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Child poverty on the island of Ireland

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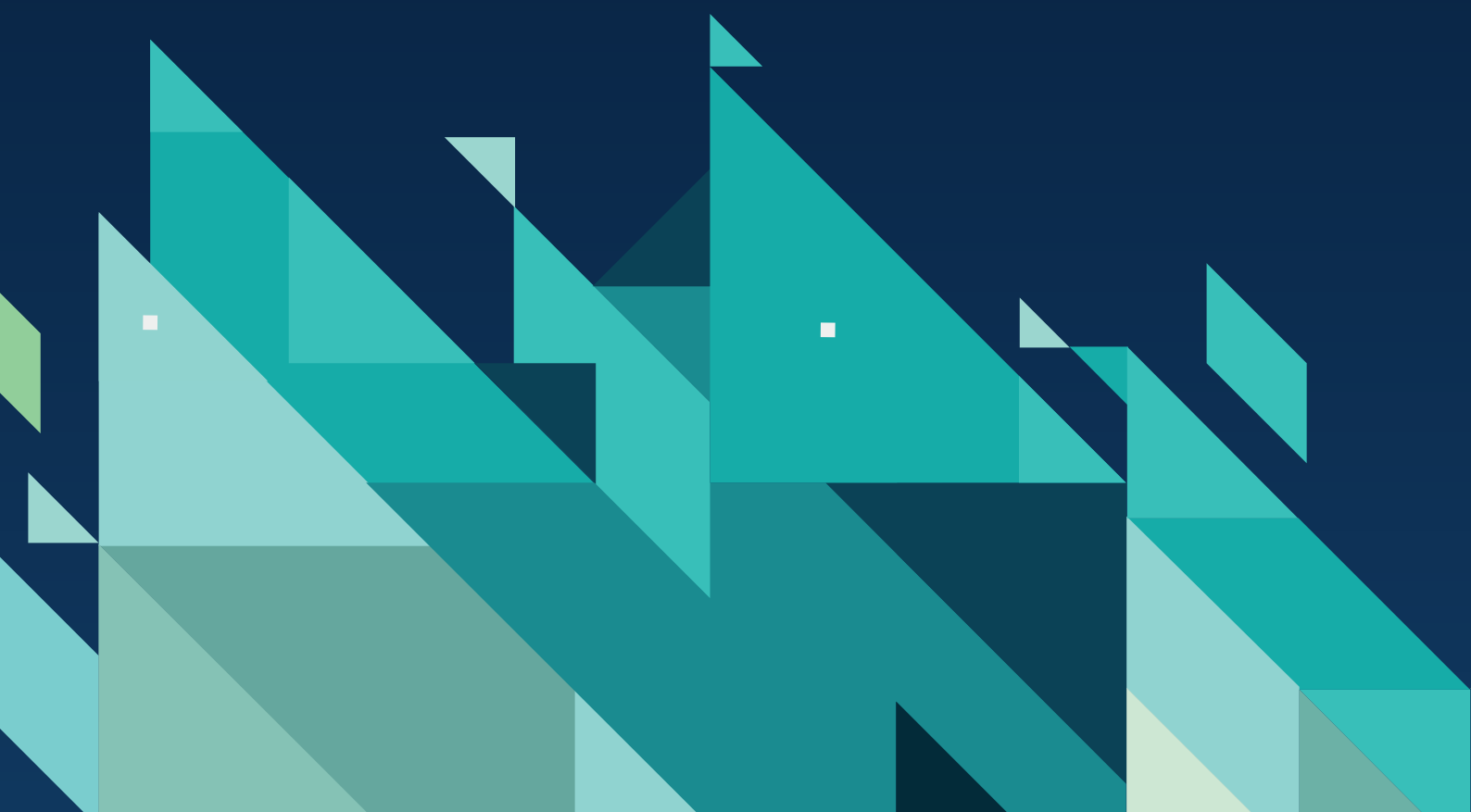
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Child poverty on the island of Ireland

**HELEN RUSSELL, BERTRAND MAÎTRE, ANOUSHEH ALAMIR
AND EVA SLEVIN**



CHILD POVERTY ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

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January 2025

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This report has been accepted for publication by the Institute, which does not itself take institutional policy positions. All ESRI Research Series reports are peer reviewed prior to publication. The authors are solely responsible for the content and the views expressed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	VI
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background to the study	1
1.2 Previous research on child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland.....	2
1.3 The labour market context	5
1.4 Data and methods	6
1.5 Profile of children in Ireland North and South	11
1.6 Outline of the report	13
CHAPTER 2 POLICY RESPONSES TO CHILD POVERTY IN IRELAND NORTH AND SOUTH	14
2.1 Introduction.....	14
2.2 Welfare supports for children and families	14
2.3 Stakeholder perceptions of policy.....	19
2.4 Conclusion	26
CHAPTER 3 POVERTY RISKS AND POVERTY EXPERIENCES.....	28
3.1 Trends in poverty on the island of Ireland	28
3.2 Which children are most at risk of poverty? Evidence from the SILC and the FRS ...	33
3.3 Stakeholder evidence of children most vulnerable to poverty	37
3.4 Experience of poverty	40
3.5 Conclusion	44
CHAPTER 4 MODELS OF INCOME POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND	45
4.1 Factors associated with child income poverty in Northern Ireland and Ireland	45
4.2 Factors associated with child deprivation in Northern Ireland and Ireland	49
4.3 Comparisons of poverty risks for children in Northern Ireland and Ireland	53
4.4 Conclusion	60
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION	62
5.1 Which children and families are most vulnerable to poverty?	63
5.2 Explaining differences between jurisdictions	64
5.3 Limitations	65
5.4 Implications for policy	66
REFERENCES	69
APPENDIX	74

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1	Poverty outcomes analysed in the report	10
Table 1.2	Characteristics of children (<18) and their households.....	12
Table 2.1	Welfare and childcare policies in Ireland and Northern Ireland	16
Table 3.1	Child income poverty by socio-demographic characteristic (%), NI and IE	35
Table 3.2	Material deprivation by children's socio-demographic characteristics (%), NI and IE.....	37
Table 4.1	Factors Influencing child income poverty, NI 2003-2023 (average marginal effects)	47
Table 4.2	factors influencing child income poverty, IE 2004-2023 (average marginal effects)	49
Table 4.3	factors influencing child deprivation (average marginal effects), NI 2010-2023	51
Table 4.4	Factors influencing child deprivation (average marginal effects), IE 2010-2023	52
Table 4.5	Factors influencing child income poverty in NI and IE (average marginal effects), NI 2019-2023; IE 2020-2022	54
Table 4.6	Factors influencing child deprivation in NI and IE (average marginal effects), NI 2019-2023; IE 2020-2022	57
Table A.4.1	Predicted probability of child AROP associated by region and socio-demographic characteristics.....	75
Table A.4.2	Predicted probability of child deprivation associated by region and socio-demographic characteristics.....	76

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1	Income poverty by age group, Northern Ireland (%)	29
Figure 3.2	Income poverty by age group, Ireland (%)	30
Figure 3.3	Income poverty among children, NI and IE (2 year moving average) (%)	31
Figure 3.4	Child material deprivation rate (short scale), NI and IE % lacking two or more items (2 year moving average)	32
Figure 4.1	Probabilities of income poverty by child and household characteristics in NI and IE 2019-2023	55
Figure 4.2	Probabilities of deprivation by children and household characteristics in NI and IE 2019-2023	59
Figure A.3.1	Mean deprivation (scale 0 to 5) by equivalised household income in NI (2021/2022 and 2022/2023) and IE (2022-2023)	74

ABBREVIATIONS

AHC	After housing costs
AMF	Anonymised Microdata File
AROP	At Risk of Poverty
AROPE	At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion
CSO	Central Statistics Office
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
ECHP	European Community Household Panel
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
EV	Economic vulnerability
FRS	Family Resources Survey
HRP	Household Reference Person
IE	Ireland
ISSDA	Irish Social Science Data Archive
LFS	Labour Force Survey
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NI	Northern Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PP	Percentage Points
RTB	Residential Tenancies Board
SILC	Survey on Income and Living Conditions
UK	United Kingdom
WFH	Working from Home

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The effects of poverty in childhood can last a lifetime. Research shows that children living in poverty have lower levels of health and wellbeing, attain lower levels of education, have lower levels of occupational attainment and are more likely to be poor in adulthood.

In this report, we focus on child poverty on the island of Ireland. While child poverty in each jurisdiction has been studied separately, there is an absence of comparative research. A comparative analysis of this sort can help to identify the features of the two systems that are influential in preventing or exacerbating child poverty. In both Ireland and the UK, children have had the highest income poverty rates of all age groups over the past ten years. While child poverty rates worsened over the past decade in the UK (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024), they remained relatively stable in Ireland over the 2000s when measured by household income. However, rates of child material deprivation rose and fell following the pattern of economic boom, bust and recovery (Roantree et al., 2024).

This report sets out to compare child poverty across the two jurisdictions, using a mixed-methods approach with harmonised national survey data on incomes and living standards (SILC and FRS), as well as consultations with stakeholders from both jurisdictions to help identify policy issues most relevant for child poverty in each jurisdiction. The study addresses three research questions:

1. Which groups of children are most vulnerable to poverty in the two jurisdictions?
2. What is the role of household labour market situation and social background in shaping the risk of child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland?
3. How do policy approaches to addressing child poverty differ in Ireland and Northern Ireland and how do these policies influence the patterns of child poverty observed?

The report uses two measures of poverty: Income poverty, which is having a disposable income that is less than 60 per cent of median income for Ireland or the UK; Material deprivation is measured by the lack of access to five items that are considered as standard within societies and are common to the two data sources, such as arrears on bills or inability to keep the home adequately warm. The consideration of deprivation is important because income alone does not capture the variation in needs and long-term resources of households.

KEY FINDINGS

For most of the period between 2004 and 2023, income poverty rates for children were higher than for any other age groups in Ireland. Over the period, Ireland saw a more consistent drop in child income poverty while in Northern Ireland the rate fluctuated and saw a smaller decline. Throughout the period, the income poverty rate among children in Northern Ireland was always above the rate in Ireland. However, while Northern Ireland had a higher percentage of children in income poverty, Ireland had a somewhat higher level of child material deprivation throughout the period. The levels of material deprivation changed over time and are more closely linked to the economic cycle of boom, recession and recovery than income poverty. The contrasting comparison for income and deprivation suggests that families on low income in Ireland have been less able to convert income into an adequate standard of living compared to families at the same position in the income distribution in Northern Ireland.

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE JURISDICTIONS

Both the quantitative data analysis and qualitative findings from the consultation showed that family composition was an important risk factor for poverty in both jurisdictions. Children in larger families, those with three or more children, faced higher risks of income poverty and deprivation in both jurisdictions. A joint model for the most recent period suggests that the effect of family size on poverty risk is similar in Northern Ireland and Ireland. In both jurisdictions, income poverty and deprivation risk are much higher among lone parent households than two-parent households.

Other risk factors common to both jurisdictions, according to the quantitative and the qualitative analyses, include having a disabled household member, and labour market exclusion. Children living in a household where someone has a disability are more than twice as likely to be deprived as children without a disabled household member in both jurisdictions, which is partly due to lower levels of employment. The relationship between disability and child income poverty is weaker, which is likely due to the fact that income is not adjusted for the extra costs of disability.

In Northern Ireland, children in workless households are found to be twice as likely to be in income poverty as those in households with at least one working-age adult employed. In Ireland, children in jobless households are three times more likely to be income poor than children in working households. The analysis suggests that in-work poverty is a greater issue in Northern Ireland, while in Ireland those outside the labour market are particularly vulnerable to poverty.

The data analysis also showed a significantly increased risk of income poverty and of material deprivation when Household Reference Persons (HRP) have lower levels

of education in both jurisdictions. In the most recent period, having a HRP with no educational qualification has a stronger effect on the risk of child income poverty in Ireland than Northern Ireland.

The consultation highlighted other risk factors such as membership of a minority ethnic group including Travellers and Roma, living in rural settings where there are additional transport and energy costs and lower access to services, living in urban areas of high deprivation, being homeless, and leaving care. Unfortunately, the data analysis could not address these issues because the relevant demographic information was not available from both surveys.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While the welfare systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland share commonalities including the significant role of the means-tested system, differences exist in child benefits and income support for low-income and lone-parent families. Child benefit levels are higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland, but the receipt of means-tested benefits in Northern Ireland stretches much higher up in the income distribution, according to microsimulation analyses from Doorley et al. (2024).

Stakeholders from Northern Ireland identified the UK's two-child limit for welfare recipients as a direct cause of increased child poverty, as also evidenced by analyses by Stewart et al. (2023). Stakeholders also emphasised that the welfare mitigation package in Northern Ireland, introduced to counteract the UK Benefit Cap, was a crucial policy to prevent further hardship, but noted it was currently under review. The temporary nature of measures to address the cost-of-living crisis in Ireland was also viewed as problematic by stakeholders in Ireland. Findings from Doorley et al. (2024) show that uprating core social welfare payments in line with inflation would have been more efficient to tackle that crisis than the package of one-off payments.

Another issue pointed out by stakeholders in Northern Ireland was the five-week waiting period that is in place when receiving Universal Credit.¹ There is an emergency payment that can cover this waiting period but there is a lack of knowledge among the public about this payment (see Chapter 2). Stakeholders in Northern Ireland noted that this leads families to go into debt in order to survive during that time lapse, and some may be pushed towards illegal lenders or high-interest rate loans.

¹ Universal Credit is a monthly payment delivered to people with low income or out of work. See here for more information: <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>.

Service provision in education and early childhood care also differs. Northern Ireland has long provided supports like free school meals and books, only recently provided on a widespread basis in Ireland. These initiatives were widely welcomed by stakeholders south of the border and were seen to make a real difference to families' lives. Stakeholders in Northern Ireland, where school meals are means-tested, called for extending these benefits to cover holiday periods and making them universal. Stakeholders on both sides of the border also stressed the need for coordinated policy action, setting targets, and holding politicians accountable in tackling child poverty.

Finally, lower level of employment among parents is a strong predictor of low income and deprivation in both jurisdictions, and is strongly linked to educational levels. Policies to support access to education, training and employment are therefore important – this includes childcare supports for those in households with younger children. Access to training and education is also essential to avoid low wage employment, which is particularly a risk for lone parents and those with a disability (Hingre et al., 2024).

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Across Europe children are disproportionately impacted by poverty compared to other age groups (Eurostat, 2024). In 2021, over 15 million children, i.e. 19.5 per cent of all children, were at risk of poverty in the EU27 (Ilmakunnas et al., 2024).

The effects of child poverty are wide-ranging and long lasting. Reviews of the research have shown that poverty during childhood has negative effects, both in the short and long term, on children's physical health, social and emotional development, psychological wellbeing and life chances (Duncan et al., 1998; 2018; Cooper and Stewart, 2021). Poverty influences parents' mental and physical health which in turn affects their parenting as outlined in the family stress model² (Conger et al., 2010; Masarik and Conger, 2017). Poverty also influences the housing quality and neighbourhood environment, with implications for children and young people's cognitive development, achievement, engagement in school, behaviour and health (Twenge and Campbell, 2002; Laurence et al., 2024). The immediate impacts of poverty during childhood also include children's sense of social inclusion and self-esteem. A review of ten years of qualitative research on child poverty in the UK highlighted exclusion from social participation not only because of the costs involved but also the shame and anxiety about not fitting in with their peers that children experience (Ridge, 2011).

The longer-term impacts of growing up in poverty are also well documented. In the UK a review of the evidence found that growing up in persistent poverty was linked to poorer outcomes in adulthood, including living in poor housing, living in material deprivation, and greater interaction with the criminal justice system (Barnes et al., 2008; Department for Work and Pensions, 2014). Curristan et al. (2022) find that adults who experienced childhood poverty have higher chances of living in poverty as an adult across a range of measures such as material deprivation, subjective economic strain, and low income. Childhood poverty is also associated with lower rates of third-level education and higher rates of unemployment in adulthood (*ibid.*)

The current study sets out to compare the incidence and distribution of child poverty on the island of Ireland focusing on both income poverty and material

² The family stress model is a theoretical model which posits that economic pressures negatively impact child and adolescent development primarily through parents' psychological distress, stresses on parental relationships and disrupted parenting (Masarik and Conger, 2017).

deprivation. While there is a significant body of research on child poverty in Ireland, the UK, and to a lesser extent in Northern Ireland, there is relatively little known about how children in Ireland fare in comparison to those in Northern Ireland. A comparative analysis of this sort can help to identify the features of the two systems that are influential in preventing or exacerbating child poverty.

We set out to address three research questions:

1. Which groups of children are most vulnerable to poverty in the two jurisdictions?
2. What is the role of household labour market situation and social background in shaping the risk of child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland?
3. How do policy approaches to addressing child poverty differ in Ireland and Northern Ireland and how do these policies influence the patterns of child poverty observed?

1.2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON CHILD POVERTY IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

In both the UK and Ireland, children have consistently experienced higher rates of income poverty than other age groups over the past decade (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2024; Roantree and Doorley, 2023). In the UK, child poverty rates improved from the mid-1990s until 2013/2014 but have worsened in the last decade. These fluctuations are largely attributed to changes in poverty among large families and have been linked to shifts in benefit entitlements, including the introduction of the two-child limit on many benefits (JRF, 2024; Stewart et al., 2023). In Ireland, while child income poverty remained relatively stable throughout the 2000s, child material deprivation rose and fell following the pattern of economic boom, bust and recovery (Roantree and Doorley, 2023). The pandemic saw a fall in child poverty in both countries but then an uptick in the latest period. In the UK this uptick is for income poverty, in Ireland for material deprivation (Roantree et al., 2024).

