

# Understanding Childhood Deprivation in Ireland

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**Children are one of the lifecycle groups identified by the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016. Poverty is especially detrimental for children due to its long-term effects on children's outcomes and life chances.**

**This report provides new information on children experiencing poverty and deprivation in Ireland from the 2009 national Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) of 1,800 households with children.**

**The report examines the extent of child-specific deprivation, its overlap with household deprivation, and the risk and protective factors for affected children.**

**The report is part of the Department of Social Protection's research programme on monitoring poverty trends and providing analysis and evidence to inform policy. It is produced by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).**

An Roinn Coimisce Sóisialaí  
Department of Social Protection

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## Key Findings

- In total, over a quarter (27 per cent) of all children aged 2 to 15 are affected by some form of deprivation.
- 13 per cent of children aged 2 to 15 experience child-specific deprivation. In addition, 24 per cent of these children are in households experiencing deprivation.
- 10 per cent of children (2-15) experience both forms of deprivation.
- In households experiencing deprivation, many parents appear to divert resources or are otherwise able to protect their children from child-specific deprivation.
- Instability in the parents' relationship is associated with an increased risk of child-specific deprivation, even in households that are not otherwise deprived.
- Mothers' employment is important in protecting children from child-specific deprivation, while their educational attainment is important in protecting children against both child-specific and household deprivation.
- Low income and where the head of household never worked significantly increase children's risk of experiencing all forms of deprivation.
- Policy responses have to take a multi-dimensional approach to address immediate child-related concerns and to avoid long-term costs of poverty and deprivation.
- Government policy to promote activation and productive employment is essential as employment protects children from all forms of deprivation.
- As well as work, adequate income (accounting for size and ages of children in the household) is critical to enabling parents to protect their children.
- There appears to be some gaps in access to GP and dental services, affecting small numbers of children outside the very lowest income groups.
- Further research is needed on the appropriateness of current equivalence scales, combining analysis of SILC data with evidence on the cost of children.

## Introduction

In Ireland, as in many European countries, the rate of poverty and deprivation is higher for children than it is for adults. The effects of these are especially of concern for children because they can have long-term negative consequences that persist into adulthood.

This new report addresses five questions using 2009 Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) data:

1. How much child-specific deprivation is there and what form does it take?
2. What are the main risk factors for child-specific deprivation?
3. How well do the existing national measures identify children who are deprived?
4. What are the risk factors for different forms of deprivation?
5. What are the implications for policy?

The report findings are intended to assist policy makers and service providers in supporting the Government's objectives to address poverty and social exclusion, particularly for children. This report demonstrates how a focus on child-specific deprivation can provide important insights into the factors that enable parents to protect the interests of their children.

## Data and measurement

The 2009 SILC questionnaire contains a special module on child-specific deprivation. For the first time on a national sample, analysis can be conducted on the extent of child-specific deprivation and its overlap with the household-based deprivation measure, as well other national measures of poverty. Using this data, the report analyses risk and protective factors for child-specific, household and multiple deprivation (deprived on both measures).

## Child-specific deprivation

### What is it?

The child-specific deprivation measure is based on 13 questions answered by the householder regarding goods, services and activities a child does not have, or cannot do, because the household cannot afford them. These include adequate food and clothing, books, toys and games, leisure equipment, school trips and doctor/dentist visits.

A child is considered to be experiencing child-specific deprivation if he or she lacks any one of the 13 items. This was developed (after testing) on the basis that all the items reliably capture a single general childhood deprivation measure. It focuses on children aged 2 to 15 due to the nature of the child-specific items.

## Household deprivation

### What is it?

'Basic' household deprivation is based on an enforced lack (cannot afford) on 2 of 11 basic items, including food, clothing, heating, furniture and social participation.

The household is considered to be deprived if anyone in the household lacks 2 or more items out of the 11. The 'basic' household deprivation measure, together with at-risk-of-poverty, forms part of the national poverty measure of consistent poverty.

