

Simon Communities of Ireland Submission on the Child Poverty Target

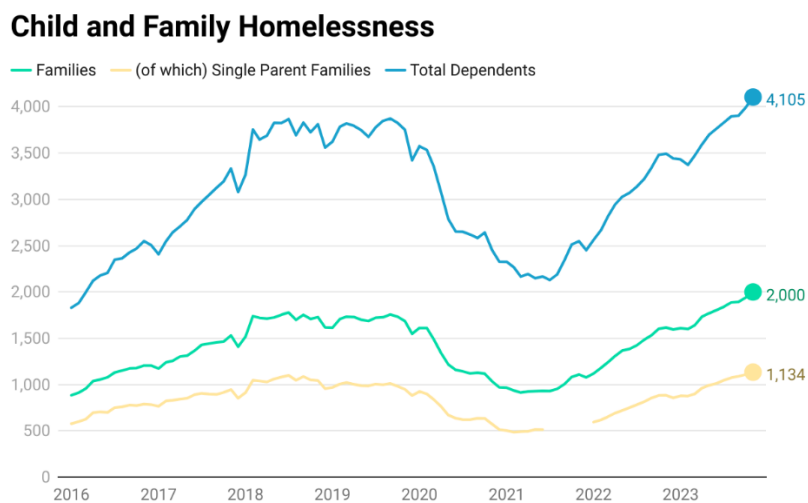
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Overview of Child and Family Homelessness

Child and family homelessness is on the rise again following a significant fall during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first time ever, the number of children living in emergency accommodation has surpassed 4,000. Although these figures are indicative of the crisis, they do not include the thousands of children living in hidden homelessness, domestic refuge shelters and those with status residing in direct provision centres. In order to combat child poverty and deprivation in Ireland, it is imperative that every child has access to adequate and affordable housing.

Table 1: Child and Family Homelessness in Ireland 2016-2023



Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage • Created with Datawrapper

Housing is often the single largest cost for families, and therefore the cost of housing has significant impacts on a household's disposable income. This is evidenced by EU-SILC data. For children under 18 years of age the at risk of poverty rate increased from 15.2% to 27.7% after housing costs were taken into account, and almost 60% of one-parent families were at risk of poverty after housing costs.¹ Renters are much more likely to experience poverty and deprivation in Ireland than those who own their homes. In 2022, unsupported renters at risk of poverty rate was 19.5% before housing costs and rose to 28.9% after housing costs. Supported renters at risk of poverty rate was 27% before housing costs, and 42.6% after housing costs. In comparison, the at risk of poverty rate before housing costs for those who own their own home outright was 14.7%, and 4.4% for those with a mortgage. After housing costs, this rate fell to 9.9% for those who own their own homes while it remained at 4.4% for those with a mortgage.²

The child poverty target was set in 2014, the same year that child and family homelessness was declared a crisis. This target aimed to reduce the number of children in consistent poverty by at least two-thirds by the end of 2020. Unfortunately, this target was not achieved and according to the latest SILC release, consistent poverty is on the rise (the rate increased from 5.2% in 2021 to 7.5% in 2022).³ In addition, child homelessness has increased from under 1,000 in 2014 when the target was set to 4,105 according to the latest figures released by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage⁴. It is impossible to meet child poverty targets with this increasing number of children in homeless emergency accommodation, and with many more families struggling to keep up with unaffordable rents and living in inadequate housing.

The Effect of Homelessness on Children

Homelessness has significant negative impacts on children, inhibiting their physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioural development.⁵ Living in cramped conditions in emergency accommodation makes children more vulnerable to accidents and traumas than if they were living in a family home. In addition, living in emergency accommodation tends to involve re-locating frequently, reduced access to basic amenities and support services, and a lack of play facilities.⁶ Becoming homeless and entering emergency accommodation often results in families becoming geographically and emotionally displaced from their core supports, such as neighbours, friends and family.⁷ Keogh at al. (2006) (in Murran and Brady, 2023)

¹ Childrens Rights Alliance (2023) Child Poverty Monitor 2023. Available at: <https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Child-Poverty-Monitor-2023.pdf>

² ESRI (2023) Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/poverty-income-inequality-and-living-standards-in-ireland-third-annual-report>.

³ CSO (2023) Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2022/poverty/>.

⁴ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2023) Homeless Report – November 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/>.

⁵ Social Justice Ireland (2019) Precarious Housing – The Long-Term Impact of Child and Youth Homelessness. Available at: <https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/precarious-housing-long-term-impact-child-and-youth-homelessness>.

⁶ Houghton and Hickey (2000) Focussing on B&Bs: The Unacceptable Growth of Emergency B&B Placement in Dublin. Available at: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/5552/1/Focus_Ireland_Focussing_on_bbs.pdf.

⁷ Murran and Brady (2023) How does homelessness impact on children's development? A critical review of the literature. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/cfs.12968>.

found that many families living in emergency accommodation report contact with their children's extended family and friends as minimal due to visitor restrictions.