Recent data indicate that within the UK, child poverty rates in Northern Ireland are the lowest among the four regions of the UK (Department for Communities, 2023a). Previous research has also shown disparities in the overall levels of deprivation between urban and rural areas, particularly in the north-west of both jurisdictions (NESC, 2021). While there is less variation for the overall poverty rates in Northern Ireland between urban and rural areas, the variation is quite large between Local Government Districts. Across these districts poverty varies from a low of 12 per cent in Ards and North Down to a high of 22 per cent in Derry City and Strabane (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022).

In 2018, Ireland ranked tenth lowest of the 28 EU Member States in terms of child poverty with a rate of 16 per cent, compared to an EU average of 20 per cent (Maître et al., 2021). On the other hand, the UK was the sixth worst performer, with a child poverty rate of 24 per cent. Focusing on child material and social deprivation, both Ireland and the UK were just above the EU average of 14 per cent, with a rate of 15 per cent for both countries. Northern European countries were the best performers, while Romania fared the worst for both measures (*ibid.*)

1.2.1 Factors contributing to child poverty in Northern Ireland and Ireland

Focusing on Northern Ireland, Horgan and Monteith (2009) found that high levels of worklessness, the nature and low pay levels of the jobs available, and obstacles to employment faced by mothers – especially lone mothers – were the main contributing factors to child poverty. For lone mothers in particular, they suggested that the main barriers to work were the low qualification level, disincentive in the benefit system to take up ‘mini-jobs’ (i.e. less than 16 hours a week); and a serious lack of childcare, particularly in poorer areas. The growing issue of low pay and in-work poverty has been identified by Blundell (2022) who report that in-work poverty accounted for 70 per cent of working-age poverty in Britain in 2019.

The presence of a person with a disability in the household is also a strong predictor of child poverty. Over one-third of children living in poverty in Northern Ireland live in a household where someone is disabled and, for four out of five of these children, the person living with disability is an adult (Expert Advisory Panel, 2020).

A 2023 discussion paper by a collective of ten NGOs pointed out that the UK currently has historically low levels of support offered by the social security system. This makes it hard for families to afford their basic essential needs and contributes to deep poverty and record need for food banks. Such low levels of financial security make it harder ‘both logistically and mentally to secure and stay in work’. The authors argue that a significant gap exists between the Universal Credit standard allowance and the 2023/2024 cost of basic essentials. Furthermore, the report identified lone parents as being twice as likely to be unemployed and underemployed compared to couple parents, and to face higher childcare costs as a proportion of income:

Full-time childcare for a single parent on minimum wage with two children would take up to a third of their income, compared to less than a quarter for couple parents. (Gingerbread, 2024)

A rising inactivity rate is also likely to contribute to child poverty. According to the same report, this is partly due to worsening health among the working-age

population, as more than a third of working-age people (36 per cent) reported having at least one long-term health condition in 2023, up from 31 per cent in 2019 and 29 per cent in 2016. The report adds that 1.6 million people are economically inactive due to looking after family and home, and 85 per cent of them are women.

According to a 2020 Report from Northern Ireland's Expert Advisory Panel, the welfare reforms and introduction of the Universal Credit in 2013 led to enhanced poverty for many households. They also note that the waiting period to receive Universal Credit was one of the primary causes of increased food bank usage, rising debt, and financial hardship in Northern Ireland (Expert Advisory Panel, 2020). Two restrictions on the value of benefits, namely the benefit cap and the two-child limit, have been identified as contributing to increased poverty in Northern Ireland and the UK, though the benefit cap has been offset by the welfare reform mitigations package in Northern Ireland (see Chapter 2). Stewart et al. (2023) found that since 2013/2014, the increase in child poverty in the UK (after housing costs) is concentrated almost entirely among larger families (i.e. with three children or more), while the poverty rate for children in smaller families has barely changed in 25 years. Over time, the demographic composition of those large and small families has also changed; children in smaller families are increasingly likely to have parents with higher educational attainment, while those in larger families are increasingly likely to come from minority groups. While employment rose for all family sizes, work intensity (the percentage of available hours worked) rose faster in smaller families. And lone parents in larger families remain much less likely to work full-time and more likely not to work at all (*ibid.*).

In Ireland, Maître et al. (2021) found that maternal education was a particularly strong predictor of persistent poverty from infancy to nine years. Meanwhile, lone-parent families, larger families and ethnic minorities were all at greater risk of economic vulnerability during early and later childhood.³ Children were also more likely to enter economic vulnerability when a partner left or a new partner joined the household. Unsurprisingly, job loss for either parent increased the likelihood of entering economic vulnerability. However, when mothers transitioned from non-employment to full-time work, or when either parent moved from part-time to full-time employment, families were more likely to exit economic vulnerability. Other predictors of child poverty included labour market characteristics of parents, especially when the primary caregiver is unable to work due to illness or disability, or when they are unemployed or caring full time.

³ Economic vulnerability (EV) is a multidimensional measure of poverty. It is based on the latent class statistical technique that analyses the underlying association between different variables (in this case economic stress, low income and material deprivation) and, based on probabilities, assign group membership to a latent variable (here EV).

Minority groups on both sides of the jurisdiction face also significant poverty risks and social exclusion. In Northern Ireland, a study by Sovacool and Furszyfer Del Rio (2022) on Gypsies and Traveller families revealed severe discrimination, inadequate housing conditions, high energy costs, and associated negative health outcomes. In Ireland, Fanning and Veale (2004) found that asylum seeker children live in poverty due to the direct provision system which offers minimal financial support. These children live also into inadequate housing, poor nutrition, and are unable to participate in normal social activities.

More recently, Roantree and Doorley (2023) found that material deprivation and at risk of poverty rates are particularly high for children in households that rent their accommodation; where no one is in paid work; large households; where someone has a disability, and where the youngest child is aged 12-17. Furthermore, living in a lone parent household is also associated with a greater risk of after housing costs (AHC) poverty and material deprivation for children. This illustrates the crucial role of paid work in determining whether a child is considered at risk of poverty.

1.3 THE LABOUR MARKET CONTEXT

Market income from employment is the most significant component of household income for those of working age, and patterns of employment North and South will therefore have a significant impact on household income and poverty risk.

There are significant differences in the labour markets in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Levels of economic inactivity among older working-age individuals are substantially higher in Northern Ireland than in Ireland and elsewhere in the UK (Devlin et al., 2023a; McDermott and O’Callaghan, 2019; NESC, 2022). This is driven by higher levels of disability and ill health, which has been attributed, at least in part, to the legacy of the Troubles on the mental health of the population in Northern Ireland (NESC, 2022). Lower levels of employment in Northern Ireland have been linked to the lower proportion of graduates in the working-age population and higher levels of early school leaving. Educational differences and variation in the occupational structure of the labour force have also been highlighted as explanations of the diverging wages and productivity in Ireland and Northern Ireland (Bergin and McGuinness, 2022). Northern Ireland’s productivity level is comparable to that of the Border and Midlands regions of Ireland, both of which fall short of the overall productivity performance of the Irish economy. Additionally, while Northern Ireland has a slightly higher disposable income per capita than Irish counties Donegal, Kilkenny, Laois and Roscommon, it is on the lower end of Ireland’s disposable income distribution (Department of Finance, 2024). Regional inequalities in Ireland can be traced back to the uneven distribution of agricultural land in terms of size and quality, which tended to be lower in the West and North, thereby impacting those regions’ economic development (Sweeney, 2019). Meanwhile, the stronger urban structures found in the South and

East made these regions more attractive to industries since the 1930s (*ibid.*). More recently, underinvestment in key infrastructure assets like national roads and research infrastructure is likely to have contributed to rising regional inequality in Ireland (NWRA, 2022).

The differences in employment rates of **parents** in Ireland and Northern Ireland are more muted as there is likely to be some positive selection into parenthood and employment, and this group will include a younger cohort less impacted by the Troubles. Rates of employment among women with children up to 18 years old were somewhat higher in Northern Ireland (78 per cent) than Ireland (76 per cent) but the reverse was true among lone parents, for whom the employment rate was higher in Ireland (70 per cent) than Northern Ireland (63 per cent) (Hingre et al., 2024). Labour market participation rates among mothers decline with the number of children to a similar extent in both jurisdictions (*ibid.*). Participation also differs by the age of the youngest child. There was no difference in the participation rates of mothers with young children under 5 or aged 5-9 years between Ireland and Northern Ireland; however mothers with children aged 10-19 years were more likely to be in the labour market south of the border (*ibid.*). Among fathers, there was no difference in labour market participation rates in the two jurisdictions (*ibid.*).

The study further highlighted differences in the hours of work in both jurisdictions, which is likely to influence household income. Both men and women in Northern Ireland worked shorter hours than their counterparts in Ireland. Part-time working was significantly higher among employed mothers in Northern Ireland than Ireland, particularly lone mothers. Doorley et al. (2024b) show that across the population, there are relatively fewer people with no earnings in Ireland than in Northern Ireland; however, the higher and more unequal wages paid to workers in Ireland result in relatively higher market income inequality, all else being equal.

1.4 DATA AND METHODS

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to examine child poverty on the island of Ireland. It relies primarily upon analysis of national survey data on incomes and living standards that have been harmonised, and consultations with stakeholders.

1.4.1 Consultation with stakeholders

An online consultation with relevant stakeholders was held on 9 September 2024 to help identify those most vulnerable to child poverty, and to discuss the policy issues most relevant for child poverty in each jurisdiction. There were 22 participants representing government departments and state agencies, researchers, and NGOs working with individuals/families experiencing poverty or at risk of marginalisation in society. Among the participants, ten were from

Northern Ireland, 11 were from Ireland, and one was from an all-island organisation.

Stakeholders were asked to respond to the preliminary research findings and to discuss the following questions:

1. Which children are most vulnerable to poverty in your community/ jurisdiction and what challenges do they and their families face?
2. What policies/initiatives are working to assist families and tackle child poverty? (examples of good practice)
3. What needs to be changed? If you were Taoiseach/Prime Minister what would be your top three priorities for policy/service provision?

1.4.2 Data on Income and living conditions

The study draws on nationally representative surveys of the population in Northern Ireland and Ireland.

In Ireland, the study uses data from the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) spanning the years 2004 to 2023. Conducted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) since 2004, the SILC survey serves as Ireland's contribution to the broader European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) overseen by Eurostat. This voluntary survey targets private households in Ireland, focusing on gathering information about their income, living conditions, and some socio-demographic details (education, health, labour market status etc.). The SILC data are used for monitoring poverty, income inequality, and living standards both within Ireland and in a European context through the EU-SILC framework. Each year since 2004, the survey has sampled between 5,000 to 6,000 households.

In this paper, we employ two versions of the SILC data. The first is a more comprehensive and detailed version (RMF from CSO), used for all statistical analyses specific to Ireland (Chapters 1 to 3). The second is less detailed and is available from the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA) which we can integrate with Family Resources Survey (FRS) data for comparative analysis, as used in Chapter 4. For Northern Ireland, we use the FRS data from 2003 to 2023. The FRS is a survey of private households across the United Kingdom, collecting detailed information on household and individual circumstances such as income, tenure, occupation, employment, education and health. The survey has been conducted in Great Britain since October 1992 and was extended to include Northern Ireland in the 2002/2003 survey year. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducts the FRS on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions, while in Northern Ireland it is carried out by the Central Survey Unit on behalf of the Department for Communities. The survey is conducted from April of the previous year to March of

the current year, which explains the dual-year labelling for each sample. Excluding the smaller sample sizes during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, the FRS sample size for the UK ranges from 19,000 to nearly 29,000 households between 2000/2001 and 2022/2023. In Northern Ireland, excluding the pandemic years, the sample size varies from 800 to nearly 1,500 households, equating to approximately 1,600 to 3,000 individuals. Due to the small number of cases in the FRS for Northern Ireland, all descriptive analysis has used data grouped over two/three years. The data were accessed from the UK Data Archive.⁴

In order to provide enough cases for the statistical analysis when looking at the recent period, we pooled together two years of SILC data (2022 and 2023) and FRS data (2021/2022 and 2022/2023). Comparing child poverty on the island of Ireland requires us to harmonise the definitions used across the two datasets, the most crucial of which are the definitions of income poverty and material deprivation.

Income poverty is measured as having less than 60 per cent of the median equivalised household income in Ireland and the UK (in the case of NI). The use of the UK wide median is standard practice for the analysis of poverty in the UK regions (NISRA, 2022).⁵ The official poverty measures in the UK and Ireland use different equivalence scales to adjust income for household size. Previous research has shown that the choice of equivalence scale can influence the level of poverty (Doorley et al., 2024a); therefore we have applied the same equivalence scale to both datasets – the Irish national scale which amounts to 1 for the first adult, 0.66 for any subsequent adult members aged 14 and over and 0.33 for each child aged under 14.

We use the household disposable income figures derived in the respective datasets. Therefore while we harmonise the equivalence scale there might remain some differences in the income components entered into the calculation of the household disposable income in Ireland and Northern Ireland.⁶

The at risk of poverty measure is a widely used indicator to measure poverty, but relying solely on an income-based measure can provide an incomplete picture of poverty, failing to capture the full extent of individuals' hardships and social disadvantages (Nolan and Whelan, 2010). Moreover, given it is based on median

⁴ Project ID 257401; Family Resources Survey, 2010-2011 to 2022-2023; Households Below Average Income, 1994/95-2022/23.

⁵ Expressed in average 2022/2023 prices, the three year averages (2020/2021-2022/2023) median weekly equivalised household income in the UK were £623 and £597 in Northern Ireland ('Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2023' available at Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) GOV.UK website, statistical release 21 March 2024).

⁶ The income poverty measure is relative, so differences in the respective absolute values of household income between jurisdiction are not relevant.

income which changes over time, the measure does not adequately capture changes in conditions where the median income falls or rises significantly (as in the case of the economic boom and bust (Watson et al., 2016)). Therefore, there has been an increasing development of the use of non-monetary measures alongside monetary measures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of poverty and social exclusion. While at risk of poverty measures focus on income levels, material deprivation captures the inability to afford basic goods and services, reflecting actual living conditions of households (Nolan and Whelan, 2010).

In Ireland, SILC includes a wide range of deprivation indicators that have been collected during the interviews since 2003. These deprivation items have been used to design a measure of deprivation (Maître et al., 2006). The official Irish measure of deprivation is based on a list of 11 essential goods and services that households and individuals cannot afford due to insufficient resources (see CSO for a comprehensive list of these deprivation items).⁷

The FRS data also include some deprivation items which have been collected in Northern Ireland since the 2010/2011 survey. While most of the deprivation items in the FRS differ from those in SILC, we have identified five items that are broadly similar between the two surveys. These deprivation items are:

- Arrears on bills;
- Inability to keep the home adequately warm;
- Unable to afford a week's annual holiday away from home in the last 12 months;
- Unable to afford the replacement of worn out furniture;
- Money to spend on self.

In the SILC survey, the first four deprivation items listed above are gathered at the household level and applied to all members of the household. The fifth item, concerning the ability to spend money on oneself, is collected from individuals aged 16 and over, and the response from the Household Reference Person is assigned to all household members.

In the FRS survey, these deprivation items are collected from the working-age population (individuals under 66 years old) and from parents, then allocated to their children. The FRS also collects different deprivation items for the older population, which may be more relevant for this age group (such as having a damp-

⁷ For a detailed list of the 11 deprivation items see: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/backgroundnotes/>.

free home, functioning heating/electrics, etc.). Consequently we cannot compare the deprivation levels of children, the working-age population, and people aged 66 and over using the FRS. Additionally, since our focus is on poverty estimates and the drivers of poverty for children, we limit the statistical analysis in the following chapters to households with children and no one aged 66 or over. This approach helps avoid potential biases associated with other income sources and support linked to the presence of someone aged 66 or over.

Two of the five deprivation measures used here overlap with the deprivation measure used in the national poverty measure for Ireland; these are the items on heating and replacing furniture. The inability to afford a week's holiday and the lack of any personal spending money are not included in the national measure: nevertheless, factor analysis shows that they load onto the basic deprivation dimension along with the 11 items used in the national scale, rather than secondary deprivation (Maître and Privalko, 2021). The question on arrears is used in the EU measure of material deprivation (Eurostat, 2024). Table 1.1 reports the two poverty indicators used in the analysis.

TABLE 1.1 POVERTY OUTCOMES ANALYSED IN THE REPORT

	NI	Ireland
Income poverty – less than 60% of median equivalised income	Source: Family Resources Survey (FRS)	Source: Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)
Material deprivation (lacking at least two items out of five)	Source: Family Resources Survey (FRS)	Source: Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)

Another task in harmonising the surveys was to identify similar socio-demographic variables that could describe the population of children in both regions and their poverty-related risk factors. Most variables were quite similar, with the main difference being the presence of a family member with a disability. In the FRS, from 2004/2005 to 2011/2012 disability was based on people reporting barriers across areas of life. From 2012/2013 onwards, disability is defined as having a long-term illness that has lasted or is expected to last 12 months or more, or a disability or impairment that causes substantial difficulty with daily activities. In contrast, the SILC classifies individuals as having a disability if they have been severely or somewhat limited in usual activities over the past six months. Although the definitions are broadly similar, the SILC measure likely underestimates the number of people with disabilities in households, as it only includes individuals aged 16 and over.

