

Childhood Inequality and Child Policy in Covid Times

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Introduction

This paper addresses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children. It is based on desk-based research carried out in the first half of 2021 for a report commissioned by Barnardos. The aim was to assess the various social, economic and political factors shaping the context of policy and provision for children in Ireland now and in the short-term future, with particular emphasis on the Covid-19 pandemic.

The multiple effects of the pandemic on the lives of children in Ireland and around the world are likely to be felt in the longer term, with implications for child outcomes across multiple domains. Within what is by now a fairly extensive literature on the impact of the pandemic on children, there is particular emphasis on mental health; child welfare and protection; educational disadvantage; and child poverty and deprivation.

A key theme within the literature is that the effects of the pandemic have been mediated by existing inequalities, which in turn were “amplified” in various ways (see e.g. Stantcheva, 2022). Another important aspect of research and commentary on the pandemic concerns its relationship to other macrosocietal challenges. Accordingly, understanding how the pandemic affected the young necessitates attention to “intersecting inequalities” in the context of multiple “intersecting crises” (Moore et al, 2021). Building on these insights, this paper seeks to draw out implications for Irish child policy, arguing that addressing childhood inequality in its various dimensions must be central to policy in the recovery from the pandemic and in response to other pressing policy challenges.

Conceptualising childhood inequality

Making sense of childhood inequality requires consideration of the structural position of those constituted as minors in relation to adults (generational relations) (Alanen, 2001), in conjunction with the intersection of other axes of inequality in the lives of children (see Crenshaw, 1990 on *intersectionality*).

Inequalities of power between children and adults are reflected in and reinforced by the laws, policies, customs, and social attitudes which shape the parameters of childhood in particular contexts (Brown Rosier 2009; Smith 2014). This necessarily has implications for children’s

individual autonomy and personal safety; for institutional arrangements in schools and other settings; and for political decision-making and resource allocation.

Child-adult relations take shape within a broader context of unequal social relations which cut across and mediate the effects of generational inequalities. This includes unequal relations of class; race; nationality/citizenship; gender and sexual identity; and disability. The experiences and outcomes of those viewed as the ‘most disadvantaged’ children are shaped by multiple, intersecting axes of inequality which can lead to significantly impaired life chances. Without close attention to the inequalities which shape access to resources and opportunities, the danger is that disadvantage comes to be viewed, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of family deficit (see, for example Clarke, 2007; MacDonald et al, 2020; Welshman, 2008 for related critique of the influential concept of ‘cycles of disadvantage’).

Developments in Irish child policy

A strong policy focus on families with children has been evident since the emergence of ‘welfare states’, however recent policy reforms in Ireland, as in many other countries, have been informed by a particular emphasis on the distinct interests of the young. Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 led to the adoption of Ireland’s first national children’s strategy *Our Children, Their Lives 2000 – 2010* (Government of Ireland, 2000), by which child policy was constituted as a distinct policy domain. The strategy had three overarching goals: strengthening mechanisms for children’s voice and participation; strengthening the evidence base on children’s experiences and outcomes; and enhancing service provision. Its successor, the national policy framework for children, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) ran from 2014-2020 (see Smith, 2019 for analysis).

Reforms to the political and administrative architecture initiated in Ireland since the adoption of the first national children’s strategy ultimately led to the establishment of a dedicated government department (the remit of what was the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has been expanded to include Equality, Disability and Integration in the current administration). Measures such as children’s councils and a youth parliament have been put in place to provide opportunities for children and young people to participate politically at local and national level, however it remains the case that formal political rights are restricted to those over the age of 18. The evidence base for child policy has grown considerably since 2000, however there are still significant data and knowledge gaps, in particular on the nature and extent of inequalities between sub-groups of children and of the structural and policy factors associated with disparities in child outcomes. In terms of service provision, Tusla, the Child and Family Welfare Agency, was established in 2014 to administer child welfare and family support services. Reflecting one of the key principles set out in national child policy, Tusla has been engaged in reorienting service provision towards prevention and early intervention, however resources are still heavily skewed towards alternative care provision (Shaw and Canavan, 2018; Tusla, 2022). Ongoing issues with recruitment and retention of social workers

hinder the effective operation of the child protection system, and while reforms to the framework for delivery of family support services have been welcomed, services are underfunded and unable to meet demand. Tusla Review of Adequacy reports (2021a, 2021b) indicate that of those referred to family support services in 2019 and 2020, 67% and 72% respectively were provided with a service, with very wide variation across geographical areas.

