávalos et al., 2020).

In these contexts, the literature often distinguishes between informal and formal forms of support. Informal support typically refers to support provided by family members or friends, such as help with daily activities, decision-making, or emotional support. Formal support, by contrast, is provided through public or private services and may include personal assistance, supported living staff, as well as financial support such as disability benefits (Aldersey et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study uses survey data from non-profit organisations representing people with intellectual disabilities and their families, all of which are members of Inclusion Europe.

Qualitative data was collected through a housing and support survey completed by representative organisations in 15 countries. Questions covered access to housing and support, long-term arrangements, disability benefits, and monitoring and evaluation. Responses were analysed thematically to identify cross-national patterns and challenges.

Quantitative data came from the Inclusion Indicators 2025 survey, completed by representative organisations in 33 European countries (24 in the EU). Two items from the housing and support indicator were analysed: estimated living arrangements of adults with intellectual disabilities and likely arrangements when parents can no longer provide support. Responses used percentage ranges and multiple-choice options and were analysed descriptively across countries.

The data reflect informed estimates from representative organisations rather than official statistics and may not be fully comparable across countries. However, they provide valuable insight into structural conditions and lived realities across Europe.

Findings and discussion

The Inclusion Indicators 2025 survey shows that across Europe, housing and support for people with intellectual disabilities remain insufficient.

In 27 countries (EU: 22) few or no adults with intellectual disabilities live in their own place. In 17 countries (EU: 14) most adults with intellectual disabilities live with their families. In 28 countries (EU: 23) people with intellectual disabilities are likely to have to move into an institution after their parents can no longer support them. These findings point to a continued reliance on families and institutions rather than community-based independent living.



People with intellectual disabilities in:

27 countries: few or none live in their own place

17 countries: most live with their families

28 countries: will likely be institutionalised as adults

A thematic analysis of the additional survey highlights five structural challenges.

Institutions persist while housing remains scarce

In many countries, institutions continue to function as the main long-term housing option for adults with intellectual disabilities. Organisations report limited access to community-based housing, leaving many people with little alternative to remaining in the parental home or an institution. Long waiting lists, high costs, and shortages of social housing reinforce this pattern. As one organisation from Malta noted, “One of the obstacles we have with deinstitutionalisation is (lack of) housing.”

Although deinstitutionalisation strategies exist in some countries, they are often undermined by weak implementation and insufficient funding. In Croatia, for example, private institutions are excluded from these processes, and an organisation also reported that “EU and state funding is still being used to renovate institutions.” In other settings, new housing initiatives reproduce institutional practices, such as residential services located on former institutional grounds or in remote areas.

Several representative organisations also reported trends of

re-institutionalisation. In Denmark, new large institutions are being built and access to support is increasingly tied to specific housing arrangements. As one organisation summarised, “The citizen should not be moved to the support – the support should be moved to the citizen.”

Concerns about the future were widespread among families. Organisations described significant anxiety about what will happen when parents can no longer provide support. An organisation in Portugal referred to planning for this “after us” situation as “a major source of anxiety for families.” Despite some legal initiatives, limited funding means that institutionalisation remains the dominant option once family support ends.

“EU and state funding is still being used to renovate institutions.”

- Organisation in Croatia

Families as the default support system

Across Europe, families continue to provide most care and support for people with intellectual disabilities. In many countries, parents receive little guidance when their child is identified as having an intellectual disability and must rely on informal networks and

non-governmental organisations. An organisation in Poland described “information chaos, and a lack of one place where one could find useful information.”

Family support remains central throughout adulthood, even where formal services exist. Organisations frequently described services as inflexible or insufficient, with limited opportunities for individualised support. As an organisation in Finland described, “‘Take it or leave it’ service models: if families do not accept a top-down, pre-defined service package, they may be left without any support at all.” Personal assistance, where available, is often restricted in hours or eligibility, reinforcing families’ role as the primary support providers.

“If families do not accept a top-down, pre-defined service package, they may be left without any support at all.”

- Organisation in Finland

Financial barriers

Financial insecurity strongly shapes housing and support options. In many countries, disability benefits are too low to cover basic living costs. As one organisation in Portugal stated,

“Many people with disabilities still live below the poverty line, even with benefits.” Strict conditions, regional variations in eligibility, frequent reassessments, and income-related reductions further limit access, particularly for those living with working family members. Administrative complexity also creates barriers, with a German organisation noting that “theoretically there is a system for any need possible but in practice it is very hard to get it.”



Unequal access between cities and rural areas

Organisations consistently reported fewer housing and support options in rural areas than in cities. Limited infrastructure and services restrict opportunities for independent living outside urban centres. In addition, organisations in Eastern European and Balkan countries highlighted stronger stigma in rural areas, contributing to social exclusion and reinforcing reliance on family or

institutions. An Albanian organisation described how stigma in rural contexts leads to “social exclusion and isolation of both individuals with disabilities and their families.”

Limited monitoring and evaluation of support services

Finally, monitoring and evaluation of housing and support services were reported as weak or absent in many countries. Existing systems often prioritise legal compliance over outcomes and include limited participation by people with intellectual disabilities. Monitoring frequently relies on provider self-assessment or complaint-based mechanisms, with few consequences following evaluations. As one organisation in Hungary stated, ombudsman reports on institutions are “not legally binding.” Where state systems are weak, non-governmental organisations often attempt to fill gaps by conducting evaluations or representing people with intellectual disabilities and their families. While some progress was noted, including increased participation in monitoring in Germany, such developments remain uneven.

Conclusion

This study shows that many people with intellectual disabilities and their families still struggle to access suitable housing and support across Europe. Many adults continue to live

with their families because affordable and accessible housing options are limited. Families remain the main source of support. When family support ends, moving into an institution is often the only available option.

The findings also show that support systems are often limited and inflexible. Support is frequently not tailored to individual needs, financial assistance is often insufficient to cover everyday costs, and people living in rural areas face fewer options than those in cities. Monitoring and evaluation of services are also weak and rarely shaped by the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities.

Overall, there is a clear gap between the right to live independently in the community and the reality experienced by many people with intellectual disabilities and their families. Reducing this gap will require more community-based housing, better access to flexible support, adequate financial assistance, and monitoring systems that lead to real improvements. Future research should focus on identifying good practices and must meaningfully involve people with intellectual disabilities to ensure that housing and support reflect real needs and preferences.

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Author: Ebba Olsson

Inclusion Europe

Avenue des arts 3, 1210 Brussels, Belgium

+32 25 02 28 15

office@inclusion.eu

www.inclusion.eu



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