Finally, beyond the issue of using harmonised variables, there are certain limitations when using two different surveys for comparative analysis, as not all

relevant variables are necessarily present in both surveys. For instance, we know that poverty and social exclusion can vary between urban and rural areas within countries. Unfortunately, while this information was available in the SILC data, the FRS data we received did not include such location details for Northern Ireland.

In Chapter 3 we use the surveys to report descriptive results and in Chapter 4 we report the results from several statistical regression models to look at the likelihood of income poverty and deprivation for children in Northern Ireland and Ireland. First, we run separate models for each of these jurisdictions and then we run models with both jurisdictions at the same time, allowing the comparison of the factors predicting at risk of poverty and deprivation between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

1.5 PROFILE OF CHILDREN IN IRELAND NORTH AND SOUTH

Table 1.2 outlines the characteristics of children under the age of 18 and the households in which they live based on the FRS for Northern Ireland and the SILC for Ireland. The distribution of children by age is very similar across the two jurisdictions, with a marginally higher proportion of children aged under 5 in Northern Ireland and of children ages 12-17 in Ireland. The distribution of number of children in households is also very similar, with 35 per cent of children living in households with three or more children in Northern Ireland and 36 per cent in Ireland.

The household type information is limited in that lone parent households are defined as those with only one adult plus children under the age of 18 years. It therefore excludes lone parents in multi-generational households. Moreover the 'other households' category contains households where there are three or more adults; these will include lone or two-parent households living with adult children. On this measure we find that there are more children living in lone parent households in Northern Ireland (22 per cent) than in Ireland (10.9 per cent of children).

TABLE 1.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN (<18) AND THEIR HOUSEHOLDS

	Northern Ireland (2021-2023)	Ireland (2022 and 2023)
Age of Children (%)		
0 to 4	26.9	25.0
5 to 11	39.8	40.4
12 to 17	33.3	34.6
Total	100.0	100.0
Number of children per household		
One child	21.2	23.1
Two children	43.7	40.9
Three and more children	35.1	36.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean number of children	2.28	2.26
Household type		
1 adult with 1-2 children	14.9	7.5
1 adult with 3+ children	7.1	3.4
2 adults with 1-2 children	42.0	39.8
2 adults with 3+ children	19.0	30.2
Other households with children	16.7	19.2
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean household size	4.2	4.4
Housing tenure		
Owned outright/ buying with a mortgage	67.5	66.1
Social rented sector tenants	12.6	17.3
Rented privately	19.9	16.6
Total	100.0	100.0
Disability in the household		
No one is disabled	67.9	77.7
Someone is disabled	32.4	22.3
Total	100.0	100.0
HRP Education		
Degree or above	40.71	50.5
Below degree level	47.51	47.9
No qualifications	11.78	1.7
Total	100.0	100.0
HRP ILO		
At work	83.19	75.87
Not at work	16.81	24.13
Total	100.0	100.0
Household work composition		
At least one adult in work	85.37	91.87
No adults in work	14.63	8.13
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Authors' analysis of SILC and Family Resources Survey.

The housing situation of children is similar on both sides of the border with two-thirds of children living in owner-occupied housing. A somewhat higher proportion of children in Ireland live in social housing (17 per cent) than in Northern Ireland (13 per cent) and consequently more children in Northern Ireland live in the private rental sector. In both jurisdictions, some of those in the private rental sector will be receiving housing support payments from the state. A significantly higher proportion of children in Northern Ireland are living in a household where one member has a disability (32 per cent) compared to 22 per cent in Ireland. This is consistent with previous studies which have found a higher rate of disability in the Northern Irish population (Devlin et al., 2023), but will also be influenced by the inclusion of information for a wider group of household members in Northern Ireland. The level of education of the Household Reference Person (HRP) in households with children is higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland. This difference in the educational levels of the population in Northern Ireland and Ireland has also been highlighted in previous research (e.g. Smyth et al., 2022). Finally, we see while a higher proportion children live in a household where the HRP is employed in Northern Ireland than Ireland, the reverse is true for household joblessness. In Northern Ireland, 15 per cent of children live in a household where there is no adult in work compared to 8 per cent in Ireland. This difference is likely due to the higher proportion of children living with lone parents in Northern Ireland, where there is no potential second earner.

1.6 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Chapter 2 discusses the extent of variation in tax, welfare, employment and family support policies in Ireland and Northern Ireland, drawing on policy documents and insights from the stakeholder consultation. Chapter 3 describes the characteristics of children and their families most at poverty in the two jurisdictions, based on analyses of the quantitative data and discussions with stakeholders. Chapter 4 further clarifies the comparison of risk factors in Ireland and Northern Ireland by conducting the same statistical models for the two jurisdictions. Chapter 5 summarises the main findings of the study and discusses the implications for policy development.

CHAPTER 2

Policy responses to child poverty in Ireland North and South

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we compare key features of the policy environments that are likely to shape differences in child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The chapter draws on desk analysis of key policies in both jurisdictions and on qualitative material from the consultations with key stakeholders.

In Ireland there is a national anti-poverty strategy called the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* which sets out a range of commitments and targets to be achieved. There is an overall target to reduce the proportion of households living in consistent poverty (i.e. income below the 60 per cent median threshold and experiencing material deprivation) to below 2 per cent. However no revised target for consistent poverty among children has been set. The previous target to lift 70,000 children out of consistent poverty was set in 2014 with a deadline of 2020;⁸ the deadline has since been extended to 2025. The Roadmap sets a target for child poverty relative to European norms, which is to be one of the top five performing EU countries in the standard EU measure of At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (AROPE).⁹ In 2018, Ireland was ranked 20th among all EU countries, with an AROPE rate of 23.9 per cent for children up to age 18. The 2025 target of moving into the top five ranked countries will therefore require a reduction in the AROPE rate to 16 per cent or less if the rates in all other countries remained unchanged. If rates in other countries fall (rise) then the target would be lower (higher). This highlights one of the limitations of such relative targets (see Sprong and Maître, 2023).

There is no equivalent anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland, although the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Northern Ireland Executive to develop a strategy ‘to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need’.

2.2 WELFARE SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The welfare systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland share many common features due to the shared historical basis of the welfare state. The UK and Ireland are usually grouped as ‘liberal welfare states’ in typologies of welfare systems.

⁸ The target was set in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the national policy framework for children and young people.
⁹ That indicator identifies people as being at risk of poverty or social exclusion if they are below a country-specific 60 per cent income poverty threshold (i.e. AROP); or above a six-item material deprivation threshold; or in a very low work intensity (VLWI) household. Individuals are counted as AROPE if they meet any of these three criteria.

However, this grouping can hide important policy differences between Ireland and the UK, and within the four parts of the UK (Deeming, 2019).

Table 2.1 outlines some of the main welfare supports for families and children in both jurisdictions. Universal child benefits are available in both jurisdictions, but the value of the payments is considerably higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. A family with three eligible children in Ireland receives €420 per month or £353 sterling. In Northern Ireland they receive £240 per month or €286.¹⁰ Additionally, a 'one-off' double payment was made to child benefit recipients in Ireland in December 2023, and two double payments were made in November and December 2024.

Core income support payments also differ in value and coverage. In Ireland the core rate for payments such as Jobseeker Benefit/Allowance or One-Parent Family Payment is €232 per week in 2024, which amounts to €997 (£838) per month. There are additional allowances for dependent adults in the household (€154) and qualified children (€46 p/w for children under 12 years and €54 for children 12 and over). In Northern Ireland parents are eligible for Universal Credit, for which the monthly standard allowance is £617.60, plus additional payments of £333 for the first child and £288 for each subsequent child born up to 2017. For children born after 2017 there is a **two-child limit**, and there is no additional payment for the third or subsequent child. Research estimated that by April 2020, 21,350 children in Northern Ireland were living in households subject to the two-child limit due to their families receiving Child Tax Credit, and an additional 8,050 children were affected by the two-child limit under Universal Credit, leaving close to 33,000 children impacted by these restrictions (Expert Advisory Panel, 2020).

The amount of benefits that households can receive in the UK is also subject to a benefit cap, which limits the total annual benefits a household can receive (including housing benefits, Universal Credit and child benefit payments). In Northern Ireland, the welfare reform mitigations package currently offsets the benefit cap but not for all households. Northern Ireland's Expert Advisory Panel (2020, p.33) estimated that around 3,600 children remain affected by the benefit cap in 2020.

In both jurisdictions, lone parents can avail of a means-tested payment, though this depends on the age of the child(ren), and there is greater conditionality regarding paid work in Northern Ireland. In Ireland, lone parents can receive the One-Parent Family Payment until their youngest child is aged 7 and then move to Jobseeker's Transition Payment, payable until the youngest child is 14. In Northern Ireland, lone

¹⁰ Using the current exchange rate of €1.19 to £1 sterling.

parent supports are through the Universal Credit system; when the youngest child is aged three, lone parents are expected to engage in job-seeking (initially for 16 hours a week moving to 35 hours for children aged 13 or above).

TABLE 2.1 WELFARE AND CHILDCARE POLICIES IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Child benefit	Monthly €140 per child aged under 16 and children aged 16-18 who are in full-time education from September 2024	Weekly payment of £24 for first child, £15.90 thereafter, up to 16 (20 in education); taxed at higher incomes
Housing supports	Social Housing (Local Authority and Approved Housing Bodies). Housing Assistance Payments	Social Housing (Local Authority and Housing Associations). Housing benefit/Rent rebate via Universal Credit
Welfare	Insurance-based/means-tested split Mean-tested payments include payment for second adult and children	Insurance-based/means-tested split Universal Credit includes payment for second adult and up to two children (two-child limit) Mitigation measures so that the benefit cap is not in place in NI
Earnings supplement	Working Family Payment – paid to families in employment with low earnings, varies with income and family size	Working Tax Credit, up £2,500 a year, for parents with child up 16 (20 in full-time ed). For new claimants this has been subsumed into Universal Credit
Lone parents	Means-tested One-Parent Family Payment; child age restrictions and conditionality re work	Universal Credit; child age restrictions and conditionality re work. Minimum of 16 hours work required where youngest child is aged 3 years or older
Childcare supports	Two years free part-time ECEC. Universal childcare subsidy plus means-tested subsidy for children 24 weeks to 15 years	1 year free part-time ECEC. Universal Credit recipients – up to 85% of childcare costs (subject to limits); for employed parents, top-up payment (up to a certain income limit)

Sources: Authors' analysis.

Notes: See Doorley et al. (2024b) and Curristan et al. (2023) for further details.

Given the complexity of welfare systems regarding eligibility, payment levels and take-up, it is difficult to assess if households with children are better protected in one system or the other based on policy. Doorley et al. (2024b) use a microsimulation model to compare the tax and benefit systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland. They find that across the population the level and coverage of means-tested benefits in Ireland is lower than Northern Ireland; however there is no separate analysis of families with children.

The effectiveness of the welfare measures is also dependent on their take-up. There is little systematic evidence on take-up within Ireland and the UK. The take-up rate for the working family payment in Ireland has recently been estimated at 53 per cent (Doorley and Kakoulidou, 2024). The authors estimate that Increasing take-up of this benefit would lead to a significant reduction of 1 percentage point in child poverty (*ibid.*). In the UK, Bennett (2024) argues that the availability of official figures on take-up rates have declined since the introduction of the Universal Credit system in 2013, even though improved take-up through an

integrated system was one of the justifications for the reform. One of the few benefits on which take-up is still tracked in the UK is Child Benefit. There has been a steady increase in non-take-up of Child Benefit payments across all family sizes in the UK since 2012 (HMRC, 2023). The figures show a take-up rate of 91 per cent of children in Northern Ireland, which is slightly higher than the take-up rate for the UK as a whole (*ibid.* Figure 6). In general, it is benefits that are means-tested, have a higher degree of conditionality (e.g. health tests), and have a higher administrative burden that have the lowest take-up. At a broad level the UK and Irish welfare systems share a similar level of reliance of means-tested benefits, which places them both in the same Liberal category in comparative analysis of welfare states. Nevertheless there may be difference in benefits take-up that we cannot document here.

Differences in service provision add further to the complexity of the picture. Supports for early care and education in the two jurisdictions are described in Curristan et al. (2023). The systems differ in the duration of free (part-time) pre-school education – being one year in Northern Ireland¹¹ and two years in Ireland. In both jurisdictions, governments have introduced subsidies towards childcare costs, particularly for low-income families. However, consultations with stakeholders highlighted a shortage of childcare places in rural areas in Northern Ireland and in cities and for babies in Ireland (Curristan et al., 2023). The requirement to pay for childcare up front and then claim back expenses led to financial difficulties for low-income parents accessing childcare in Northern Ireland.

Housing supports also differ in Ireland and Northern Ireland. In both jurisdictions there has been a pronounced decline in the stock of social and affordable housing since the early 1970s (Disch et al., 2024). Both jurisdictions have also seen an increase in the homeless population over recent years. Homelessness in Northern Ireland increased from 4,740 households in 2014 to 8,531 in 2023 according to the Department for Communities' Homelessness Bulletins (Disch et al., 2024). In March 2024 there were 4,784 households living in temporary emergency accommodation, and within these there were 5,106 children (Department for Communities, 2024). This translates to a child homelessness rate of 11.7 per thousand children.¹² In Ireland, the number of people in emergency accommodation increased from 3,258 people in July 2014 to 14,966 people in emergency accommodation in October 2024 (Focus Ireland website based on Department of Housing data). Children accounted for 4,645 of those in emergency accommodation in October 2024. This translates to a child homelessness rate of 3.8 per thousand children. The figures for both Ireland and Northern Ireland exclude the hidden homeless, asylum seekers and others (Cunningham, 2024). In both jurisdictions there is now an increased

¹¹ With some providers in the state sector providing two years.

¹² According to the Census 2021 the population aged under 18 in Northern Ireland is 435,075. The population aged <18 in Ireland is 1,218,567 (Census 2022).

policy focus on providing social housing. In Northern Ireland the Department for Communities (2023b) outlines that 6,709 additional social homes were completed between 2017/2018 and 2020/2021. In Ireland, 11,939 new social homes were completed in 2023, and 4,000 ‘affordable’ homes under the affordable purchase and cost rental schemes.¹³

Both jurisdictions have also seen a significant increase in rental costs in recent years. In Northern Ireland there has been strong growth in average rents for **new tenancies** in the last four years: the average year-on-year increase in rents between the first half of 2024 compared to the first half of 2023 was 8.5 per cent, with higher increases in Belfast compared to other areas. In June 2024, the average monthly rent for new tenancies stood at £886 for Northern Ireland, £1,019 in Belfast, and £797 outside of Belfast.¹⁴

In Ireland rents for new tenancies have increased by between 5 per cent and 11 per cent year-on-year since 2021. Average standardised rents for new tenancies stood at €1,644 per month in Q2 2024. There are significant differences across counties with an average cost of €2,147 in Dublin compared to €788 in Donegal and Monaghan for example. However average rents in **ongoing** tenancies are lower than new tenancies, standing at €1,415 in Q2 2024 according to newly available figures (RTB/ESRI Rent Index, 2024). The year-on-year increase for ongoing tenancies in Ireland for the last five quarters has been between 5.5 and 5.9 per cent. No equivalent figures on existing tenancies exist for Northern Ireland.

Given the rising rental prices, commentators in both jurisdictions have noted a shortfall between housing support levels and average prices (Doolan et al., 2022; Housing Rights, 2023). Similarly in both jurisdictions some families, especially lone parent and migrant families, are more likely to be located in the private rented sector (Russell et al., 2021; Wallace et al., 2013).

Access to healthcare services also differs across the two jurisdictions. The National Health Service in Northern Ireland is based on a principle of healthcare that is free at the point of delivery, though there have been increasing strains exemplified by long waiting lists for treatment and difficulties in obtaining GP appointments. The Irish healthcare system is based on a mix of public and private provision but aims to move to a system of universal provision as set out in Sláintecare (Connolly et al., 2022). Low-income households are entitled to a Medical Card that covers GP,

¹³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/6d982-minister-obrien-publishes-social-and-affordable-housing-delivery-statistics-for-quarter-4-2023/#:~:text=In%202023%2C%2011%2C939%20new%20social,10%2C263%20social%20homes%20were%20delivered.>

¹⁴ https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1655173/PrivateRentalReport_H1-2024.pdf.

hospital services and heavily subsidised prescription medicines. Therefore, the costs of healthcare for low-income families may not differ so much across the border as for other groups. However, the means tested element of the Medical Card system can create traps and affect work incentives (Bercholz and Keane, 2019). Free GP care for children aged under 6 was introduced in July 2015 and was extended to children under 8 years in 2023. Families with older children and with incomes above the GP visit card threshold must pay for primary healthcare out of their disposable income.

2.3 STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF POLICY

As part of the consultation process, stakeholders were asked to outline any policies that were working well in their jurisdiction in tackling child poverty. They were also asked to consider their top priorities for policy change. The themes that emerged in the discussions were education and childcare support, social welfare measures, housing, political leadership and strategy. Each of these is discussed in turn.

