The state we are in:
inequality in Ireland 2024

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About TASC

TASC is an independent think-tank whose mission is to address inequality and sustain democracy by translating analysis into action. TASC's Constitution presents its main objectives as: Promoting education for the public benefit; Encouraging a more participative and inclusive society; Promoting and publishing research for public benefit.

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In Ireland, the big story about income inequality remains largely unchanged. Among developed economies, Ireland has one of the highest levels of market inequality. However, disposable income inequality is significantly lower, with Ireland in the middle-of-the-pack among developed economies.

The fact that Ireland does not have higher disposable income inequality is primarily due to major state interventions aimed at mitigating the worst effects of market inequality.

While the state has had some success here, it has consistently failed to address the underlying problem of high market inequality. Consequently, while the number at-risk-of-poverty has decreased, a significant portion of the population continues to experience low living standards and high levels of social insecurity.

We can see the economic insecurity that people experience in the significant fluctuations in enforced deprivation rates, which increased dramatically during the recession. Although these rates declined in the second half of the last decade, they are once again on the rise.

The most recent figures show that nearly half (45.6%) of individuals in lone-parent families experienced enforced deprivation. Among those out of work due to longstanding health problems, 44.7% experienced enforced deprivation, as do 37.8% of unemployed workers. The ongoing housing crisis is also evident, with 36.5% of those in rented or rent-free accommodation experiencing enforced deprivation.

The housing crisis is further highlighted by the alarming increase in the number of homeless children accessing state-run emergency accommodation, which has increased nearly 6-fold over the last ten years—from 749 in July 2014 to 4,206 in April 2024. These figures likely underrepresent the true extent of child homelessness figure.

While both the Gini coefficient and the at-risk-of-poverty rate have declined in recent years, reflecting extensive state interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis, these improvements are reliant on these supports. Without them, as Chapter 6 shows, the at-risk-of-poverty rate would have increased rather than decreased. It is uncertain what will happen as these supports are withdrawn.

All of these facts—the extremely high market inequality; the fluctuations and recent increase in deprivation rates; the high levels of deprivation experienced by lone-parents, those out of work, and renters; the high level of child homelessness; and the dependence of large numbers on stop-start emergency interventions to support incomes – demonstrate the profound income insecurity faced by many in Irish society.

1. Introduction

1. Introduction

This is the fifth "The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland"[1] report produced by TASC and builds on the previous "Cherishing All Equally"[2] report series, which ran from 2015 until 2020. Over the nine years that these reports have been produced there have been some welcome developments but also some unwelcome ones, along with numerous persistent challenges.

In the years following the launch of the Cherishing All Equally report series there were real signs of improvement across various indicators of inequality and poverty. The "at risk of poverty" rate was falling. After increasing in the years leading up to the Great Recession, market inequality was declining. After increasing significantly during the recession, enforced deprivation was once again on the way down.

More recent years, however, have given grounds for concern. Unfortunately, enforced deprivation is once again increasing. Additionally, the large state interventions to support those on low incomes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis may be masking increases in underlying poverty and inequality.

Furthermore, the problems of poverty and inequality affecting families, children, and young people persist. The high levels of poverty and deprivation experienced by those out of work due to long term health problems have not been adequately addressed.

Of course, inequality is not simply a question of income. It reflects an unequal distribution of power and wealth in society, which can be seen in various intersecting forms of inequality. These include income and wealth inequality, but also unequal social and political participation and unequal access to education, healthcare, housing, culture etc.

In this report, we begin in Chapter 2 by considering income inequality. Looking at income both before and after taxes and benefits, we examine the percentage of total income going to the top 10% and the Gini coefficient. We then look at the income levels across society and different segments of the income distribution. Chapter 3 looks at the impact of inequality in terms of poverty and deprivation, finding some very high levels of deprivation in certain demographics.

Disappointingly, the most recent available figures show that 45.6% of people in lone-parent families experienced enforced deprivation. Among those out of work due to long standing health problems, 44.7% experienced enforced deprivation, while 37.8% of unemployed workers had the

1 Sweeney, Robert. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland today." Dublin: TASC, 2019. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/18457_inequality_in_irelandinnerfinalweb.pdf; Sweeney, Robert. "The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2020." Dublin: TASC, 2020. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_state_we_are_in_tasc_final_030320.pdf; Sweeney, Robert, and Donald Storrie. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2022." Dublin: TASC, 2022. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/2205-4_tasc_inequality_in_ire_2022.pdf; Sweeney, Robert. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2023." Dublin: TASC, 2023. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/he_state_we_are_in_tasc_2023_final.pdf.

2 O'Connor, Nat, and Cormac Staunton. "Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland." Dublin: TASC, 2015; https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_cherishing_all_equally_web.pdf; Hearne, Rory and Cian McMahon. "Cherishing All Equally 2016 Economic Inequality in Ireland." Dublin: TASC, 2016. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_inequalityreport_2016_web.pdf; Wickham, James. "Cherishing All Equally 2017 Economic Inequality in Ireland." Dublin: TASC, 2017. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/cherishing_all_equally_2017.pdf; Sweeney, Robert, and Robin Wilson. "Cherishing All Equally 2019: Inequality in Europe and Ireland." Dublin: TASC, 2019. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/20190220114456.pdf; Sweeney, Robert. "Cherishing All Equally 2020: Inequality and the care economy." Dublin: TASC, 2020. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/cae_2020-report-final.pdf.

same experience. The ongoing housing crisis is also reflected in these figures, with 36.5% of those in rented or rent-free accommodation experiencing enforced deprivation.

In Chapter 4, we examine the impact of inequality and low incomes on families with children, particularly lone-parent families. The number of dependent children accessing local authority emergency accommodation has increased nearly 6-fold over the last ten years. Official child homelessness figures show an increase from 749 in July 2014 to 4,206 in April 2024. And we know these figures undercount child homelessness.

Chapter 5 continues this focus on young people with an extended consideration of educational inequality. This extended chapter provides this year's special focus. This chapter discusses Ireland's educational system in terms of investment, interventions to address educational inequality, and how, despite the success of these interventions, there remains significant educational inequality. It concludes by considering how educational inequality intersects with wider social inequality.

We then consider the various recent government interventions over the last four years in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, raising concerns about the potential impact as these income supports are withdrawn.

We conclude in Chapter 6 by considering how the various challenges examined in this report reveal a high level of social insecurity experienced by many members of our society.

2. Income Inequality

2. Income Inequality

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in interest in the topic of inequality. Two major catalysts for this increase have been debates over the distribution of income arising from the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent Great Recession, as well as the work of Thomas Piketty and his co-authors. Piketty's surprise best-seller, "*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*" (2013), presents an impressive body of evidence that, after declining in the mid-twentieth century, inequality has been increasing in recent decades.

While Piketty's work has been subject to substantial debate and criticism[3], the basic findings that income inequality, by a variety of metrics, declined in the mid-twentieth century before increasing towards the end of the century, have proven to be quite robust.

A key point in Piketty's work is the argument that the share of national income going to the top 1% and top 10% of earners has been increasing.

Irish income shares in the world inequality database

Therefore, in considering income inequality in Ireland, it is worth starting with this metric using evidence from the World Inequality Database (WID), developed and maintained by a research group including Piketty.

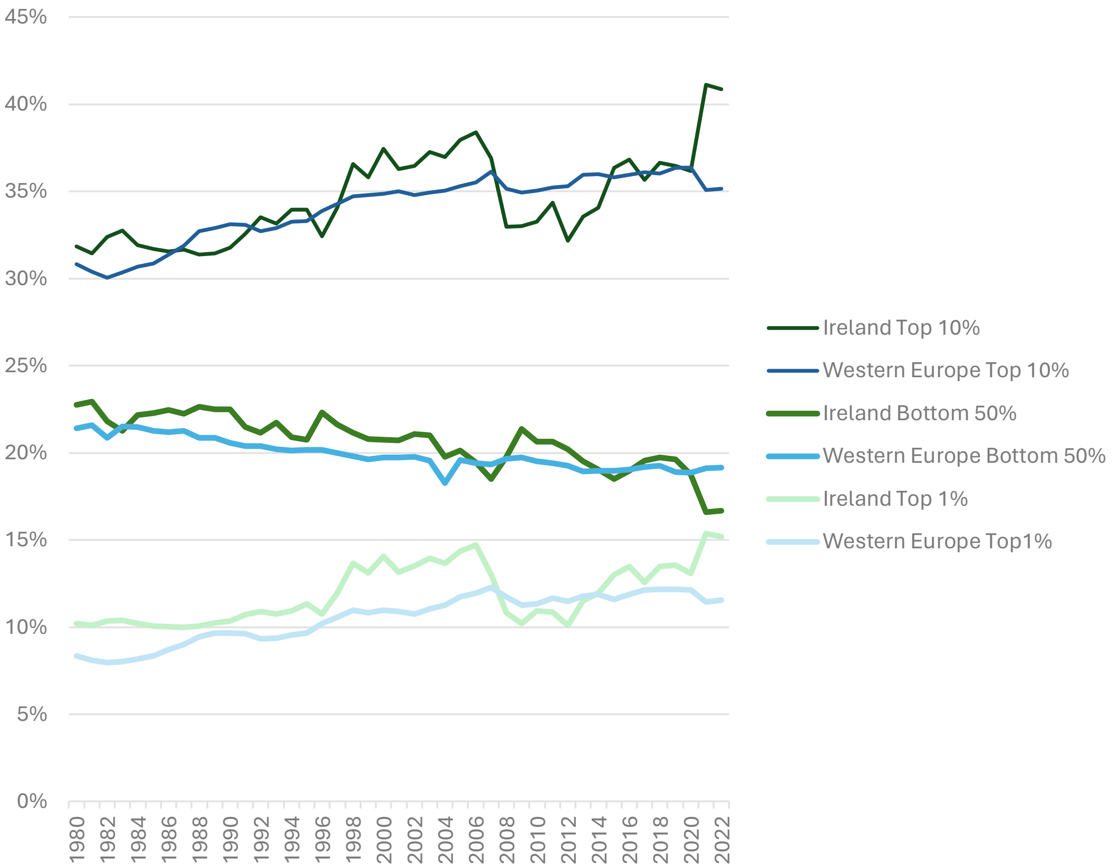

Figure 1: Top 10%, 1% and bottom 50% in Ireland and Western Europe

Source: World Inequality Database

3 For example, Rognlie argues that the rise in the capital share of national income found by Piketty is driven mostly by housing. Rognlie, Matthew. "Deciphering the fall and rise in the net capital share: accumulation or scarcity?." Brookings papers on economic activity 2015, no. 1 (2016): 1-69.

Figure 1 shows the development of the share of national income going to the top 1%, the top 10%, and the bottom 50% in the World Inequality Database.

The data for Ireland tracks developments in Western Europe fairly closely. The percentage of income[4] going to the top 10% increased from slightly more than 30% in the early 1980s to over 35% in recent years. The share of income going to the top 1% has increased from close to 10% to closer to 15%, while the percentage going to the bottom 50% declined from over 20% to less than 20%. These trends clearly indicate an increasing share of income going to the upper end of the income distribution, with a corresponding decline for the lower end.

It is important to note that the World Inequality Database data series are primarily derived from tax data rather than household survey data. While conceptually similar to the market income series in the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), they are different.

Top income shares in SILC and Roantree et al.

In the EU, including in Ireland, the main data source for examining inequality is the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), a household survey. The measure of income used for the main indicators of income inequality is called "equivalised disposable income". Disposable household income measures gross income (which includes employment income, rental income, social transfers, and inter-household transfers received) less tax, social insurance contributions, pension contributions and inter-household transfers paid. This household income is then converted into equivalised individual income by dividing disposable household income by the equivalised household size. The equivalised household size is used to account for the number of people living in a household. The national equivalence scale attributes a weight of 1 to the first adult, 0.66 to each subsequent person aged 14+ living in the household and 0.33 to each child aged less than 14.

Roantree et al. (2021, 2022, 2023) present a harmonised set of indicators derived from large-scale household surveys going back to 1987. This includes the SILC dataset (2004-2022), the Living in Ireland Survey (1994-1999), and the ESRI Survey of Income Distribution, Poverty and Usage of State Services (1987).

From the Roantree et al. data, we can extract a series on the share of income going to the top 10% of individuals. This can be analysed both in terms of market income (i.e. before tax and benefits) and disposable income (i.e. after taxes and benefits). Figure 2 presents both of these series along with the WID series on the share of income going to the top 10%. Caution should be used here, as these series do not use the same methodology. Nevertheless, both attempt to approximate the income going to the highest 10% of earners before tax and benefits. It is striking that both present results that are relatively close to one another. Both series suggest that for the last 35 or so years around 31-38% of pre-tax income has gone to the top 10% of earners. However, each tells slightly different stories about what has happened over that period.

4 The "Technical Notes for Figures and Tables" accompanying the World Inequality Report 2022 explains that "Income inequality is measured using the distribution of pre-tax national income among adults (equal-split series). Pre-tax national income is the sum of all pretax personal income flows accruing to the owners of the production factors, labor and capital, including social insurance benefits (and removing corresponding contributions), but excluding other forms of redistribution (income tax, social assistance benefits, etc.)". Bajard, Felix, Lucas Chancel, and Rowaida Moshrif. "World Inequality Report 2022 Technical Notes for Figures and Tables." Paris: World Inequality Lab, 2021. https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2021/12/WIR2022-Technical-Note Figures Tables-1.pdf. & Chancel, Lucas, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, eds. World inequality report 2022. Harvard University Press, 2022.

Roantree et al. suggest that between 1987 and 1999, the share of income going to the top 10% declined, before increasing from 2004 until 2010. Since the onset of the Great Recession in 2010, the share of income going to the top 10% has gradually declined. In contrast, the World Inequality Database data suggest that from 1987 until 2007 the share of income going to the top 10% increased steadily, before sharply declining during the Global Financial Crisis, after which it began to increase again.

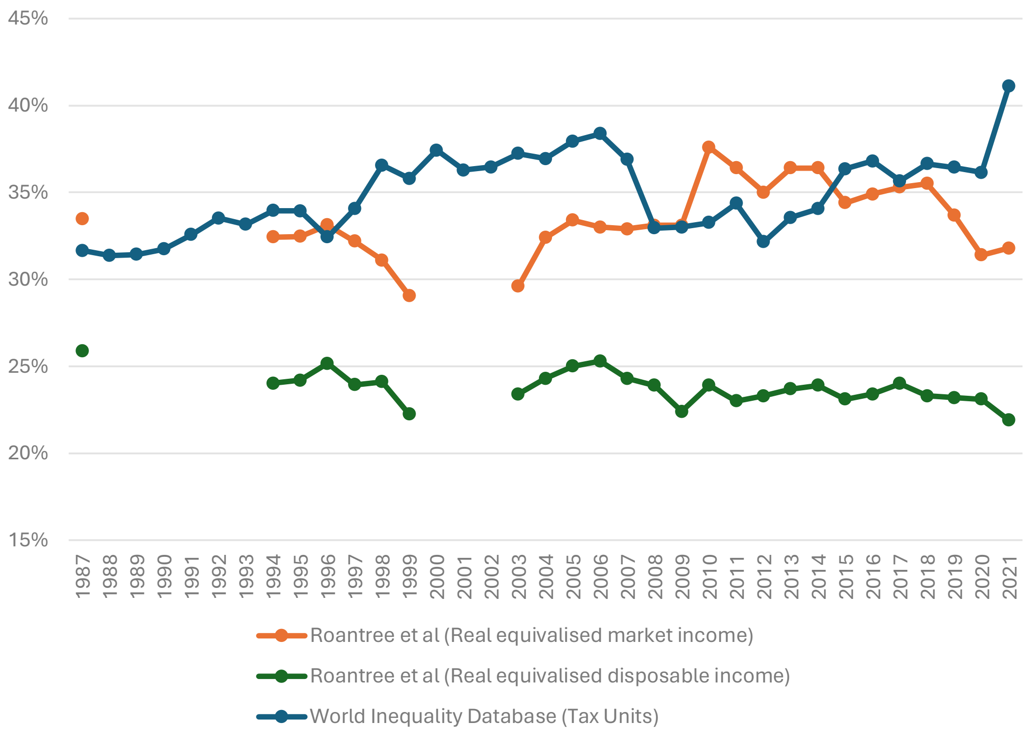

Figure 2: Top 10% income share: market income vs disposable income

Source: Roantree et al. (2022); World Inequality Database

Figure 2 also presents the development of the disposable income of the top 10% (i.e. income after tax and benefits) as measured by Roantree et al. This, of course, is lower than the pre-tax series since the top 10% are net tax contributors. As can be seen, this measure has been remarkably stable over a long period. According to this series, the top 10% earned between 22-25% of total income in the 1990s and they have continued to earn within that range ever since.