## Poverty trends for children

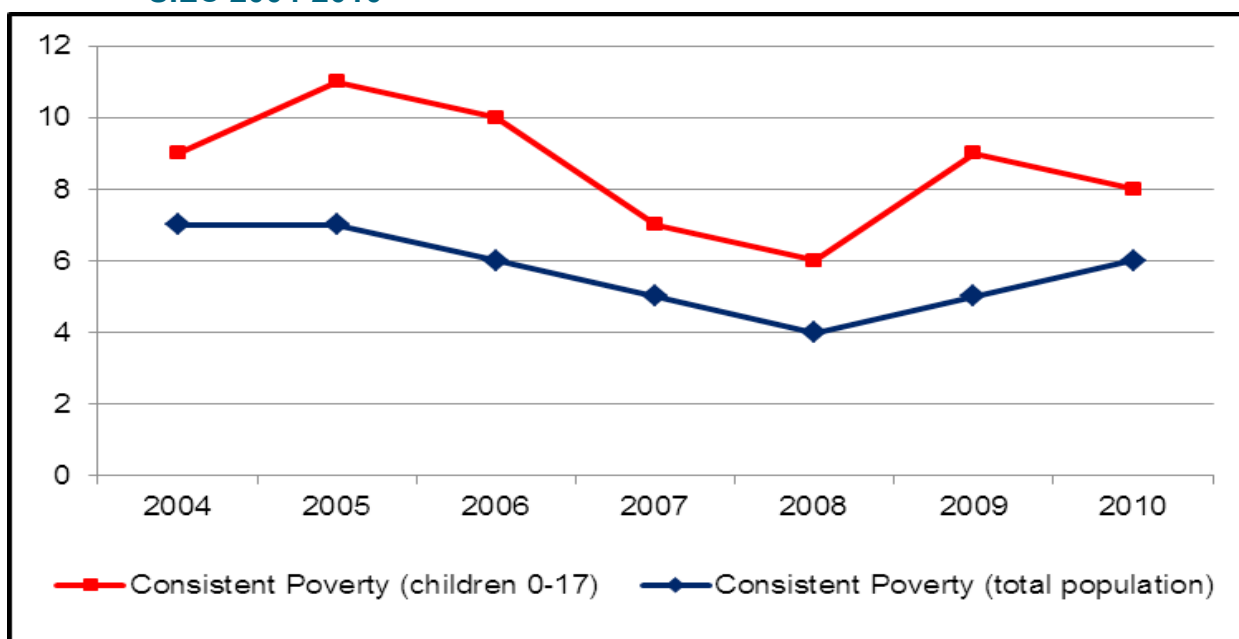
The report gives an overview of patterns and trends among children using existing household-based measures of at-risk-of-poverty (ARP), deprivation and consistent poverty from 2004 to 2010. It includes all children aged 0 to 17.

By 2010, 8 per cent of children were in consistent poverty, compared to 6 per cent of the general population. The consistent poverty rate in 2010 was lowest for the youngest children (aged under 5). The consistent poverty rate has been higher for children than for adults for all of the period 2004-2010. (see Figure 1).

There is a higher deprivation rate for children than for adults across this period. However, there is no clear pattern by age of child.

The authors use the EU indicator of material deprivation<sup>1</sup> to compare the situation of children in Ireland in 2009 (the most recent EU data available at the time of the report) to the situation of children in other European countries. The rate of material

**Figure 1: Consistent Poverty Trends, Children (0-17) vs. Total Population, SILC 2004-2010**



Source: CSO SILC (2004-2010)

The at-risk-of-poverty rate for children was 20 per cent in 2010 compared to 16 per cent for the total population. Children have a higher rate of at-risk-of-poverty throughout the period than the general population. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for both adults and children tended to decline between 2004 and 2008; remained relatively stable between 2008 and 2009 and then rose in 2010. Compared to the 27 EU countries, child at-risk-of-poverty rates in Ireland are towards the middle of the distribution, but are higher than most of the EU 15 countries.