The policy framework which will succeed *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* has been significantly delayed but is due to be published later this year. Another significant policy development has been the adoption at European level of a new instrument for addressing childhood poverty and disadvantage. The European Child Guarantee imposes obligations on member states to utilise a proportion of funds received under the European Social Fund+ to address child poverty (a minimum of 5% in the case of states with above-average child poverty levels) and to develop a national action plan. The focus is on ensuring access to services for six particular groups: homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; children with a disability; children with a migrant background; children with a minority racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma); children in alternative (especially institutional) care; and children in precarious family situations (European Council, 2021). The Guarantee does not provide *additional* funding to member states and the proportion of funds which must be deployed is relatively small, nonetheless the enhanced focus on structurally disadvantaged subgroups at higher risk of poverty is both welcome and overdue.

Childhood inequality in Ireland: the picture before the pandemic

Looking at the Irish context prior to the pandemic, two broad policy issues of particular concern in relation to children and young people included (1) poverty and housing deprivation and (2) violence, neglect and unmet welfare needs. While children and young people as a group could be said to be disproportionately affected by policy gaps and deficits in these domains, not all are affected in the same way.

Looking first at child poverty, data from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) shows that on all poverty indicators rates for individuals in the 0-17 age range have invariably been higher than for the Irish population generally. Although limited in scope, the evidence suggests that intersecting inequalities are associated with variation in poverty rates across different sub-groups of children.

Since the survey was first initiated, SILC data for Ireland has revealed a marked disparity between households with children headed by one adult compared to households in which children reside with two adults (see Table 1). Data from the 2016 Census shows that the vast majority of lone parent households are led by mothers and that children of migrant background, children of Mincéir/Traveller background, and children with a disability are disproportionately represented in lone parent households (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2020). It is widely recognised that lone parenthood is a highly gendered phenomenon, however, there tends to be less attention in policy discourse as to how unequal

relations of race, citizenship/residency status, social class and disability intersect with gender and family status.

	At-risk-of poverty			Forced Deprivation			Consistent Poverty		
	2003	2013	2019	2003	2013	2019	2003	2013	2019
State	22.7	15.2	12.8	10	30.5	17.8	9.4	8.2	5.5
Households with 1 adult and child(ren) under 18	42.3	31.7	29.7	38.1	63.2	45.4	32.6	23	17.1
Households with 2 adults and 1-3 children	15.3	11.1	11.9	6.5	31.2	17.1	6.5	6.6	6.1

Table 1: At-risk-of poverty, Forced Deprivation and Consistent Poverty Rates for 2003, 2013 and 2019ⁱⁱ for Households with 1 adult and child(ren) under 18 and Households with 2 adults and 1-3 children. Source: CSO, 2004; 2014; 2020

Byrne and Treanor (2020) note the limitations of existing poverty data in respect of race/ethnicity: their analysis of 2018 SILC data carried out for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs points to variation in child poverty rates by nationality. Various research reports suggest that children of racialised minority background, in particular Mincéir/Traveller or Roma background, experience much greater risks of poverty than the general child population in Ireland (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre & Department of Justice and Equality, 2018).

There has been increasing attention to disparities in poverty rates by housing tenure. The analysis by Byrne and Treanor (2020) reveals significantly higher child poverty rates among households renting compared to owner-occupied in 2018. Lone parent led families and families of migrant background are among those more likely to be living in the private rented sector (PRS), and, along with those of Mincéir/Traveller and Roma background, have long been overrepresented among the population experiencing housing precarity and homelessness (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Kennedy and Smith, 2018).

Turning to the issue of violence and neglect, this is a multifaceted issue which it is not possible to examine in depth here. The World Health Organisation (2016) identifies a number of different categories of violence against children including abuse and neglect by caregivers; sexual violence; peer violence and bullying; and intimate partner violence. Analysis of data from prevalence surveys suggest that over half of children globally experience violence annually (Hillis et al, 2016; Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). Type and prevalence of violence vary by age and across different sub-groups of children, for instance children with a

disability have been found to be disproportionately at risk of maltreatment (Jones et al, 2012), while reported rates of sexual violence are greatest among adolescent girls (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). There has never been a national prevalence survey of violence against children in Ireland. In the only prevalence survey on sexual violence carried out in Ireland to date (more than two decades ago), childhood sexual abuse was reported by 30.4% of women and 23.6% of men (McGee et al, 2002).

The limitations of data obtained from child protection reports are well recognised. We can say that the trend in child welfare and protection reports in Ireland is upward, in large part due to the introduction of mandatory reporting in 2016. The majority of reported cases involving protection issues are ‘screened out’ of the system without any further action taken (Tusla, 2021a, 2021b). A lack of disaggregated data means it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which those protected under equality grounds or socioeconomically disadvantaged are more likely to be involved with Tusla child welfare and protection services. Analysis conducted under the Child Care Reporting Project suggest that certain groups are significantly overrepresented in child-care proceedings including Mincéirí/Travellers and families of African descent, while three-quarters of cases reviewed involved lone parent families (Coulter, 2015). This underlines the need to address the data gaps which inhibit analysis and understanding of the unequal social relations which shape the circumstances of the most disadvantaged children and families.

