

Child Poverty in Ireland:

An Overview

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1 Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes adequate income and accommodation, a right to education and health and a right to have access to necessary supports and services.

In other words, every child has a right to the material and other resources necessary to allow them to experience a childhood free of poverty and deprivation and which enables them to reach their full potential.

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. It thereby committed itself to fully implement the Convention's provisions, to the maximum extent of its available resources. Our economic resources have grown enormously over the past decade. Ireland is, therefore, in a much better position to fully implement the commitments made when it ratified the Convention.

Poverty among children manifests itself across a range of needs that go beyond income, to include inadequate housing, unequal access to health care, disability and educational disadvantage. The longer a child is poor, the greater the impact on the life chances of the child and the subsequent deprivation in later life.

The Children's Rights Alliance strongly endorses the commitments to end child poverty contained in the *National Children's Strategy* (2000), the revised *National Anti-Poverty Strategy* (2002), the national partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress, 2003-2005* and the *Programme for Government* (2002). These actions commit the Government to eliminating poverty among children and young people under the age of 18 years.¹

Realising the commitment to end child poverty requires the Government to take the appropriate policy and budgetary measures. Children, particularly disadvantaged children, are extremely vulnerable to the impact of the Government's spending and taxation decisions. They are also directly affected by changes in child income support policy and changes in the provision of and access to services.

Eliminating child poverty must be moved up the top of the political and economic agenda and kept there. Ending child poverty, like any major national objective, requires sustained and comprehensive action supported by the allocation of significant resources. Achieving the goal of ending child poverty by 2007 is a challenge that can be met, but only if the effort is a matter of national and political priority.

This report has been compiled to mark the 2004 United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty – 17th October 2004. Since its creation, October 17th has been a day for those living in extreme poverty to speak out and for all citizens to consider how they can contribute to the eradication of extreme poverty.²

2 Children Living in Poverty in Ireland Today

Children in Consistent Poverty – 66,000

The most recent research on the incidence of child poverty in Ireland relates to 2001.³ In that year, approximately 6.5% of children were living in consistent poverty. This means that more than 66,000 children were living in households with incomes below 70% of the national median income and experiencing enforced basic deprivation. By deprivation we mean the enforced lack of basic necessities of living, such as:

- heating in the last year
- a warm waterproof overcoat
- new, instead of second hand, clothes
- two pairs of strong shoes
- going without a substantial meal one day in the last two weeks
- not having a roast or equivalent once a week
- not having a meal with meat, fish or chicken every second day or
- going seriously into debt or depending on charity to meet very basic living expenses.

Although significant progress has been made in recent years in reducing the incidence of in consistent poverty among children,⁴ this fell from 25% in 1987 to 6.5% in 2001, much still remains to be done to end poverty for those 66,000 children.

Children in Relative Income Poverty – 237,000

In 2001, approximately 23.4% of all children in Ireland were experiencing relative income poverty.⁵ This means that 237,000 children were living in a household income below 60% of median income.

Additionally, recent research indicates that the depth of ‘relative income’ child poverty has increased, with a greater percentage of children now living in households with incomes below 40% of average disposable income.⁶

Ireland’s Comparative Poverty Ranking

Many commentators are concerned that Ireland has become an increasingly divided society in recent years. Income inequality can blight the lives of children and impact their future prospects. Within a European context, where a 60% median income threshold has become a benchmark poverty line, Ireland performs poorly in comparative child poverty rankings. The average EU child poverty rate in 1999 was 19%, but Ireland’s was 21%. For lone parents, the EU average income poverty rate was 38%, but was 44% for Irish lone parents.⁷

Ireland has one of the highest rates of poverty among developed countries. It is second only to the US at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index (2004) which measures the extent of ‘human poverty’ in seventeen industrialised countries.⁸

3 At Risk Groups

A greater proportion of children than adults face a risk of poverty in Ireland. Certain groups of children are particularly at risk of experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Some of these groups are not included in the survey, which produces the official figure for poverty among children in Ireland.⁹ Groups not counted include Traveller children, homeless children (either in temporary accommodation or sleeping rough on the streets), children leaving institutional care and children of asylum seeking families.

Groups of children particularly at risk of experiencing poverty and social exclusion include:

- Children living in welfare dependent or low income households
- Children living in lone parent households
- Children in families of four or more children
- Children with disabilities
- Children from the Traveller community
- Children from asylum seeking families
- Children from immigrant and refugee families
- Children who leave school early
- Children who leave the juvenile justice system or health board care.