Income by quintiles

In addition to focusing on the income earned by the top 10%, it is worth examining the income distribution across the entire population. One way to do this is to look at the share of income going to each quintile, as reported in the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). This is presented in Table 1.

As can be seen, the bottom quintile (i.e. the 20% with the lowest income) receives less than 10% of the total income in Ireland. This has remained consistent for the last three observed years.[5]

5 It is worth pointing out that while this 2023 data was released in March 2024, and is therefore the most up-to-date data we have, it actually measures income in the preceding calendar year to the year of the survey. In other words, the 2023 data measures income in 2022.

Quintile	2021	2022	2023
1	9.3	9.6	9.4
2	13.4	13.7	13.5
3	17.3	17.7	17.6
4	22.4	22.6	22.3
5	37.6	36.5	37.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 1: Share of equivalised disposable income by quintile and year (%)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

The next two quintiles, i.e. those between the 20th and 60th percentile, each earn less than a fifth of total income. Those between the 60th and 80th percentile earn slightly more than a fifth of total income, while those in the top fifth receive almost two fifths of all income.

By comparing individuals in the highest 20% and the lowest 20%, we can further understand the income distribution. Some facts about this are not particularly surprising. (The data for the following is provided in Appendix 1.)

Those aged under 18 and over 65 are the most likely to be in the poorest quintile. Among those of working age, the likelihood of being in the highest income quintile increases with age.

Households with no one at work are much more likely to have low incomes than those with multiple people at work. Of individuals from households with no one at work, 45% are in the poorest quintile, while only 8.6% are in the highest quintile. In contrast, 26.6% of households with two people at work are in the highest income quintile, while only 9.8% of these households are in the poorest quintile.

Likewise, income tends to be higher the higher the level of education. Of those whose highest level of educational achievement was primary school completion or below, 37.5% were in the lowest quintile of the income distribution, while only 7.9% were in the highest quintile. In contrast, 38.8% of those who had a third-level degree or higher were in the highest quintile, while only 7.9% of those with a third-level degree or higher were in the poorest quintile.

Remarkably, while only 13.2% of those in owner-occupied housing are in the lowest income quintile, 35.4% of those in "Rented or rent-free" accommodation fall into that quintile.

Figure 3 shows that one-person and lone-parent households are more likely to be in the bottom quintile than households involving couples. Conversely, households involving couples are more likely to be in the top quintile than one-person and lone-parent households.

Households with at least one child under the age of 25 are more likely to be in the bottom quintile than households where all children are aged 25 or more, or where there are no children. Conversely, households where all children are aged 25 or more, or where there are no children, are more likely to be in the top quintile than households with children under 25.

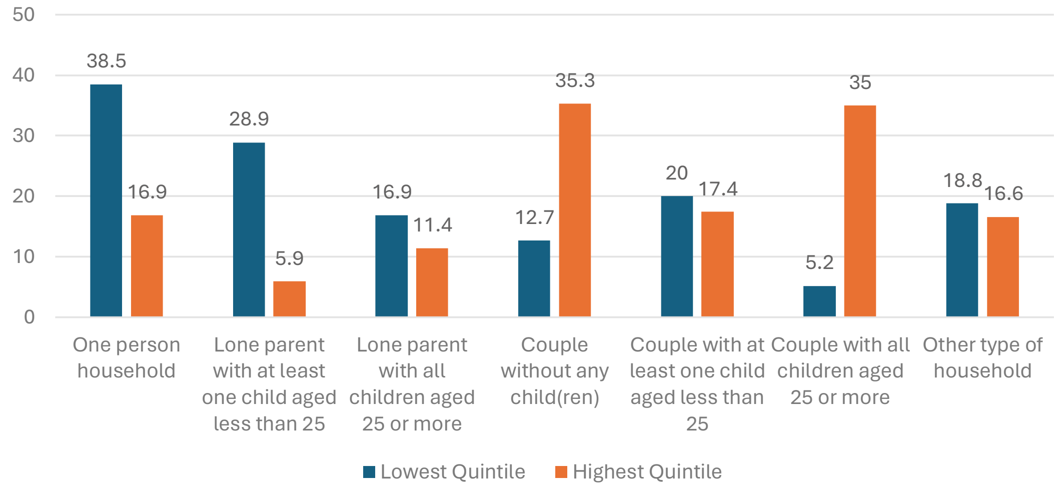

Figure 3: Individuals in the highest and lowest net disposable equivalised income quintiles, by principal economic status 2023

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

Figure 4 depicts individuals in the richest and poorest net disposable equivalised income quintiles by their Principal Economic Status. It is evident that being out of work significantly affects the likelihood of being in the bottom quintile. Specifically, more than half (52.5%) of unemployed individuals fall into the bottom quintile, while only 8.0% are in the top quintile. Nearly half (42.3%) of those unable to work due to long-standing health problems are in the bottom quintile, with only 4.8% situated in the top quintile.

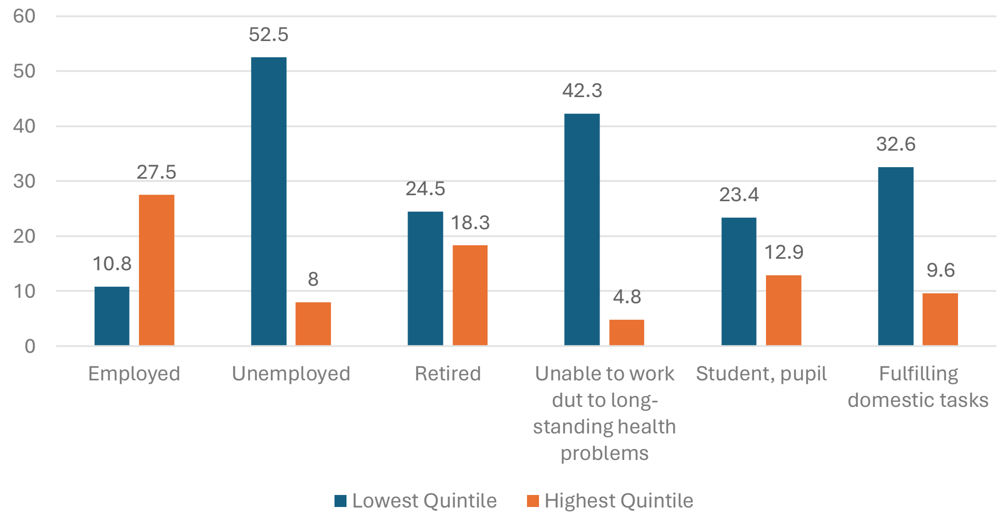

Figure 4: Individuals in the highest and lowest net disposable equivalised income quintiles, by household composition 2023

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

The Gini coefficient

Instead of focusing on distinct segments of the income distribution, the Gini coefficient provides a single number that measures income equality across the entire distribution. The Gini coefficient is perhaps the most widely used indicator of income inequality. It measures where the income distribution is relative to a situation of complete income equality on the one hand (i.e. where income is perfectly equally distributed) and a situation of complete inequality on the other (i.e. where all income would go to one person). A situation of perfect equality would have a Gini coefficient of 0, while a situation of perfect inequality would have a Gini coefficient of 1.

Table 2 presents the Gini coefficient for the last three observed years. As above, market income, (income before taxes and benefits), is compared to disposable income, (income after taxes and benefits).

Income Type	2021	2022	2023
Equivalised market income	0.475	0.473	0.470
Equivalised disposable income	0.267	0.274	0.275

Table 2: Gini coefficient by year

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

The distribution of market income in Ireland is notably more unequal than disposable income. While the market income Gini coefficient has declined slightly over the last few years, the Gini coefficient for disposable income has seen a slight increase.[6]

Figure 5, sourced from Roantree et al. (2023)[7], displays the longer-term development of these metrics. As can be seen, both have proven reasonably stable. According to Roantree et al., the disposable income Gini coefficient has remained very close to 0.3 for approximately 35 years. While the apparent decline in the disposable income Gini coefficient over this period has been commented upon[8], there is only a minimal decline. Between 1987 and 2017, a period of 30 years, the disposable income Gini coefficient declined by an unremarkable 0.03. For comparison, between 2009 and 2010 alone, the market income Gini increased by 0.06. Since 2018, the disposable income Gini coefficient has further declined. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, this appears to largely reflect the large state interventions to support low incomes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis. The decline in the disposable income Gini coefficient is modest compared to its long-run stability.

6 Market income inequality has been discussed more extensively in a previous issue of The State We Are In. Sweeney, Robert. "The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2020." Dublin: TASC, 2020. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_state_we_are_in_tasc_final_030320.pdf.

7 Many thanks to Barra Roantree for providing us with this data.

8 Roantree, Barra, Bertrand Maître, Alyvia McTague, and Ivan Privalko. "Poverty, income inequality and living standards in Ireland: first annual report." Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Research Series (2021) & Sweeney, Robert, and Donald Storrie. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2022." Dublin: TASC, 2022. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/2205-4_tasc_inequality_in_ire_2022.pdf.

In contrast, the market income Gini coefficient has exhibited much more significant fluctuations. It reached a low of 0.47 in 1999 and 2003, and a high of 0.60 in 2010, aligning with the pattern of the top 10% income share in Roantree et al. (2022), described in Figure 2 above. While market income inequality declined up to the late 90s, it increased until 2010, after which it began to decline again.

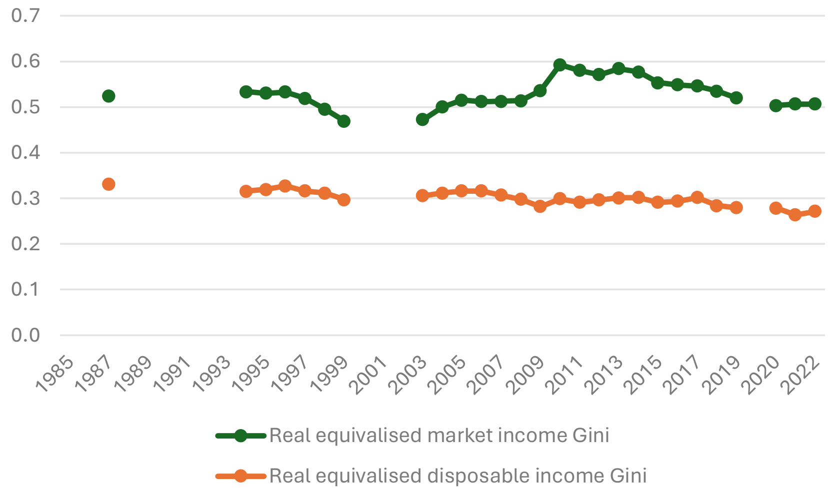

Figure 5: Market and disposable income Gini coefficients

Source: Roantree et al. (2023)

A benefit of the Gini coefficient is that it allows a simple comparison between different countries. When we compare Ireland with other OECD countries, we find that Ireland exhibits one of the highest levels of market inequality in the OECD. (See Figure 6.) Indeed, previous issues of this report have observed that Ireland had the highest level of market inequality of any OECD country.

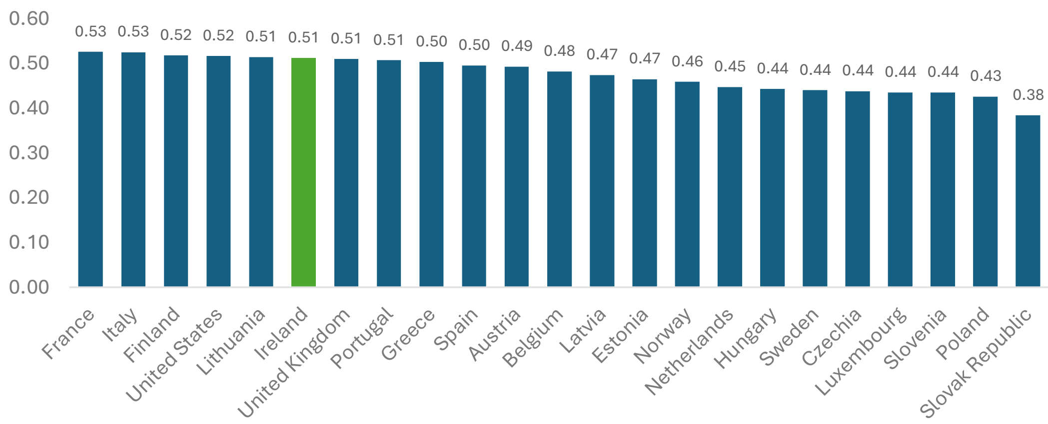

Figure 6: Market income Gini (Selected OECD states, 2021)

Source: OECD, Income distribution database

After factoring in taxes and benefits, Ireland's ranking substantially improves. We go from being one of the most unequal advanced economies to a position that is fairly middle-of-the-pack. (See Figure 7.)

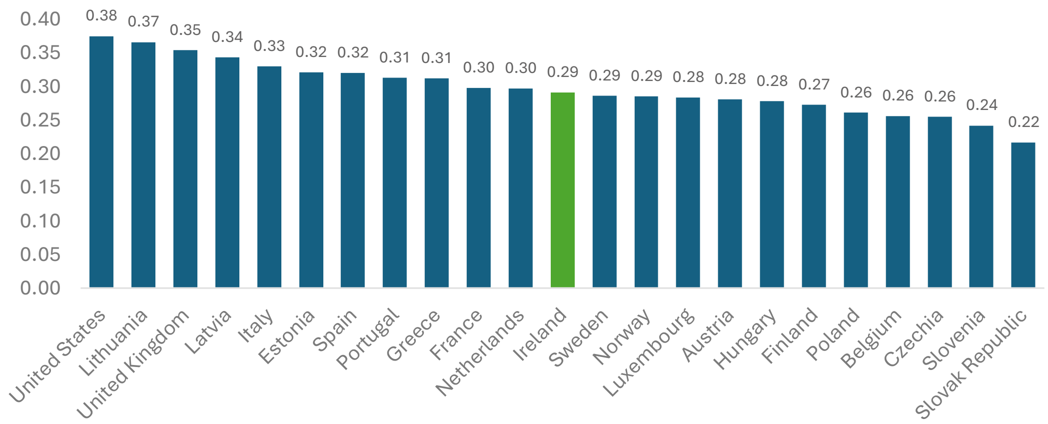

Figure 7: Disposable income Gini (Selected OECD states, 2021)

Source: OECD, Income distribution database

The fact that Ireland moves from being one of the most unequal advanced economies, in terms of market income, to not having unusually high levels of disposable income inequality, is testament to the amount of work that the Irish tax and benefit system does. Among the 23 countries described in Figures 6 and 7, Ireland has the fourth largest gap between its market income Gini and its disposable income Gini.

3. Inequality, Poverty and Deprivation

3. Inequality, Poverty and Deprivation

Social inequality extends beyond income disparities; it reflects an unequal distribution of resources and power in society. While income inequality is significant, it is merely one aspect of this issue. Unequal access to resources and power is not only evident in unequal income, but also in unequal wealth, unequal social and political participation, and unequal access to education, healthcare, housing, culture etc.

Therefore, central to any discussion of inequality must be, not only income inequality, but also individuals' ability to participate fully in society as equals. This requires a degree of security in life, both political and economic.

Economic security is multifaceted. It depends on income sufficiency and income security, but also on being able to access necessities both through market and non-market consumption.

In this chapter, we consider the question of income sufficiency by examining income levels, income composition, relative poverty and material deprivation.

Income levels

The economic recovery over the last ten years has been extensively discussed. In terms of employment and growth, the economic turnaround has been remarkable and has dramatically improved the lives of many. However, despite income improvements, many continue to struggle and continue to be unable afford necessities. Further, recent nominal income increases were essentially wiped out by the increase in inflation in 2022 following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[9]

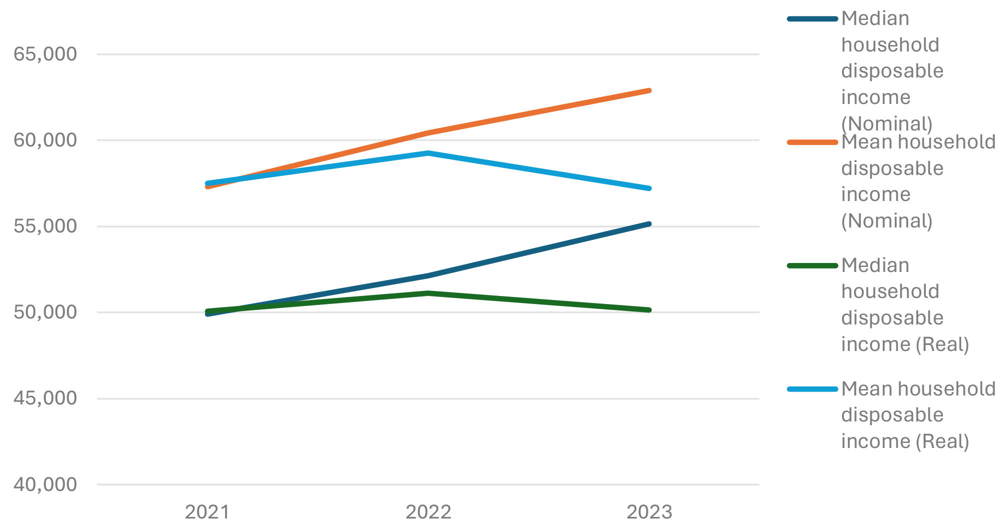

Figure 8: Nominal vs real disposable income

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

9 Between 2013 and 2020, annual inflation was below 1%. It increased to 2.4% in 2021 and after the Russia's invasion of Ukraine in January 2022 increased to 7.8% that year, dropping slightly to 6.3% in 2023. Inflation between April 2023 and April 2024 was down to 2.6%. See: Central Statistics Office. "Consumer Price Index April 2024." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexapril2024/ & Central Statistics Office. "Consumer Price Index CPA01." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://data.cso.ie/table/CPA01/.

