



 **Combat Poverty**  
*working for the prevention  
and elimination of poverty* Agency

# AGAINST ALL ODDS

## GROWING UP IN POVERTY

## Introduction

With all our wealth and prosperity what is it like to be poor in Ireland? The most recent poverty data (2001) tells us that:

- 6% of the population live without basic necessities and on weekly incomes of less than €172 per adult
- 4.9% (192,000) of population are on weekly incomes of less than €192 for an adult and €63 for a child and lack basic necessities
- 22% of the population live on weekly incomes of less than €164 per adult and €54 per child per week
- 6.5% of children (66,000) experience consistent poverty; 23.4% (237,000) are in income poverty.

A Combat Poverty Agency study, called *Against All Odds – Family Life on a Low Income*, is revealing about how poverty impacts on families and children. The study was an in-depth examination of 30 families in urban and rural areas.

It highlights how inadequate resources and lack of basic necessities curtail people's everyday life. The families studied were very poor – the average weekly income for an adult was €124.

Health problems or care responsibilities were significant reasons for those who could not work. The study also highlights that poverty is a situation people want to escape.

This briefing is part of a three part series based on the study that highlights the experience of:

- Growing up in poverty
- Living in deprived communities
- Living with poverty and poor health

## FACTBOX

- Children in Ireland are almost twice as likely as adults to be poor.
- By EU standards Ireland has amongst the highest rates of child poverty, even though it has fallen in recent years.

## In the study *Against All Odds*:

- Most households had no money left over in a typical week. Many households were in arrears on regular and basic expenditure such as rent, electricity and telephone.
- A playground was the most frequently missed amenity for younger children.





- Parents were especially concerned that the lack of amenities or their inability to afford leisure activities for their children would result in them becoming involved in joyriding or drug use in their local communities.
- School was the most likely place where children experienced bullying. This was often triggered by the lack of family income that made it difficult or impossible to buy brand name clothes, runners or school bags similar to other children.

### Impact of poverty

Children's experience of living in homes where there is low income or poverty gives rise to three potential risks of exclusion. These risks are:

- Exclusion from everyday social activities and experiences of other children
- Early school leaving or unfulfilled potential
- Exposure to drug use, joyriding or early lone motherhood.

"the kids are walking around the streets and there's nothing around for them. Then they ask why the kids get into trouble. It's all money, money, money. If only there was something for the kids to do that didn't cost loads of money".

Insufficient money, insufficient capacity and resources to change their situation and insufficient public service provision all contributed to children and their families experiencing disadvantage. The daily grind of living in situations where it is difficult to make ends meet undermines and robs from the fulfilment of a positive childhood experience, of self-esteem and self-confidence and of the choice of a different future.

### Doing without everyday things

When mothers spoke of the difficulties of living on little money, worries about the impact on children featured prominently. Problems associated with bringing up children on a tight budget were acute for lone mothers. After bills were paid, there was not money left for socialising or providing a treat for children.

"I can't afford things for me and the kids and it's a no win situation. You are barely surviving. You can't give them what you want."

Few children felt satisfied with their lives. Their concerns included the pressure of trying to 'fit in' with peers and a fear of being different. The 'right' clothes emerged a crucial pre-requisite for being accepted by other children. Certain brands had to be bought, despite the expense, to increase children's chances of 'fitting in'.

"With some people whether they're your friends or not depends on what you wear. People don't like friends who don't have brand-name clothes".



## Helping to make ends meet

Children and young people contributed financially, either directly or indirectly, to the household. In five families, the children were the only earners in the family.

Spending on clothes was the most common form of children's spending followed by sweets and snacks. Children knew that parents made sacrifices on their behalf and this provoked feelings of guilt amongst some of them. Most children had money on a regular basis from pocket money. Some children earned money, mostly from babysitting.

## Community environment

People in the study generally lived in fear. Almost half of Dublin based households suggested that they lived in fear of people who lived locally. Lone mothers especially felt bullied in the local area.

There was a concern amongst parents for the well-being of their children. Some parents expressed apprehension about children in relation to the area in which they lived. There was a marked lack of amenities.