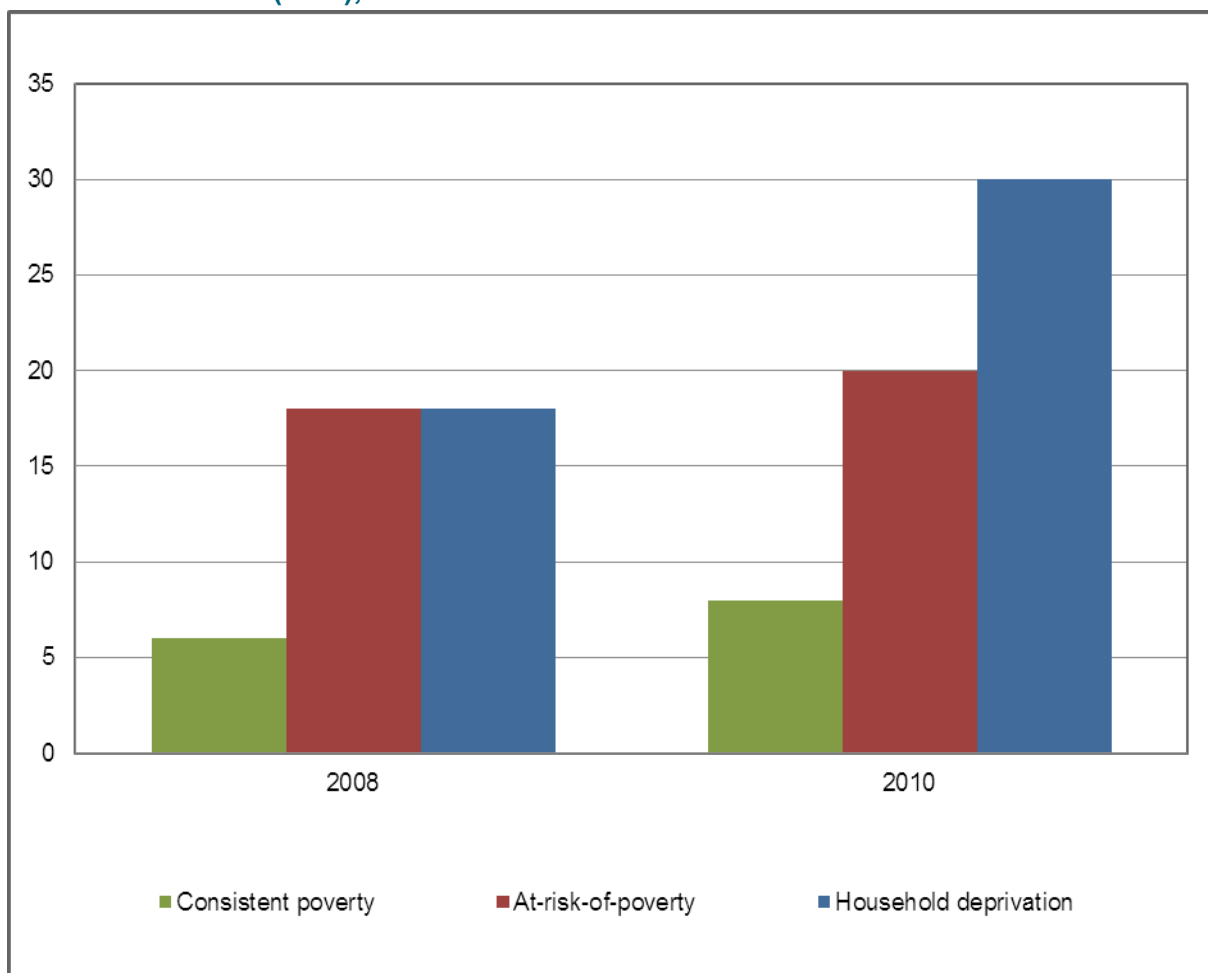
In 2010, 30 per cent of children were in households experiencing household deprivation compared to 23 per cent of the general population. The household deprivation rate fell from 2004 to 2007 and rose between 2007 and 2010.

deprivation among children is high in Ireland relative to other countries in the EU 15, but is below the rate in most new Member States.

### Variations by age of child and effects of equivalence scales

There are inconsistent trends by age of child, for the deprivation and at-risk-of-poverty measures. Part of this is due to family size and part is due to the way incomes are adjusted to take account of the needs of the household based on size and composition (i.e. the equivalence scale)<sup>2</sup>. The lack of consistency suggests that the equivalence scales may be either 'overcompensating' for the higher costs associated with children in their mid to late teens, or making insufficient allowance for the costs associated with younger children.

**Figure 2: ARP, Household Deprivation and Consistent Poverty Trends Children (0-17), SILC 2008 and 2010**



Source: CSO SILC (2008 and 2010)

### What are the effects of the economic recession?

Figure 2 shows trend data for all three national measures for children in 2008 and 2010. Of particular concern is the substantial increase in children experiencing household deprivation. This suggests that the household deprivation measure is particularly responsive to changes in the economic (and social) circumstances of the household.

### How much child-specific deprivation is there?

Thirteen per cent of children aged 2 to 15 – or just over one in eight – experience child-specific deprivation. There are no significant differences by age group of the child in the percentage lacking one or more items. However, pre-school age children are more likely (7 per cent) to lack two or more items than older children (5 per cent).

### What are the main risk factors for child-specific deprivation?

The report examines whether particular groups of children may be more at risk of child-specific deprivation than others. It considers characteristics such as age and gender, household features and parents' status.