As Figure 8 shows, while mean nominal disposable income has increased from €57,309 to €62,898, the mean real disposable income has declined from €57,309 to €57,210[10]. The increase in inflation has also wiped out the increase in median household disposable income.

The impact of inflation on disposable income is felt across the entire income distribution. However, inflationary shocks are most strongly felt by those that are dependent on fixed incomes, such as pensions and welfare payments, unless these incomes are adjusted in response to inflation. (The distributional impact of inflation was addressed in last year's issue of this report.[11])

Income composition

Examining household incomes by decile, we see that among the lower deciles, a significant proportion of average household income comes from social transfers. Gross household income for the lowest income households overwhelmingly (79%) comes from social transfers, with a large portion of this income coming from pension payments.[12] For the poorest 40% of households roughly a third or more of their income comes from social transfers. In contrast, only 3% of the income of the highest income decile comes from social transfers[13].

Decile	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**State**
Weekly threshold (€)	**<372.6**	**<574.96**	**<732.92**	**<889.71**	**<1057.04**	**<1218.04**	**<1402.67**	**<1632.3**	**<2035.32**	**≥2035.32**	
Average Weekly nominal household Income											
Market Income											
Employee income	29.43	174.64	321.89	452.43	681.56	888.37	1,298.28	1,516.57	2,090.40	3,132.96	1,059.22
Employer's social insurance contributions	2.88	20.44	36.87	52.59	78.66	106.79	169.01	186.6	280.16	415.13	134.99
Self-employment income	13.71	28.46	39.68	45.42	70.24	95.94	98.13	132.05	203.23	813.28	154.17
Private or occupational pension	4.78	37.68	62.3	81.77	94.4	102.5	90.77	118.6	105.67	207.51	90.62
Other market income	10.71	18.44	21.04	20.49	16.03	25.59	25.2	36.26	45.4	479.19	69.94
Total Market Income	**61.5**	**279.65**	**481.78**	**652.7**	**940.89**	**1,219.19**	**1,681.39**	**1,990.08**	**2,724.86**	**5,048.08**	**1,508.94**
Social Transfers											
Unemployment related benefits	25.43	30.38	33.97	48.28	33.13	32.36	11.08	8.5	6.53	12.41	24.2
Old-age related payments	107.4	132.55	116.3	100.79	80.45	67.27	46.16	39.25	33.09	58.32	78.15
Family/children related allowances	6.84	27.24	62.32	76.34	81.5	71.48	60.11	66.15	41.33	51.33	54.47
Housing allowances	48.6	44.63	32.79	34.35	27.88	32.78	13.09	17.08	8.99	12.78	27.28
Other social transfers	47.14	37.55	40.14	52.99	59.5	52.2	37.74	52.57	25.51	21.59	42.68
Total Social Transfers	**235.41**	**272.35**	**285.51**	**312.75**	**282.46**	**256.1**	**168.19**	**183.56**	**115.46**	**156.43**	**226.79**
Gross Income	**296.92**	**552.01**	**767.3**	**965.45**	**1,223.35**	**1,475.29**	**1,849.58**	**2,173.64**	**2,840.32**	**5,204.51**	**1,735.73**
Tax and Social Contributions											
Tax on income and social contributions	6.71	31.39	60.82	91.9	144.1	197.37	311.11	396.55	618.41	1,506.22	336.76
Employer's social insurance contributions	2.88	20.44	36.87	52.59	78.66	106.79	169.01	186.6	280.16	415.13	134.99
Pension Contributions	1.75	6.09	8.22	14.85	27.08	31.48	57.72	73.09	109.07	220.98	55.08
Regular inter-household cash transfers paid	4.83	3.57	3.64	0.8	1.19	2.87	4.67	2.23	2.17	9.01	3.5
Total Tax and Social Contributions	**16.17**	**61.49**	**109.55**	**160.14**	**251.04**	**338.5**	**542.52**	**658.47**	**1,009.81**	**2,151.34**	**530.33**
Net Disposable Income	**280.75**	**490.52**	**657.75**	**805.31**	**972.31**	**1,136.79**	**1,307.07**	**1,515.17**	**1,830.51**	**3,053.17**	**1,205.40**

Table 3: Average weekly nominal household income by deciles and composition, 2023 (€)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

10 This conversion to real income uses a base income of 2019.

11 Sweeney, Robert. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2023." Dublin: TASC, 2023. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/he_state_we_are_in_tasc_2023_final.pdf.

12 235.41/296.92=0.79

13 226.79/1,735.73=0.03

While 79% of gross income of the lowest income households comes from social transfers, only 21% comes from market income, with just 10% coming from employee income. In contrast, across the state, an average of 87% of gross household income comes from market income[14], nearly 80% of which is derived from employee income (including employers' social insurance contributions)[15].

Clearly, for a significant proportion of Irish households, social transfers are an extremely important part of their gross and disposable income.

Relative poverty and deprivation

Two widely used poverty indicators are the at-risk-of-poverty rate and the enforced deprivation rate, sometimes referred to as the "material deprivation rate" or simply the "deprivation rate".

The at-risk-of-poverty rate refers to the percentage of individuals whose nominal equivalised disposable income is below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is defined as 60% of the median nominal equivalised disposable income. It is, therefore, a relative measure of poverty. In the 2023 figures for Ireland, 10.6% of individuals were at-risk-of-poverty, down from 12.5% in 2022 and 11.8% in 2021 figures.

The "enforced deprivation rate" measures the percentage of households experiencing two or more of the following eleven deprivation items:

1. Without heating at some stage in the last year.
2. Unable to afford a morning, afternoon or evening out in last fortnight.
3. Unable to afford two pairs of properly fitting shoes in good condition that are suitable for daily activities.
4. Unable to afford a roast once a week.
5. Unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish, or vegetarian equivalent every second day.
6. Unable to afford new (not second-hand) clothes.
7. Unable to afford a warm waterproof coat.
8. Unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm.
9. Unable to afford to replace any worn out furniture.
10. Unable to afford to have family or friends for a drink or a meal once a month.
11. Unable to afford to buy presents for family or friends at least once a year.

In Ireland 17.3% of individuals experienced enforced deprivation according to the most recent figures, a significant increase from 13.7% in 2021 over just two years.

	2021	2022	2023
At-risk-of-poverty rate	11.8	12.5	10.6
Deprivation rate[2]	13.7	16.6	17.3

Table 4: At-risk-of-poverty rate & enforced deprivation rate (2021-2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

14 1508.94/1735.73=0.87
15 (1059.22+134.99)/ 1508.94=0.79

If we examine these indicators over a longer period, we can see that the at-risk-of-poverty rate has steadily declined since 2004, when 19.4% of individuals in Ireland were at-risk-of-poverty.

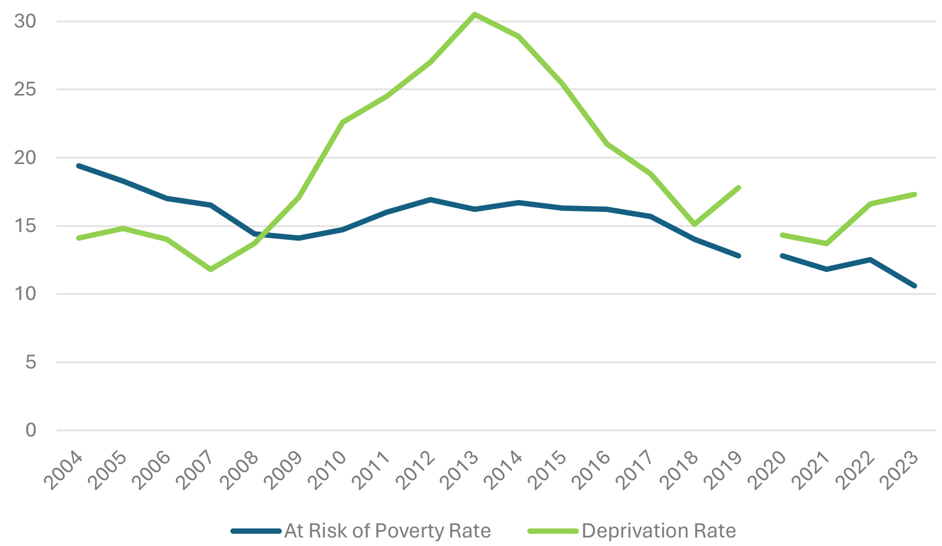

Figure 9: At-risk-of-poverty rate & enforced deprivation rate (2004-2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)

The development of the enforced deprivation rate, however, tells a different story. The most recent figure of 17.3% in enforced deprivation is higher than the 14.1% observed in 2004.

Between 2004 and 2008, the enforced deprivation rate declined to 11.8%, but the Global Financial Crisis and Great Recession saw a significant increase in deprivation. By 2013, 30.5% of individuals, nearly one-third of the population, experienced enforced deprivation. As the economy recovered, the rate of enforced deprivation declined to around 15%. However, recent years have seen another significant increase in enforced deprivation.

These significant fluctuations in the enforced deprivation rate highlight the challenges of economic security, with many individuals being pushed into economic deprivation during periods of adverse macroeconomic conditions. It is concerning that, despite the relatively strong performance of the economy in recent years, enforced deprivation is on the rise.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, poverty and deprivation are particularly significant issues for children and for households with children.

They also disproportionally affect renters and people out of work.

Regrettably, more than a third (36.5%) of those in rented or rent-free accommodation experienced enforced deprivation in the 2023 figures, while one-fifth were at-risk-of-poverty. This contrasts sharply with those living in owner-occupied housing, where only 6.5% were at-risk-of-poverty and 8.8% experienced enforced deprivation (see Figure 10).

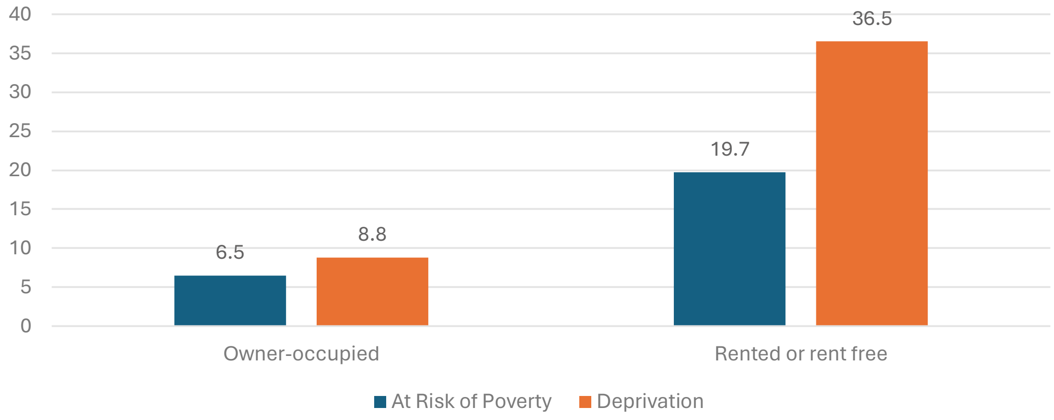

Figure 10: At-risk-of-poverty rate & enforced deprivation rate, by tenure status (2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

Perhaps unsurprisingly, people living in households where no one is at work are the most at risk of both poverty and deprivation. In such households, 29.2% of individuals experience enforced deprivation, while 22.6% are at-risk-of-poverty. In contrast, in households where three or more people are at work, only 11% experience enforced deprivation, and a mere 1.2% are at-risk-of-poverty. (See Figure 11.)

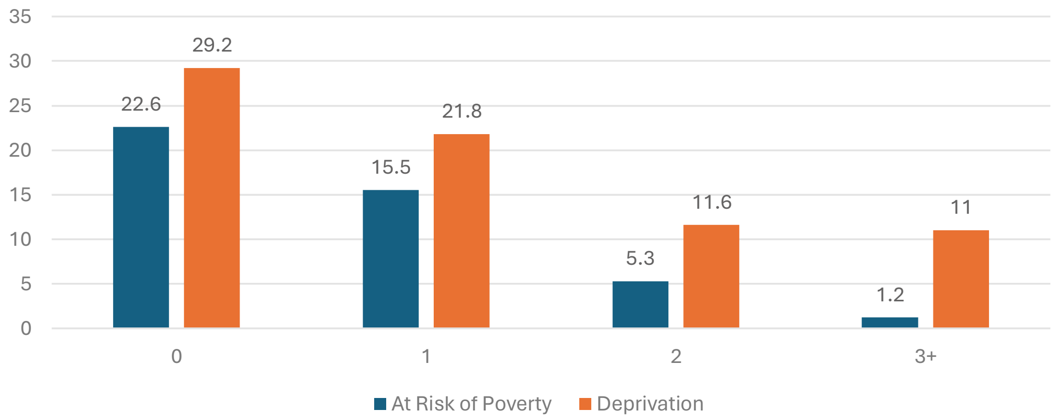

Figure 11: At-risk-of-poverty rate & enforced deprivation rate, by number of persons at work in the household (2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

Fortunately, recent years have seen a significant fall in unemployment, which fell from 16.2% in December 2011 to 4.0% in May 2024.[16] However, among those who are unemployed, the level of deprivation remains very high, with more than a third (37.8%) experiencing enforced deprivation and 25.5% being at-risk-of-poverty. Of even greater concern is that nearly one in two (44.7%) people unable to work due to long-standing health problems experienced deprivation in the 2023 figures, and 27.3% are at-risk-of-poverty. (See Figure 12.)

16 Central Statistics Office. "Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Unemployment MUM01." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://data.cso.ie/table/MUM01/.

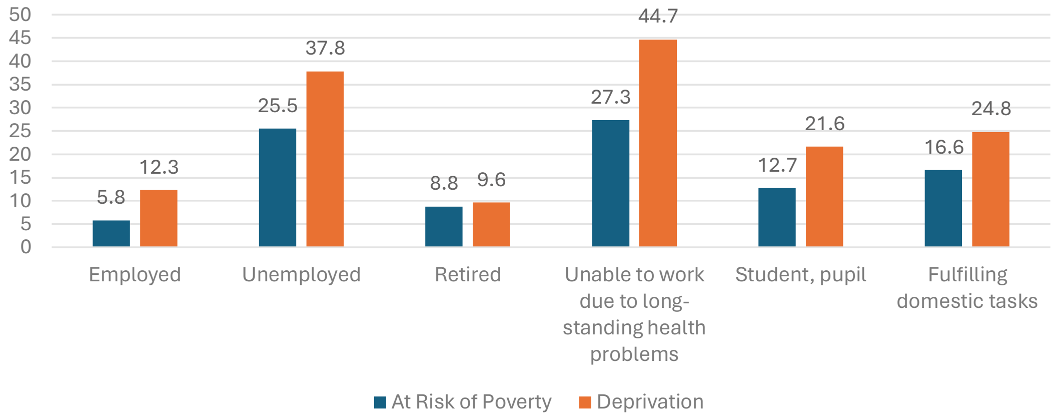

Figure 12: At-risk-of-poverty rate & enforced deprivation rate, by principal economic status (aged 16 years and over) (2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

The high levels of poverty and deprivation experienced by the unemployed and those unable to work due to long-standing health problems starkly contrast with the figures for those in employment and retirees. Among the employed, the level of enforced deprivation is only 12.3% and only 5.8% are at-risk-of-poverty. Retirees, likewise, experience low levels of poverty and deprivation. According to the most recent figures, only 9.6% experienced enforced deprivation, and only 8.8% are at-risk-of-poverty. As we will see in the next chapter, this is a relatively recent development, as the rate of poverty and deprivation was previously significantly higher among older groups.