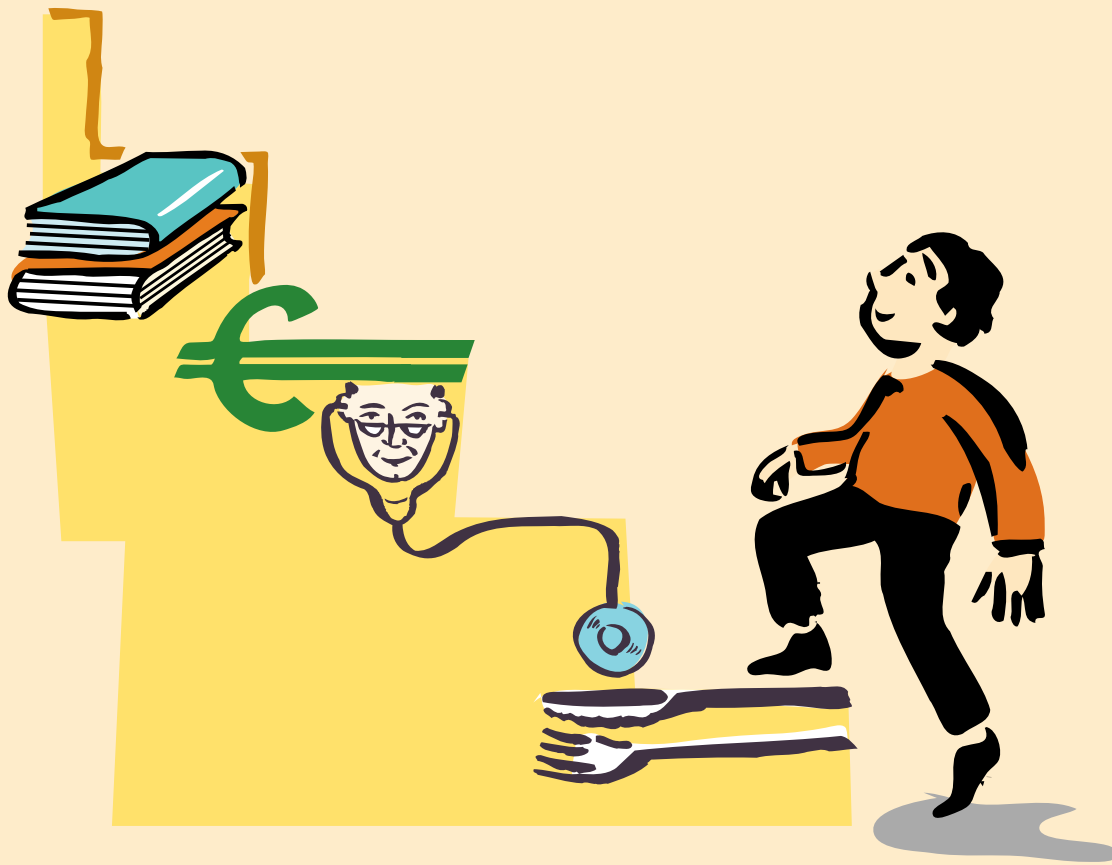
"It's a bad area. There's a lot of arguments and robbed cars and drugs".

Children were cited in the majority of cases in the study as fundamental in helping their parents struggle on and in giving life some meaning. Half of children considered their family the best thing about their lives.

## Policy implications

The goals of the government's National Children's Strategy include that children will receive quality supports and services, children's lives will be better understood and children voices will be heard. A number of policy implications arise from the findings of *Against All Odds*.

- Insufficient income to meet basic everyday living costs was a significant problem. Social welfare payments primarily support those who are not or cannot be in work. Higher basic social welfare payments and child income supports (Child Benefit and Child Dependent Allowances) are two main ways to provide higher incomes for families on low income. Additional payments for child care, school and disability costs and exceptional costs such as new born babies would also make a difference.
- Lack of affordable childcare, direct access to the labour market, decent pay rates and loss of welfare benefits on return to work were all highlighted as important barriers to employment. Education and training for unemployed people, particularly families headed by an unemployed lone parent, require further investment. Return to work policies and programme also need to further address childcare costs and retention of benefits such as the Medical Card, particularly for those moving to low paid employment.
- The provision of local play and recreation amenities for children and young people should be significantly expanded and should be poverty-proofed to ensure that they benefit people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. The development of national play and recreation policies by the National Children's Office is a significant policy development and resources to deliver the policy at local level should be given high priority.



- Children living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion need to be supported to participate in consultations by local service planners on service development and monitoring. National guidelines on consultation with children are being developed by the National Children's Office. Their implementation should be adequately resourced across a range of public service providers.
- Further research should be undertaken to broaden our understanding of the risks associated with childhood. This could include research into children's experience of education and their involvement or distance from the social and educational environment of the school.

**Useful contacts:**

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**National Children's Office**  
[www.nco.ie](http://www.nco.ie)  
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The full report '*Against All Odds Family Life on a Low Income*' by Mary Daly and Madeline Leonard is available for €18 from Institute of Public Administration, E-mail: [sales@ipa.ie](mailto:sales@ipa.ie)  
 Tel: 01 240 3600 Website: [www.ipa.ie](http://www.ipa.ie)