The impact of the pandemic on children

Rates of infection among children, relatively low in the earlier waves of the pandemic in 2020, climbed considerably in subsequent waves in Ireland as elsewhere. While serious illness and fatalities resulting from infection with the SARS-COV2 virus have disproportionately affected older generations, the direct impact on children and young people has not been insubstantial. As of September 27th 2022, the 0-25 age category made up 31.8% of the total PCR confirmed cases and 10.9% of the total number of Covid-related hospitalisations in Ireland since March 2020 (Government of Ireland, 2022).

The effect on mental health has been a particularly important focus in the literature on children in the pandemic. Reviews of the international literature indicate increased symptoms of anxiety and depression among children compared to pre-pandemic levels and point to heightened risks associated with older age groups, female gender in adolescents, low-income background, living in an area severely affected by the pandemic, neurodiversity, and having a pre-existing physical or mental health condition. (Darmody et al 2020; de Miranda et al, 2020; Nearchou et al 2020; Singh, 2021)

The impact on access to health and developmental services is ongoing in Ireland where already long waiting lists for tertiary care, mental health and community health services for children increased substantially since the beginning of the pandemic. Children from socioeconomically marginalised backgrounds are thus doubly disadvantaged in that they are more likely to be in need of services and less likely to access services in a timely manner compared to those whose families can afford to pay for private healthcare (Darmody et al, 2020). This is likely to deepen

health inequalities while delayed access to developmental and early intervention services offered under the public health system also has significant implications for equality in education.

The impact of closures of schools and other educational settings is recognised to have disproportionately affected those children and young people already disadvantaged educationally by unequal social relations. Data from a special wave of the Growing Up in Ireland survey carried out in December 2020 identified disparities by socioeconomic background in access to space to study and to the digital resources necessary to support home learning (National Longitudinal Study of Children, 2021). Various studies have evidenced the impact of loss of supports for those with additional learning needs (Darmody et al, 2020; Thorell et al, 2021).

Another issue raised in the literature is the effect of school closures on child protection reporting. Statistics from Tusla point to significant reductions in welfare and protection reports in Ireland during periods of school closure and sharp increases when schools reopened (Tusla, 2021c). Increased reports of domestic violence in a number of countries (Piquero et al, 2021), including Ireland (Safe Ireland, 2021), indicates more dangerous living conditions for children in the most difficult family situations. A rapid review of the literature conducted by Proulx et al (2020) found evidence of the effects of pandemic-related stress on parent-child relationships and quality of parenting, with “financially vulnerable” families more likely to be affected. A scoping review by Karbasi et al (2022) on child abuse during the pandemic identified financial stresses and previous history of child protection concerns as key risk factors. In this context ongoing staffing shortages and resource challenges in the Irish child protection and family support systems are particularly concerning.

The economic impact of the pandemic is recognised to have been highly uneven with a stark divide between those whose financial position improved and those who suffered a deterioration in living standards. The sharp rise in unemployment following the introduction of public health measures in Ireland in 2020 disproportionately impacted young, low-wage, migrant and female workers (Coates et al, 2020). While over 40% of Irish households reported difficulty to at least some degree in making ends meet in 2020 and 2021 (CSO, 2021, 2022a), household savings increased by an additional €10 billion between Q1 2020 and Q1 2021 (Lydon and McIndoe-Calder, 2021). The additional savings were accrued mainly by higher income and older households (ibid) and thus serve to reinforce existing wealth divides. Data from the Household Finance and Consumption Survey for 2020 shows that households with one adult and children under the age of 18 have particularly low levels of savings and other assets as median net wealth for these households was just €4000 compared to €193,100 for the population generally, €142,300 for households with two adults and one to three children, and €361,800 for households with two adults with at least one over 65 (CSO, 2022b). In 2021, households with one adult and children under the age of 18 were almost three times more likely to report ‘difficulty’ or ‘great difficulty’ in making ends meet than households with two adults and one

to three children and more than four times more likely than households comprised of two adults with at least one over 65 (CSO, 2022a).

The current context of Irish child policy: interlinked crises and rapid social change

The Covid-19 pandemic occurred in the context of extraordinary global challenges and cannot be viewed in isolation from them. Of these, the most significant is the climate and biodiversity crisis. Other pressing challenges include political instability and armed conflict; the risks associated with digitalisation, the lingering effects of austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis and, of course, the current ‘cost of living crisis’.