The rates of child-specific deprivation are particularly high (over 20 per cent) for the following groups of children:

- where the mother is under age 29
- where the mother has a disability
- where the mother has no educational qualifications (i.e. primary education or less)
- where the child lives with just one parent (rather than a couple)
- where the father is not at work<sup>3</sup>
- where the household social class is unknown. Many of these households are those where the householder has worked for pay

- where the household income is in the bottom quintile across households with children.

Many of these factors are inter-related. For instance, the age of mother, education of mother and lone parenthood are associated. The authors disentangle these factors to identify those driving patterns of risk. After controlling for other factors, only the following remain significantly associated with a higher risk of child-specific deprivation:

- where the mother has no educational qualifications
- in lone-parent households where the parents were formerly married
- where the household reference person never worked
- where the household income is in the bottom quintile.

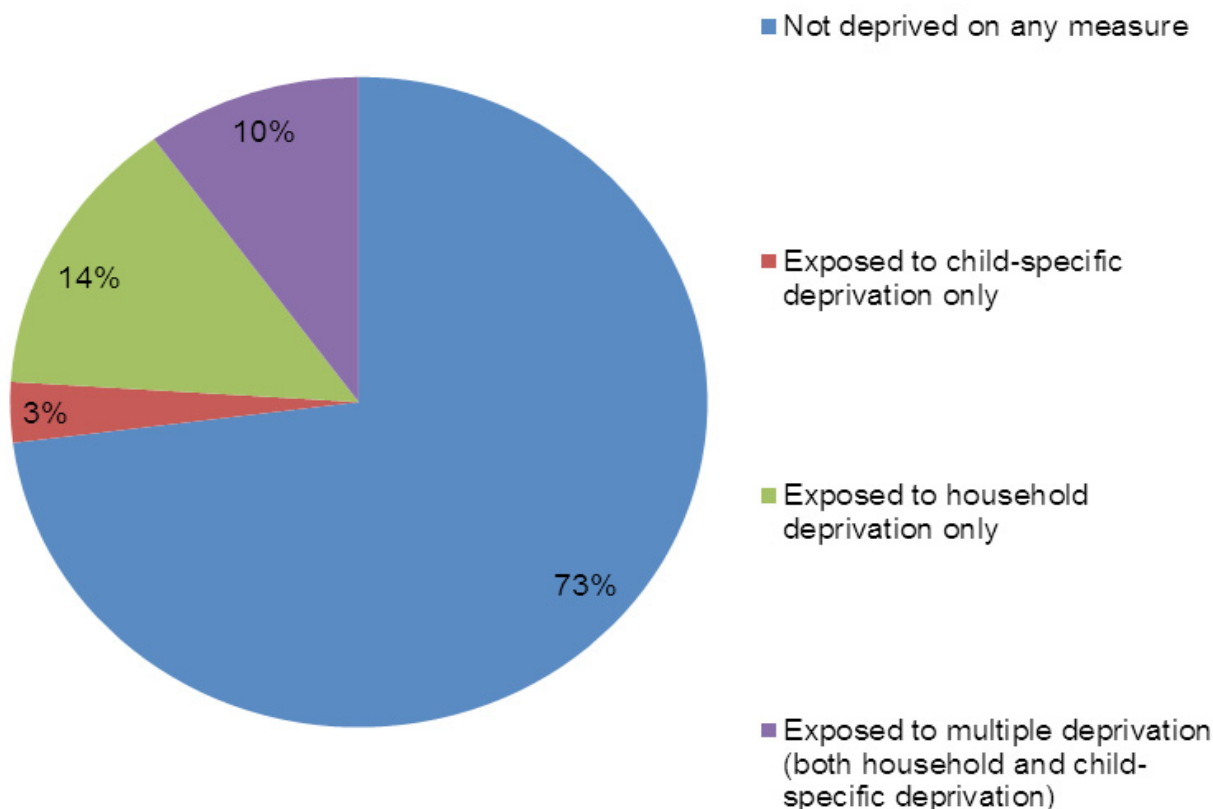
Low income is the strongest predictor of child-specific deprivation. For example, the risk of child-specific deprivation is seven times as high among children in the bottom quintile compared to children in the top quintile.

### What is the overlap between household national and child-specific deprivation measures?

The percentage of children exposed to household deprivation is considerably higher than the percentage of children exposed to child-specific deprivation (24 per cent versus 13 per cent).

There is considerable overlap between the two. Figure 3 shows that 73 per cent of children are not deprived according to either the child-specific or the household deprivation measure while almost 10 per cent are multiply deprived (deprived according to both indicators). To focus solely on child-specific deprivation would ignore a relatively large group of children (14 per cent) who are exposed to household deprivation but not to child-specific deprivation. 3 per cent of children are exposed to child-specific deprivation only.