2.3.1 Education supports and early childhood education and care

Several stakeholders north and south of the border highlighted the importance of education policies for tackling child poverty. In Ireland two stakeholders singled out the DEIS programme, which provides additional resources to schools in disadvantaged areas, as being crucial for addressing the impact of child poverty:

For example, in disadvantaged areas where you might have high levels of poverty, you'd like to say the DEIS programme in schools, but that doesn't address the fact that you have disadvantaged children, children living in poverty all across the country attending schools that don't have those supports. (Stakeholder IE)

In Northern Ireland, one participant also highlighted the importance of additional educational supports for disadvantaged groups but felt that the funding was not properly ring-fenced:

So every school is allocated a specific budget, an additional budget for children from certain backgrounds that includes Traveller children, Roma children and what the Department of Education here defined as newcomer children. And that the purpose of that additional budget is to support those children to reduce educational inequalities. But there's no real monitoring of whether that budget is being used for what is intended to be used for. (Stakeholder NI)

The importance of early childhood education and care was also highlighted, particularly the new Early Start (now called Equal Start) Programme in Ireland which provides additional supports for pre-school children in selected areas of

urban disadvantage. However, stakeholders in Northern Ireland highlighted the inadequacy and cost of childcare that put it out of reach of many families:

longer term we're seeing some positive pieces that I think will probably bring about like better protections in terms of poverty, more opportunities for children living like the Equal Start programme. You know, what was happening around the early years, enabling more children from more disadvantaged areas to get good quality early years. Obviously, we're starting at a low base point [but] that's, that's positive. (Stakeholder IE)

So we don't have the same kind of childcare provision as they have in Britain or indeed the system that's gradually growing, I suppose in the South, what we have is vouchers really that [you] can redeem some of your childcare costs. But because childcare costs are so exorbitant, who that's helping is people who are already earning quite well It's very often childcare costs can come close to £20,000 a year. The average salary here is about £24,000 a year..... Realistically those in poverty are cut off completely from childcare. (Stakeholder NI)

Stakeholders in Northern Ireland mentioned early education schemes that are targeted at particularly disadvantaged children, for example those from the Traveller Community:

You know we have different programmes here in Sure Start, Pathway Fund, and Toy Box [which] is a programme that's delivered for Traveller children and their families. An independent review of that published very recently that kind of talked about the value that these different initiatives add, and I raise it just because those were all three programmes were at risk of being cut in the previous budget.

Other in-kind supports targeted at children in school were also highlighted. Participants in all three break-out groups identified the Free School Meals programme as being particularly important. The scheme has been in place for a long time in Northern Ireland but has only recently been extended in Ireland. School meals (and books) were provided to designated schools in disadvantaged areas through the DEIS scheme but have recently been expanded to all schools. Stakeholders emphasised that universal provision, as in place in Ireland, has benefits over the means-tested scheme as in Northern Ireland:

if we look at free school meals there, I mean, there's no argument that has had a very positive impact for a lot of children who wouldn't be having a hot meal during the day or, or wouldn't be getting the nutrition they need. So that's definitely, definitely a positive thing. (Stakeholder NI).

So in Northern Ireland we would really love to see universal free school meals.... free school meals are means-tested.... What that basically means is that we have a quite an arbitrary threshold and if you go over by a pound, suddenly you're no longer accessing free school meals. And the difference that that makes to families, it can also be very difficult if there's family where income can fluctuate depending on different things.... the other advantage of universal free school meals as well is that idea that it removes any form of stigma as well around accessing meals for children. (Stakeholder NI)

Fluctuating income was seen as a barrier for accessing school meals for farming families and impacted their access to other means-tested benefits. The role that free-school meals play as a passport for other supports for children and schools was also highlighted:

if you're in a rural area and your children are not taking up free school meals,[The] school budget then suffered as a result of that lack of uptake of free school meals...

In Northern Ireland stakeholders also commended the holiday hunger programme rolled out during COVID. This provided hot meals to children when they were not in school. It was argued that this should be reinstated.

Free schoolbooks have been a long-standing entitlement of the education system in Northern Ireland and the UK. In Ireland, the expansion of the scheme on a universal basis was praised by several participants as having a real impact on families with low incomes. A participant from a voluntary sector organisation supporting families in poverty noted the impact on calls for their services:

The extension of free books to primary school and junior cycle is something that we very much welcome. And interestingly, the first year it was introduced, we had 20 per cent fewer calls with school related requests. And this year it's 6 per cent less than last year. (Stakeholder IE)

However, concerns remained about the limitations of these schemes. South of the border the issue of the quality of the meals was raised, while stakeholders in both jurisdictions mentioned costs of education that are not covered by the current schemes such as uniforms or IT equipment:

The free books up to junior cycle, which is great. But that doesn't address, I suppose, the digital divide that doesn't help the child living in poverty who goes to a school where they need an iPad to do their schoolwork. With the free school meals programme that's being rolled out.....there seems to be a

lack of monitoring of the actual standards of these meals. Are the children getting these meals, getting as healthy a meal? (Stakeholder IE)

In discussing childcare and early education and other supports, a number of discussants emphasised the importance of early intervention to protect children against the long-term effects of poverty:

One is early intervention. You know, services need to be in place kind of, you know, from either when a family, I suppose maybe comes into poverty or for children who are born into poverty to get them the supports in and services that they need in the hopes that doesn't become their kind of life trajectory. (Stakeholder IE)

2.3.2 Social welfare measures

Stakeholders from both jurisdictions highlighted the importance of levels of social welfare income supports for addressing child poverty and the need for these to be sufficient to meet the needs of families. They emphasised the need to uprate welfare benefits in line with inflation to take account of the rise in the cost-of-living in recent years. Participants also emphasised the importance of social transfers as an entitlement rather than a hand-out:

The major [policy change] would be just ... sorting out that inadequacy of Social Security and investing in the Social Security system. (Stakeholder NI)

We've been seeing over the last number of years in particular the lack of benchmarking has in essence meant that there's been in real-terms cut in social welfare payments... we've seen prices increase exponentially, we've seen inflation go up. And despite that core social welfare payments are as low as they could ever be, we're not linking payments or disregards or means testing to keep up with the, say, national minimum wage here in the South. (Stakeholder, IE)

We have to accept that people and certain families will potentially always need that [social welfare supports]. And we've got to stop shaming them and allow them to be able to just take what they need and protect the children and children that come first. (Stakeholder, IE)

A number of stakeholders in Ireland praised the introduction of a higher level of income support for children over the age of 12 via a higher qualified child addition, because of the additional needs for this age group:

Another thing that the government has done, although they've started to roll back on that, is that they have provided additional support for children who

*are over the age of 12.... the recognition that that older children do cost more.
(Stakeholder IE)*

In Northern Ireland too, participants highlighted the value of social welfare entitlements that are focused on an overall standard of living rather than more piecemeal efforts to address specific symptoms of poverty.

Sometimes we can get drawn into talking about fuel poverty and how we address that and food poverty and how we address that and period poverty and how we address that. And if that is something that can focus minds on a particular issue and maybe get us to take very specific action, maybe that's not terrible, but what would be terrible is if we thought, oh, we'll put period products in every school we've taken [a] big action on poverty and actually we haven't done, all we've done is just address some of the symptoms of poverty and not address those underlying issues.. (Stakeholder NI)

Stakeholders from Northern Ireland were unanimous in their criticism of the **two-child limit** and the benefit cap operating elsewhere in the UK. This was seen as pushing larger families into poverty. It was also noted that families in Northern Ireland were bigger than the UK average, and therefore disproportionately hit by the two-child limit:

In the North, the two-child policy drives rising rates of child poverty. Families in Northern Ireland tend to be larger than those in Britain. Around 21 per cent of families in Northern Ireland have three or more children compared to just under 15 per cent of families in the UK as a whole. Almost half of children in relative poverty in Northern Ireland live in families where there are three or more children. (Stakeholder NI)

*And right across the UK, but especially in Northern Ireland, because of our larger families, the two-child policy is really pushing child poverty.
(Stakeholder NI)*

[top priority for policy is the] immediate scrapping of the two-child policy and the benefit cap. (Stakeholder NI)

Several stakeholders across all three break-out groups highlighted the important role of **mitigation measures** put in place by the Northern Ireland government to mitigate welfare cuts introduced by the UK government that prevented more families falling into poverty. It was noted however, that there is no guarantee that the scheme will continue:

We have a what we call a mitigations package here that doesn't exist outside of Northern Ireland really. So that the package provides mitigation payments for those affected by the benefit cap, which is a limit on the level of Social Security benefits that a household can get. And a mitigation for the bedroom tax. So that people are protected from those two welfare reform policies. And that was one good thing came out of the Northern Ireland Assembly here.... So those are very beneficial (Stakeholder NI)

Another stakeholder highlighted a further mitigation measure in Northern Ireland to address the five-week gap between applying for Universal Credit and receiving it:

We have another mitigation called the Universal Credit Contingency Fund which provides grant to people who are in the first five weeks of the Universal Credit claim to protect them. You know, to give them some income during that five week wait. That is a payment that doesn't exist beyond Northern Ireland. Now the problem with that is that there are quite low levels of awareness of it. (Stakeholder NI)

Indeed, other Northern Ireland stakeholders noted that families were getting into debt problems due to waiting periods for benefits (see discussion in Chapter 3). However, a number of participants expressed concern that there is no guarantee the mitigation schemes will continue, and they are currently under review. Similarly, while one-off measures in Ireland were seen to address immediate problems arising from energy price increases and inflation, their temporary nature was criticised:

The temporary cost-of-living measures that were introduced in, in the last couple of budgets. Now that's not to say that we agree with those in principle. We, we don't, but we do understand and we can see in the data that they have impacted. I suppose what we're looking for is that they're converted now into being sort of an, an improved payments and that they're more long term and that they're targeted support. (Stakeholder IE)

So I think the once-off [payments], while they relieve pressure at particular pinch points of the year, it's not sufficient, [it] doesn't give stability to people. (Stakeholder IE)

Finally, participants suggested several welfare reforms to address the needs of particularly marginalised groups. For example, participants in one break-out group recommended that **Child Benefit** payments be extended to asylum seekers in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. This recommendation was included in the White Paper on Direct Provision in Ireland but has not been implemented. Specific

reforms around maintenance payments to address poverty for lone parent families were welcomed by a stakeholder in Ireland:

The recent change here where previously child maintenance, for example, was considered income for social welfare payments in terms of the means testing and that's now been removed. (Stakeholder IE)

2.3.3 Housing

While housing policy was not a strong theme in the discussions, a number of stakeholders in Ireland mentioned the need to address housing for families in general and in particular for Traveller children and children in Direct Provision:

We're compounding deprivation in respect of our housing policy. (Stakeholder IE)

One thing we haven't mentioned that I think is really critical from the Republic of Ireland's point of view is there's over 4,000 children living in in emergency accommodation. We need to really see specific targeted actions around housing. (Stakeholder IE).

2.3.4 Poverty targets, anti-poverty strategies and leadership

In addition to specific measures and supports, stakeholders also emphasised the importance of having a strong overall strategy to address child poverty and political leadership to carry it forward. Participants referenced policies in New Zealand and Scotland as examples of good practice. The lack of such a strategy was highlighted by participants in Northern Ireland:

So in Northern Ireland we don't have an anti-poverty strategy as yet. There's indications that that will be published in the near future, but as yet we don't have one. (Stakeholder NI)

Having an Anti-Poverty Act, which means that you can commit your targets to legislation, which then ... drives government to meet those targets. We have many, many strategies written and we don't see delivery on those. And we have seen in Scotland that where they have the legislation, it does seem to be prompting them to try and meet those targets. (Stakeholder NI)

While Ireland has an anti-poverty strategy, one participant called for a stronger Anti-Poverty Act:

*[At a] macro level, an **active poverty act**. There's a child poverty reduction act in in New Zealand, for example, that was introduced and this seems to be effective. And you have specific target measures and have an overseen by an Oireachtas committee or an all-party Dáil committee. (Stakeholder IE)*

One Northern Ireland stakeholder suggested that existing legislation could be used more effectively to address poverty among children and young people:

In Northern Ireland, all policy decisions are supposed to be subject to an equality impact assessment, which is a statutory duty, which departments are required to do.... we often don't see it being used to its full potential.... And then we have a piece of legislation in the North called the Children's Services Cooperation Act, which was designed to encourage interdepartmental collaboration to improve outcomes for children..... that would be really effective if that was used in something like contingency accommodation. (Stakeholder NI)

Another stakeholder made a strong plea for greater leadership and collaboration across Departments in Northern Ireland:

I don't think that we've really seen in Northern Ireland real strong, either political leadership or leadership from our civil servants in terms of strong action to deliver on poverty.... we don't see any department or minister standing up and taking ownership of that in a confident and collaborative way.what we really want to see is a collaborative approach because poverty impacts upon every area of a child's life, every area of a community's life. There's no department that won't intersect with poverty. So everybody should be coming to the table and asking what they can do, what they can bring and what they can deliver. (Stakeholder NI)

The new child poverty and wellbeing unit in Ireland was mentioned as bringing such a cross-cutting approach to tackling child poverty. Participants in two of the break-out rooms highlighted the unit as having positive potential:

Yes, it's early days, but we do very much welcome the establishment of the child poverty and wellbeing unit within the Department of the Taoiseach. So we think that has great potential. (Stakeholder IE).

2.4 CONCLUSION

While the welfare systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland share many features and are usually grouped together in comparative welfare state analysis, there are differences in the parameters of income support policies for families in terms of eligibility, coverage and payment levels. The discussion in this chapter highlighted variation in the child benefit systems and the income supports for low-income families and lone parent households. While child benefit levels are considerably higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland, an evaluation of the net impact of the full range of benefits and taxes in the two jurisdictions is beyond the scope of the current analysis. Using a microsimulation model of both systems, Doorley et al. (2024b) suggest that the value of means-tested benefits in Northern Ireland for the

full population is higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland, and the receipt of such benefits stretches much higher up in the income distribution in Northern Ireland. A similar micro-simulation analysis for households with children would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

The introduction of the two-child limit for welfare recipients in the UK was roundly criticised by stakeholders and viewed as a direct cause of increased child poverty (Stewart et al., 2023, reach a similar conclusion). Temporary measures to address the cost-of-living crisis for families have been introduced in both jurisdictions; the mitigation package in Northern Ireland and in Ireland the one-off payments (e.g. energy payments, double child benefits payments). These were welcomed by stakeholders on both sides of the border, but their temporary nature was seen as problematic by stakeholders. There was resounding support from stakeholders for a continuation of the mitigation measures currently under review in Northern Ireland. Analysis by Doorley et al. (2023) has shown that uprating core social welfare payments in line with inflation would have provided better protection against poverty compared to the impact of the 'once-off' measures.

Service provision in the areas of education and early childhood education and care also differ across the two jurisdictions (see Devlin et al., 2023b and Curristan et al., 2023). Stakeholders emphasised the importance of investment in these areas for breaking the cycle of child poverty. Some long-standing supports for children in low-income families in Northern Ireland such as free school meals and free schoolbooks have only recently been extended beyond DEIS schools in Ireland, where they have been warmly welcomed. Calls to extend the provision in Northern Ireland to make it universal and to cover holiday periods were made by Northern Ireland stakeholders.

Finally, stakeholders in both jurisdictions emphasised the importance of cross-cutting policy action to address child poverty and the need to set targets and monitor progress and hold the government to account.

CHAPTER 3

Poverty risks and poverty experiences

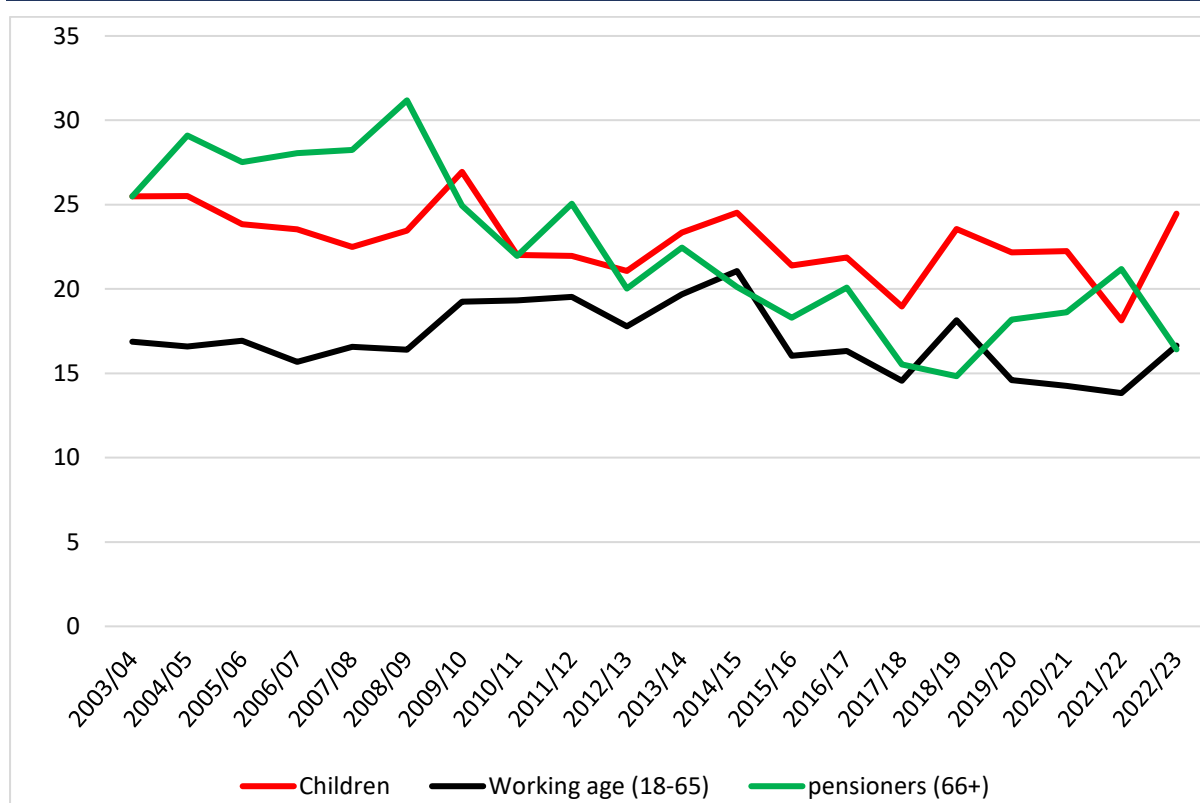
As outlined in Chapter 1, this report calculates a harmonised measure of income poverty and material deprivation, which allows us to compare poverty across the island of Ireland. The first step of the following analysis compares trends in child poverty in the two jurisdictions from the early 2000s up until 2023, the latest data available at the time of writing. The analysis then turns to identifying the children that are most at risk of poverty in the two jurisdictions based on the most recent data in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This quantitative comparison is then complemented by the results of the consultation with key stakeholders on the groups they see as being most at risk. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the experiences of children living in poverty from the consultation.