International research highlights the long-term impacts of child homelessness, with studies showing that experiencing homelessness as a child or youth is associated with adverse long-term consequences, such as instability in housing in adulthood.⁸ This points to the need for early intervention and prevention of child and family homelessness. However, as of Q3 2023, 1,206 out of 1,921 (62%) homeless families have been living in emergency accommodation for over six months, 509 of which have been living there for over 18 months, the effects of which will be felt on these children for many years to come.

Recommendations

Simon Communities of Ireland suggest that a review of current consistent poverty indicators is undertaken, and that child-specific indicators are developed.

Consistent poverty is a useful measure for capturing valuable information on aspects of child deprivation within the context of family deprivation. However, it captures an imprecise picture of the realities of child poverty, given that the measure focuses on deprivation indicators that are more relevant to adults' lives and assumes that all household members experience parallel deprivation.⁹

The consistent poverty measure fails to adequately address housing/environmental aspects of child poverty, as it only includes indicators relating to keeping the home adequately warm. Housing costs in Ireland have become increasingly unaffordable in recent years. According to EU-SILC data from 2022, the at-risk-of-poverty rate increased from 13.1% of the population to 21.9% after rent and mortgage interest are taken into consideration. As mentioned previously, for children under 18 years of age the rate increased from 15.2% to 27.7% and almost 60% of one-parent families were at risk of poverty after housing costs.¹⁰ This demonstrates how fundamental housing is when measuring poverty and deprivation.

Simon Communities of Ireland suggest that a review of current consistent poverty indicators is undertaken, and that child-specific indicators are developed. This would provide much greater insight into the extent to which parents and children experience parallel deprivation and locate the experience of deprivation within the state of childhood. International evidence has highlighted that parents and families do not necessarily experience the same level of deprivation, as parents often 'go without' and make sacrifices to prevent their children being deprived or excluded.¹¹ In addition, we recommend that further consideration be given to household/environmental indicators, given the effect that housing costs are having on households' disposable income in Ireland. Table 2 highlights examples of child-specific indicators used internationally across different dimensions including income and economic capacity, food/nutrition,

⁸ Parpouchi, Moniruzzaman and Somers (2021) The association between experiencing homelessness in childhood or youth and adult housing stability in Housing First. Available at: <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-021-03142-0>.

⁹ Kerrins et al. (2023) Going without: measuring child poverty and social exclusion in Ireland. Available at: <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/219871/GoingWithoutMeasuringChildPoverty.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1>.

¹⁰ Childrens Rights Alliance (2023)

¹¹ Kerrins et al. (2023)

clothes, participation, developmental, housing/environmental and education. Child-specific indicators such as these, used alongside existing household deprivation indicators would help to paint a more complete picture of child poverty in Ireland.

Table 2: Child Specific Indicators

Dimension	Child-specific indicators	Household deprivation indicators – consistent poverty measure
Childrens income and family economic capacity.	Getting money from parents for events at school, activities with friends, buying birthday gifts etc.	60% median household income.
Food/Nutrition	Fruit and vegetables once a day for a child.	Eat meals with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day.
		Have a roast joint or its equivalent once a week.
Clothes	Have a ‘best outfit for special occasions’ for a child.	Two pairs of strong shoes.
		A warm waterproof overcoat.
		Buy new not second-hand clothes.
Participation	Family day trip once a year.	Buy presents for family or friends at least once a year.
	A party on their birthday with friends.	Replace any worn-out furniture.
	A hobby or leisure activity for children.	Have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month.
		Have a morning, afternoon, or evening out in the last fortnight, for entertainment.
Developmental	Lessons in music, dance, or sport.	
	Basic toys and sports gear.	
Housing/Environmental	Separate bedrooms for different children aged 10 and over.	Had to go without heating during the last year through lack of money.
	Extent child brings friends home.	Keep the home adequately warm.
Education	All required school uniform.	
	Computer suitable for schoolwork.	
	School books/new clothes for children.	
	Education, up to age 20 years for all children.	

Source: Kerrins et al. (2023) Going without: measuring child poverty and social exclusion in Ireland.

Available at:

<https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/219871/GoingWithoutMeasuringChildPoverty.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1>

Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that the child poverty target is set on a rate basis.

Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that the child poverty target is set on a rate basis given that Ireland has experienced an unprecedented increase in population over the last number of years. Setting the target on a rate basis would avoid the need for a revision of the target due to population changes.

Simon Communities of Ireland suggest that the target should remain at the existing timeframe of 2030.

This offers a timescale of 6 years to make the changes needed to better the lives of children, young people, and their families. This is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. Ireland is in a position where record budget surpluses and very low levels of unemployment are being achieved. Notwithstanding existing issues, particularly the homelessness and housing crisis, the State has the resources to make a significant impact on child poverty in this country, especially given the establishment of the new Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach. As well as an overarching and ambitious target to reduce child poverty by 2030, Simon Communities of Ireland suggest that annual targets are set to track progress. This would ensure political focus on the issue and mobilise action.

Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that lone parent families, children in care and children known to the care system are monitored closely.

Lone parent households are one of the groups most vulnerable to poverty and exclusion. It is therefore essential that children living in such households are monitored closely if we are to achieve targets. Lone parents are overrepresented among homeless families, representing almost 60% of families accessing emergency homeless accommodation in October 2023.¹² Simon Communities of Ireland suggest that sub-targets are established for lone parent families so that children in these families are lifted out of poverty and deprivation.

Children in care and children known to the care system should be monitored closely as this cohort is particularly vulnerable to youth homelessness. As is well known and documented, children in State care are overrepresented among the homeless population. However, children who are known to the care system but who have not entered care are also a particularly vulnerable cohort. This cohort is not afforded the same supports that children in state care receive, such as aftercare. Therefore, it is important that these children are monitored closely so they do not fall through the cracks of supports.

From the Simon Communities of Ireland's perspective, housing affordability issues need to be addressed, and child and family homelessness needs to be eradicated if child poverty targets are to be met. As such, the Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that:

- **The Simon Homeless Prevention Bill be implemented.**

¹² Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2023) October Homeless Report. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/90e33-homeless-report-october-2023/>.

- **The Housing Assistance Payment rates be increased.**
- **At least 15,000 social homes are provided annually.**
- **Social welfare rates be benchmarked against a minimum standard of living.**
- **A new Child Income Support Payment be introduced.**

Unaffordable accommodation has significant impacts on households' ability to make ends meet, and provision of secure and affordable accommodation to households would undoubtedly ease the pressure which so many families are currently facing. Simon Communities of Ireland notes how there were no additional supports for children experiencing homelessness in budget 2024.

Given the current cost of living pressures, it is imperative that those reliant on social welfare are protected and that their purchasing power is maintained. According to St. Vincent De Paul's Budget 2024 analysis, the budget did not adequately protect incomes or guarantee access to essentials. Social welfare rates were adjusted by €12 but required a minimum €27.50 adjustment to restore purchasing power to 2020 levels.¹³ Although the budget introduced several measures aimed at prioritising children in poverty, the increase of €4 for the Qualified Child Payment is insufficient. Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that social welfare rates are benchmarked against a minimum standard of living to progress towards meeting our child poverty targets.

Several organisations such as NESC, the Children's Rights Alliance and the Commission on Taxation and Welfare have recommended the introduction of a new Child Income Support Payment. The ESRI describe how this reform would provide all households with children to receive a payment determined by their means and number of children. The ESRI estimates that the reform has the potential to reduce child poverty by a quarter and the child poverty gap by half at a cost of around €700 million.¹⁴

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has recently established a Child Poverty Unit in his department with the vision "to make Ireland the best country in Europe in which to be a child."¹⁵ According to UNICEF Innocenti ranking¹⁶ Slovenia and Poland are outperforming their EU counterparts, having made significant strides in reducing child poverty. For Slovenia, the key to success was improving living standards by increasing the minimum wage. In Poland, an increase in cash benefits to families helped to reduce child poverty. Despite Ireland's recovery from the financial crash and economic prosperity in recent years, our efforts to alleviate child poverty have not matched the success rates of the top-performing countries in this regard. Therefore, it is crucial that we pay attention to the evidence-backed measures implemented in these countries.

Simon Communities of Ireland would like to emphasise that it is completely unacceptable for any child to experience poverty. However, Simon Communities of Ireland acknowledge that the new child poverty target should be considered in the context of the long-term goal of ending child poverty, as set out in the guidance document. Therefore, out of the options presented, Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that the new 2030 child poverty target is set at 2.8%. In addition, in order to meet the Taoiseach's stated

¹³ St. Vincent de Paul (2023) Budget 2024: Will it reduce poverty? Available at: <https://www.svp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Budget-2024-Detailed-Ssessment.pdf>.

¹⁴ ESRI (2023)

¹⁵ House of the Oireachtas (2023) Child Poverty. Available at: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-04-26/6/>

¹⁶ The Innocenti ranking ranks countries based on their most recent income poverty rate and their success in reducing child poverty in a period of prosperity.



goal of becoming the best country in the EU for children, the government should aim to rank first in UNICEF's Innocenti ranking.

About Simon Communities of Ireland

The Simon Communities support over 22,000 men, women, and children. We have 50 years of experience providing homeless, housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. We are a network of independent Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the Northwest, and the Southeast, responding to local needs and supported by a National Office in the areas of policy, research, and communications. We share common values and ethos in tackling homelessness and, informed by our grassroots services, we campaign for more effective policies and legislation regionally, nationally and at European level. Whatever the issue, Simon's door is always open for as long as we are needed. For more information, please visit www.simon.ie.

Services include:

- Homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment and resettlement.
- Street outreach, emergency accommodation and harm reduction. • Housing with support and Housing First services.
- Homeless specific health and wellbeing services (counselling; addiction treatment and recovery; and mental health supports).
- Personal development, education, training, and employment services.
- Foodbanks, drop-in centres, and soup runs.