4. Inequality, Families, Children and the Elderly

4. Inequality, Families, Children and the Elderly

Inequality today is most pressing on those who are out of work due to unemployment or health problems and on children and families with children.

As noted in Chapter 2, one-person and lone-parent households are more likely than households involving couples to be in the bottom net disposable equivalised income quintile. Likewise, households where there is at least one child aged less than 25 are more likely than households where all children are aged 25 or more, or where there are no children, to be in the bottom quintile (see Figure 3 above).

At-risk-of-poverty rate and deprivation by age group

According to the most recent figures, children aged under 18 are most at-risk-of-poverty and most likely to experience enforced deprivation. As you get older, the less likely you are to experience enforced deprivation. 21.4% of children experienced enforced deprivation, while only 10.7% of those aged over 65 experienced the same (see Figure 13).

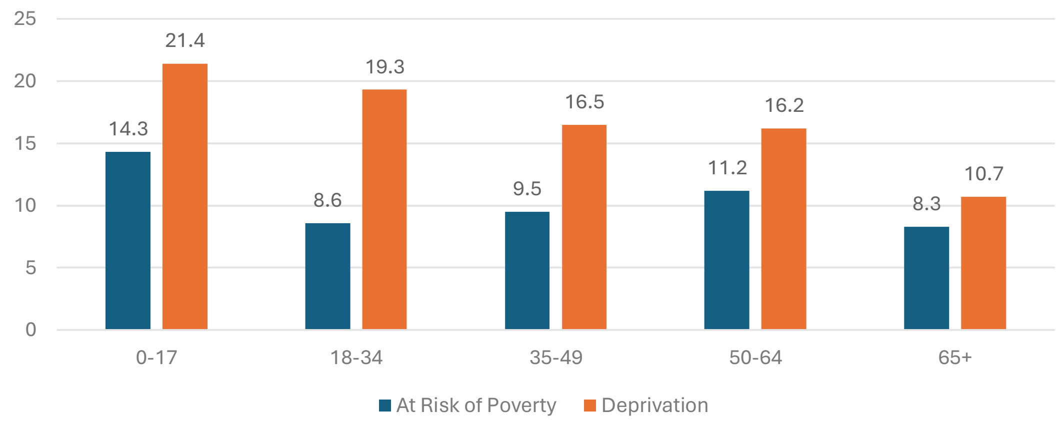

Figure 13: At-risk-of-poverty rate & enforced deprivation rate, by age group (2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

Previously, the risk of poverty experienced by older people was significantly higher.

As can be seen in Figure 14, twenty years ago, the at-risk-of-poverty rate of those aged 65 and older was higher than those aged under 18. But between 2004 and 2010, the at-risk-of-poverty rate of those aged over 65 declined much more than the decline in poverty among those aged under 18. This decline was related to changes to the maximum rate of the state pension, which grew by 50% in real terms over the 2000s, much faster than the 28% growth in median disposable income. However, since 2009 the maximum rate of the state pension has grown slower than median income. As Roantree et al. (2021) show, while this did not result in an increase in the at-risk-of-poverty rate across those aged 65 and over, it did lead to a significant rise in that at-risk-of-poverty rate across those aged 65 and over who live alone. It increased from 12.4% in 2010 to 40.2% in 2019.[17] The sharp increase in the at-risk-of-poverty rate among those aged over 65 in the 2021 and 2022 is therefore rather concerning. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

While we have grounds for concern that the reduction in poverty among the elderly might have reversed, there is less uncertainty about the persistence of child poverty. With the exception of 2022, the at-risk-of-poverty rate among those aged under 18 has been significantly higher than that among both the total population and those aged over 65.

Figure 14: At-risk-of-poverty rate, under 18 and 65 and older age groups (2004-2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)

In contrast with those aged over 65, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children under 18 has consistently been higher than the at-risk-of-poverty rate experienced in the total population. Nevertheless, in line with the general decline in the at-risk-of-poverty rate, the rate has declined significantly among those aged under 18 over the last twenty years. In 2004, 22.7% of those aged under 18 were at-risk-of-poverty. By 2008, this had fallen to 18%. It remained at roughly that level throughout the recession, but after the recession, it began to come down again. In the most recent data, 14.3% of those aged under 18 are at-risk-of-poverty. This compares to 8.3% of those aged over 65 and 10.6% of the entire population.

However, if we turn to the enforced deprivation rate, this encouraging story of declining child poverty disappears. The deprivation rate among those aged under 18 is higher today than it was in 2004.

As with the at-risk-of-poverty rate, the deprivation rate is significantly higher for those aged under 18 than it is for either the total population or those aged over 65.

In 2004, 18.2% of those aged under 18 experienced enforced deprivation. This increased dramatically during the recession. By 2013, 37.5% of those aged under 18 experienced enforced deprivation. While that has declined significantly since then, reaching as low as 17.3%, over the last couple of years, that decline has reversed. In the most recent data, 21.4% of those aged under 18 experienced enforced deprivation. This compares to 10.7% of those aged over 65 and 17.3% of the entire population.

17 Roantree, Barra, Bertrand Maître, Alyvia McTague, and Ivan Privalko. "Poverty, income inequality and living standards in Ireland: first annual report." Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Research Series (2021): pp. 15-16

Figure 15: Enforced deprivation rate, under 18 and 65 and older age groups (2004-2023)

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)

If we compare Ireland's children at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate[18] with the other 27 EU member states, we find that Ireland has the 11th highest rate but is still well below the average rate across the EU-27.

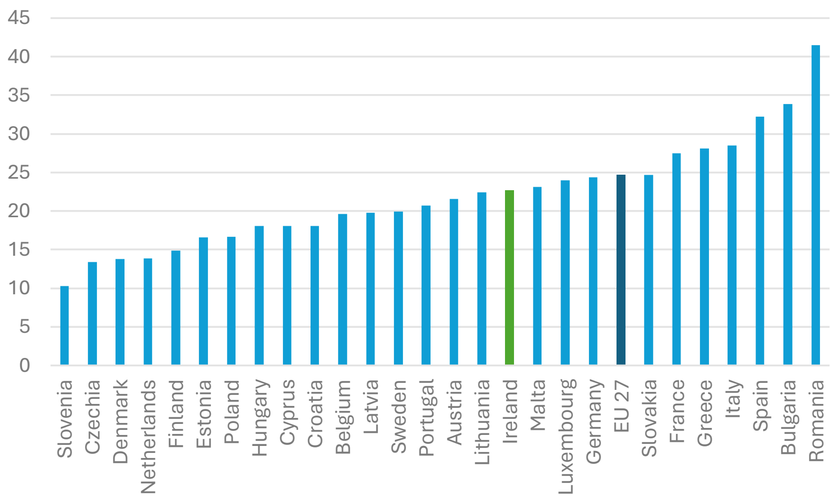

Figure 16: At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (Aged less than 18) 2022

Source: Eurostat

18 The risk of poverty or social exclusion rate measures persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. See: Eurostat. " Glossary: At risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_(AROPE).

At-risk-of-poverty rate and deprivation by household composition

Estimates of the at-risk-of-poverty rate are based on equivalised income, which generates an individualised income estimate by adjusting total household income by the number of adults and children living in the household.

Therefore, when considering at-risk-of-poverty rate among those aged under 18, these rates are derived from household income figures, which are primarily dependent on the income of the adult members of the household.

As noted in Chapter 2 and at the start of this chapter, one-person and lone-parent households, and families with children aged under 25, are more likely to be in the bottom income quintile and much less likely to be in the top income quintile. Given this unequal distribution of income, it is not surprising that if we examine the at-risk-of-poverty and deprivation rates by household composition, we find these households more likely to be at-risk-of-poverty or experience enforced deprivation than households with no children aged under 25, or those that contain a couple.

As can be seen in Figure 17, households with couples where all the children are aged 25 or older experience the lowest rates of at-risk-of-poverty (0.9%) and deprivation (3.9%), followed by couples without children (4.1% and 7.3%). Meanwhile, in households with couples with at least one child under 25, 11% are at-risk-of-poverty, and 14.6% experience enforced deprivation.

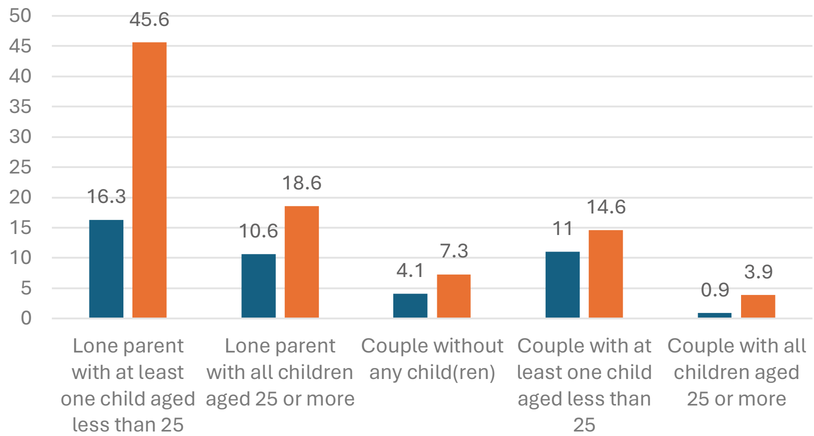

Figure 17: At-risk-of-poverty rate & enforced deprivation rate, by household composition (2023)[19]

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

Among lone-parent families, these rates are higher, including for those where all children are aged 25 or older (10.6% and 18.6%). 16.3% of those in lone-parent households with at least one child aged under 25 are at-risk-of-poverty, and nearly half (45.6%) experience enforced deprivation.

While poverty and deprivation rates among lone-parents have declined in recent years, these figures highlight that much more remains to be done.[20]

19 Also reported in the SILC data are figures for "one person households" and "Other type of household". The at risk of poverty rate among these types of households is 21.9% and 10.7% respectively. The rate of enforced deprivation is 21.9% and 10.7% respectively.

20 See: Brown, Gordon. "Ireland has made vital progress in tackling child poverty but no child can be left behind." The Irish Times, May, 2024. https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2024/05/23/gordon-brown-ireland-has-made-vital-progress-in-tackling-child-poverty-but-no-child-can-be-left-behind/ & Children´s Rights Alliance. "Child Poverty Monitor 2022." 2024. https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Child-Poverty-Monitor-2024.pdf.

Child homelessness

The ongoing housing crisis affects children particularly harshly. During the week of April 22-28, 2024, 9,803 adults and 1,996 families accessed local authority managed emergency accommodation. In these families, there were 4,206 dependent children.[21] (See Table 5.)

	Adults				Families			
Region	Adults	(of which) Single Adults	Male	Female	Total Families	(of which) single parent families	Total Adults	Total child dependan ts
Dublin	7,028	4,527	4,368	2,660	1,445	754	2,501	3,188
Mid-East	506	317	295	211	107	58	189	179
Midlands	148	107	73	75	34	27	41	46
Mid-West	489	331	281	208	96	56	158	169
North-East	222	144	111	111	54	40	78	116
North-West	172	140	117	55	23	17	32	53
South-East	285	233	184	101	40	29	52	66
South-West	558	437	372	186	88	64	121	157
West	395	221	225	170	109	50	174	232
TOTAL	9,803	6457 (66%)	6026 (61%)	3777 (39%)	1,996	1095 (55%)	3,346	4,206

Table 5: Adults and families accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation during the week of 22-28 April 2024

Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Over the last decade, the number of children in emergency accommodation has increased more than 5.6-fold (see Figure 18). In July 2014, 749 children were counted in local authority emergency accommodation. This increased to over 3,800 in the summer of 2018. It stabilised at this level for two years before falling during the COVID-19 pandemic when the number in local authority emergency accommodation declined. Aisling Reidy of Focus Ireland explained at the time that the "total ban on evictions was clearly a very significant factor" for this decline, and argued that "the failure to continue this latter measure means that we can expect to see a return to previous patterns of entry into homelessness, with a potential surge as landlords seek to 'catch up'."[22] This is precisely what happened, and the last three years have seen child homeless nearly double from 2,129 in July 2021 to 4,206 in April 2024. This is the most recent figure and is the highest level since this data series began ten years ago.

21 Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. "Homelessness data." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/

22 Focus Ireland. "Homeless Figures and the Impact of COVID-19." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.focusireland.ie/focus-blog/homeless-figures-and-the-impact-of-covid-19/.

Figure 18: Child dependents accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation (2014-2024)

Source: Focus Ireland, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

A strong health warning should be attached to these figures, as they are not a measure of child homelessness. They only count child dependents accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation. While we do not have consistent and reliable data on child homelessness, we know that it is far higher than what is in these official figures from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. These official figures do not include those who are in 'own-door' temporary accommodation, domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers, people who are sleeping rough, and the very many who are 'hidden homeless' and staying with family or friends in insecure housing[23]. As Social Justice Ireland observe[24], in 2019, a report commissioned by the European Commission referred to the current state of data collection on homelessness in Ireland as "statistical obfuscation if not 'corruption'." [25]

23 Focus Ireland. " Number of people who are homeless and relying on emergency homeless accommodation." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/latest-figures/.

24 Healy, Seán, Colette Bennett, Sibéal Devilly, Michelle Murphy, Susanne Rogers, and Brigid Reynolds. "Social Justice Matters: 2023 Guide to A Fairer Irish Society." Social Justice Ireland, 2023, p.132

25 Daly, Mary. "ESPN Thematic Report on National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion – Ireland." Brussels: European Commission, 2019.

5. Special Focus: Educational Inequality

(with Sara Singleton)

5. Special Focus: Educational Inequality

(with Sara Singleton)

While Ireland's educational outcomes are impressive across various metrics, significant inequality persists within the educational system. If we consider education a key driver of social mobility, it is essential to examine education within the context of broader societal structures.

Expenditure on education

Ireland does not allocate an unusually high amount of expenditure to education. Figure 19 provides educational spending data for 36 of the 38 OECD member states.[26] As a percentage of GDP, Ireland's expenditure on education is lower than that of nearly all other advanced economies. However, Ireland's GDP figures are inflated, leading to a misleading representation[27]. To address this, Figure 19 also shows Ireland's educational spending as a percentage of Modified Gross National Income (GNI*).[28] When educational spending is evaluated in terms of GNI*, Ireland shifts from having the lowest total spending on primary to tertiary education to the 11th highest among these 36 countries.[29] This significant change is primarily due to Ireland's investment in primary education. With GNI* as the measure, Ireland ranks 6th in primary education spending[30]. However, for secondary and tertiary education, Ireland's spending is comparatively lower, ranking 23rd and 19th respectively[31].

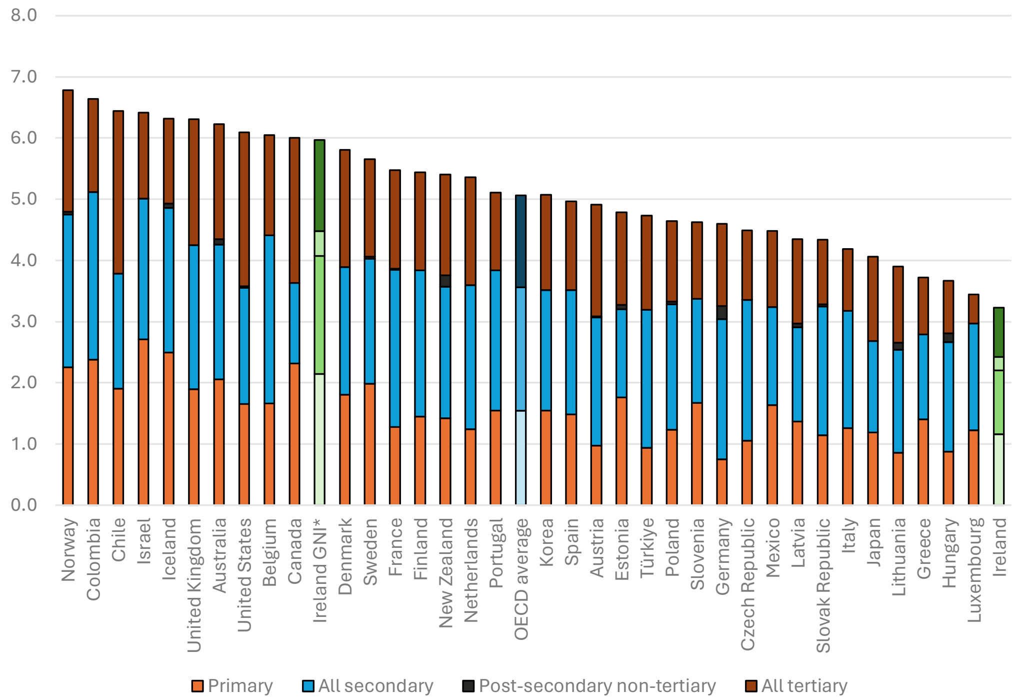

Figure 19: Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2020)
Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2023

26 These data exclude Switzerland and Costa Rica due to unavailable data. See: OECD. "Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators." Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022. https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/

27 Central Statistics Office. "National Income and Expenditure 2022." Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2023. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/nationalaccounts/nationalincomeandexpenditure/

28 GNI* is a metric developed by the Central Statistics Office to exclude globalisation effects that disproportionately affect the measurement of Ireland's economic size. See: Central Statistics Office. "Modified Gross National Income (GNI*) Explained." Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2023. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/methods/nationalaccounts/modifiedgrossnationalincomegni/

29 OECD. "Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators." Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024. https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Even more striking is the low level of spending on early childhood education. Figure 20 reproduces the total primary to tertiary education spend from Figure 19 and also shows spending on early childhood education as a percentage of GDP. Among the 24 OECD members with reliable and consistent data on spending on early childhood education, Ireland ranks last in terms of public investment. This ranking remains unchanged even when recalculated using GNI*.