3.1 TRENDS IN POVERTY ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

The comparison of trends covers a period of significant economic change, with the economic boom in the early 2000s ending in 2008 when the financial crisis brought a period of austerity and labour market decline. This lasted until 2013 and was then followed by a period of recovery. The extent of the economic boom-and-bust was much stronger in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. For example, the rise and fall in employment was much more dramatic (see Hingre et al., 2023, Figure 1.1). The period of analysis also encompasses the pandemic during 2020 and 2021.

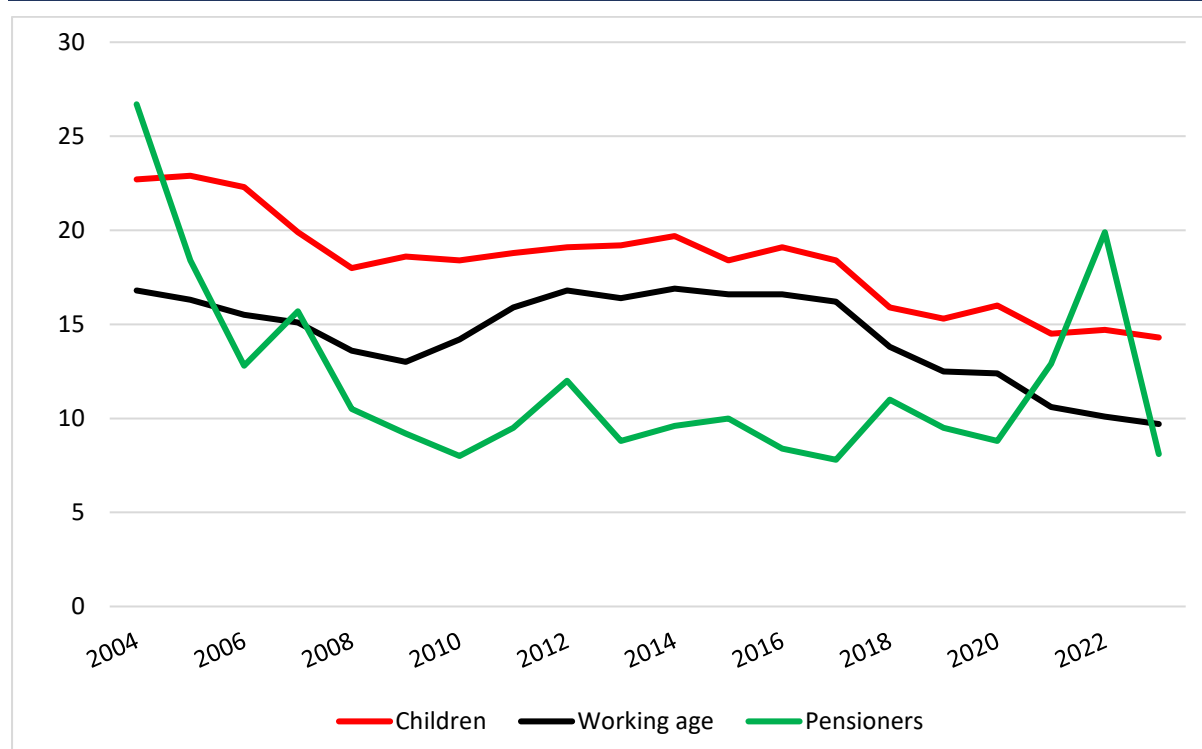
Figure 3.1 presents the trends in income poverty in Northern Ireland by broad age group: this represents the proportion of each group that has an income less than 60 per cent of median equivalised income. While child poverty rates declined between 2003 and 2009, the proportion of children in income poverty remained higher than those of the working-age population throughout that period. During this period, the percentage of pensioners at risk of poverty increased, reaching a peak in 2009 before falling below the level of children.

Children have remained the group with the highest risk of poverty since 2012, except for 2021/2022. In 2023, the rate for child income poverty was 24.3 per cent compared to 17 and 18 per cent for working-age persons and pensioners respectively. Over the full period, while income poverty of the older population had declined over time, this is not true of child and working-age poverty.

FIGURE 3.1 INCOME POVERTY BY AGE GROUP, NORTHERN IRELAND (%)

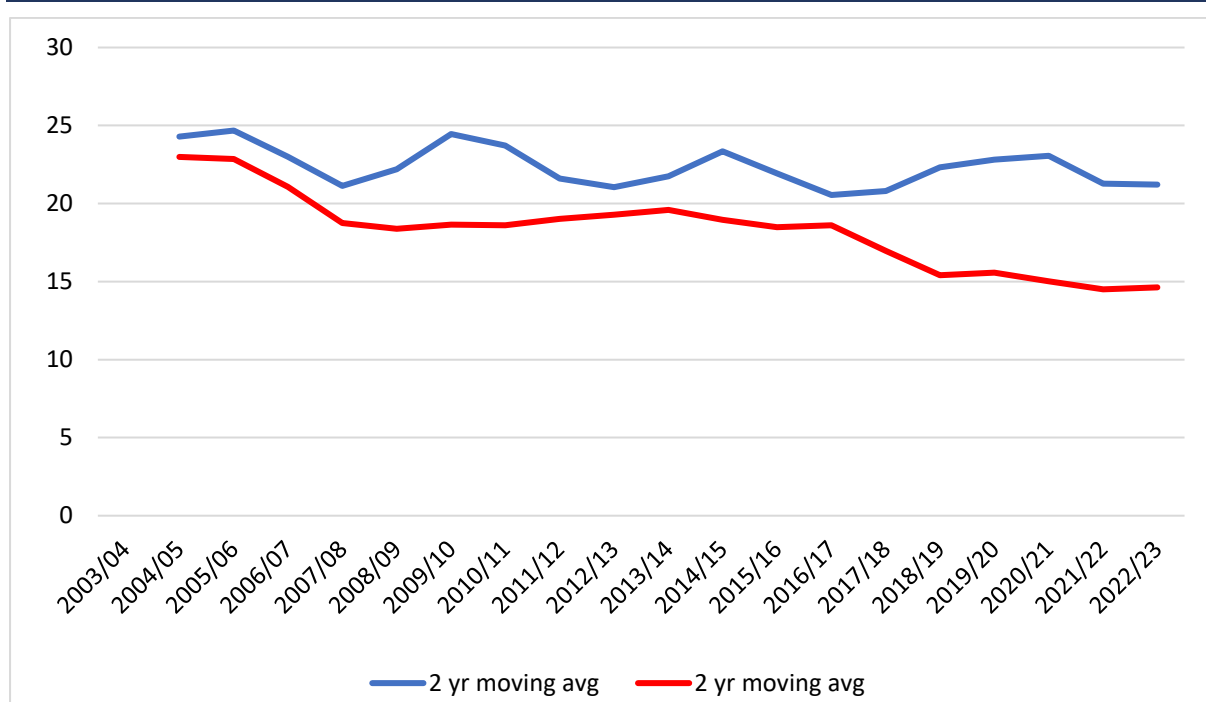
Source: Authors' analysis of Family Resources Survey.

The difference between income poverty risk by age group is markedly wider in Ireland than in Northern Ireland (Figure 3.2). Income poverty risk for pensioners declined dramatically from 2004 to 2010 on foot of policy intervention. This brought them from being the age group most at risk of income poverty to those least at risk (see Roantree et al., 2024 for longer term trends). Since 2005, children have been the age group experiencing the highest risk of income poverty in Ireland. The one exception to this was in 2022 when there was a steep rise in pensioner poverty, which has been attributed to the failure of pension rates to keep pace with median income growth in preceding budgets (Roantree and Doorley, 2023). Viewing the period as a whole, income poverty risk decreases over time for children, dropping from 23 per cent in 2004 and 2005 to below 15 per cent for the last three years since 2021. It is noticeable that income poverty rates do not fluctuate greatly during the period of the financial crisis despite the very substantial rise in unemployment and the marked decline in household income. This is because with a relative income measure, if household income declines (or rises) for most households the poverty threshold will also decline (or rise) meaning that the widespread change in income is not properly captured (see Watson et al., 2016; Roantree et al., 2021).

FIGURE 3.2 INCOME POVERTY BY AGE GROUP, IRELAND (%)

Source: Authors' analysis of SILC.

For ease of comparison, trends in child poverty in Northern Ireland and Ireland are placed side-by-side in Figure 3.3. Due to a small number of cases in Northern Ireland in each year of the FRS, a two-year moving average of income poverty is presented. Northern Ireland sees a higher rate of child income poverty over the whole period. The gap between child income poverty rates is small (2-3 percentage points) in the initial period from 2003/2004 to 2007/2008 but then begins to widen as rates of poverty increase in Northern Ireland but remain stable in Ireland, before returning to similar trends from 2011/2012. The trends diverge again after 2015/2016, where the two-year moving average in Northern Ireland increases while it decreases steadily in Ireland.

FIGURE 3.3 INCOME POVERTY AMONG CHILDREN, NI AND IE (2 YEAR MOVING AVERAGE) (%)

Source: Authors' analysis of FRS and SILC.

The analysis now switches to material deprivation. As outlined in Chapter 2 this is a limited measure that includes only the five items that were available for both jurisdictions, and are not those that have been selected as best measuring deprivation in Ireland (Maître et al., 2006). Figure 3.4 shows the proportion of children (in households) lacking two or more of the five items.

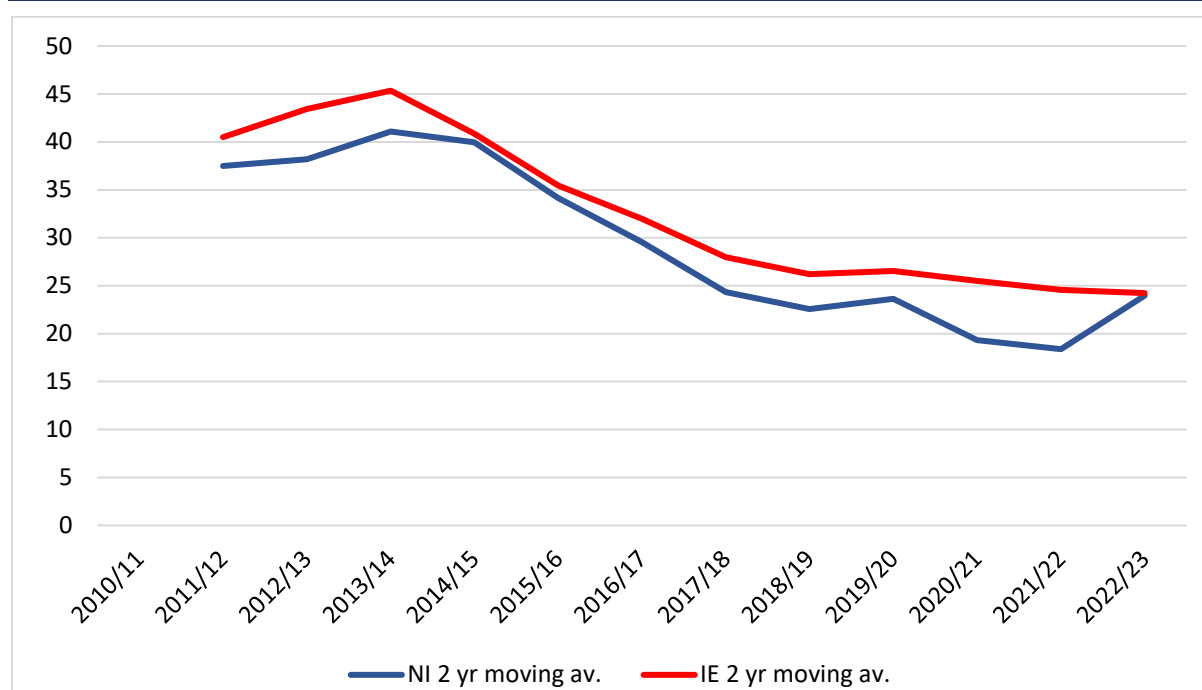
The trend analysis for material deprivation begins at a later date than income poverty due to the lack of data for Northern Ireland in the earlier period. Rates of material deprivation for children in Northern Ireland and Ireland follow similar trends over time, both increasing from 2011 to 2014, corresponding to the Great Recession and European Debt Crisis, before decreasing substantially from a peak of 46 per cent in Ireland and 42 per cent in Northern Ireland. Material deprivation rates in both countries decrease in parallel from 2014 until 2018 and diverge from this point as Irish figures stabilised while Northern Ireland's figures continued to fall until 2021/2022 before rising again in the latest two-year period. This five-item measure does not show the increase in material deprivation between 2022 and 2023¹⁵ in Ireland, which is observed using a 10-item scale (see Roantree et al., 2024) or 11-item scale (CSO, 2024). The latter Irish measures include additional

¹⁵ On the 5-item scale child deprivation in 2021 was 24.9 per cent; 2022 (24.2 per cent); and 2023 (24.2 per cent). With the 11 items measure it was: 2020 (18.9 per cent); 2021 (17.3 per cent); 2022 (18.8 per cent); 2023 (21.4 per cent).

essential and social participation items, which are more likely to capture the full extent of child deprivation and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

A key difference between Figure 3.4 and Figure 3.3 is that, while Northern Ireland had a higher percentage of children in income poverty, Ireland has a somewhat higher level of material deprivation. This pattern is robust to changing the number of items in the material deprivation measure.¹⁶ The gap in material deprivation is relatively narrow for much of the period, and has disappeared in the latest period. Analysis of the average deprivation across income quintiles in both surveys show that families in Ireland have been less able to convert income into an adequate standard of living compared to families at the same position in the income distribution in Northern Ireland, due to a higher cost of living. Figure A.3.1 in the Appendix demonstrates that indeed, across the income distribution, the mean deprivation within each income quintile is higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, except for the top quintile.

FIGURE 3.4 CHILD MATERIAL DEPRIVATION RATE (SHORT SCALE), NI AND IE % LACKING TWO OR MORE ITEMS (2 YEAR MOVING AVERAGE)



Source: Authors' analysis of FRS and SILC.

Note: Deprivation rate is lacking at least two items out of a list of five items.

¹⁶ I.e. we tested whether dropping each item in turn from the scale changed the pattern.

3.2 WHICH CHILDREN ARE MOST AT RISK OF POVERTY? EVIDENCE FROM THE SILC AND THE FRS

In this section the income poverty risks of different groups of children are compared descriptively (statistical models are carried out in Chapter 4). In 2022/2023, 21.2 per cent of children in Northern Ireland (NI) are income poor compared to 14.6 per cent in Ireland (IE) (see Table 3.1). In both jurisdictions, income poverty increases with children's age, but the age differences are wider in Ireland. In both countries the 12-17 age group is at the highest risk of income poverty, at 22.6 per cent (NI) and 17.3 per cent (IE). This may be an artefact of the equivalence scale, though some of the stakeholders argue that children of this age have greater needs.¹⁷

Income poverty by number of children in the household is non-linear in both jurisdictions: households with two children show the lowest risk of poverty, followed by one-child households, and is far higher in households with three or more children. The higher poverty rates among one-child households are likely to be related to lone parenthood as this group are more likely to have smaller families (Russell and Maître, 2024; Stewart et al., 2023); this is taken into account in the models in Chapter 4. The relationship between family size and income poverty is stronger in Northern Ireland which is consistent with the discussion of policy in Chapter 1. In Northern Ireland, 32.2 per cent of children in households with three or more children are income poor, while in Ireland this figure is lower at 23 per cent.

Income poverty risks are much higher among lone parent households than two-parent households in both jurisdictions. Children in households with one adult and three or more children have the highest risk of income poverty in both jurisdictions; more than 50 per cent of children in households with this makeup are income poor in Northern Ireland. In Ireland this figure is lower, but still shows a high risk of poverty (32 per cent). In Ireland children in households with two adults and three or more children are the second highest risk category overall, while in Northern Ireland children in 'other' categories of households with children are more at risk. The 'other' category includes households with three or more adults and children, and so captures larger households; the adults can include children aged 18 and over.

