

END CHILD POVERTY COALITION

Child Poverty: Ireland in Recession

April 2011


Barnardos

children's
RIGHTS ALLIANCE


Focus
Ireland


national youth council of Ireland
COMHAIGE NAIFÉIRIA NA hÉIREANN


OPEN
representing lone parent groups in Ireland


PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLERS CENTRE


start
strong
Advancing Children's
Early Care & Education


Society of St Vincent de Paul

Child Poverty: Ireland in Recession

End Child Poverty Coalition, April 2011

The recession has hit the lives of many children hard. Child poverty in Ireland did not end during the boom years, in spite of Government promises. Now, as our economic situation worsens, and families up and down the country struggle to make ends meet, more and more children are growing up in poverty. In 2009, there were more than 96,000 children living in consistent poverty in Ireland – 28,000 more than the year before – and there were more than 205,000 children at risk of poverty. Today, these figures are likely to be even higher.

What does child poverty in Ireland look like in the recession? How do the experiences of children in poverty differ from what we expect childhood to be? This pamphlet describes child poverty in Ireland today, based on stories of real children's lives.

The picture we paint is unacceptable. Our children deserve better, because children living in poverty are missing out on childhood and all that it offers them. It is time to place ending child poverty firmly on the political agenda. There have been enough reports written on how to do this – now is the time for concrete actions. The evidence is there and the strategy is clear. We need:

- **Prevention and early intervention measures to halt the inter-generational cycle of poverty**
- **A balance of investment in income supports and services**
- **Meaningful targets to end child poverty**

With enough political will, we can end child poverty once and for all.

Broken promises

It is hard to imagine that in a country where until recently money was plentiful, children's lives are marked by basic unmet needs. We had many commitments to end child poverty in the boom years, but a lack of political will led to failure. It is a story of broken promises:

- In 1992, Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, pledging to make children's rights real and to ensure that every child has the right to experience a childhood free from poverty and deprivation.
- In 2000, the National Children's Strategy made a commitment to provide the financial resources necessary to end child poverty.
- In 2002, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy pledged to reduce the number of children experiencing consistent poverty to 2% and, if possible, to eliminate child poverty by 2007.
- In 2007, having failed to meet this aim, the pledge was re-packaged, repeated, and the end date pushed out to 2016.
- In 2006, Towards 2016, the National Social Partnership Agreement, stated that 'every child should grow up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services, to nurture and care for the child, and foster the child's development and full and equal participation in society'.

The most recent figures show that nearly 9% of children – or one in every eleven children – are living in consistent poverty, and that the proportion is rising.

The impact of the recession

Child poverty damages children's lives in many ways. Though inadequate income is at the problem's core, it is the knock-on effects – exclusion from participation in everyday activities like education and play, poor quality housing, delayed access to healthcare – that make a real difference to children's lives.

Member organisations of the End Child Poverty Coalition have seen at first hand the devastating effect the recession is having on the lives of the children and families engaging with their services.

The recession's impact on these children's lives will last a long time. The longer a child is poor, the greater the deprivation he or she is likely to experience in later life. Poor children become poor adults and the cycle continues, influencing the life-chances of the next generation and the one after that. The prospect of relentless poverty and cuts to services for children is deeply worrying.



Child poverty – rising numbers

The 'at risk of poverty' rate is the percentage of persons with disposable income less than 60% of national median income. The 'at risk of poverty' threshold was €12,064 in 2009 (down 3% from 2008).

- Nearly 19% of children (over 205,000) or **one in every six children** aged 0-17 were **at risk of poverty** in 2009, a larger proportion than in any other age-group.

The 'consistent poverty' rate combines relative income poverty (the 'at risk of poverty' rate) with material deprivation.

- Nearly 9% of children (over 96,000) or **one in every eleven children** aged 0-17 lived in **consistent poverty** in 2009. This is a significant increase from just over 6% in 2008. The consistent child poverty rate had fallen from 11% in 2005, in parallel with significant increases in Child Benefit, but this trend has since reversed due largely to rising unemployment and cuts in incomes and social welfare.

We also see the scale of child poverty within the family context:

- **Lone parent** households remain very vulnerable to poverty. 36% of all those in lone parent households – adults and children – were at risk of poverty in 2009.
- Individuals living in households headed by an **unemployed person** represented 31% of those in consistent poverty in 2009, an increase from 17% in 2008.
- The proportion of those **at risk of poverty** who live in households where no person is at work rose from just over 50% in 2008 to almost 63% in 2009.
- Some children benefited little from the boom years and are still among the most excluded, especially **Traveller children** and the **children of asylum seekers**.