It is now widely acknowledged that the climate and biodiversity crisis represents a threat to the health and survival of all life on this planet. A recent analysis of data from 43 countries found that excess mortality due to global heating amounted to 5 million deaths annually between 2000 and 2019 (Zhao et al, 2021). Access to clean air, water, and food is already negatively impacted, while biodiversity loss is also associated with heightened risks of crossover of infectious diseases from animals to humans (Contini et al, 2020).

The geopolitical context in which the pandemic occurred was marked by increased polarisation and the impact of conflicts including in Syria and Yemen and, most recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Pandemic restrictions impacted access to asylum and resettlement, while for those already in asylum systems, social distancing measures operated to reinforce existing marginalisation and disadvantage of those living in congregated settings (Lupieri, 2021). The particular challenges faced by children in Direct Provision in Ireland were highlighted in a special report by the Office for the Ombudsman for Children (2020).

The sharply increased reliance on online services in the context of pandemic public health measures has been viewed by some commentators as hastening the “fourth industrial revolution” associated with the rise of Artificial Intelligence and increased digitalisation (World Economic Forum, 2020). It is concerning that private actors are driving such far-reaching economic and social transformation and that there has been limited effective action on the spread of misinformation; intensified concentration of resources, opportunities and influence associated with the digital economy; or the environmental impact of information and communication technology (see e.g. Guillaume et al 2022), all of which have serious implications for the current and future wellbeing of children living today.

Occurring just over a decade after the global financial crisis, the pandemic exposed weaknesses in public health systems damaged by austerity measures (Thomson et al, 2022). Austerity also had effects on the social determinants of health with potentially long-term consequences, due to inhibited investment in social housing; reduced expenditure on education; and the disproportionate effect of benefit cuts on resources of households with children in many countries, including Ireland (Chzhen et al, 2017).

In the response to the pandemic, governments in Ireland and elsewhere attempted to limit the social and economic impact of public health restrictions, expending vast sums of public money on temporary supports for businesses and households. The drop in poverty rates evidenced by Irish SILC data for 2020 and 2021 indicate that pandemic support measures had some effect in cushioning households. Unfortunately, since then, sharp increases in inflation associated with the return to economic activity as pandemic restrictions ended, and the rise in energy costs caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have contributed to the current ‘cost of living crisis’, which obviously places particular strain on low-income households with children. Furthermore, housing access and affordability issues have intensified in Ireland over the last year and temporary pandemic measures protecting against evictions in the PRS have now ended. Since 2020, SILC data includes “At Risk of Poverty” (AROP) rates after housing costs are taken into account – a staggering 59.1% of households in the PRS in receipt of housing benefits were at risk of poverty in 2021 after paying rent (CSO, 2022a). Following a brief period of decline, homelessness – including child and family homelessness – has increased sharply once more (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2022)).

Conclusions and Recommendations

It can be said that all children in Ireland are affected by the interlinked crises we currently face. The effects will be mediated by the interaction of intersecting inequalities in children’s lives and the resulting disparities in access to resources and opportunities. Ensuring positive outcomes for *all* children thus requires a three-part focus:

- Childhood has a lower political, legal and cultural status than adulthood and there is a pressing need to advance children’s rights in Ireland, including protection rights; economic and social rights; and political rights. The commitment contained in the national policy framework *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* to hold a referendum on lowering the voting age to sixteen was one of only two commitments on which no progress was made. Arguably there is a case for an even lower voting age, and this should be considered.
- The discussion above has highlighted some of the inequalities which intersect with age to produce disparities in outcomes for children. Addressing structural and policy factors associated with unequal outcomes should be central to child policy. This includes addressing gaps in disaggregated data, which inhibit understanding of the complex inequalities which drive childhood disadvantage as well as urgently prioritising promised policy reforms to address the most egregious inequalities, in particular in relation to Direct Provision and Traveller accommodation. Taking effective action to address policy deficits and gaps impacting lone parents and low-income households is more important than ever in the context of the cost-of-living crisis – the evidence is clear that growing up in poverty impacts upon various dimensions of child well-being in the short and longer-term and that the stress of financial precarity impacts upon parent-child relationships.
- Finally, it is important that the present and future interests of the young are taken into account in *all* policy domains, including and beyond the conventional remit of child policy. The interconnectedness of the various crises means there is a need for a radically holistic

policy approach in which health and survival are central. This means, for example, that short-term responses to the cost-of-living crisis must be aligned with – rather than subversive of – the urgent measures required to reduce emissions, safeguard ecological systems, and protect health. Measures such as free public transport; significantly enhanced subsidies for retrofitting and renewable energy; strengthened protections for PRS tenants; expansion of public social housing; enhanced investment in public education and care services and supports; and recalibrating agricultural subsidies can serve to further social and environmental goals, thus promoting child well-being now and in the future.

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