Children living in households who own their own homes are at the lowest risk of poverty (14 per cent and 7 per cent for Northern Ireland and IE). Children in rental housing are at a much higher risk of poverty, with those in the social rented sector

¹⁷ As noted above those aged 14 and over are treated as an additional adult in the equivalence scale and given a value of 66. Therefore they will be classified as having a lower equivalised income.

having the largest proportion of children at risk of income poverty in both jurisdictions.

Children in households where at least one person is classified as having a disability are at a much higher risk of poverty, and this proportion is greater in Northern Ireland than Ireland (26 per cent compared to 18 per cent).

Qualifications of the HRP (Household Reference Person) also impact on poverty risk. Children in households where the HRP has no qualifications are at a much higher risk of income poverty. This risk decreases as qualifications increase; there is a similar risk (below 8 per cent) for both countries where the HRP has a degree or above qualification. However, we saw in Chapter 1 a lower proportion of parents have a degree in Northern Ireland.

Having a HRP out of work is associated with a much higher risk of income poverty for children in both jurisdictions. The risk is particularly high for Northern Ireland, where 55 per cent of children in households where the HRP is not in work are income poor, compared to 35 per cent in Ireland. Children in households with no working-age adults at work have the highest risk of income poverty across all the groups examined, with a high risk of poverty in both Northern Ireland and Ireland – 59 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.

TABLE 3.1 CHILD INCOME POVERTY BY SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC (%), NI AND IE

	Northern Ireland (2021/2022 and 2022/2023)	Ireland (2022 and 2023)
Total child Income Poverty	21.2	14.6
Child's Age (%)		
0 to 4	19.9	11.6
5 to 11	20.9	14.2
12 to 17	22.6	17.3
Number of children per household		
One child	17.9	10.8
Two children	14.0	9.4
Three and more children	32.2	23.0
Household type		
1 adult with 1-2 children	23.2	19.8
1 adult with 3+ children	53.0	32.0
2 adults with 1-2 children	12.4	8.1
2 adults with 3+ children	19.2	21.9
Other households with children	30.7	11.6
Housing tenure		
Owned outright/ buying with a mortgage	14.1	7.3
Social rented sector tenants	42.0	29.5
Rented privately	32.2	26.6
Disability in the household		
No one is disabled	19.0	13.6
Someone is disabled	25.9	18.4
HRP Education		
Degree or above	7.6	6.4
Below degree level	21.5	22.9
No qualifications	42.0	43.2
HRP ILO		
At work	14.7	8.1
Not at work	55.0	35.3
Household work composition		
At least one adult in work	14.7	11.6
No adults in work	59.4	49.5
Observations	1,876	4,731

Source: Authors' analysis of FRS and SILC. Individuals aged under 18 only.

A similar comparison is carried out for material deprivation. The total material deprivation rate for children in both Northern Ireland and Ireland sits at around 24 per cent. Like the table for at risk of poverty, children in the 12-17 age category have a higher rate of material deprivation. Children in the 0-4 age category have the lowest rate of deprivation, though these numbers do not vary substantially between age groups, particularly in Northern Ireland (23.5 per cent v 24.6 per cent). This will be investigated further in the models in Chapter 4.

Like the results for poverty risk, the relationship between material deprivation with the number of children in Northern Ireland is non-linear. Children in families where there are two children have the lowest rate of deprivation, while those in three-children and over families have by far the highest rate. In Ireland a different pattern is observed, whereby material deprivation decreases with family size. This unexpected finding is assessed further in Chapter 4.

Lone parent households have a much higher rate of material deprivation than two-parent households in both jurisdictions. Households with one adult and three or more children have the highest rate, particularly in Ireland where 81.9 per cent of children in these households experience material deprivation. In Northern Ireland this figure sits at 69.3 per cent.

There is a higher rate of material deprivation for children in rented accommodation, either privately or in the social housing sector, mirroring the results for risk of poverty. Disability also is associated with a higher material deprivation rate, with 41.5 per cent (NI) and 37.3 per cent (IE) of children in households with a disabled person experiencing material deprivation. Lack of qualifications or having a HRP out of work is associated with a higher rate of material deprivation in both countries; and children in households where no adults are at work have a very high rate of material deprivation (64.4 per cent and 72.9 per cent for Northern Ireland and Ireland respectively).

TABLE 3.2 MATERIAL DEPRIVATION BY CHILDREN'S SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS (%), NI AND IE

	Northern Ireland (2021/2022 and 2022/2023)	Republic of Ireland (2022 and 2023)
Total child deprivation rate	24.0	23.6
Age of Child (%)		
0 to 4	23.5	19.7
5 to 11	23.7	23.5
12 to 17	24.6	26.5
Number of children per household		
One child	24.3	27.2
Two children	20.5	23.4
Three and more children	28.1	21.5
Household type		
1 adult with 1-2 children	41.7	53.6
1 adult with 3+ children	69.3	81.9
2 adults with 1-2 children	14.2	18.9
2 adults with 3+ children	7.3	14.4
Other households with children	32.7	25.9
Housing tenure		
Owned outright/ buying with a mortgage	12.3	11.7
Social rented sector tenants	54.9	67.2
Rented privately	44.0	24.8
Disability in the household		
No one is disabled	15.6	19.7
Someone is disabled	41.5	37.3
HRP Education		
Degree or above	7.9	12.2
Below degree level	27.2	34.2
No qualifications	43.7	56.6
HRP ILO		
At work	16.5	17.4
Not at work	60.7	43.3
Household work composition		
At least one adult in work	17.0	19.2
No adults in work	64.4	72.9
Observations	1,876	4,731

Source: Authors' analysis of FRS and SILC. Individuals aged under 18 only.

3.3 STAKEHOLDER EVIDENCE OF CHILDREN MOST VULNERABLE TO POVERTY

Participants in the consultation represented NGOs that are supporting families in poverty or other social groups that are marginalised in society, as well as researchers and policymakers. Stakeholders were asked to consider whether the findings of the quantitative research shown in Chapter 3 reflected their experience on the ground, and which children and families they found to be most at risk of

poverty. They were also asked to discuss the everyday realities of living in poverty, as reported in Section 3.4.

Discussions with stakeholders confirmed the importance of the factors that were analysed in the quantitative data – i.e. family composition (number and age of children; lone/two parent), disability, housing situation and labour market exclusion – in shaping the risk of child poverty in both jurisdictions.

3.3.1 Family composition

In terms of family composition, participants in all three break-out groups and from both sides of the border highlighted the risk faced by lone parents and their children. These were related to barriers in the labour market including low pay and childcare access:

So the families are, the children that we would hear that are most vulnerable to poverty would be lone parent families and their children. (Stakeholder IE)

Even for two parents. It's very difficult. So we need to accept that it's more difficult for one parents. (Stakeholder IE)

People on Universal Credit [are vulnerable to poverty] since they are definitely on low income... Of those people in Universal Credit, the worst affected are ... as far as we know, lone parent households. So there is only one possible income. (Stakeholder NI)

[we] would say to address in-work poverty, to increase the earning disregard for lone parents. We have numbers of lone parents who work, but they're caught in traps. (Stakeholder IE)

Age and number of children were also referenced in all of the discussions. Stakeholders highlighted the specific needs of those with very young children, including the costs of baby formula and childcare, and the additional costs of older children:

An increasing difficulty is for families with babies, that they seem to be having a lot of more difficulty with the cost of formula and everything like that. That's been coming up quite a bit. (Stakeholder All Island)

But then if maybe they had a child under two, there was the childcare factor. I think, you know, we have had a lot of issues around our childcare strategy and lack of childcare infrastructure. (Stakeholder NI)

We've looked at the cost of kind of a healthy basket for different family types But it's the families with the older child in particular that experience the

most costs and have, you know, more difficult decisions to make then around how they spend their money. (Stakeholder All Island)

Family size was raised more frequently by stakeholders in Northern Ireland and discussed in the context of the two-child limit introduced for Universal Credit payments and other 'legacy' benefits in the UK (see Chapter 2):

Almost half of children in relative poverty in Northern Ireland live in families where there are three or more children. (Stakeholder NI)

3.3.2 Disability

The experiences of the stakeholders also mirrored the statistical analysis above in terms of the increased poverty risks facing households where someone has a disability. Stakeholders pointed to the additional costs faced by these households and the barriers they experienced in the labour market:

So we know that in Ireland, people who have a disability or live with the person who has a disability are among the subgroups most likely to experience poverty. And that's I think for a number of reasons. We have one of the highest disability employment gaps in Europe... which means a lot of people with disabilities are relying on social welfare. But the current disability allowance payments we have don't take any account of the fact that there are very high costs of having a disability.... the unavoidable costs you have relating to equipment, medication, higher heating and electricity bills. (Stakeholder IE)

Even if one parent was in work, but maybe there was a disabled parent in the household. That was about 9,000 of the, of the whole total of 107,000 children in poverty, in that situation. (Stakeholder NI)

3.3.3 Additional groups vulnerable to poverty

The discussion among stakeholders also identified other children and families that faced a high risk of poverty that are not identified in the quantitative data. These were:

- young people leaving care;
- migrants/ asylum seekers / new arrivals;
- Travellers, Roma and other ethnic minority groups;
- homeless families.

Stakeholders in Ireland highlighted the risk factors facing these groups including the unequal access to services for some minority groups, for example children in Direct Provision and migrants on work permits:

Traveller Children and [children living in] Direct Provision ... have a lack of access to adequate housing, early childhood education and care and access to a safe place to play. (Stakeholder IE)

We're most concerned about children seeking international protection, children living in IPAS centres and direct provision who are only entitled to 38 euro a week and not the child benefit allowance. So obviously that's having a huge impact on their access to, well, to basic food and clothing, sanitation, laundry, educational needs, social activities, extracurricular activities, just they're very, very fundamental basic needs of food and healthcare. (Stakeholder IE)

Just also on migrant children, the UK government has this law about no recourse to public funds for people who come here on work permits. And that means that if a family split up, for example, if there's domestic violence or something, the, the women and children are really trapped because mostly the visa is the man's.....[Extending] child benefit to international protection applicants. That would be really good. (Stakeholder NI)

3.3.4 Data and information gaps

These discussions highlighted the limitations of existing data used to monitor poverty in society; similar issues were faced in both Ireland and Northern Ireland:

You know, we have the headline data, but there's a lot of experiences underneath that, that we might not know whether that's Traveller or Roma or a different forms of ethnicity or.... some of the more detailed experience of lone parents. (Stakeholder IE)

There's a, a real lack of disaggregated data around the different kind of equality groups and knowing which children are experiencing this. In my own areas Traveller children, which is a really good, a really good example. We would say similar themes with minority ethnic children as well. (Stakeholder NI)

3.4 EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY

Quantitative analysis of low income and material deprivation can provide evidence of the way poverty is distributed across children in society; however it does not provide a picture of the lived experiences of these children. Stakeholders provided insights into the challenges faced by children and their families living in poverty.

Rising prices of food, energy and housing were referenced by many participants:

We spoke to 250 women here about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on their lives. And they talked about food insecurity was a big finding and also issues in relation to the cold, so an inability to put their heat on. So we had

issues like the affordability of food, which meant that they were relying on cheaper, more junk food, which is obviously implications for their health and obesity and diabetes and all those things. Issues around heating and cold and damp homes. (Stakeholder NI)

One feature of living in poverty noted is the constant juggling of competing bills. Stakeholders were also cognisant of the pressures living in poverty put on parents' mental health and their parenting, and feelings of social exclusion and isolation:

Then you've got, the financial worry and all of that, it's impacting on their ability to be the very best parent that they can be..... We know it affects physical health, we know it impacts physical, mental health for children as well as parents. (Stakeholder IE)

We would help with food, heating, lighting, so the very basics, yes. And then the knock-on effect that has on everything really on their lives. Like, so there is a huge feeling from parents and from children as well as that they're they feel isolated from their peers. (Stakeholder IE)

They're trying to juggle expenses, you know, to put food on the table. What do I pay? what has to give? Is this the utility bill this week or this month? Is it the rent? Is it the mortgage? It's a constant juggling and wear and tear, that psychological wear and tear that that parents and guardians are experiencing as a result. (Stakeholder NI)

The steps taken by parents to protect their children from the impact of poverty were also highlighted by stakeholders:

What we're finding in our services when we're dealing with parents who are in these situations, maybe on lower incomes, is that very often it's them that will go without to try and ensure that their children doesn't go without.... we can see them in the dark with blankets around them on their Zoom meeting because they've turned the energy, the heating off whilst their child is out of school. It'll come back on again in the evening when they're home. (Stakeholder IE)

What we often find, and what women are often referred to as the shock absorbers of poverty.... they'll take on the poverty that exists in the house to make sure that the children have enough to eat or the homes are heated when the children are there, but not when they're not. (Stakeholder NI)

Despite their parents' best efforts to protect them, children in poor households were having to go without things that other children could access. For example,

they were excluded from extracurricular and social activities. One participant noted that this was exacerbated in rural households where there was a lack of transport options outside of school hours:

And then they [women] talked a lot about ... the things that their children miss out on. So you know, those extra opportunities that maybe other children get in school, whether that's the extracurricular activities, after school clubs, things like that. You know, they mentioned things like going swimming or gymnastics and or even going to the cinema. Those sort of things were totally out of the picture because they just couldn't afford the extra costs. (Stakeholder NI)

It's not just the material poverty, it's the opportunity poverty and it's the opportunity poverty of kids not being able to stay for after school clubs because they're, they're not getting, they, they can't stay because there's no transport home. So they, they can't take part in hockey or sport or games outside of what's offered in the 9:00 to 5:00 where there's transport to and from the school available for them. (Stakeholder NI)

The consultation discussions also underlined how inadequate income was leading families into debt, and in Northern Ireland this could be 'dangerous debt':

The five week wait [for Universal Credit] and of course one of the byproducts of that is families getting into insecure dangerous debt, I mean paramilitary debt and illegal lenders across society, using that. And then the long-term impact that has not just on the parent who maybe has entered into that debt, but what that means for the child as well. (Stakeholder NI)

People on low incomes, you know, if they don't have enough money, then they're forced in a lot of cases to borrow from either very high interest places, like buy now pay later, or credit cards or whatever. And also unfortunately in Northern Ireland from very dangerous lenders like paramilitary groups. (Stakeholder NI)

3.4.1 Urban/rural differences

Participants were also prompted to consider whether there were any regional or urban/rural differences in the risks and experiences of poverty. The feedback from participants mainly focused on the additional costs faced by those in rural areas for transport, and worse access to both public and voluntary/community support services:

The support network in rural areas is, is fewer and far between. So it's harder to reach out for additional support. The, you know, the level of charitable support is, is much reduced in, in very many rural areas. I think the cost of rural isolation, in terms of access to transport, adds an additional cost onto

the budget, so it costs more to get anywhere, whether it's going by private taxi, the diesel cost or the cost if you have access to public transport, which is few and far between in rural Northern Ireland. (Stakeholder NI)

Transport is a big thing when we think about rural communities, but it's also then the knock on impact is that and you have to buy your food in the local convenience store with higher prices and you can't get to a supermarket or people are living in food deserts. (Stakeholder IE)

For the parents in rural [areas], it would be a big thing access, lack of transport really limits their ability to access things like food banks. So that's something that we hear a lot about..... there's a real lack of opportunities for clubs and activities for their children. And then again goes back to the kind of mental health children quite isolated with no travel and opportunities and then the cost of transport. So during the summer holidays, that was a major thing that was coming up. (Stakeholder NI)

Those living in rural areas were also exposed to higher heating costs because of a lack of choice of energy providers:

in Northern Ireland, like it's nearly 2/3 of households are on oil heating and a lot of those are in rural areas. The price fluctuates but the issue with the oil heating is that you have to have that larger amount of money upfront in order to be able to afford to get a fill of oil.... whereas you can top up your gas meter maybe for a £10 or £5 or whatever.... And those in rural areas are very, very trapped into oil heating because there is no gas [supply] in a lot of the rural areas here. (Stakeholder NI)

A number of participants highlighted the problem of intergenerational poverty faced by families and children living in urban areas of high deprivation:

I suppose one particular group that we are concerned about as well is.... those suffering from intergenerational poverty, intergenerational disadvantage, and I suppose the lack of supports that are available, for those children and their families to try and break that cycle. (Stakeholder IE)

So if you were born in an area and lived as a child in poverty, and 20 years later, if you were having children of your own and you stayed in that area, your children are now going to be experiencing similar chances of poverty. So that's one of the biggest things we would certainly see. You know, we work in we work in five, the five most disadvantaged areas in the country... all, all urban areas with historic issues around, lots of issues around poverty around and that there's a lot of historic things. (Stakeholder IE)

3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented both quantitative data and qualitative evidence on the characteristics of children and their families who are most at risk of poverty. There was agreement across both sources of evidence that family composition, disability and labour market exclusion were significant risk factors for poverty in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. The quantitative analysis also highlighted the increased risk of parents with lower levels of education, a factor that did not arise in the consultation discussions. The qualitative evidence highlighted a number of additional groups not adequately covered by the data, namely members of minority ethnic groups including Travellers and Roma children; children and young people in care and leaving care; and those living in rural areas.