Source: Figures are the latest available statistics from the Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2009', November 2010.

Family incomes

The recession has pushed many families deeper into poverty and many have fallen below the poverty line for the first time as a result of job losses, falling wages and cuts to take-home pay through tax and welfare changes. Income supports do, however, continue to lift many families out of poverty. A recent UNICEF report found that, in the absence of social assistance payments and tax system reliefs, the child poverty rate would be higher in Ireland than in any of the other 21 OECD countries they studied. Recent cuts to Child Benefit and social welfare, combined with the extension of the tax net, are likely to worsen our already unequal society.

I have €11 to keep us going until next week. We don't have money to put food on the table, can't afford beds for the younger children, the washing machine has broken down and we are in arrears with both the ESB and Bord Gáis.

In Ireland in the recession, many families have incomes that are unsustainably low, and children suffer the effects:

- Children attending one of our services have been asking to bring food home with them. One family is going to the swimming pool as their 'holiday'.
- Many children cannot take part in the normal things that children do – go on school tours, take swimming lessons, attend birthday parties – as they cost too much. Missing out on normal childhood activities stigmatises children and puts undue pressure on them and their families.
- There has been a huge increase in the proportion of families experiencing financial difficulties, with a quarter of households in arrears on utility bills, rent, mortgage payments, hire-purchase agreements or other loans and bills. The use of money-lenders is widespread.

Children's early years

Giving children the best possible start in their early years is vital to a positive childhood experience and to longer-term well-being. When care and education in children's early years are of high quality and affordable, not only can parents access employment and training opportunities, but children have a positive start in their learning and development. The first few years of a child's life are critical – remedial action at a later date is difficult and costly. Early childhood care and education (ECCE) can be the key to changing the life-chances of children growing up in poverty. In 2008, however, Ireland came bottom of an international 'league table' of ECCE in developed countries.



In Ireland in the recession, ECCE services for young children remain variable in quality and can be unaffordable or inaccessible to many families:

- Many parents who have jobs have no choice but to send their children to ECCE settings that are of uncertain quality that they can scarcely afford.
- The Free Pre-School Year is a great support for children and for their families in the final year before school entry, but the cost of other ECCE services is so high that they are not even an option for many parents, especially lone parents.
- Many young children with disabilities do not receive any support in ECCE services, and cuts to health services threaten those supports that are in place.

Children's education

Education is a proven route out of poverty, but full participation in school can be a luxury that children in poor families cannot afford, and many children's educational needs are not being met. One in ten children in Ireland leaves school with literacy problems, rising to one child in three in disadvantaged communities. These children are more likely to experience educational failure, damaging their life-chances. As adults, they are more likely to be long-term unemployed, to experience poverty, and to enter the criminal justice system.



The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) initiative provides additional, targeted investment in schools in areas of concentrated disadvantage, but 56% of children from non-employed households do not attend DEIS schools.

A child in one of our services has been held back from school as she has had no psychology assessment despite being on the waiting list for 3 years. This is the second year she has been prevented from attending school due to no assessment being carried out.

Anne is doing her Junior Cert this year. The mock exam papers and corrections cost €120, but the Community Welfare Officer will only help with the cost of the real exams in the summer. Anne's school books cost a lot and she can't use her brother's old books as the book company has brought out a new edition that the teacher says she has to have. Anne also needs new clothes but knows that money is tight.

In Ireland in the recession, children's school experience has been seriously affected by recent cuts and the public sector moratorium on recruitment:

- Children are struggling in class because they are showing up hungry to school.
- Children are left without the required support because of recent budget cuts to special needs assistants, language support teachers, resource teachers and visiting teachers for Travellers.
- Vital links between home and school, facilitated by Home School Community Liaison Officers, have been diminished due to non-replacement of staff.
- Delays in accessing educational psychology services mean children can wait months for an assessment and longer still before acquiring critical educational supports.

Children's health

The pressures of poverty affect both children's physical health and their mental well-being. The chances of a long and healthy life are not the same for everyone: the link between poverty and poor health is striking. Children who live in poorer families are likely to experience more illness during their lifetimes, and die younger, than their financially better-off peers. These inequalities continue as Ireland's two-tier health system means that service availability and treatment are largely based on the individual's ability to pay rather than the patient's need.