4 Policy Approaches

The Government views employment as the key route out of poverty.¹⁰ However, one third of children in relative income poverty in 2001 were living in households headed by a person in employment.¹¹

While parental employment has to date successfully lifted many children out of poverty, there are limitations to this approach. Some parents cannot work, or are only able to obtain low waged employment which does not yield sufficient income to adequately support their family.¹²

Research clearly shows that Government intervention to combat child poverty can make a major difference. Societies which do most to 'look after' people will, over time improve the capacity of people to 'look after' themselves. The countries with the lowest child poverty rates in the OECD are those which allocate the highest proportions of GNP to social expenditures.¹³

Concerns that cash transfers to households on behalf of children may create work disincentives for parents and/or be 'siphoned off' by adult members for their own use are not substantiated by research. Income support measures which protect people from poverty appear to empower people to get back into the workforce rather than create a disincentive to their doing so.¹⁴

5 Effects of Poverty on Children's Lives

Child poverty is a multi-dimensional problem, centred on inadequate income, but with knock-on exclusionary effects in terms of access to resources and participation in everyday activities such as education and play. It can be exacerbated by other social inequalities such as race, ethnicity, disability and geographical location.

Child poverty has a fundamental influence on the life-chances of the next generation. The longer a child is poor, the greater the subsequent deprivation in later life. Poor children are more likely to have a low birth weight, to leave school early and to start smoking and drinking at a young age. Poor children who have been poor a long time are likely to be worse off than children who are newly poor, because the capacities of families to 'get by' are eroded over time.¹⁵

Exclusion from Activities

Children living in poverty can be excluded from activities considered to be the norm by wider society and by their peers.¹⁶ For example, in the Living in Ireland 1999 study families noted that were not able to afford certain goods for their children:

- 13% of families were unable to afford birthday parties
- 11% school trips
- 10% friends to play
- 13% extra lessons or sports
- 14% pocket money.

Deprivation levels were substantially higher for children in lone-parent families, with one in four doing without extra lessons or sports, pocket money or a bike. Deprivation levels were also much higher in families where parents were unemployed, ill or disabled and in families with three or more children.

Children and Young People's Views on Social Exclusion

Living in poverty is stressful and upsetting. Children can come under enormous pressure if they cannot afford to conform to the expectations of their peer group. This pressure may even manifest itself in bullying and stigmatisation. Being stigmatised can have a negative impact not only on the child's ability to make and sustain a circle of friends but on their education and emotional well-being.

The worst thing [about being poor] is being bullied and being frightened of being beaten up. (child)¹⁷

Being poor: that's what I would change. All the kids have brand names...we haven't. We stick out and we're picked on. Look at what I'm wearing, these crap runners. You get picked on for wearing these. (girl who left school because of bullying)¹⁸

Poverty also places burdens on family home life as parents struggle to balance the family budget or to earn sufficient money to make ends meet.

I rarely seen much of her, there was no security there...I became a very insecure person...My mother was out working all the hours God sent. We were going to the neighbours, my sister and myself, looking to get fed and washed.¹⁹ (young homeless man)

Education and Poverty

Educational disadvantage affects children's life chances and their chance to fulfil their potential. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that poverty and social disadvantage can inhibit children participation in education and their chances of achieving success in their schooling.

- Young people who leave school early with few or no qualifications have significantly higher unemployment rates than the average and considerably lower earnings.²⁰ Compared to people with primary level education only, on average those with Junior Certificate or equivalent earn about 10% more, those with a Leaving Cert., about a quarter more, and those with a degree, about three quarters more.²¹
- 15% of young people leave school without a Leaving Certificate and 3% with no qualification at all.²²
- Up to 1,000 children annually do not transfer from primary to secondary level school.
- One in ten children leave primary school with serious literacy problems.²³

Investment in education is a powerful tool to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) calculated that if young people could be prevented from dropping out of school before their Junior Certificate savings of at least €14 million a year could be made on social costs associated with early school leaving.²⁴

Children and Young People's Views on Education and Poverty

The lack of adequate accommodation and a supportive home environment can greatly hinder the chances of children to get the most out of their education.

It's hard to do homework in this house. I go to my room but the kids would be playing and shouting and making noise. It's hard to study. I would like my own room.²⁵

...Like, the other kids that I hung around with when I was younger were sort of in the same boat as meself, like. Their das were missing, and most of them had big families and their big families were struggling as well, you know what I mean. So they were sort of...like school wasn't, like [for them], they had no time for school, they had no discipline at all, like. (young person in residential care)²⁶

The lack of facilities and poor quality buildings in disadvantaged schools make an already difficult situation even more so for young people who are in danger of leaving school early or not achieving their full potential.