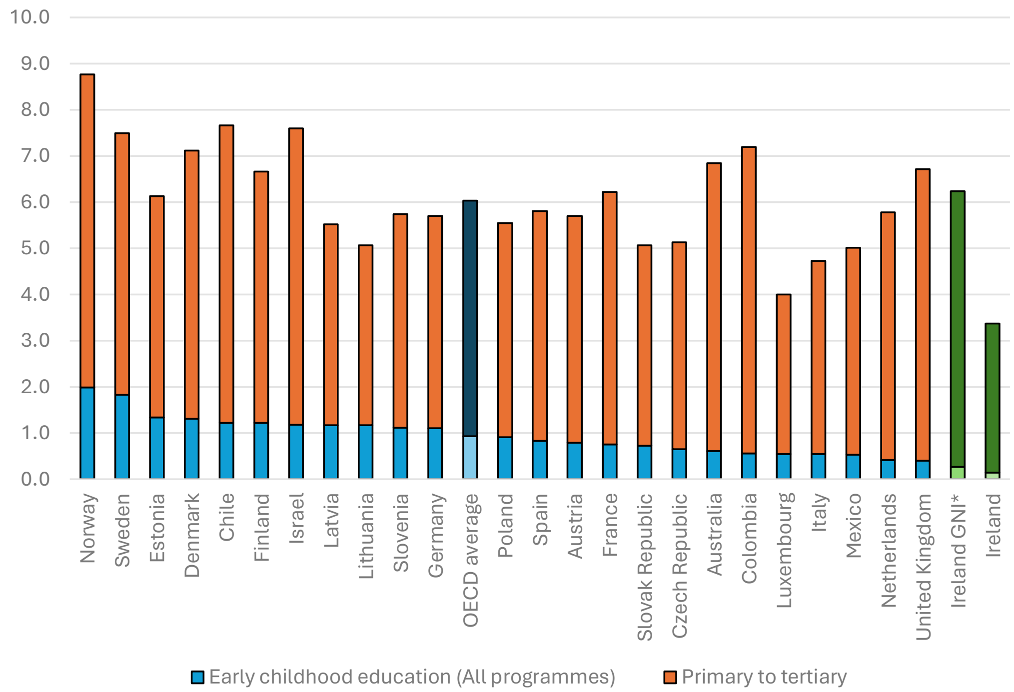

Figure 20: Expenditure on early childhood and primary-to-tertiary education as a percentage of GDP (2020)
Source: OECD, Social Expenditure Database

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme have significantly improved childcare in Ireland. Launched in November 2019, the NCS provides income-based subsidies, alleviating the financial burden on families. In 2022, over 122,814 children benefited from the scheme, marking a 62% increase in participation from the previous year[32]. The ECCE Scheme, launched in 2010, offers two years of free preschool education, enhancing school readiness and social skills, and resulting in better educational outcomes for participants. The latest figures from the 2021/2022 school year, show that 107,782 children were enrolled in the ECCE programme, a 3% increase from the previous year[33]. Additionally, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) supported over 6,000 children with disabilities in accessing the ECCE programme across Early Learning and Care (ELC) services in 2022[34]. These developments highlight the potential of these interventions in promoting greater equality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)[35]in Ireland.

There has been increased investment in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) in Ireland over recent years. According to a statement by Roderic O'Gorman in response to a parliamentary question, investment in ELC and SAC has grown from €260 million in 2015 to €1.25 billion in 2023, achieving the "First 5" investment target five years ahead of schedule. Despite this progress, investment is still low by international standards. The OECD reports that Ireland spends

32 Government of Ireland. "National Childcare Scheme." Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ff071e-national-childcare-scheme/

33 Government of Ireland. "Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme." Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/service/11bbee-early-childhood-care-and-education-programme/

34 Government of Ireland. "Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)." Available at: https://aim.gov.ie/

35 Difference between ECEC and ECCE: ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) is an international term for services for young children from birth to school entry. ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) refers specifically to Ireland's scheme, launched in January 2010, which offers free pre-school education to children.

0.3% of its GDP on ELC, whereas the OECD average is 0.8%. This calculation for Ireland excludes spending on children under six in primary school[36].

To align with the 1% GDP target for ELC spending as recommended by the OECD, an additional €3.7 billion would be needed, totalling €4.7 billion. However, it is important to note that GDP is a misleading indicator in the Irish context due to the peculiarities of its economic structure. While figures for 2022 are not yet available, in 2021, Ireland's GNI* was €234 billion[37]. To increase spending to 1% of GNI*, an additional €1.3 billion would be required, bringing the total to €2.3 billion[38]. The "First 5 Strategy" commits the Government to at least doubling public spending on ELC and SAC by 2028. This target has already been met ahead of schedule, and there is a commitment to continue increasing state funding for ELC and SAC as part of a multi-annual budget process[39].

However, the focus on increased public spending only gives part of the picture. Despite the increased investment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), providers in Ireland are largely corporate and controlled by global investment and pension funds. Profitable ECEC businesses, bolstered by Irish State subsidies, are being burdened with debt, effectively financing their own takeovers[40]. Profits are then redirected from the Irish ECEC system to shareholders and dividends, funded by Irish public money[41]. The government currently lacks a meaningful strategy to address this issue[42]. There is an observable trend of small Irish-owned ECEC services being bought out by international corporate providers, mirroring patterns seen in the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, and the US.[43] This shift brings additional consequences, such as pressure on quality standards, health and safety regulations, and wages from corporate bodies.[44]

Successes

Ireland boasts an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and consistently ranks highly in international education assessments, with students performing well above the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science[45,46]. This success is achieved despite spending relatively little on education[47,48] and historic underinvestment[49]. Additionally, citizen satisfaction with

36 House of the Oireachtas. "Written Answers." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-05-23/652/.

37 Central Statistics Office. "Modified Gross National Income (GNI*) Explained." Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2023

38 Central Statistics Office. "Annual National Accounts 2021." Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2022. https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ana/annualnationalaccounts2021/data/.

39 House of the Oireachtas. "Written Answers." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-05-23/652/.

40 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. "Childcare Facilities Guidelines." gov.ie, 2020. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c8b38-childcare-facilities-guidelines/

41 Eurydice. "Ireland: Early Childhood Education and Care." Eurydice, 2021. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/early-childhood-education-and-care-29_en

42 Oireachtas. "Commercialisation and the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care." Written Answers, Dáil Éireann Debate, 19 November 2019. Available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-11-19/124/

43 Eurydice. "Ireland: Early Childhood Education and Care." Eurydice, 2021. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/early-childhood-education-and-care-29_en.

44 Ibid.

45 OECD. "Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators." Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022. https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/.

46 Department of Education. "Annual Report 2021." Dublin: Department of Education, 2021. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8df78-annual-report-2021/

47 NERI. "NERI Report Series No. 9: Spending on Public Services in Ireland." Dublin: NERI, 2018. Available at: https://www.nerinstitute.net/research/spending-public-services-ireland

48 OECD. "Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators." Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/

49 DES. "Action Plan for Education 2018." Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2018. Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Action-Plan-for-Education-2018.pdf

the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of the 22 European countries studied[50]. An Ipsos MRBI survey in 2019 found extraordinarily high levels of public trust in teachers, surpassing trust levels for journalists, Gardai, civil servants, politicians, business leaders, bankers, or even the "ordinary person in the street"[51].

The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) project assesses the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in mathematics, reading, and science. Irish students are significantly above the OECD average in all three domains, and Ireland has moved from eighth place to second place among the 81 countries[52]. Another notable aspect of this performance is the higher likelihood of Irish students remaining in secondary education compared to their counterparts in other developed countries. In Ireland, 92% of students complete secondary school, surpassing the average completion rate of 88.9% for OECD countries. However, it is important to acknowledge that the disparity in grades between students from more and less disadvantaged backgrounds is more pronounced in Ireland than in many other countries[53].

Another significant achievement of the Irish education system is the high level of third-level qualifications among its young adults. In 2022, 62.3% of persons aged 25-34 in Ireland had attained a third-level qualification, the highest rate within the EU27 (see Table 6). This reflects Ireland's success in promoting higher education and ensuring that a large proportion of its population has access to advanced educational opportunities[54].

Additionally, Ireland boasts the third-highest rates of upper secondary education completion in the EU for both those aged between 20 and 24 and those aged between 25 and 34 (see Table 6). 95% of both age categories have completed secondary education in Ireland, surpassing the EU average of 84% and 85% respectively. However, it is worth noting that when this metric is considered in relation to the full working-age population (25-64), the number with a completed secondary school education drops to 88%, and Ireland's ranking drops from 3rd to 11th. This indicates the significant improvement in educational outcomes over previous decades.

The high levels of tertiary completion reflect the high tertiary enrolment rates in Ireland. 59% of all 20-year-olds in Ireland are enrolled in some form of tertiary education (see Table 7). This is the third-highest level of tertiary enrolment in the EU and significantly surpassing the EU average of 44%.

Ireland also has the fourth lowest level of early school leaving. Only 4% of those aged 18-24 left school early in Ireland, which is less than half the average EU rate of 9.5%.

50 Boyle, Richard. "Citizen Satisfaction with Public Services: Insights from the 2018 Survey." Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2018. Available at: https://www.ipa.ie/_fileUpload/Documents/CitizenSatisfaction2018.pdf

51 Ipsos MRBI. "Public Trust in Various Professions." Irish Times, 2019. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/poll-reveals-high-public-trust-in-teachers-and-low-trust-in-politicians-1.3868866

52 OECD. "Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators." Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022. https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/.

53 Jeffers, G., & Lillis, C. Responding to educational inequality in Ireland; Harnessing teachers' perspectives to develop a framework for professional conversations. Educational Studies, 50(2) (2021): 139–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2021.1931043

54 Central Statistics Office. "Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022." Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2022. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/fp/fp-edatt/educationalattainmentthematicreport2022/

	Tertiary educational attainment	People with at least an upper secondary education qualification		
	From 25 to 34 years	From 20 to 24 years	From 25 to 34 years	From 25 to 64 years
EU 27	43.1	84.1	85.5	79.8
Belgium	50	88.4	86.4	82.2
Bulgaria	35.8	88.6	86	85.2
Czechia	33.7	89.5	91.7	94.1
Denmark	49	75.3	82.4	82.2
Germany	38.4	71.4	83.3	83.1
Estonia	43.5	83.3	87.2	89.4
Ireland	***62.7***	***95***	***95***	***88.3***
Greece	44.5	95.4	92.4	81.1
Spain	52	79	74.3	64.2
France	51.9	90.5	89.2	83.7
Croatia	38.7	97.3	96	89.1
Italy	30.6	85.7	80.1	65.5
Cyprus	61.6	88.3	90.1	86.2
Latvia	45.1	87.4	90.5	91.1
Lithuania	57.4	92.7	95.1	94.4
Luxembourg	60.2	82	88.6	81.2
Hungary	29.4	85.1	86.6	87.4
Malta	46.3	86.9	82.2	68.1
Netherlands	54.5	86.6	89.2	80.7
Austria	43.5	85.1	90.1	86
Poland	46.3	93	94.7	94.3
Portugal	40.9	87.3	81.6	59.4
Romania	22.5	81.3	79.1	80.4
Slovenia	40.7	90.4	92.9	88.5
Slovakia	39.8	90.6	93.5	93.8
Finland	39.2	85.3	89.7	88.8
Sweden	54.1	87.9	89.9	88.4
Ireland's ranking	1	3	3	11

Table 6: Educational attainment, % of relevant population, 2023

Source: Eurostat

	Early childhood education, 2021	Adult (25-64) education and training, 2023	Enrolled in tertiary education, 20 years, 2022	Early leavers from education and training, 18–24, 2023
EU 27	**92.7**	**12.7**	**44.5**	**9.5**
Belgium	98.4	11.1	57.9	6.2
Bulgaria	80.4	1.4	45.8	9.3
Czechia	85.3	9.9	48.2	6.4
Denmark	97.1	30.5	16.6	10.4
Germany	93.1	8.3	31.5	12.8
Estonia	91.9	23.2	34.3	9.7
Ireland	***93.2***	***12.3***	***59.4***	***4***
Greece		3.4	60.9	3.7
Spain	96.7	15.8	53.4	13.7
France	100	14.9	52.7	7.6
Croatia	97.9	6.4	52.9	2
Italy	92.7	11.6	43.9	10.5
Cyprus	84.4	11	34.7	10.5
Latvia	95.5	10.7	49.8	7.7
Lithuania	96.6	10.7	52.6	6.4
Luxembourg	90.5	16.2	8.6	6.8
Hungary	92.6	9.6	34.5	11.6
Malta	87.5	16.5	44.5	10
Netherlands	92	24.4	49	6.3
Austria	90.6	17.1	33.6	8.6
Poland	92.4	8.7	46.9	3.7
Portugal	96.3	13.4	52.4	8
Romania	74.8	6.7	40.2	16.6
Slovenia	92.7	19.9	62.1	5.4
Slovakia	78.6	10.5	37.1	6.4
Finland	89	26.1	30.3	9.6
Sweden	96.1	38.8	26.6	7.4
Ireland's ranking	10	13	3	4

Table 7: Participation in education rates, % of relevant population

Source: Eurostat

However, two areas where Ireland does not rank as highly are in relation to adult education and early childhood education. Currently, 12.3% of those aged between 25 and 64 are in education in Ireland, which falls slightly below the EU average of 12.7%.

Additionally, while 93.2% of those aged between 3 and starting primary school are in education in Ireland, this figure is only marginally above the EU average of 92.7%. Consequently, early childhood education participation in Ireland ranks as only the 10th highest of the EU's 27 member states. This issue is closely tied to the relatively low level of spending on early childhood education, as illustrated in Figure 20 above.

Interventions

The Irish government has initiated several interventions with the aim of promoting equity and accessibility in education. Key initiatives include the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, which addresses educational disadvantage at primary and secondary levels. The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) support underrepresented and disadvantaged students in higher education. Additionally, SUSI grants provide financial assistance to students pursuing further and higher education. These programmes have had an impressive impact and are a testament to the potential of targeted government interventions to address inequality.

Efforts to address these inequities are reflected in initiatives such as the National Access Plan 2022-2028, which aims to enhance access, participation, and success in higher education for underrepresented groups. This plan includes measures such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities, which provide critical financial support to students in need. By addressing both the financial and non-financial barriers, these programmes seek to create a more inclusive higher education environment, thereby improving student retention and success rates[55].

DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme is an initiative in Ireland aimed at addressing educational disadvantage and promoting equality within the school system. Launched by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005, DEIS provides a framework for resources and supports specifically targeted at schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities. The initiative is part of a broader effort to ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have access to quality education[56]. As of 2022, 20% of primary and post-primary schools in Ireland participate in the DEIS programme, encompassing around 180,000 students[57].

For teachers, DEIS offers extensive support and resources designed to enhance teaching and learning experiences. These include professional development opportunities, additional teaching staff, and the implementation of various literacy and numeracy programmes[58]. Teachers in DEIS schools receive specific training to help them address the unique challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, the programme includes measures to improve school leadership and management, aiming to foster a more supportive and effective educational environment[59].

Students in DEIS schools benefit from a range of supports aimed at improving their educational outcomes and overall well-being. The programme includes initiatives such as breakfast clubs, homework clubs, and after-school activities, which aim to support academic learning and promote

55 Higher Education Authority. "National Access Plan 2022-2028." Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2022. Available at: https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/

56 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Plan 2017," Department of Education and Skills, https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/DEIS-Plan-2017.pdf

57 Department of Education. "DEIS Plan 2022." Dublin: Department of Education, 2022. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/93b40-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/

58 Department of Education and Skills. "Professional Development for Teachers in DEIS Schools." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://oide.ie/primary/home/inclusive-education/deis-social-inclusion/.