CHAPTER 4

Models of income poverty and deprivation in Ireland and Northern Ireland

Chapter 3 looked at the descriptive statistics for the income poverty and material deprivation rates for children for the recent period for Northern Ireland and Ireland. Some similarities in the pattern and strength of association between child and household characteristics and poverty were observed across both jurisdictions. In this chapter, formal statistical models are employed to analyse the relationship between these characteristics and child poverty in each jurisdiction, considering all these characteristics simultaneously. First, we explore these relationships over the period from the early 2000s to the present for each jurisdiction separately. We then use a more restricted version of the data¹⁸ set to carry out a combined analysis of both jurisdictions; this allows us to see which factors are most important and whether the strength of the relationship differs between Northern Ireland and Ireland. For that analysis we use the most recent available data for 2019-2022, combining a number of years to ensure sufficient numbers for Northern Ireland.

4.1 FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILD INCOME POVERTY IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND

4.1.1 Northern Ireland

In Table 4.1, we present the factors influencing income poverty of children in Northern Ireland from 2003/2004 to 2022/2023.¹⁹ The results are presented as marginal effects. These tell us how much the probability of an outcome changes for each independent variable compared to the reference group, holding all other independent variables constant.

Dividing the period into distinct parts of the economic cycle, Model 1 shows that there was no distinct period effect in the likelihood of children being income poor, as none of the marginal effects are significant, as also depicted in Figure 3.3.

Older children (aged 12 to 17) are more likely to be income poor (4.2 percentage points higher) compared to younger children (aged 0 to 4), while the likelihood is lower for children aged 5 to 11 (1.9 percentage points lower). Children in lone-parent households are 8.7 percentage points more likely to be income poor

¹⁸ It is not permitted by the CSO to combine the more detailed Researcher Micro Datafile with the UK data. Therefore, we must use the SILC Anonymised Microdata File for this analysis; this contains fewer details on variables such as the age of youngest child, and does not include the most recent wave of data (2023) for Ireland.

¹⁹ We do not control for housing status as this can also be seen as an outcome of household income rather than a predictor of poverty.

compared to those in two-adult households, and it is 5.6 percentage points higher for children in other types of households. The likelihood of being income poor increases significantly with the number of children in the household, being 13.5 percentage points higher for households with three or more children compared to those with only one child.

The risk of income poverty is 2.3 percentage points higher for children in households where someone has a disability compared to households where there is no disability. There is a strong association between the education level of the Household Reference Person (HRP) and income poverty. Compared to children where the HRP has a degree or higher qualification, those with a HRP having below-degree qualifications or no qualifications are 14.2 percentage points and 27 percentage points more likely to experience income poverty, respectively.

Model 2 adds controls for the employment status of working-age adults in the household. Where the HRP is not employed, children have a risk of income poverty that is 19.3 percentage points higher than where the HRP is employed. Even when HRP employment status is controlled, children in workless households in Northern Ireland have a risk of being income poor that is 10.4 percentage points higher than children in households where at least one working-age adult is employed. When employment status is controlled, a number of other factors become non-significant or change. For example, the probability associated with disability and lone parenthood become negative. This indicates that higher risks of poverty for these groups operate through exclusion from the labour market. The lower risk for children aged 5-11 also disappears when employment status of adults in the household is controlled, suggesting that the reason they fare somewhat better than those under 5 is that there is more likely to be someone in employment. The higher poverty rate of older children remains. As noted earlier, this may partly reflect the measurement of income poverty where children aged 14-17 are given a higher weighting in the equivalence scale. The higher rates of poverty for children in bigger families persist even when employment status of the HRP and household is taken into account.

TABLE 4.1 FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD INCOME POVERTY, NI 2003-2023 (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS)

	Model 1	Model 2
Boom (2003-2006/2007): ref		
Recession (2007/2008-2012/2013)	0.001	-0.001
Recovery (2013/2014-2019/2020)	0.013	0.015
COVID and recovery (2020/2021-2022/2023)	0.006	0.020
0 to 4 (ref)		
5 to 11	-0.019**	-0.006
12 to 17	0.042***	0.053***
Two adults with children (ref)		
One adult with children	0.087***	-0.035***
Other households with children	0.056***	0.040**
1 child (ref)		
2 children	0.022**	0.022**
3+ children	0.135***	0.116***
No disability in family (ref)		
In a family where someone is disabled	0.023*	-0.043***
HRP degree or above (ref)		
Qualification below degree level	0.142***	0.127***
No qualifications	0.270***	0.185***
HRP at work (ref)		
HRP Not a work		0.193***
At least one adult at work (ref)		
No adults in work (workless)		0.104***
Observations	22,314	22,314

Source: FRS 2003-2023.

Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

4.1.2 Ireland

Table 4.2 presents the analysis for Ireland. The likelihood of income poverty increases with both the age and number of children (Model 1). The higher likelihood of income poverty of older children compared to younger children appears stronger in Ireland than Northern Ireland and this will be tested directly below. Children in lone-parent households have a 19.5 percentage points higher probability of being income poor compared to children in two-adult households (again a higher probability than in Northern Ireland). Children in 'other households' also have higher risk of income poverty.

Children in households with a member with a disability have a 7.1 percentage points higher risk of being income poor than those in households without a member with disabilities (Model 1). This effect becomes non-significant when labour market status is controlled, indicating that labour market exclusion plays a role in the higher poverty rates for these families. The educational qualifications of

the HRP are a very strong predictor of income poverty in Ireland. The probability of income poverty for children in households where the HRP has no qualifications is 30.2 percentage points higher than for children living with a HRP with degree level qualifications.

There is little relationship between income poverty and time period, despite the period of boom and bust covered; this underlines the limitations of the relative income measure in periods of significant economic change (see Chapter 1).

Model 2 adds controls for the employment status of adults in the household. For children in jobless households in Ireland, the likelihood of being income poor is 27 percentage points higher than for children in households with at least one working-age adult. Non-employment of the HRP is also associated with increased income poverty (10.8 percentage points times more) even if others in the household are employed. The employment status of adults in the household significantly influences the poverty risk for children of different ages and for single parents.

TABLE 4.2 FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD INCOME POVERTY, IE 2004-2023 (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS)

	Model 1	Model 2
Boom (2003-2006/2007): ref		
Recession (2007/2008-2012/2013)	-0.001	-0.042***
Recovery (2013/2014-2019/2020)	0.011	-0.016
COVID and recovery (2020/2021-2022/2023)	0.008	-0.002
0 to 4 (ref)		
5 to 11	0.007	0.021***
12 to 17	0.059***	0.086***
Two adults with children (ref)		
One adult with children	0.195***	0.052***
Other households with children	0.027**	0.028***
1 child (ref)		
2 children	0.032***	0.027***
3+ children	0.123***	0.089***
No disability in family (ref)		
Someone in family is disabled	0.071***	0.003
HRP degree or above (ref)		
Qualification below degree level	0.103***	0.059***
No qualifications	0.302***	0.141***
HRP at work (ref)		
HRP Not a work		0.108***
At least one adult at work (ref)		
No adults in work (workless)		0.270***
Observations	59,028	59,028

Source: SILC 2004-2023.

Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

4.2 FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILD DEPRIVATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND

The same analysis is applied to material deprivation in Northern Ireland and Ireland. The characteristics used are the same as those for income poverty, but the period covered is shorter. As noted in Section 1.4.2, the deprivation indicators common to both surveys are only available from 2010/2011 onwards.

4.2.1 Northern Ireland

The logistic regression results expressed as marginal effects in Table 4.3 indicate that, compared to the period of the Great Recession, the likelihood of children experiencing deprivation has decreased over time in Northern Ireland (Models 1 and 2).

In Northern Ireland young children aged 0-4 years (the reference group) are more likely to experience material deprivation than the two older age groups. While

there is no difference between households with one or two children, children in larger families with three or more children are 5.4 percentage points more likely to face material deprivation than children in one-child households (Model 2). This was also true in the income poverty analysis. Children in lone-parent households have a 27 percentage higher risk of experiencing material deprivation than those in two-parent households.

Additionally, children in households with a person with disabilities have a 14.7 percentage points higher risk of deprivation compared to those without a disabled person in the household (Model 1). The education level of the Household Reference Person (HRP) strongly influences the likelihood of child deprivation (Model 1).

In Model 2, controls for the employment status of adults are introduced. Children living in a household where the HRP is not employed are 7.5 percentage points more likely to be deprived as those where the HRP is in work. Additionally, the probability of deprivation for children living in workless households is 17.8 percentage points higher compared to households with at least one person in work.

Interestingly, social and demographic characteristics remain significant predictors even when labour market status is controlled. The disability effect is stronger for deprivation than low income and remains significant in Model 2. This suggests that income is an imperfect measure for this group, as it is not adjusted for the additional needs and costs experienced by people with a disability (Doorley et al., forthcoming).

TABLE 4.3 FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD DEPRIVATION (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS), NI 2010-2023

	Model 1	Model 2
Recession (2007/2008-2012/2013: ref)		
Recovery (2013/2014-2019/2020)	-0.070***	-0.070***
COVID and recovery (2020/2021-2022/2023)	-0.170***	-0.158***
0 to 4 (ref)		
5 to 11	-0.060***	-0.045***
12 to 17	-0.065***	-0.053***
Two adults with children (ref)		
One adult with children	0.270***	0.160***
Other households with children	0.081***	0.068***
1 child (ref)		
2 children	0.007	0.008
3+ children	0.054***	0.037**
In a family where no one is disabled (ref)		
In a family where someone is disabled	0.147***	0.092***
HRP degree or above (ref)		
Qualification below degree level	0.168***	0.147***
No qualifications	0.308***	0.233***
HRP at work (ref)		
HRP Not a work		0.075*
At least one adult at work (ref)		
No adults in work (workless)		0.178***
Observations	13,633	13,633

Source: FRS 2010-2023.

Note: We kept the labelling 'Recession from 2007/2008-2012/2013' while the reference period for the deprivation measure was from 2010/2011 to 2012/2013 as the deprivation items were only available from 2010/2011. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

4.2.2 Ireland

In Ireland, like in Northern Ireland, there has been a downward trend in the likelihood of child deprivation compared to the period of the Great Recession, as illustrated in Table 4.4.

Unlike the results for income in Ireland, young children are more at risk of deprivation than older children (as the risk for other two age groups is 2 percentage points lower); however, this becomes non-significant when the work status of adults in the household is controlled (Model 2), suggesting it is due to lower employment in households with very young children.

Similar to Northern Ireland, children in lone parent households and those in households with three or more children face the highest likelihood of deprivation (Model 1). The presence of someone with disability is associated with a

18.8 percentage points higher likelihood of deprivation compared to households where no one has a disability. Lower education levels are a very strong predictor of children's material deprivation, with the risk of deprivation being 40.5 percentage points higher where the HRP has no qualifications compared to those with degree level qualifications (Model 1).

These associations between lone parenthood, disability, family size, and HRP education are somewhat reduced when the employment status of the Household Reference Person and other adults is controlled, but all remain statistically significant (Model 2). In the final model lone parenthood and no qualifications are the strongest predictors of deprivation alongside period effects.

TABLE 4.4 FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD DEPRIVATION (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS), IE 2010-2023

	Model 1	Model 2
Recession (2007/2008-2012/2013: ref)		
Recovery (2013/2014-2019/2020)	-0.074***	-0.057***
COVID and recovery (2020/2021-2022/2023)	-0.123***	-0.093***
0 to 4 (ref)		
5 to 11	-0.020*	-0.013
12 to 17	-0.025*	-0.010
Two adults with children (ref)		
One adult with children	0.298***	0.206***
Other households with children	0.022	0.015
1 child (ref)		
2 children	0.020*	0.012
3+ children	0.084***	0.048***
In a family where no one is disabled (ref)		
In a family where someone is disabled	0.188***	0.127***
HRP degree or above (ref)		
Qualification below degree level	0.183***	0.135***
No qualifications	0.405***	0.251***
HRP at work (ref)		
HRP Not a work		0.129***
At least one adult at work (ref)		
No adults in work (workless)		0.190***
Observations	33,280	33,280

Source: SILC 2010-2023.

Note: We kept the labelling 'Recession from 2007/2008-2012/2013' while the reference period for the deprivation measure was from 2010/2011 to 2012/2013. In Ireland the deprivation measures are available from 2004 onwards but to be consistent with the NI period reported in Table 4.3 we cover also the analysis from 2010 onwards. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

4.3 COMPARISONS OF POVERTY RISKS FOR CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND

In the previous sections, we conducted separate regression analyses on income poverty and deprivation for Northern Ireland and Ireland. By combining the data for Northern Ireland and Ireland we can now compare the relative risk of income and deprivation between children in Northern Ireland and Ireland. We use the same set of variables that are available in both datasets and the results of the model are presented as marginal effects. It is also possible to test whether the predictors of poverty vary significantly between the two jurisdictions by presenting the interaction effects results. This analysis is confined to the most recent period 2019-2023. Due to lack of detail in the SILC AMF data files, the age categories of children are collapsed into two categories: 0-14 and 15-17.

4.3.1 Income poverty

In the period 2019-2023 children in Northern Ireland have a higher risk of income poverty (almost 7 percentage points higher) compared to children in Ireland (Table 4.5, Model 1). This difference in poverty risks disappears when social and demographic characteristics are controlled (Model 2), suggesting that factors such as family composition, prevalence of disability and education levels account for this difference. While not being significant, the higher poverty risk in Northern Ireland re-emerges in Model 3 when employment status is controlled, which suggests that within employment categories Northern Ireland families fare worse. The interactions between jurisdiction and each of the explanatory factors are demonstrated graphically in Figure 4.1.

In the combined model for the recent period, we again find strong household composition effects across the island of Ireland. Children in households with three or more children are almost 16 percentage points times more likely to be income poor than those in households with only one child. Children in lone-parent households are at greater risk of income poverty than those in two-adult households (Model 2) until labour market status is controlled.

In contrast to the previous results for the longer time period, we find that children aged 15-17 years are more likely to be income poor than those under 15 years of age (Model 2). Given the change in the age categories it is not clear if this is due to a shift over time in the risks of younger and older children.

Although relatively small, children in households with a disabled member are more likely to experience income poverty. However, this is no longer the case once we account for the household's labour market characteristics (Model 3). Education of the Household Reference Person (HRP) is even higher than in the earlier models,

suggesting that the link between educational qualifications has strengthened over time (see also Smyth et al., 2022). Although there is also a negative effect when the HRP is not employed, this effect is not as strong as when children live in workless households.

TABLE 4.5 FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD INCOME POVERTY IN NI AND IE (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS), NI 2019-2023; IE 2020-2022

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Ireland (ref)			
Northern Ireland	0.068***	0.005	0.031
0 to 14 (ref)			
15 to 17		0.053***	0.065***
Two adults with children (ref)			
One adult with children		0.116***	0.011
Other households with children		0.014	0.016
1 child (ref)			
2 children		0.024*	0.024*
3+ children		0.159***	0.133***
In a family where no one is disabled (ref)			
In a family where someone is disabled		0.033*	-0.011
HRP degree or above (ref)			
Qualification below degree level		0.125***	0.097***
No qualifications		0.339***	0.217***
HRP at work (ref)			
HRP Not a work			0.091***
At least one adult at work (ref)			
No adults in work (workless)			0.172**
Observations	11,114	11,114	11,114

Source: FRS and SILC AMF data.

Note: The age category differs from the analyses in Tables 4.1 to 4.4 as the SILC AMF version allows only the distinction between children aged 0 to 14 and from 15 to 17. The sample consists of 7,780 cases from Ireland and 3,334 cases from Northern Ireland. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

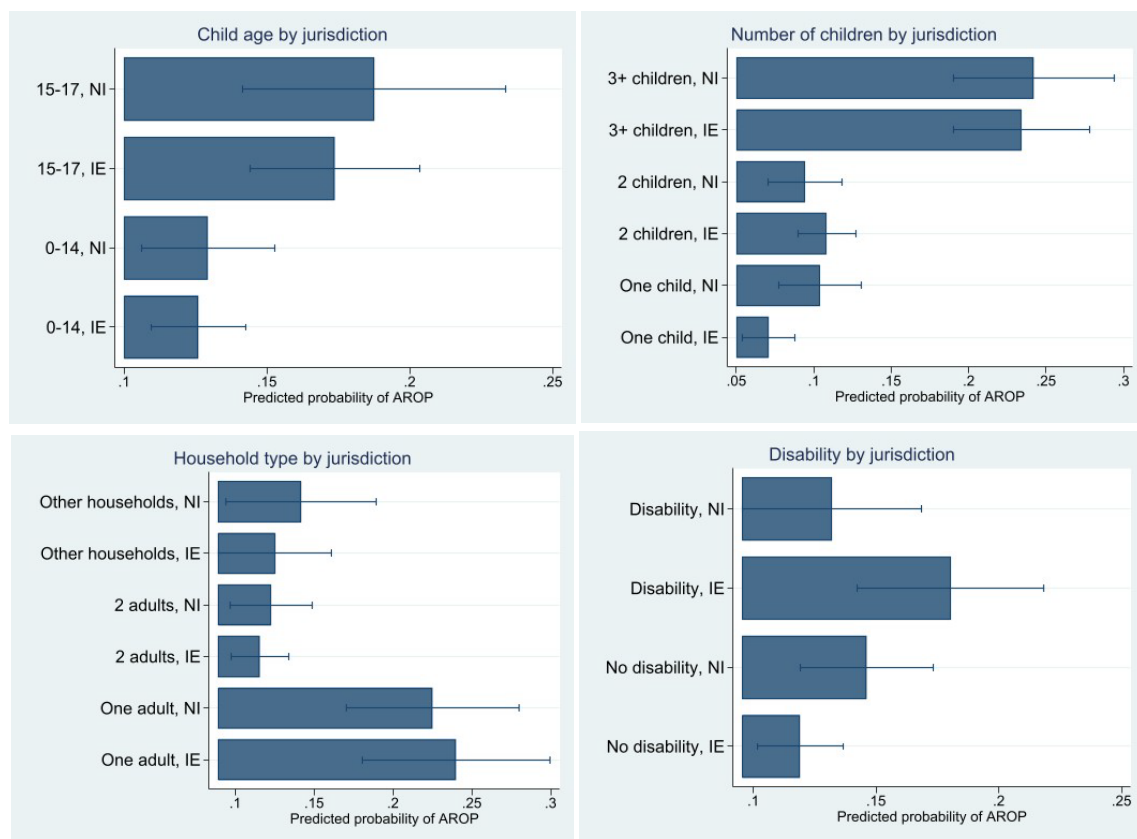
To assess if the relationships between the characteristics and income poverty differ between Northern Ireland and Ireland, we analyse the interactions between these characteristics and jurisdiction for the most recent period. The interaction results are reported in the Appendix (Table A.4.1) along with corresponding graphs in Figure 4.1.