It's a crap school really...not enough facilities...They need to have more subjects to choose from, like computers or music or something...and they need teachers who think about the kids more than their wages. (young person in residential care)²⁷

Child Health and Poverty

It is now well recognised that poverty affects not only the health status of children but their access to health care. Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has a right to health and to have access to health services.

In theory, the lowest income groups are entitled to a medical card which provides free access to General Practitioner (GP) and hospital services. However, the means test for this entitlement is extremely stringent, and it has not been significantly reviewed with the result that the percentage of the population covered by the medical card has been falling in recent years.

Families who are just above the means test income limit but are still on low incomes are required to pay the full cost of GP services. The cost of a visit to a doctor for a child and the obtaining of prescription medicine could eat away as much as 40% of the weekly income of a low income family without a medical card²⁸.

Citing the connection between poverty and ill-health and the importance of eliminating financial obstacles to medical treatment for children, the Chief Medical Officer of the Department of Health and Children has called for the provision of free primary health care for all children.

In relation to hospital care, Ireland's two-tier system means that children reliant on the public system experience much longer delays in accessing out-patient and in-patient care than those covered by private health insurance.

- The proportion of babies with low birth weight increased from 4.2% to 5% over the 1990s. The rate of low birth weight among unskilled manual groups is twice that of professional groups. Significantly higher mortality rates for newborn babies of asylum-seeking and refugee mothers were recorded compared to infants born to Irish mothers.²⁹
- Perinatal mortality is three times higher in poorer families than in rich families.³⁰
- Infant mortality amongst Traveller children is two and a half times that for the settled population.³¹ Traveller children also have significantly lower birth weights than for the settled community³². A large majority of Traveller children live in conditions that are far below the minimum required for healthy child development.
- Weight loss among children and ill health among babies was found among children of asylum seekers living in direct provision centres, where inadequate and inappropriate diet coupled with a lack of resource to supplement the diet was highlighted.³³

- One sixth of girls aged between 10 and 11 years from the lower social classes report never having breakfast during the week. In the highest social classes this falls to one in 20.

Children and Parent's Views on Children's Health

Children themselves identify the range of factors that cause poor health for them, such as their accommodation and their diet.

We don't have radiators in my house at all, it's freezin'. (girl, aged 13)³⁴

*If you're [living] in poverty, you can't get better. You can't get better if you've not got a good diet to build you up...of if you can't pay for heating to keep you warm if you're getting over pneumonia or whatever. Health and poverty are really closely linked.*³⁵

Sometimes the food goes pretty low. I won't let them go to school if they've had no breakfast. (parent)³⁶

Inadequate Accommodation and Poverty

All children have a right to suitable and secure accommodation. According to the most recent Government statistics:³⁷

- 50,000 children are currently in need of housing and are on local authority waiting lists with their families
- There are a total of 1,405 children who are homeless with their families in Ireland³⁸
- 1,140 children are homeless with their families in the Dublin area alone. The majority of these children are under the age of 12 years, and over half of these children are under the age of 5 years
- 588 unattached homeless children were dealt with by health boards in 2000³⁹
- Approximately 3,000 children within 1,200 Traveller families are living on the roadside without piped water or electricity.

Children's Views on Inadequate Accommodation and Poverty

It is clear from the children's comments below that living in poor housing in disadvantaged areas has an immense impact on their wellbeing, in terms of depression, anxiety and boredom.

When I was young, I was a bit stupid...I thought that maybe life was nice but now that I am older and I am out in the world, I know that that is not right. I have seen some terrible things, people over-dosing, people getting beat up, things being stolen. They do it during the day and you just stand there and watch. Two of my friends have killed themselves. It just got to them. That's what it's like here. (girl, 14 years old)⁴⁰

The houses in our estate are all rotten. The walls are like, all 'off' in them. (boy, aged 15)⁴¹

*I'd rather live somewhere else. There's fights around here. I'd like to live somewhere where there are no robbed cars.*⁴²

*It's just awful...we sit on the walls after school or watch the TV. There's nothing only houses around here. (boy, aged 14)*⁴³

*Where I was living..., there wasn't anything for kids to do. No playgrounds. No groups. They have projects now, but there was nothing when I was younger. I'd say that plays a big part in people going on drugs out there. There's just nothing to do. (girl)*⁴⁴

Parent's Views on the Impact of Homelessness on their Children

Research has shown the negative impact on children's schooling, health, ability to maintain friendships, and overall well-being of living in overcrowded and confined space with little or no access to play and recreational facilities. Children affected include homeless children living in bed and breakfast accommodation and emergency hostels and children of asylum seeking families living in 'direct provision' accommodation.