**Figure 3: Overlap of Household and Child-specific Deprivation**



Source: CSO SILC 2009, analysis by authors  
 Number of cases: 2450; percentages are rounded

An alternative way to look at child-specific deprivation is from a composition perspective. Nearly eight out of ten (78 per cent) children experiencing child-specific deprivation are in households experiencing household deprivation. This means that the household deprivation indicator would capture the majority of children exposed to child-specific deprivation.

Child-specific deprivation is also strongly associated with at-risk-of-poverty and consistent poverty. The association with at-risk-of-poverty is not as strong as was the case for household deprivation, however. Only 46 per cent of children exposed to child-specific deprivation are in households below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. In the case of consistent poverty, the overall percentage of children in consistently poor households (8 per cent) is lower than the percentage of children experiencing child-specific deprivation (13 per cent). Just over one-third of the children experiencing child-specific deprivation are consistently poor.

### **What are the risk factors for different forms of deprivation?**

The report identifies different risk factors associated with being in each of the four following groups (the percentage of children in each is given in Figure 3):

- no deprivation
- multiple deprivation
- child-only deprivation, and
- household-only deprivation.

The main distinguishing characteristic of multiple deprivation is the strong association with low income and with mother's low level of education. There is also a slight increase in risk associated with large family size (three or more children) but it is not clear which form of deprivation is driving this.

The risk of child-only deprivation (in households that are not also experiencing deprivation) is strongly associated with family type, mother's employment and social class. It is more common in lone parent households where the parent was formerly married, where the parents are cohabiting, where the mother does not work, in lower social classes or where the household reference person has never worked.

What is very striking here is the importance of mother's employment in protecting children, and specific family types in presenting greater risks.

Household-only deprivation – where children are protected from child-specific deprivation – is associated with a number of child and family characteristics. The patterns here are not as strong as for multiple deprivation or child-only deprivation. Some of the risk factors unique to household-only deprivation are mother's disability, mother's lower second level education (rather than no education), father's non-employment and two social class groupings. The odds of household-only deprivation were higher for those in the intermediate service class (mainly clerical occupations) and in the skilled and semi-skilled manual and service classes.

A possible explanation is that households experiencing deprivation only are in a somewhat better resource position than those experiencing multiple deprivation, and that these resources are directed towards making sure the children have an adequate standard of living, at the expense of the parents.

## Policy Implications

The report shows that household income remains an important predictor of deprivation among children. Other important predictors to consider are education level of the mother, employment of the parent(s), stability of the relationship between the parents and social class inequalities. Therefore addressing childhood deprivation and poverty involves a multi-dimensional, long-term strategy that spans several different policy domains and which considers the overall well-being of children.

The implications of the findings for policy can be summarised as follows:

- Low income is a significant risk factor for all forms of deprivation. Child and family income supports therefore play a critical role in protecting children.
- Government policy to promote activation and productive employment is essential as employment protects children from all forms of deprivation.
- The protective role of mother's employment and educational attainment against child-specific deprivation reinforces the well-known need for supports and services that remove barriers to participation faced by mothers. This includes for example more affordable and appropriate childcare and flexible working arrangements. The provision of the free pre-school year, as well as the benefits it provides directly in terms of early education of children, is an important initiative that begins to address some of these issues.
- The design of programmes for second chance education and training for employment needs to address barriers to mothers' participation.
- Consideration should be given to designing a system to ensure that children up to middle income levels have access to affordable dental and doctor care.
- The child-specific deprivation measure does identify a small group with unique features. Further research is needed to develop supports for the children in these households.
- The national *Growing Up in Ireland* survey, with its large sample size and broad range of child outcomes, is an ideal source of data to explore the experiences of children in different family forms.
- The importance of adequate income and adjustment for age of children and family size suggests that further research is needed on equivalence scales and costs of a child, to inform child and family income support policy.

The full report *Understanding Childhood Deprivation in Ireland* and the Irish version of the research briefing is available at <http://www.socialinclusion.ie/publications.html> & <http://www.esri.ie>,

Full references are available in the report.

## Endnotes

1 The EU uses different items to construct a 'material' deprivation measure of enforced lack of 3 of 9 items.

2 This adjustment is accomplished by equivalence scales that assign a different 'weight' to household members. The weight is intended to take account of the greater needs of larger households while also taking account of the economies of scale associated with living together. Equivalence scales generally assign a lower weight to children under age 14.

3 In the vast majority of cases where the father works, the work is full-time.

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