59 Department of Education and Skills. DEIS Action Planning: The quality of leadership and management; teaching, learning and professional development. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2022. Accessed June 12, 2024 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ba007-looking-at-deis-action-planning-for-improvement-in-primary-and-post-primary-schools/

social and emotional development.[60] DEIS also provides additional funding for learning materials and classroom resources. Furthermore, there are initiatives focused on parental involvement and community engagement, recognising the crucial role that families and local communities play in a child's education.[61]

The achievements of the DEIS programme are significant. Since its inception in 2005, DEIS has contributed to noticeable improvements in literacy and numeracy levels among participating students. For instance, the percentage of DEIS primary school students achieving the highest levels in reading increased by 13% and in maths by 15% between 2007 and 2022.[62] Research indicates that the gap in educational attainment between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has narrowed, demonstrating the programme's impact on reducing educational inequality. Specifically, the gap in Junior Certificate retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools decreased from 16.8% in 2001 to 8.5% in 2014, and further improvements have been noted up to 2022[63]. Additionally, DEIS has been credited with enhancing student retention rates and increasing the number of students progressing to further education and training. Notably, the percentage of students from DEIS schools transitioning to higher education rose from 45% in 2012 to 60% in 2022[64].

Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)

In Ireland, Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) are initiatives designed to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disabilities, respectively, in accessing third-level education. HEAR provides additional consideration for entry to participating higher education institutions for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, while DARE offers tailored supports and accommodations to students with disabilities throughout their academic journey. These initiatives are instrumental in promoting inclusivity and widening participation in higher education.[65]

HEAR and DARE students have access to a range of supports at third-level, aimed at facilitating their academic success and overall well-being. These supports include academic guidance and mentoring programmes, financial assistance, disability support services, counselling services, and assistive technology resources. Research indicates that such supports play a crucial role in mitigating barriers to education and enhancing the retention and progression rates of HEAR and DARE students in higher education institutions[66].

60 Department of Education and Skills. "Supports for Students in DEIS Schools." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/#supports-to-deis-schools.

61 Byrne, D. (2019). Parental involvement in Ireland. Parental Involvement Across European Education Systems: Critical Perspectives, 49.

62 Department of Education. "2022 Annual Report." Dublin: Department of Education, 2022. https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/department-of-education-and-skills-annual-reports/.

63 Educational Research Centre. A Report on the Evaluation of DEIS at Second Level. Dublin: Educational Research Centre, 2014. Retrieved from https://www.erc.ie/documents/deisevaluation_secondlevel_report2014.pdf

64 Higher Education Authority. (2022). Access to Higher Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/

65 Access College. "Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)." Available at: https://accesscollege.ie/hear/

66 Access College. "Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)." Available at: https://accesscollege.ie/dare/

The availability of dedicated support staff, such as HEAR and DARE coordinators, within higher education institutions ensures that students receive personalised assistance and advocacy throughout their academic journey. These coordinators facilitate the smooth transition of HEAR and DARE students into third-level education, provide ongoing support and guidance, and liaise with relevant stakeholders to address any barriers or challenges faced by students[67].

The HEAR and DARE schemes in Ireland have demonstrated considerable success in promoting access to higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds. According to the 2023 summary report by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), these initiatives have notably increased the representation of socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities in third-level institutions. Figures from the report indicate that in 2023 almost 1 in 5 students who applied to CAO on the basis of their Leaving Certificate (and were aged under 23) were assessed for DARE and or HEAR eligibility, and 13,650 offers were made to DARE and HEAR applicants across the entire Irish higher education sector.[68]

The success of the HEAR and DARE schemes can be attributed to a range of tailored supports and accommodations provided to participating students. These include academic guidance, mentoring programmes, financial assistance, disability support services, assistive technology, and counselling. Such supports have been instrumental in enhancing the retention and progression rates of HEAR and DARE students in higher education.[69]

Furthermore, the collaborative efforts between higher education institutions, community organisations, and advocacy groups have contributed to the success of these initiatives. Dedicated HEAR and DARE coordinators within institutions play a crucial role in facilitating the transition of students into third-level education, providing ongoing support, and advocating for their needs. External support services and networks complement the efforts of higher education institutions, further enhancing the support available to HEAR and DARE students.[70]

The positive impact of the HEAR and DARE schemes on academic outcomes and career prospects is evident from the IUA report. HEAR and DARE students have achieved comparable academic success to their peers and have successfully transitioned into employment or further education opportunities after graduation.[71]

Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) in Ireland, initiated by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), aims to improve access to tertiary education for underrepresented groups. PATH offers financial aid, outreach efforts, and academic support to eligible candidates[72]. Since its inception in 2017, PATH has increased enrolment of socio-economically disadvantaged students and improved retention rates within higher education institutions (HEIs). Since the launch of the PATH programme, there has been a 20% rise in the enrolment of students from underrepresented backgrounds in

67 Irish Universities Association. "HEAR and DARE Summary Report 2023." Available at: https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/DARE-HEAR-Summary-Report-2023.pdf

68 Ibid.

69 Access College. "Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://accesscollege.ie/hear/.

70 Irish Universities Association. "HEAR and DARE Summary Report 2023".

71 Ibid.

72 Higher Education Authority. "Programme for Access to Higher Education." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/.

HEIs. Retention rates for these students have improved by approximately 15% over the same period. These figures demonstrate the tangible impact of PATH in facilitating access to higher education and fostering inclusivity within the sector. Overall, PATH demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted interventions in promoting equitable access to higher education. Continued investment and collaboration are essential for further advancing inclusivity in the Irish higher education landscape.[73]

Since the launch of the PATH programme in 2017, there has been a 20% rise in the enrolment of students from underrepresented backgrounds in HEIs. Retention rates for these students have improved by approximately 15% over the same period. These figures demonstrate the tangible impact of PATH in facilitating access to higher education and fostering inclusivity within the sector.

SUSI grants

The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant system aims to enhance educational accessibility and equity by providing financial support to eligible students pursuing further and higher education. Established as Ireland's single national awarding authority for all new student grant applications, SUSI administers a range of grants under criteria defined by the Student Support Act 2011, Student Support Regulations, and the Student Grant Scheme[74][75].

The primary goal of the SUSI grant system is to alleviate financial barriers that may prevent students from accessing higher education. This objective is reflected in the means-tested nature of the grants, which ensures that support is directed towards those from lower-income families. According to the Growing Up in Ireland 2019 report, 37% of students receive the SUSI maintenance grant, with a significant concentration among those from the lowest income quintile (58%), compared to just 11% from the highest income quintile. This targeted approach demonstrates the grant system's role in promoting social equity by enabling students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue higher education[76].

The uptake of the SUSI grants has been robust, reflecting their importance in the Irish education landscape. The TASC 2016 report "Cherishing All Equally" highlighted a social class disparity in grant receipt, with 56% of new entrants in institutes of technology receiving support compared to 36% in universities. This data underscores the broader reach and impact of the SUSI grants across different types of educational institutions, particularly benefiting those in more vocational and technical fields[77]. By reducing financial stress and enabling greater focus on academic pursuits, SUSI grants have played a pivotal role in increasing participation in third-level education.[78]

73 Higher Education Authority. " 2022 Annual Report of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in accordance with Section 22 of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014." Higher Education Authority, 2022. https://hea.ie/resources/publications/.

74 Department of Education. "Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/; Technological University Dublin. "Grant Information." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.tudublin.ie/for-students/student-services-and-support/fees-grants/grant-information/.

75 Technological University Dublin. "Grant Information."

76 Economic and Social Research Institute. (2019). Growing Up in Ireland: Key findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old. ESRI.

77 Hearne, Rory and Cian McMahon. "Cherishing All Equally 2016 Economic Inequality in Ireland." Dublin: TASC, 2016. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_inequalityreport_2016_web.pdf.

78 Department of Education. "Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/.

Remaining inequality

A report from the Joint Committee on Education and Skills[79] underscores the need to recognise the ongoing inequality prevalent within the Irish education system. It highlights the complex nature of educational disadvantage, emphasising its intersectionality across various dimensions including class, community, family dynamics, policy implementations, and school environments. Despite the widespread existence of these disparities, they often remain unacknowledged.[80] While certain vulnerable groups share common challenges, the report stresses how they also encounter unique, group-specific obstacles, necessitating tailored interventions. Moreover, the report outlines the dual nature of disadvantage as both horizontal and vertical: horizontally, existing policies and practices fail to coalesce effectively, exacerbating disparities; vertically, structural inadequacies and policy deficiencies impact educational institutions. The below analyses illustrate the nature of educational inequality in Ireland.

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data

Student scores on these PISA tests allow us to assess some aspects of educational inequality.[81] The 2022 PISA report found that in Ireland students in the top 25% in terms of socio-economic status outperformed students in the bottom 25% by 74 points in mathematics.[82] This is lower than the average 93-point difference observed across OECD countries. Additionally, 12% of those in the bottom 25% in terms of socio-economic status were able to score in the top quarter of mathematics performance, which is higher than the OECD average (10%).

We can also use these PISA scores to assess the performance of different types of schools within Ireland. Unfortunately, as can be seen in Table 8, it remains the case that students in DEIS schools underperform compared to those in non-DEIS schools.

	DEIS	**Non-DEIS**
%	**21**	**79**
Mean reading performance	486.5	523.8
Mean maths performance	463.5	499.1
Mean science performance	472.5	512.2

Table 8: 15 year olds academic performance in Ireland, PISA data 2022

Source: OECD. "PISA 2022 results."; Carroll at al. "Embracing Diversity in all its forms: The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education." ESRI, 2024.

79 Oireachtas. "Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report 2019." Available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/report/2019-11-27/37/

80 Jeffers, G., & Lillis, C. "Responding to educational inequality in Ireland".

81 OECD. "PISA 2022 results." Accessed June 12, 2024. https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/country-notes/ireland-01173012/.

82 The PISA scores are fitted to a normal distribution with the mean value is then assigned the value of 500 points and the standard deviation is equal to 100 points.

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data

Another significant source of evidence regarding educational inequality is the Growing Up in Ireland study. This national longitudinal study of children and young people is a joint project of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Launched in 2006, the study has followed the progress of two groups of children: 8,000 from "Cohort '98" and 10,000 from "Cohort '08". Members of Cohort '98 are now 25-26 years old, while those of Cohort '08 are around 16 years old. In 2023, the study launched a new third cohort of babies who will be 9 months old in 2024.

The proportion of secondary-level students attending fee-charging schools in Ireland has experienced a gradual decline from a peak of nearly 8% in 2008 to approximately 6.7% in 2023[83]. Despite this decline, fee-charging schools continue to play a significant role in the Irish education system, offering alternative educational experiences and environments to students and families who opt for such institutions.[84]

Among the fee-charging schools in Ireland, there exists significant variation in fees. St. Columba's College in Dublin was the most expensive secondary school for day pupils in 2023, with fees amounting to €9,632, while Sligo Grammar School charged the lowest fees for day pupils at €3,750 per annum[85]. Irish parents' choice of fee-paying schools is influenced by location, parental education, and occupation[86]. While these schools are often perceived as offering academic excellence, as highlighted by media outlets such as the Sunday Times[87], it's important to recognise the limitations of such metrics. Academic achievements, notably in Leaving Certificate results and progression to third-level education, contribute to their appeal as investments in children's futures[88]. However, disparities in school performance may stem from student characteristics rather than institutional quality. The concentration of fee-paying schools in urban areas, particularly Dublin, raises concerns about access and equity[89].

In 2021/2022, the '08 GUI data Cohort was interviewed at age 13. As can be seen from the results of this survey, displayed in Figure 21, children attending fee-charging schools are more likely to have parents in the highest quintile of income and parents who themselves have attained a degree.

83 Department of Education. "Statistical Bulletin: Enrolments September 2023 – Preliminary Results" Dublin: Department of Education, 2023. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/055810-education-statistics/.

84 O'Brien, Carl. "Private school numbers climb to highest on record." The Irish Times, August, 2023. Retrieved from https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/08/21/private-school-numbers-climb-to-highest-on-record/.

85 Ibid.

86 RTÉ Brainstorm. "Why do Irish parents choose fee-paying secondary schools?" August, 2023. Retrieved from https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2023/0823/1068599-ireland-fee-paying-secondary-schools-location-education-parents/.

87 Corr, Julieanne. "Six of Ireland's 10 Most Expensive Private Schools Hike Fees." The Times, June, 2023. Retrieved https://www.thetimes.com/article/six-of-irelands-10-most-expensive-private-schools-hike-fees-ljl7bs26h.

88 RTÉ Brainstorm. (2023, August 23). "Why do Irish parents choose fee-paying secondary schools?"

89 Ibid.

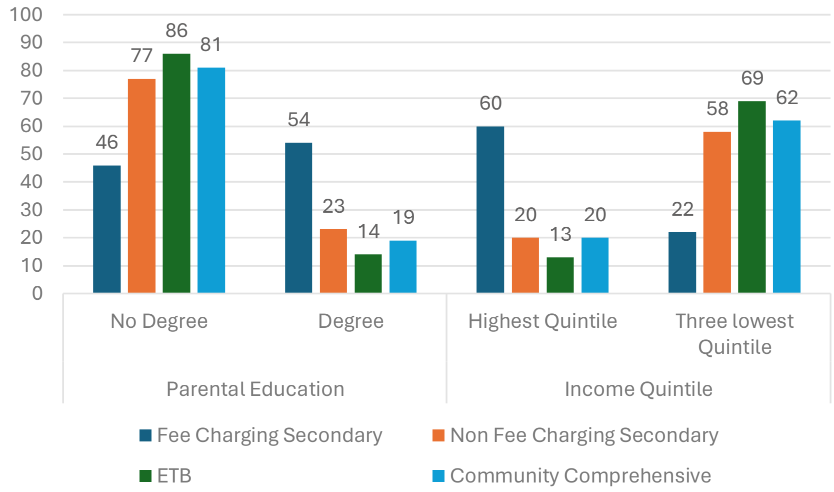

Figure 21: Student social profile (%)

Source: Carroll et al. "Embracing diversity in all its forms: The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education." ESRI, 2024.

In fee-charging schools, 60% of students attending were in the richest 20% quintile, while only 22% were in the lowest 60%. Furthermore, more than half of the students in fee paying schools had a primary caregiver with a third-level degree, compared to fewer than one quarter who did so in all other types of schools.

This inequality is also reflected in the educational outcomes of young people in this study.

In 2018/19, the '98 cohort of the GUI study, who were 20 years old at the time provided some interesting information about educational inequality which is displayed in Figures 22 and 23. By the age of 20, this cohort had aged out of secondary education and had either gone on to tertiary education or pursued other paths.

Those whose parents were professionals, on average, got 138 points more in their Leaving Certificate than those whose parents were from the lowest skilled group. Similarly, those from two-parent families did better than those from one-parent families.

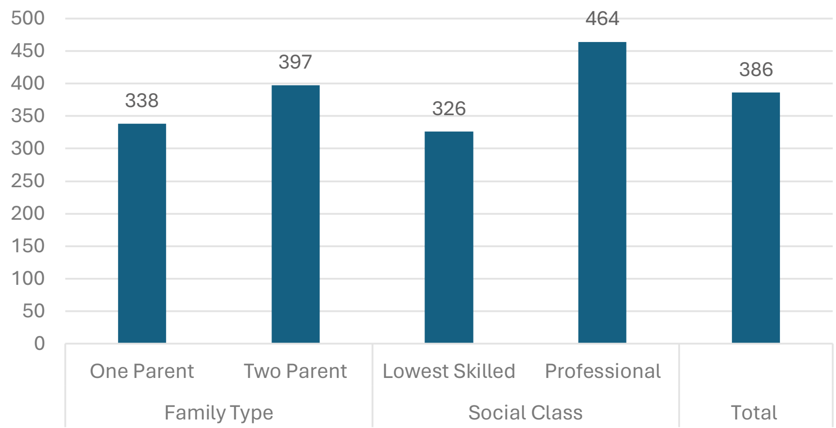

Figure 22: Average points in leaving certificate by social class, gender and family type

Source: Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old in 2018/19

20-year olds in this study whose parents had a university education were substantially more likely to be in university themselves. 92% of those whose mother had a degree were in education, with 86% of them in higher education. This contrasts with those whose mothers' highest level of education was the Junior Cert or less. Only 78% of this group were in education, with only 48% in higher education.