*I can see it in their little faces, like, in other words, they do be depressed and sometimes very sad. I find it hard to explain to you...the expressions on their faces. And then the questions that they keep throwing towards me like, 'Mummy would you try and sort another house out for us, to get us out of here'. You can see the children are under the pressure of living in that room, so small of a room like. (mother with 3 children, living in emergency accommodation)*⁴⁵

*[It affects them] more mentally than physically...like their heads are a bit confused and muddled up from moving from here to here and not knowing what's going on. (father with 5 children living in emergency accommodation)*⁴⁶

*When you're put in B&Bs you have to be out at certain times of the morning and my ma does not have that much money and she can't really go anywhere and on Sunday and Saturday mornings almost everything's closed and you just wander around on your own, or sit in parks. And wait until it's time to go back in... (young woman)*⁴⁷

*He's no friends here. He's basically just sitting around here. That's what he does all day. He's totally mixed up. His health is very poor. He's a lot of psychological problems and all. It's just totally mixed up altogether. He doesn't know whether he's coming or going. (mother with five children living in emergency accommodation)*⁴⁸

6 Government Commitments to End Child Poverty

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Ireland in 1992)	Guarantees every child the right “to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”. Require States Parties to ensure that children are enabled to fully develop their human potential ⁴⁹ .
National Anti-Poverty Strategy 2002-2007 & National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005	Made commitments to eliminate child poverty and to move towards greater equality for all children in terms of access to education, health and housing. Made a commitment to reduce the incidence of consistent child poverty to below 2%, and, if possible, to eliminate consistent child poverty by 2007.
National Children’s Strategy, 2000	Promised to provide children “with the financial supports necessary to eliminate child poverty”.
Programme for Government, 2002	Stated that the effort to end child poverty would be “a core element” of the Government’s work.
Sustaining Progress, 2003-2005 (Social Partnership Agreement)	Reiterated the NAPS commitment and established ‘Ending Child Poverty’ as one of the Ten Special Initiatives to be undertaken over the lifetime of the Agreement.
Health Strategy, 2001	Made a commitment to substantially expand Medical Card eligibility so as to include an additional 200,000 low income people, taking particular account of the needs of families with children.
Education (Welfare) Act, 2001	Established a National Educational Welfare Board and provided for Education Welfare Officers to encourage regular school attendance and develop strategies to reduce absenteeism and early school leaving.
Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998	Obliges local authorities to provide accommodation for Traveller families.
Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy, 2000	Prioritises the elimination of the use of Bed and Breakfast Accommodation for families other than in emergencies and then only for short-term use.

7 Steps Necessary to Eliminate Child Poverty

The number of children and young people still living in poverty after a period of unprecedented prosperity shows the scale of the challenge which Irish society faces if it is to eliminate child poverty. None of the Government's strategies, initiatives and commitments on child poverty will come to fruition without adequate funding. Tackling child poverty requires the development of a comprehensive, fully-resourced and sustained programme of action that can address the multi-dimensional nature of child poverty. This programme of action should, among other things:

- Ensure that child income support provides an adequate income that meets the costs of childrearing
- Implement the provisions of the National Children's Strategy that relate to poverty and social exclusion
- Ensure equal access to medical care for all children regardless of income
- Provide accessible, good quality and appropriate accommodation for all children
- Invest in education, particularly at pre-school and primary level, to ensure that all children can benefit equally from educational opportunities and to reduce early school-leaving
- Recognise and safeguard the rights of children with disabilities
- Promote and protect the rights of all children experiencing poverty or social exclusion, including children from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds
- Take steps to ensure the voices of children who are experiencing poverty are heard by those who are developing policies that impact on their lives, in line with the National Children's Strategy and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Endnotes