Traveller children face particular health risks, with the many effects that discrimination has on their life-chances. In 2007, UNICEF placed Ireland in the bottom third of countries in relation to child health, along with the United States and Greece.

In Ireland in the recession, children's health is under serious threat:

- There are delays in developmental health checks, allowing problems to become entrenched and more difficult to address.
- Continued under-resourcing of mental health services means very vulnerable children face long delays in accessing assessment and treatment.
- Parents who cannot afford to go the doctor are accessing advice from the pharmacist, but this risks leaving an illness undiagnosed and untreated.

Children's housing

Access to secure, affordable and appropriate accommodation is central to family life and a happy childhood. The high cost of housing can cripple families on low incomes as they struggle to pay regular bills and fear being cut off from essential services like gas and electricity. Among families living in the private rented sector, the rate of consistent poverty rose sharply from 3% in 2008 to 8% in 2009. Many children are being raised in substandard accommodation because of the large number of households waiting for social housing and because of the stagnation of regeneration projects.



In Ireland in the recession, children are living in unsuitable and unhealthy conditions:



- Fewer social houses are being constructed or repaired as there has been a 36% reduction in expenditure on social housing provision and support.
- Some private rented accommodation remains in substandard condition due to the lack of resources for local authorities to inspect private residential dwellings.
- Children who experience homelessness are frequently given inadequate support because there is no national 24-hour out-of-hours service nor a statutory right to aftercare for young people who need it.

Political will

There is an opportunity today to improve children's lives by taking measures to end child poverty once and for all. Politicians need to take a long-term view and look beyond the electoral cycle. The actions we suggest will bring benefits for children now, but the real results - impacting across society - are longer term in nature. Child poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional problem and we will not end it by piece-meal change. We need a multi-faceted, joined-up approach, with the political will to ensure there are no more broken promises.



Of course, the budgetary context creates a huge challenge. We recognise the constraints the Government faces, but we believe the budget crisis also creates the need - and the opportunity - for new approaches.

Ending child poverty: the way forward

1. Prevention and early intervention

Prevention and early intervention are key to ending the intergenerational transmission of poverty and disadvantage and to improving outcomes for children. Prevention and early intervention approaches bring clear benefits in educational outcomes, mental and physical health, and social and emotional development. These approaches are more effective and less expensive than later interventions, and result both in future savings in expenditure on welfare and criminal justice, and in higher tax revenues. It takes time, but shifting resources to prevention and early intervention approaches can succeed in breaking the cycle of poverty that traps so many children in Ireland.

2. A balance of investment in income supports and services

The End Child Poverty Coalition supports the Department of Social Protection's 2010 Value for Money Review finding that in order to eliminate child poverty we need a combination of child and adult income supports and access to quality public services. Comparing Ireland with the countries that perform best in reducing child poverty shows there is a marked imbalance in Ireland, with a particularly low level of expenditure on services here. The End Child Poverty Coalition recommends that any changes to the social welfare system must be both child and poverty proofed before implementation - to ensure that children are not adversely affected by any change - and investment in quality public services must continue.

3. Meaningful targets

The new National Children's Strategy must contain a meaningful target to reduce child poverty, and a clear plan outlining how this will be achieved. Progress must be measured and reported annually, and departments made accountable for delivery. Importantly, the Strategy must acknowledge the need for balanced investment in income supports and services by including objectives for children's access to services in the areas of ECCE, school-level education, health and housing. It is more important now than ever, in a time of scarce resources, that we make ending child poverty a priority.

ENDCHILDPOVERTY COALITION

End Child Poverty Coalition is a partnership of eight national non-governmental organisations:

Barnardos

Children's Rights Alliance

Focus Ireland

National Youth Council of Ireland

OPEN

Pavee Point

Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Start Strong

For more information see

www.endchildpoverty.ie

End Child Poverty Coalition, c/o Children's Rights Alliance,
4 Upper Mount Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

Tel: 00 353 1 662 9400 E-mail: contact@endchildpoverty.ie


Barnardos


children's
RIGHTS ALLIANCE


Focus
Ireland


nyci
national youth council of Ireland
CUMHATAI NAIFÉIRTE NA hÉIR


OPEN
representing lone parent groups in Ireland


PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLERS CENTRE


start
strong
Advancing Children's
Early Care & Education


SVP
Society of St Vincent de Paul