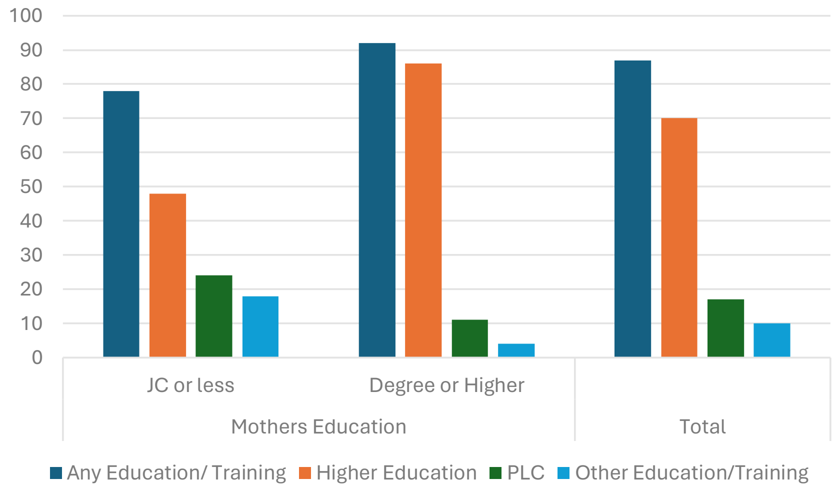

Figure 23: Participation in education and training since leaving school by mothers' education

Source: Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old in 2018/19

The Growing Up in Ireland study indicates the persistence of inequality from parents to their children, with better educational outcomes for young people from two-parent families, those whose parents are highly educated, have a high income, or are professionals.

Interestingly, these educational outcomes closely correlate with their expectations at age 13, and with the expectations of their mothers. Table 9 shows that of those who at age 13 expected to go to higher education, 82% did go.

But perhaps more remarkable is the positive fact that of those who expected that the highest level of their education would be the Junior Cert or Leaving Cert, half were in higher education when they were 20.

	JC/LC	Post Secondary	Higher Education
Young Person	50	70	82
Mother	37	48	79

Table 9: Participation in higher education by educational expectations of the young person and their mother at age 13

Source: Growing Up in Ireland, Key Findings: Cohort '98 at 20 years old in 2018/19

Recent evidence for the young '08 cohort, displayed in Figure 24, identifies that maternal expectations are also closely connected to the mother's socio-economic position. 84% of mothers in families with the highest family income expect their children will earn a degree, while only 54% with the lowest family income expect the same. Likewise, the higher the level of the mother's education, the more likely it is that they will expect their children to earn a degree.

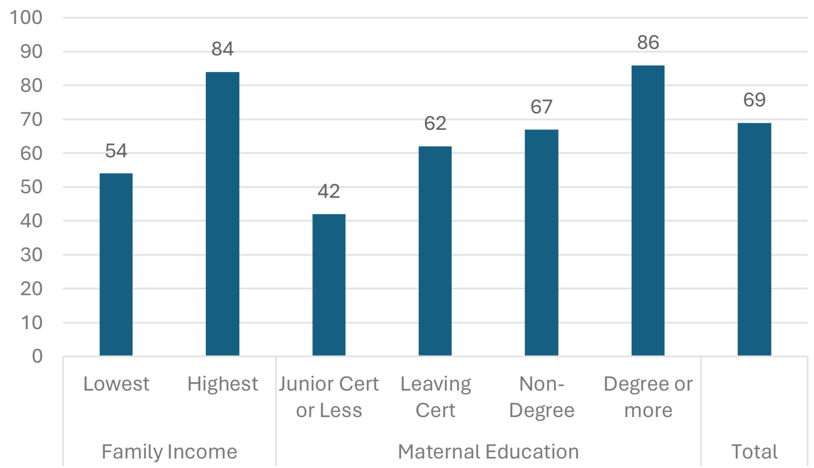

Figure 24: Maternal expectations for their 13-year-old to achieve degree level or higher by family income and maternal education (%)

Source: Growing Up In Ireland, Key Findings: Cohort '08 at 13 Years Old

Inequality in early years education

UNICEF's 2021 report, *Where Do Rich Countries Stand on Childcare?*, ranks parental leave and childcare policies in 41 higher-income countries. Despite recognising Ireland's recent efforts to enhance childcare affordability and quality through subsidies and policy reforms, the report ranks Ireland 36th overall due to several persistent issues[90]. Childcare costs remain among the highest, with families spending nearly a third of their income on childcare, posing a significant financial burden, especially for middle-income families[91]. Furthermore, childcare services for children under three years old are limited, with only about one in three children in this age group having access to formal childcare, leaving a gap after parental leave[6]. Finally, child-to-staff ratios often exceed recommended levels, and caregiver qualifications vary, affecting the quality of care provided[92].

Despite the progress in increasing access to early childhood education and care in Ireland by way of the introduction and expansion of ECCE and NCI, as noted in the previous chapter, several deficits persist that impact educational outcomes for children. Lack of access to quality early years education in Ireland has profound implications for the future outcomes of young people, both educationally and in their broader life prospects. Numerous studies and reports underscore the critical role that early childhood education plays in laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development. However, significant gaps remain in the availability and quality of early years education, particularly for children from lower socio-economic and marginalised backgrounds.[93]

The quality of early years education varies significantly, often correlating with socio-economic status. In disadvantaged areas, a lack of resources and qualified staff results in lower-quality education and care, which can hinder children's cognitive and social development. The disparities in early educational experiences contribute to achievement gaps that can persist throughout a child's academic journey, limiting their future opportunities[94]. Initiatives such as the "First 5" strategy aim to address these issues by increasing funding and enhancing the professional development of early

90 UNICEF. "Where Do Rich Countries Stand on Childcare?" 2021. Available at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1260-where-do-rich-countries-stand-on-childcare.html

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Early Childhood Ireland. "Child Poverty Monitor." 2023. https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/research-and-policy/child-poverty-monitor/

94 Ibid.

years educators, but challenges remain in ensuring consistent quality across different regions and communities[95].

The structure of the Irish early ECEC system perpetuates and exacerbates inequality, relying predominantly on private for-profit provision while the small non-profit/community sector remains underfunded. Already marginalised communities, particularly in urban poverty areas like Dublin's Ballymun and Poppintree, as well as many rural areas, face severe disadvantages in accessing high-quality ECEC. For-profit providers often do not serve these areas, leading to the emergence of "childcare deserts"[96]. Despite government commitments to increased funding, a significant number of young children are deprived of their right to education from birth, as outlined in the UNESCO Tashkent Declaration[97]. This situation leaves families without access to affordable childcare and results in a low rate of female labour force participation, adversely affecting society and the economy[98].

Accessibility issues also disproportionately affect marginalised communities, such as Traveller and Roma families, who often face significant barriers in accessing quality early childhood education. These barriers include a lack of awareness about available subsidies and support services, as well as cultural and logistical challenges. The Early Childhood Ireland Child Poverty Monitor highlights the need for targeted interventions, such as community outreach and support workers, to help these families navigate the system and access necessary services. Without such support, children from these communities are at a higher risk of educational underachievement, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage[99].

Research has consistently shown that high-quality early childhood education is crucial for cognitive and social development. According to the OECD, children who attend quality ECE settings are more likely to perform better academically in later years.[100] In Ireland, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face barriers to accessing such high-quality early years education. For instance, approximately 25% of children in the most disadvantaged areas do not attend any early years education compared to 13% in more affluent areas[101]. This lack of access can lead to early developmental delays, which are difficult to overcome later in life, further perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

The psychological and social benefits of early childhood education are well-documented. Children who attend quality early years education programs are more likely to develop better social skills, exhibit higher self-esteem, and experience fewer behavioural problems. These benefits extend into adulthood, contributing to more stable and fulfilling lives[102]. In Ireland, the disparity in access to

95 Government of Ireland. "First 5 - A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028." 2022. Retrieved from https://first5.gov.ie/

96 Dalton, C. Double Disadvantage: Reduced Access to Early Childhood Care and Education for Children at Risk of Poverty in Fingal. Fingal Children and Young People's Services Committee (FCYPSC), 2021.

97 UNESCO. "Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education." 2022. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381980

98 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. "Childcare Facilities Guidelines." gov.ie, 2020. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c8b38-childcare-facilities-guidelines/

99 Barnett, T. "Early childhood education." In T. Bertrand, R. N. Mark, & S. Jayne (Eds.), Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development, 2008. Retrieved from https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/early-childhood-education/according-experts/early-childhood-education

100 OECD. "Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Learning in Early Childhood Education and Care." 2023. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/education/starting-strong-vi-9789264249428-en.htm

101 Ibid.

102 Barnett. "Early childhood education", 2008.

such programs means that many children miss out on these critical developmental opportunities, affecting their long-term well-being.

Multiple international studies recognise that early childhood education significantly contributes to long-term educational inequalities. Data from Early Childhood Ireland indicates that children who do not receive quality early education are at a higher risk of lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and reduced chances of pursuing higher education. Specifically, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are 1.5 times more likely to leave school without a Leaving Certificate compared to their peers from more affluent backgrounds. These educational setbacks are often compounded by socio-economic challenges, creating a persistent gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.[103]

The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) reports that every €1 invested in early years education yields a return of up to €7 through improved educational outcomes and reduced social costs. Conversely, the lack of such education can limit career opportunities and economic mobility, affecting not only individuals but also the broader economy[104]. The economic implications of inadequate early childhood education are also significant. NESC highlights that early education is not just a social good but also an economic investment. Quality early years education can lead to better employment outcomes, higher earning potential, and reduced social welfare dependency.[105]

Inequality in higher and further education

A 2022 report from the HEA titled "Public Service Performance Metrics: Higher Education Access and Outcomes" provides insights into the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in facilitating social mobility, particularly in the context of Ireland. One significant aspect of the report is the ranking of HEIs based on their contribution to social mobility, which includes a social mobility index for Irish HEIs.[106] The findings reveal disparities in access and outcomes among students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The report investigates the economic implications of socio-economic background on graduate outcomes. Even after controlling for various student and institute-level characteristics, graduates originating from DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) second-level schools are predicted to earn approximately 2% less than their counterparts from standard second-level schools. This finding underscores the persistent challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds in achieving equitable outcomes in higher education and the labour market. In light of these findings, the report recommends a shift in focus from equality metrics solely based on access to higher education towards a more comprehensive approach that considers both access and outcomes by incorporating outcome-based metrics.[107]

The HEA report highlights the prevalence of socio-economic disparities within HEIs. For instance, it is observed that in institutions such as Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin, the proportion of students from affluent backgrounds is notably high, ranging from 34% to 36%. Conversely, the representation of students from disadvantaged areas in these institutions is

103 Early Childhood Ireland. "Child Poverty Monitor." 2023.

104 National Economic and Social Council (NESC). "Childhood Development: Economic Considerations." 2021 Retrieved from https://www.nesc.ie/publications/childhood-development-economic-considerations

105 Ibid.

106 Higher Education Authority. "Public Service Performance Metrics: Higher Education Access and Outcomes.", 2022. Retrieved from https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2022/10/Public-Service-Performance-Metrics-Higher-Education-Access-and-Outcomes.pdf

107 Ibid.

comparatively low, with only 5-6% of students originating from such backgrounds. In contrast, institutions like the Technological University Dublin (TUD) and Munster Technological University (MTU) have a higher percentage of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Technological University Dublin (TUD) has approximately 28% of its student body coming from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, Munster Technological University (MTU) also sees a significant proportion of its student population from similar backgrounds, with about 30% being identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged.[108]

Furthermore, the report sheds light on the socio-economic diversity issues present within specific fields of study. For example, it is noted that in disciplines like medicine and economics, a mere 4% of undergraduate students come from disadvantaged areas, indicating significant underrepresentation from these socio-economic groups.[109]

The "Student and Course Match in Higher Education" report by the HEA presents findings regarding student course selection patterns within higher education. The report indicates that students are inclined to opt for courses where the average academic performance of fellow students is lower than their own academic achievements. Additionally, there is a tendency for students to select courses offered in their own regional vicinity.[110] The report highlights a disparity in course selection based on socio-economic status (SES), revealing that students from lower SES backgrounds are less likely to enrol in courses associated with higher-paying careers. For instance, a notably smaller proportion of low SES students pursue courses such as medicine compared to their high SES counterparts, despite achieving similar academic credentials.[111] These findings highlight the varied factors influencing student decision-making processes in higher education, with implications for both course enrolment patterns and future career trajectories.

How societal inequalities impact education

This chapter has explored Ireland's educational landscape, focusing on investment, interventions to mitigate inequality, and persistent educational disparities despite these efforts. However, educational inequality cannot be viewed in isolation from broader societal inequities. Multiple intersections between educational inequality and wider social issues underscore how societal disparities manifest within the education sector, revealing the complex nature of educational disadvantage.

Economic instability is a major driver of educational inequality. High levels of income inequality, fluctuating deprivation rates, and pervasive financial insecurity faced by lone parents, unemployed individuals, and renters create conditions that severely hinder educational attainment. Financial constraints and limited access to resources contribute to higher dropout rates and lower completion rates among economically disadvantaged students compared to their more affluent peers. According to the Eurostudent VIII report, 33% of Irish third-level students encountered serious financial difficulties in 2022 (an increase on the 26% figure from 2019), highlighting a trend of increasing economic hardship that has been found to impede academic progression across the EU[112].

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Higher Education Authority. "Student and Course Match in Higher Education.", 2021. Retrieved from https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/11/Student-and-Course-Match-in-Higher-Education.pdf

111 Ibid.

112 Higher Education Authority. Eurostudent VIII Report on the Social and Living Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland, 2023. Retrieved from https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/04/Eurostudent-8-Final-Report.pdf

Housing instability is a critical factor influencing educational outcomes. Inadequate housing conditions, including homelessness, poor quality housing, overcrowding, and uncertainty, can severely impact students' academic performance and overall well-being. Disparities in access to stable, affordable housing exacerbate educational inequalities, as students from unstable housing situations are less likely to succeed academically.[113]

Transport access presents significant disparities across Ireland, particularly between urban and rural areas. The National Household Travel Survey 2022 indicates that 69% of trips nationwide are made by car, with rural areas heavily reliant on cars (80%) compared to urban centers (53% in Dublin City and Suburbs). Public transport usage is notably higher in urban areas, with Dublin City and Suburbs leading in bus/coach usage (9%) and cycling (5%)[114]. This disparity exacerbates socio-economic inequality, as rural households face higher costs and limited access to essential services, work opportunities, and education. Government measures[115] to lower public transport fares and cap school transport fees are beneficial but assume equal access to public transport, which rural areas lack.

Finally, the deficiencies in Ireland's early childhood education system have profound immediate and long-term repercussions. High childcare costs and inconsistent quality of care not only impede children's early learning and development but also hinder parental educational and career advancement. Parents struggling with childcare challenges find it harder to pursue further education or training, limiting their economic mobility and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Addressing these challenges in early childhood education is crucial to ensuring equitable educational opportunities and supporting parents in achieving their professional aspirations[116].

Tackling educational inequality demands a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of economic insecurity, housing instability, and systemic deprivation. Only through comprehensive policy measures can Ireland create a truly equitable education system.

113 Jeffers, G., & Lillis, C. Responding to educational inequality in Ireland

114 National Transport Authority. (2024). National Household Travel Survey 2022. Retrieved from https://www.nationaltransport.ie/publications/national-household-travel-survey-2022/

115 For more information see: Government of Ireland. (2021). *Climate Action Plan 2021*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6223e-climate-action-plan-2021/

116 Jeffers, G., & Lillis, C. Responding to educational inequality in Ireland

6. Recent Interventions and their Withdrawal

6. Recent Interventions and their Withdrawal

The last number of years have seen a series of major economic shocks: Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the high levels of inflation following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In response, the Irish government, like all western governments, has made a number of major interventions in the economy to support incomes and living standards.

COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many were forced out of employment. The government introduced the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) in March 2020. From March 24th, this was set at €350 per week, well above the €203 then paid as Job Seekers Allowance/Benefit. It was subsequently reduced to either €203, €250, or €350, depending on the recipient's pre-pandemic earnings. The government also introduced a Temporary Wage Subsidy scheme (TWSS), which was replaced by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS). These schemes aimed to maintain employment during the pandemic through "wage subsidies", where the government provided income to employers to subsidise their wage costs. The TWSS allowed employers to claim subsidies of up to €410 per week per eligible employee. The EWSS provided a two-tier subsidy of €151.50 or €203 per employee.

These interventions had a major distributional impact.[117] The CSO estimates that in the absence of these interventions, the at-risk-of-poverty rate would have been 19.9%, rather than the 11.6% that was observed in the SILC 2021 data.[118] (Note that reference year for the SILC 2021 data was 2020).

Cost-of-living crisis

More recently, the war in Ukraine gave rise to a spike in inflation and a "cost-of-living crisis". The distributional aspect of this has been examined in previous issues of this report.[119] However, recent data from the CSO SILC 2023 data allows us to examine the impact of the government interventions in response to this crisis.