- ¹ Children refers to all children and young people under the age of eighteen years - Census 2002 recorded 1,013,031 children.
- ² <http://www.oct17.org/en/welcome04.htm>
- ³ The 2001 Living in Ireland survey is the most recent poverty data at the time of writing.
- ⁴ Combat Poverty Agency (2004) *Child Poverty in Ireland* Fact Sheet.
- ⁵ Whelan, C.T. et al. (2003) *Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland: Results from the 2001 Living in Ireland Survey*, Dublin: ESRI.
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- ⁸ The *UN Human Development Index 2004* is available at http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/pdf/hdr04_backmatter_2.pdf
- ⁹ *Living in Ireland Survey 1994-2001* and the forthcoming *EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions*
- ¹⁰ Department of Social and Family Affairs (16th September 2004) Press Release, 'Mary Coughlan Welcomes ESRI Report on Relative Income Poverty'.
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- ¹⁵ p. 10.
- ¹⁶ Barnardos (2004) *Children Living Without*, Dublin: Barnardos, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ Daly, M. and Leonard. M. (2002) *Against All Odds: Family Life on a low income in Ireland*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.
- ¹⁸ p. 123
- ¹⁹ Cleary, A., Corbett M., Galvin M. & Wall, J. (2004) *Young Men on the Margins*, Dublin: Katherine Howard Foundation p. 60.
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- ²³ Combat Poverty Agency, (2004) *Child Poverty in Ireland factsheet - ref: 1998 National Assessment of English Reading*.
- ²⁴ www.newb.ie ref: ESRI, 2003
- ²⁵ Daly, M. and Leonard. M. (2002) *Against All Odds: Family Life on a low income in Ireland*, p. 131
- ²⁶ Cleary et. al (2004) *Young Men on the Margins*, p. 75
- ²⁷ Edmond, R. (2002) *Learning from their lessons: A study of young people in residential care and their experiences of education*, Dublin: The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, p. 20.
- ²⁸ Wren, M.A., (2003) "Medical Card Extension and Child Health", Presentation to End Child Poverty Coalition conference, Dublin Castle, November 4th 2003
- ²⁹ Lalchandani et al. (2001) quoted in Fanning, B., Veale, A. and O'Connor, D. (2001) *Beyond the Pale: Asylum-Seeking Children and Social Exclusion in Ireland*, Dublin: Irish Refugee Council.
- ³⁰ Public Health Alliance (2004) *Health in Ireland – An Unequal State*, Dublin: Public Health Alliance, p. 23.
- ³¹ Combat Poverty Agency (2004) *Poverty Briefing 15, Poverty and Health*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency
- ³² Department of Health (2002) *Traveller Health – A National Strategy 2002-2005*, Dublin: Department of Health and Children.
- ³³ Fanning, B., Veale, A. and O'Connor, D. (2001) *Beyond the Pale: Asylum-Seeking Children and Social Exclusion in Ireland*, Dublin: Irish Refugee Council.
- ³⁴ Offaly County Development Board (December 2003) *Equally Cherished? A Study of Child Poverty in County Offaly* (unpublished), p. 67
- ³⁵ Ritchie, A., *Our Lives Consultation: Final Report* (Edinburgh: Save the Children Scotland, 1999) p. 27 quoted in McAuley, K & Brattman, M. (2002) *Hearing Young Voices: Consulting Children and Young People*, Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council, p. 11. available at www.childrensrights.ie
- ³⁶ Daly, M. and Leonard. M. (2002) *Against All Odds: Family Life on a low income in Ireland*, p. 94.
- ³⁷ Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. *Assessment of Housing Need 2002*.
- ³⁸ Department of the Environment and Local Government, *Assessment of Homelessness, 2002*.
- ³⁹ Department of the Environment and Local Government, *The Youth Homelessness Strategy, 2001*
- ⁴⁰ Daly, M. and Leonard. M. (2002) *Against All Odds: Family Life on a low income in Ireland*, p. 135.
- ⁴¹ Offaly County Development Board (2003) *Equally Cherished? A Study of Child Poverty in County Offaly*, p. 67
- ⁴² Daly, M. and Leonard. M. (2002) *Against All Odds: Family Life on a low income in Ireland*, p. 143.
- ⁴³ Offaly County Development Board (2003) *Equally Cherished? A Study of Child Poverty in County Offaly*, p. 82
- ⁴⁴ Northern Area Health Board (Spring 2004) *Hyper*, p. 4 (Bernie)
- ⁴⁵ Halpenny, AM., Keogh, AF, & Gilligan, R. (2002) *A Place for Children? Children in Families Living in Emergency Accommodation*, Dublin: Children's Research Centre, Trinity College and the Homeless Agency, p. 45.
- ⁴⁶ p. 45.
- ⁴⁷ p. 33.
- ⁴⁸ p. 45.
- ⁴⁹ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, when monitoring Ireland's implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1998, noted that it was "particularly concerned about the incidence of child poverty and homeless children...". It recommended that Ireland "take immediate steps to tackle the problem of child poverty and to make all possible efforts to ensure that all families have adequate resources and facilities."



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