

2. OVERCOMING SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Does where a student lives affect his or her reading performance?

- In most countries, students in cities perform better than those in rural areas, even after accounting for the higher average socio-economic status of city-dwellers.
- The performance differences between students who live in cities and those who live in rural areas are greatest in Hungary and Turkey. They are also very large in Chile, Mexico and the Slovak Republic, and in the partner countries Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Panama and Peru, where students in cities are, on average, more than one proficiency level ahead of those in rural areas.

What it means

In some countries, the size or location of the community in which a school is located is strongly related to student performance. In large communities or densely populated areas, more educational resources may be available for students. Isolated communities might need targeted support or specific educational policies to ensure that students attending schools in these areas reach their full potential.

Findings

Across OECD countries, students in urban schools perform an average of 23 score points higher in reading than students in other areas, even after accounting for socio-economic background. The difference is largest in Hungary and in the partner countries Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Panama and Peru. In each of these countries, 15-year-olds in city schools are at least one proficiency level ahead of those in rural schools. The performance gap between students living in urban and rural areas is at least half a proficiency level in Chile, the Czech Republic, Italy, Mexico, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Turkey and in the partner countries Albania, Argentina, Bulgaria, Indonesia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Panama, Peru, Qatar, Romania and Tunisia.

School location and student performance, however, are not strongly related after accounting for socio-economic differences in Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States and in the partner countries and economy Croatia, Dubai (UAE), Montenegro, the Russian Federation and Serbia.

The variation in performance reflects differences in the educational opportunities available in rural and urban areas, and the characteristics of these locations, such as population density, distribution of labour markets, and the extent to which urban and suburban areas are sought and populated by individuals from different backgrounds.

The PISA data can also be used to compare the performance of students in large cities across countries. In Canada, Japan and Korea, for example, students in cities with over one million people perform better than those in large cities in other OECD countries. In Poland, students in large cities perform at a similar absolute level to those in Canada, Japan and Korea; but when the different socio-economic composition of urban and rural areas is taken into account, students in large cities in Poland do not perform as well. This reflects the fact that students in Polish cities have much higher socio-economic status on average than those in the countryside.

Definitions

PISA categorises the communities in which the schools and students were assessed as i) villages, hamlets or rural areas with fewer than 3 000 people, ii) small towns with 3 000 to 15 000 people, iii) towns with 15 000 to 100 000 people, iv) cities with 100 000 to one million people and v) large cities with over a million people. The analysis above compares the performance of students in villages, hamlets or rural areas with that of students in cities with 100 000 or more people.

Information on data for Israel: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

Going further

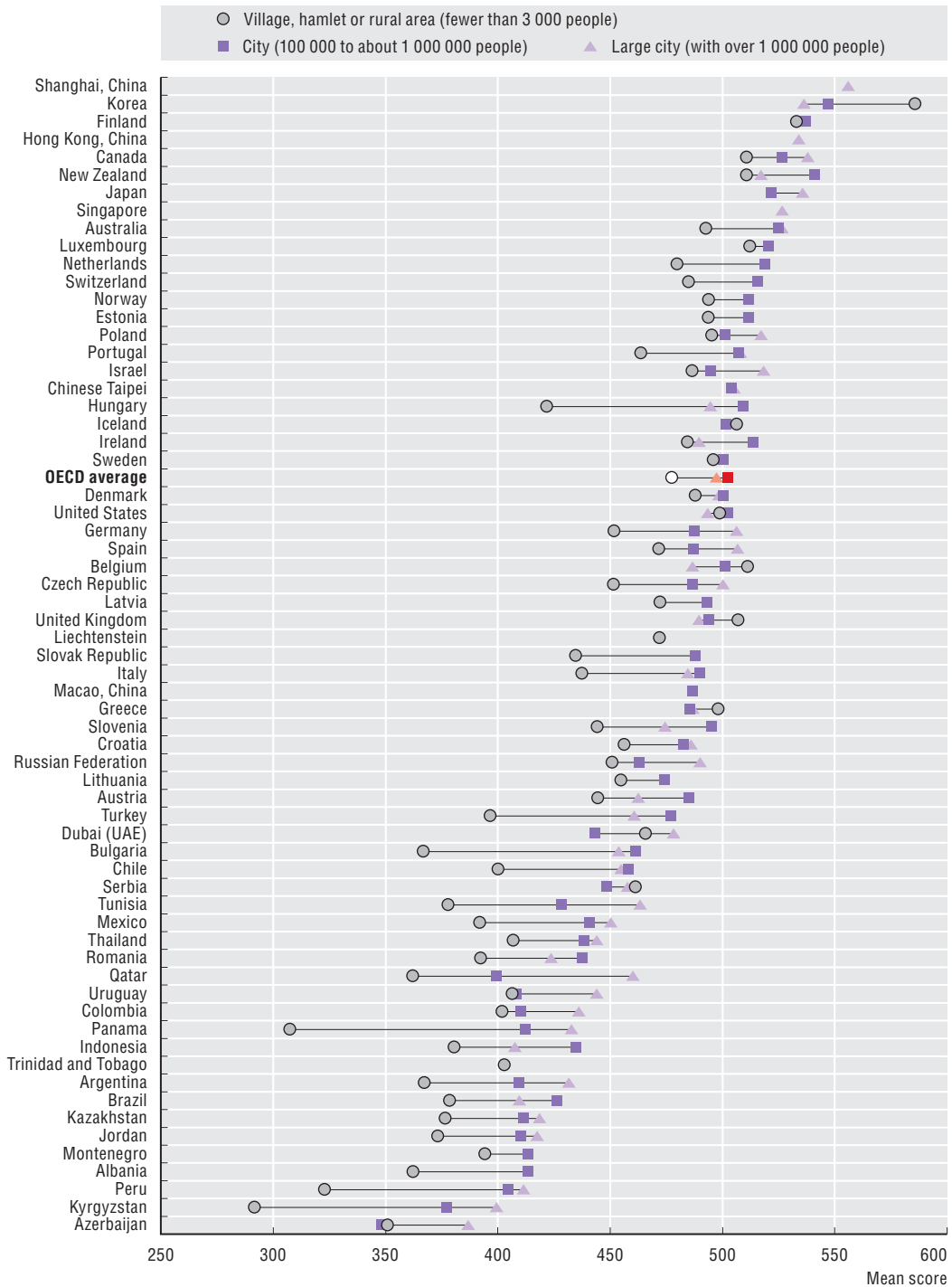
Further analysis is presented in Chapter 2 of *PISA 2009 Results Volume II, Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*. Full data are shown in Table II.2.6 at the back of that volume.

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Figure 2.5. Reading performance, by school location

Mean scores after accounting for socio-economic background



Note: Countries are ranked in descending order of the average performance of students in cities (cities and large cities). For Liechtenstein and Trinidad and Tobago, where this is not possible, the average of remaining categories were used, including village, hamlet and rural area (shown), and two other categories which are not shown in this Figure (small town [3 000 to about 15 000 people] and town [15 000 to about 100 000 people]).

Source: OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results, Volume II, Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes, Figure II.2.6, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932343570>.



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