While inflation rose to 7.8% in 2022, the sharpest rise was in Housing, Water, Electricity, Gas & Other Fuels, where prices increased by 20.6%. Therefore, many of the government interventions were specifically around the issue of fuel and energy prices.

A universal €200 energy credit was applied to domestic electricity customer accounts for the March/April 2022 billing cycle. For those in receipt of the Fuel Allowance, a €125 lump sum was provided

117 Sweeney, Robert, and Donald Storrie. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2022." & 2022, Doorley K., Keane, C., McTague, A., O'Malley, S., Regan, M., Roantree, B., and Tuda, D. (2021). Distributional impact of tax and welfare policies: COVID-related policies and Budget 2021, Economic and Social Research Institute, special article, December 2020; CSO (2022b). Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2021: Impact of Covid-19 income supports on poverty, Central Statistics Office, information note. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2021/impactofcovid-19incomesupportsonpoverty/

118 Central Statistics Office. "Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2021 Impact of COVID-19 Income Supports on Poverty." Central Statistics Office, 2022. https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2021/impactofcovid-19incomesupportsonpoverty/.

119 Sweeney, Robert, and Donald Storrie. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2022." & Sweeney, Robert. "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2023."

in March and a further €100 lump sum in May. In July 2022, the rates of payments for the Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance scheme were increased by €100 for each eligible child.

Further measures were introduced as part of Budget 2023. These included a double payment for most people in receipt of a weekly social welfare payment and a double Child Benefit payment; a €400 lump sum Fuel Allowance payment, a €200 cost-of-living lump sum payment for pensioners and people with a disability in receipt of the Living Alone Increase; a €500 cost-of-living lump sum payment to recipients of the Working Family Payment, the Carer's Support Grant, or Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, or Blind Pension; a universal €200 energy credit applied to domestic electricity customer accounts for the November/December 2022 billing cycle; and an extra month's maintenance grant payment to Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) maintenance grant recipients.

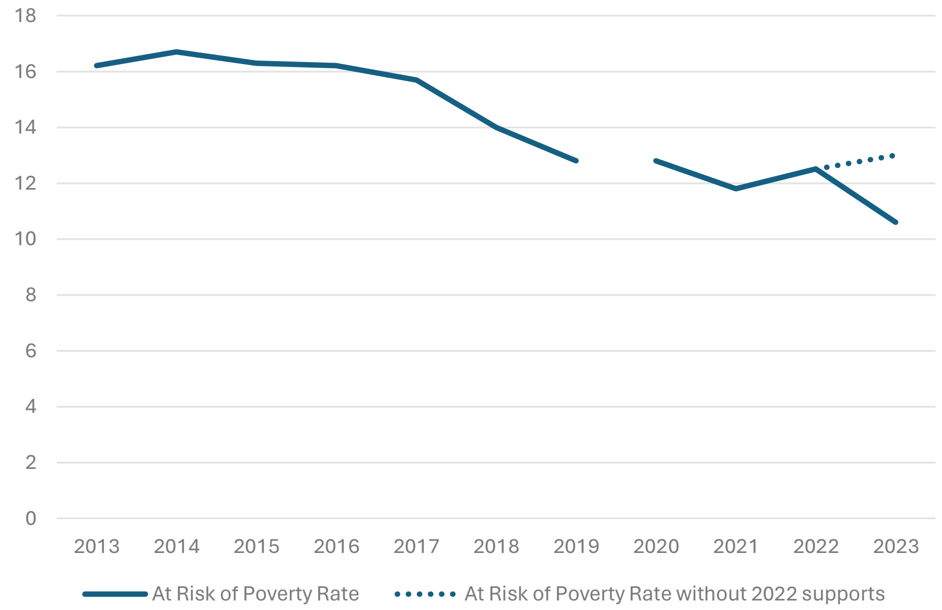

Figure 25: At-risk-of-poverty rate (2013-2023), both with and without 2022 cost of living supports

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

These substantial supports have had a significant impact. Figure 25 shows that in the absence of these supports, rather than the at-risk-of-poverty rate declining in the SILC figures for 2022 and 2023, the at-risk-of-poverty rate would have increased to 13.0%.[120] (Note that the reference year for the SILC 2023 figures is 2022.)

The impact would have been largest on the unemployed, retirees, those unable to work due to long-standing health problems, those aged over 65, and lone-parents. This is not very surprising as these groups are uniquely dependent on fixed incomes, in particular social welfare payments.

As noted in Chapter 4, a significant success of the Irish welfare system over the last 30 years has been the reduction in the at-risk-of-poverty rate among the elderly, which declined from 27.1% in 2004 to 8.7% in 2010. A major factor in this decline was the increase in the maximum state pension

120 Central Statistics Office. "Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023 Impact of Cost-of-Living Measures on Poverty." Central Statistics Office, 2024. https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/impactofcostoflivingmeasuresonpoverty/

over this period. However, since then the growth in the state pension has lagged median income, and among those aged 65 and over who live alone, the at-risk-of-poverty rate increased from 12.4% in 2010 to 40.2% in 2019.[121] Since 2019 we have also seen an increase in the at-risk-of-poverty rate across those aged 65 and older, increasing from 9.1% in the 2020 figures, to 12.8% in 2021 and to 20.1% in 2022. The cost of living supports introduced in 2022 did a lot to reverse this increase and the at-risk-of-poverty rate declined to 8.3%. But as Figure 26 shows, without these supports, the decline would have only been to 16.9%. This strongly suggests that underlying poverty among the elderly is once again on the increase, reversing the achievements in poverty reduction achieved in 00s. There are real grounds for concern here about what the welfare implications of the removal of the temporary 2022 cost of living supports will be for those aged over 65.

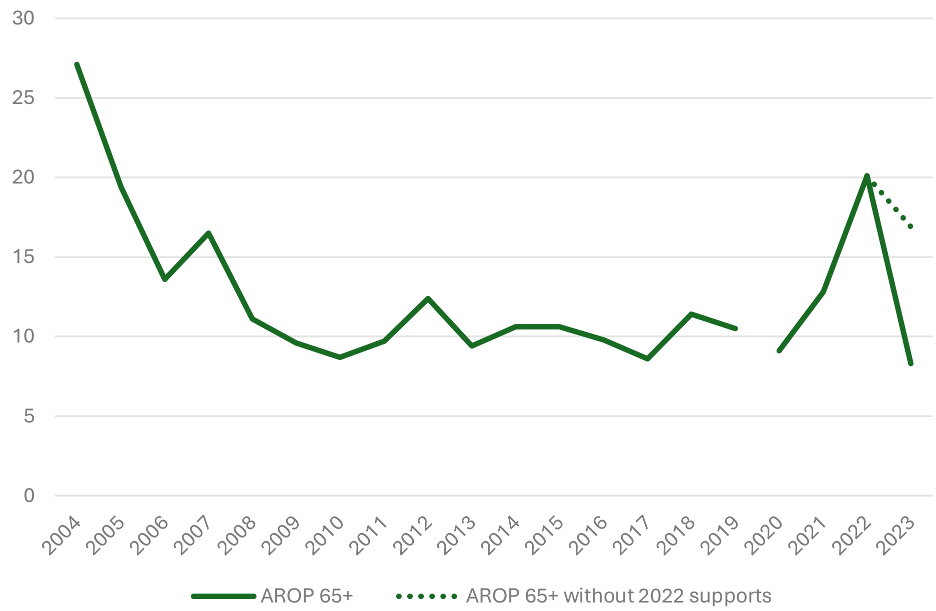

Figure 26: At-risk-of-poverty rate among those aged 65 and older (2013-2023), both with and without 2022 cost of living supports

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

The size and importance of these temporary government interventions are unusual and pose challenges for assessing underlying inequality in Irish society.

It is unclear what will happen with regard to income inequality, poverty, and deprivation now that these temporary supports have been withdrawn. Inflation has proven rather persistent, while incomes have failed to keep pace.

While these temporary inventions are to be welcomed insofar as they minimised the damage to vulnerable elements in our society from the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, they shield the fact that there are a large number of vulnerable people in our society who lack economic security.

As noted earlier, inequality is not simply a matter of income. Inequality refers to wider issues around the unequal distribution of resources and power in society.

This lack of economic security places people in a situation of precarious dependence on the state.

121 Roantree et al 2021, pp. 15-16.

7. Conclusion

7. Conclusion

In Ireland, the big story about income inequality remains unchanged. Among developed economies, Ireland has one of the highest levels of market inequality, but disposable income inequality is significantly lower. In terms of disposable income inequality, Ireland is middle-of-the-pack among advanced economies.

The fact that Ireland does not have higher disposable income inequality is due to major interventions by the state. The state substantially intervenes in a very unequal society to mitigate the worst excesses of that inequality and is somewhat successful in doing so.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Ireland's disposable income inequality is how stable it has remained over a long period of time (see Figure 5 above). This stability reflects the state interventions to support those on low incomes.

However, while the state achieves a lot in mitigating Ireland's high levels of market inequality, it has failed to address the underlying problem of high levels of market inequality. As a result, while Ireland has seen the number at-risk-of-poverty continually declining, a large number continue to experience low living standards and high levels of social insecurity.

We can see the economic insecurity that people experience in the significant fluctuations in enforced deprivation. This increased dramatically during the recession. While it declined in the second half of the last decade, deprivation rates are once again increasing.

In the most recent available figures, nearly half (45.6%) of people in lone-parent families experienced enforced deprivation. Among those out of work, 44.7% of those out of work due to long standing health problems experienced enforced deprivation, while 37.8% of unemployed workers experienced the same. The ongoing housing crisis is also evident, as 36.5% of those in rented or rent-free accommodation experienced enforced deprivation.

The ongoing housing crisis can also be seen in the remarkable fact that child homelessness has increased nearly 6-fold over the last ten years. The official child homelessness figures show an increase from 749 in July 2014 to 4,206 in April 2024. These figures are an undercount of the real child homelessness figure.

While the decline in both the Gini coefficient and the at-risk-of-poverty rate in recent years is, of course, to be welcomed, both are reflective of the very large state interventions to support low income during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis. In the absence of these supports, as Chapter 6 shows, the at-risk-of-poverty rate would have increased rather than decreased.

All of these facts-the extremely high market inequality; the fluctuations and recent increase in deprivation rates; the high levels of deprivation experienced by lone-parents, those out of work, and renters; the high level of child homelessness; and the dependence of large numbers on stop-start emergency interventions to support incomes – demonstrate the real insecurity of income faced by many in our society.

This income insecurity does not only have a monetary impact. It creates a condition of social insecurity that creates obstacles to people participating fully in society as equals. The question of income inequality cannot be separated from wider questions of economic, social and political inequality, and unequal access to education, healthcare, housing, culture etc.

A special focus of "The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2024" is on educational inequality. Various interventions have been made by the Irish government to address inequality in education. While each specific scheme has had successes, Ireland's recent experience of trying to reduce educational inequality is an illustrative example of the limitations when addressing one form of inequality in isolation from wider questions of social inequality.

Despite Ireland's relatively low levels of educational spending, Ireland's educational outcomes are impressive. And, the various programmes pursued by the Department of Education to address educational inequality have had some real successes. For example, the gap in Junior Certificate retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools decreased from 16.8% in 2001 to 8.5% in 2014, with further improvements noted up to 2022. The percentage of students from DEIS schools transitioning to higher education rose from 45% in 2012 to 60% in 2022. Since the launch of the PATH programme in 2017, there has been a 20% rise in the enrolment of students from underrepresented backgrounds in higher education institutions.

However, despite these successes, it remains the case that the educational outcomes for students in non-DEIS schools are better than those in disadvantaged DEIS schools, better for those who go to fee-paying schools than non-fee paying schools, better for those whose parents have university education than for those who don't, and better for those who come from high income families than for those who come from low income families. These facts are not surprising, but the stark reality that children's future lives are so heavily determined by the position they are born into in our unequal society illustrates a fundamental injustice.

Nevertheless, whatever the limitations of addressing educational inequality by itself, high quality primary and secondary education are entitlements enjoyed by everyone in society. This is something that people can be secure in, contrasting strongly with the insecurity that people on low incomes experience in many other aspects of their lives.

There are many things that governments can do to address both market income and disposable income inequality. For those who earn market income, further action to reduce low pay - in particular by increasing the minimum wage to a living wage and increasing union coverage - is key. Also important are increased income supports for workers on low incomes. Of particular importance here are income supports for families with children, where Chapter 4 demonstrates there remain significant problems.

For those unable to work, whether due to old-age, illness or disability, or involuntary unemployment, the provision of adequate income is vital. Since 2004, the level of old-age poverty has declined significantly (see Figure 14). However, as Chapter 6 discusses, there are signs that underlying poverty and deprivation among older people is increasing. For those out of work due to long standing health problems, there are serious issues, with nearly one-in-two experiencing enforced deprivation. This is an area where major improvements in targeted income supports are necessary.

Finally, as the chapter on education illustrates, key to building a society of equals is the provision of high-quality universal services, such as education, that can be used to address disadvantage. However, it should not be expected that education can address social inequality by itself.

Appendix:

Appendix: Demographic characteristics of individuals by net disposable equivalised income quintiles, 2023

Quintile	1	2	3	4	5
Sex					
Male	19.1	19.6	19.8	20.5	20.8
Female	20.8	20.4	20.2	19.5	19.2
Age group					
0-17	24.6	22.8	21.3	17.5	13.9
18-34	15.9	19.6	22.3	21.2	21
35-49	18	18.2	18.5	22.9	22.5
50-64	17.2	18.8	18.7	20.3	25.2
65+	24.8	20.7	18.8	17.5	18.2
Principal Economic Status (aged 16 years and over)					
Employed	10.8	15.6	21.2	24.9	27.5
Unemployed	52.5	25.7	7.9	5.9	8
Retired	24.5	20.4	18.7	18.1	18.3
Unable to work due to long-standing health problems	42.3	31.9	10.2	10.9	4.8
Student, pupil	23.4	25.1	21.6	16.9	12.9
Fulfilling domestic tasks	32.6	29.8	20	7.9	9.6
Highest education level attained (aged 16 years and over)					
Primary or below	37.5	27.1	20.6	9.7	5.1
Lower secondary	30.5	25.7	19.6	14.6	9.7
Higher secondary	19.8	24	18.8	22.8	14.7
Post leaving cert	19.4	22.3	22.7	21.7	13.8
Third-level non degree	16.4	17.1	20.6	25.4	20.5
Third-level degree or above	7.9	11.1	19.2	22.9	38.8
Household composition					
1 adult aged 65+	46.3	17.2	13	12.3	11.2
1 adult aged <65	32.4	12	13.2	20.8	21.6
2 adults, at least 1 aged 65+	22.3	21.3	18.2	18.1	20.1
2 adults, both aged <65	8.2	12.8	15.4	22.6	41
3 or more adults	8.1	19.1	22.7	23.7	26.3
1 adult with children aged under 18	33.6	29.4	25.2	6.4	5.4
2 adults with 1-3 children aged under 18	20.9	16.2	20.3	22.5	20.2
Other households with children aged under 18	26.4	31.1	22	15.7	4.8
Household type					
One-person household	38.5	14.4	13.2	17	16.9
Lone-parent with at least one child aged less than 25	28.9	32.3	23.4	9.5	5.9
Lone-parent with all children aged 25 or more	16.9	22.2	18.3	31.3	11.4
Couple without any child(ren)	12.7	14.2	15.8	21.9	35.3
Couple with at least one child aged less than 25	20	19.8	21.7	20.9	17.4
Couple with all children aged 25 or more	5.2	15.6	24	20.1	35
Other type of household	18.8	24.2	19.8	20.5	16.6
Number of persons at work in the household					
0	45	25	12	9.4	8.6
1	26.3	26.4	20	13.2	14.1
2	9.8	15.2	22	26.4	26.6
3+	6.4	16	24.9	27.5	25.2
Tenure status					
Owner-occupied	13.2	18	20.5	22.7	25.6
Rented or rent free	35.4	24.7	18.9	13.7	7.3
Urban/rural location					
Urban areas	19.1	18.7	20.9	20.2	21.2
Rural areas	21.8	22.8	18.2	19.5	17.5
Region					
Northern and Western	31.6	18.9	22.2	16.4	10.9
Southern	18.4	23.8	21.3	20.3	16.2
Eastern and Midland	17	18	18.4	21.1	25.6

Source: CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023

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While the state has had some success at mitigating the worst effects of market inequality, problems persist, and a significant portion of the population continues to experience low living standards and high levels of social insecurity.

This report has a special focus on education and educational inequality. It also tackles issues relating to income inequality, poverty and deprivation, the impact of inequality on families and children, the impact of recent interventions to support living standards and the risks around the withdrawal of these supports.

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