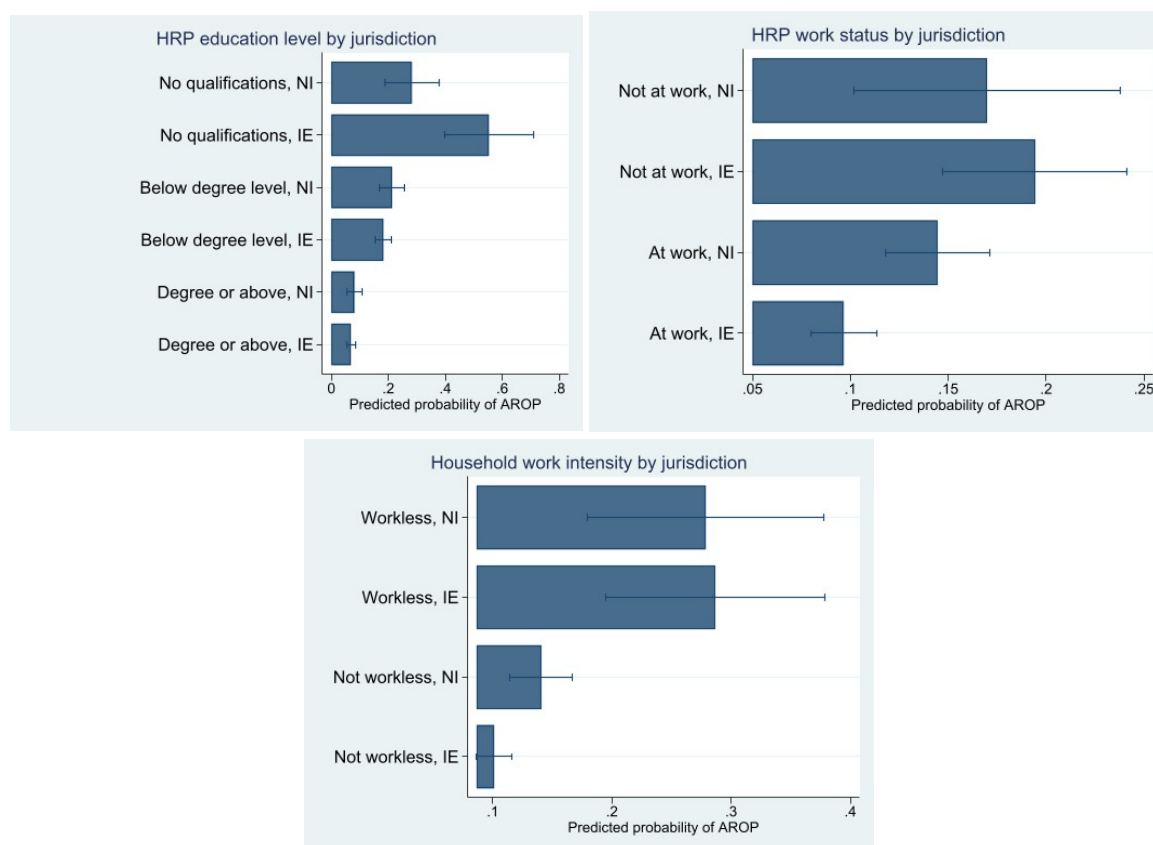
We find that that children of the same age group in both jurisdictions have similar probabilities of experiencing income poverty, with the youngest age group having the lowest probabilities. Across both jurisdictions, income poverty tends to increase with the number of children in the household, but the confidence intervals overlap within jurisdictions.

There is a similar increase in income poverty between families with two and with three or more children in both jurisdictions. Once we have controlled for whether the household has one or two parents present, families with only one child have a relatively low risk of income poverty.

As suggested by the individual country models for the longer time period, the strength of the relationship between child income poverty and HRP education is much stronger in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. The risk of child income poverty related to disability appears to be somewhat higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland but the error bars are overlapping which shows that this difference does not reach statistical significance.

FIGURE 4.1 PROBABILITIES OF INCOME POVERTY BY CHILD AND HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS IN NI AND IE 2019-2023





Source: FRS and SILC AMF data.

Finally, we consider the interactions between employment status and jurisdiction. There is no significant difference in the high probability of income poverty when the HRP is not at work in both regions, but the risk of child income poverty is much higher and significant when the HRP is at work in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland. This suggests a higher level of in-work poverty in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland. A similar pattern is observed in the association of income poverty with workless households. Indeed, the risks of income poverty are high and quite similar in both regions for workless households, but are significantly higher when there is at least one person at work in Northern Ireland than in Ireland.

4.3.2 Material deprivation

A similar analysis is used to explore the relative risk of deprivation across the two jurisdictions. In contrast to the findings for income poverty, when no other factors are considered, there is no difference in child deprivation between Ireland and Northern Ireland in the most recent period (Table 4.6, Model 1). When social and demographic characteristics are controlled, children in Northern Ireland are less likely to be deprived than children in Ireland.

In the joint model for the recent period there is no difference in material deprivation by children's age or when there are only two children, but it becomes

significant when there are three or more children (Table 4.6 Model 2). Children in lone-parent households have a 32.6 percentage point higher risk of deprivation than those in two-adult households. Additionally, having a household member with a disability contributes to higher deprivation risk. Children in households where the HRP has no qualifications are 31 percentage points more likely to be deprived than those where the Household Reference Person has a degree.

Adding controls for labour force status (Model 3) we find that household work intensity also has a stronger impact on deprivation than the Household Reference Person's work status, though both significantly increase the risk of deprivation.

TABLE 4.6 FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD DEPRIVATION IN NI AND IE (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS), NI 2019-2023; IE 2020-2022

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Ireland (ref)			
Northern Ireland	-0.010	-0.104***	-0.085***
0 to 14 (ref)			
15 to 17		-0.008	0.001
Two adults with children (ref)			
One adult with children		0.326***	0.237***
Other households with children		0.021	0.021
1 child (ref)			
2 children		-0.003	-0.005
3+ children		0.040*	0.017
In a family where no one is disabled (ref)			
In a family where someone is disabled		0.157***	0.116***
HRP degree or above (ref)			
Qualification below degree level		0.154***	0.128***
No qualifications		0.310***	0.221***
HRP at work (ref)			
HRP Not a work			0.085**
At least one adult at work (ref)			
No adults in work (workless)			0.133***
Observations	11,114	11,114	11,114

Source: FRS and SILC AMF data.

Note: The age category differs from the analyses in Tables 4.1 to 4.4 as the SILC AMF version allows only the distinction between children aged 0 to 14 and from 15 to 17. The sample consists of 7,780 cases from Ireland and 3,334 cases from Northern Ireland. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.

Figure 4.2 illustrates the graphical results of the interactions between characteristics and jurisdictions, and their association with the probability of deprivation (see Table A.4.2 in the Appendix for detailed results).

The interactions for child age show that the probability of deprivation within age groups is much higher for children in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. But within-jurisdiction there is no significant difference by age group. This is partly because the measure we have for this analysis puts all children aged 0-14 together and therefore does not pick up the different pattern for the under 5s and 5-11 age group seen in the separate analysis for Northern Ireland and Ireland.

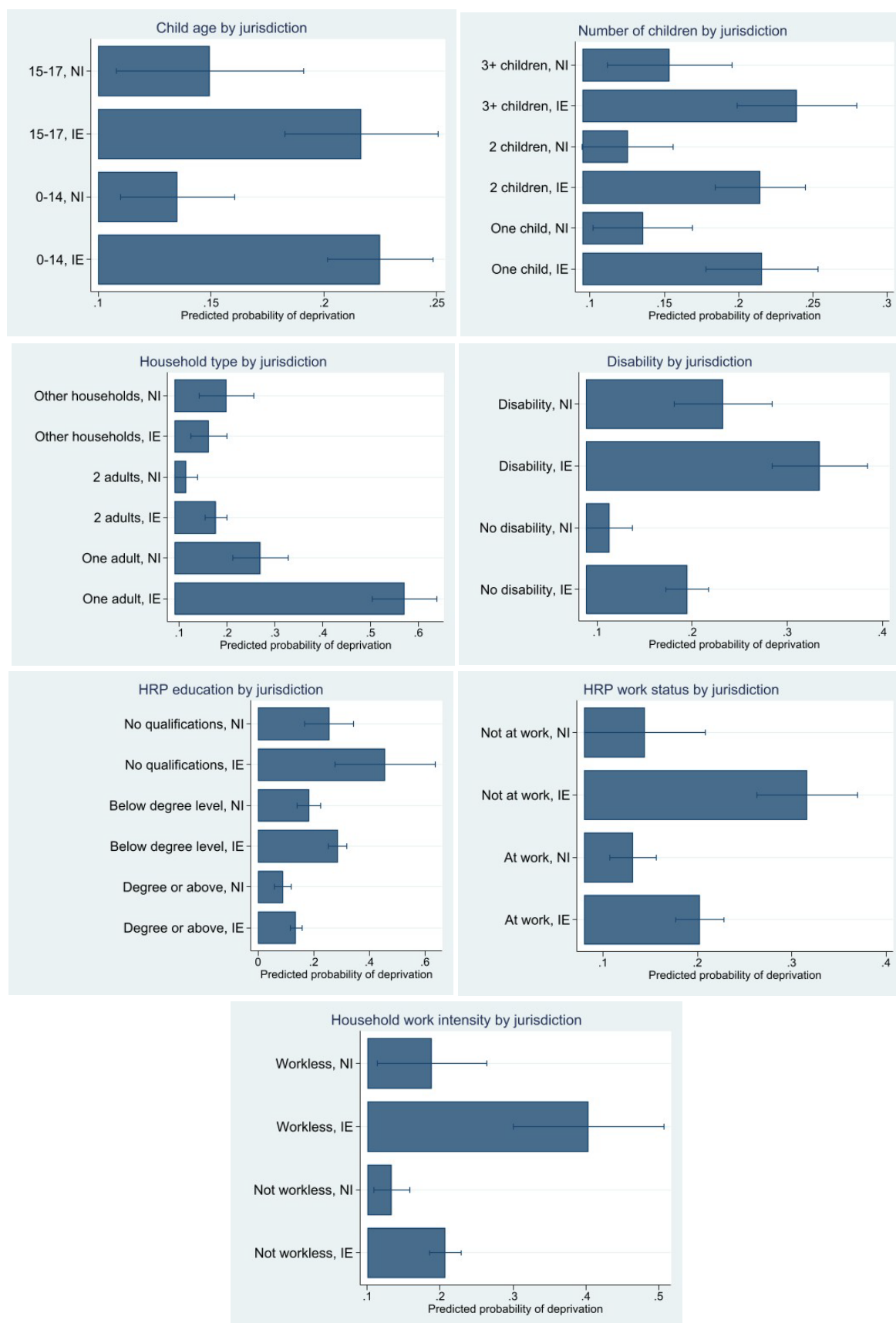
This pattern is also evident when considering the number of children in households, with children in Ireland being roughly twice as likely to be deprived as those in Northern Ireland in households with one, two, or three or more children. The gap in material deprivation rates between family size is not significant within country.

Similarly, children in lone-parent households in Ireland have a probability of deprivation (0.57) that is two times that of children in lone parent households in Northern Ireland (0.27).

The differences between children in households with and without someone with a disability are equally wide in both jurisdictions, but for both types of family the probability of deprivation is considerably higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland.

The risk of deprivation at each HRP education level is higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland. The gaps in deprivation between education level are somewhat greater in Ireland than Northern Ireland.

Finally, the Household Reference Person and household work status are also strong predictors of deprivation in both jurisdictions. When the Household Reference Person is not employed in Ireland, the probability of deprivation is 0.34 while for a similar child in Northern Ireland the probability is 0.13. The gap between workless and employed households is more pronounced in Ireland.

FIGURE 4.2 PROBABILITIES OF DEPRIVATION BY CHILDREN AND HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS IN NI AND IE 2019-2023

Source: FRS and SILC AMF data.

4.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we examined long-run factors associated with childhood income poverty and deprivation in Northern Ireland and Ireland, and detailed comparison of the strength of effects for the most recent period in the two jurisdictions.

There are strong commonalities in the factors influencing the risk of child income poverty and deprivation in the two jurisdictions. For example, children in larger families, lone parent families, in households where the HRP has low education and where adults are not employed are more likely to be poor on both measures in both jurisdictions.

There are a few factors that have somewhat different effects on risk depending on the measure of poverty used. Income poverty rises with child's age, but deprivation is highest for children under 5 years. This suggests that the income poverty measure is not adequately adjusting for the additional costs of very young children, including childcare. It also suggests that the Irish national equivalence scale used for older children may be over-adjusting for differences in consumption (see Doorley et al., 2024). Similarly, disability within the household has a much weaker association with income poverty than deprivation. The limitation of income-based measures of poverty to take account of additional needs of these households is likely to play a role.

There are also some differences in the scale of these effects. For example, the increased risk of deprivation associated with single-parent families and households with a disabled member is greater than that in Northern Ireland; while the lower risk of deprivation for older children compared to those aged under 5 years is greater in Northern Ireland.

The direct comparison was limited to the most recent period and found contrasting results for levels of income poverty and deprivation between the two jurisdictions. In the case of income poverty, while the level of income poverty is higher overall in Northern Ireland than in Ireland, within groups the risks are generally quite similar in the two jurisdictions. In the case of deprivation, there is no raw difference overall between Northern Ireland and Ireland. When socio-demographic and labour market factors are controlled, deprivation is lower for children in Northern Ireland. The within-group differences in deprivation are wide and consistently show a higher risk of deprivation for children in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. This suggests that low-income families in Ireland are less able to convert their income into an adequate standard of living than in Northern Ireland in the most recent period. This is likely to be connected to the cost-of-living differences, in particular housing costs.

In the case of income poverty two differences across the jurisdictions are worth noting. Firstly, that the effect of education of HRP on child income poverty is stronger in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, and also that the effect of employment is stronger in Ireland. This suggests that those with lower levels of education in Ireland are particularly vulnerable. Children in families where someone is in work have a higher poverty risk in Northern Ireland suggesting that in-work poverty is a greater issue in that jurisdiction.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The effects of growing up in poverty are widespread and long-term. This report examined the levels and distribution of child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland, comparing the two jurisdictions where possible. It set out to examine three questions: Which groups of children are most vulnerable to poverty in the two jurisdictions?; What is the role of household labour market situation and social background in shaping the risk of child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland?; and How do policy approaches to addressing child poverty differ in Ireland and Northern Ireland? The study draws on quantitative analysis of income poverty and deprivation using harmonised measures across the two jurisdictions, and qualitative evidence from a consultation with stakeholders from civil society, government departments/agencies and academics.

Combining Irish data from the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) with Northern Ireland data from the UK Family Resources Survey (FRS), this report firstly compared trends in child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland between 2004 and 2023. In Ireland, child income poverty fell in the early 2000s then stalled from 2008 to 2017 before gradually falling again in the most recent period, where it has remained at about 14 per cent. In Northern Ireland child income poverty has fluctuated much more but has stood at over 20 per cent for the entire period. There was a significant rise in child income poverty in Northern Ireland in the latest year but due to smaller numbers in the Northern Ireland sample, it is safer to rely on the two-year smoothed average, which shows stability. It is notable that the income poverty trends do not pick up the substantial effects of the recession on household income, which is a limitation of the measure.

The two jurisdictions show a much more similar trend in child material deprivation: both saw a rise in deprivation from 2010 to 2013/2014 followed by a steady decline which halted in 2018/2019. The trends differ for the most recent period: Ireland rates declined marginally from 2019/2020 to 2022/2023 while in Northern Ireland there was a steeper fall until 2022 and then child material deprivation went back up again. The more limited five-item deprivation measure used in this study does not pick up the increase in child deprivation in 2023 in Ireland that is found using a 10 or 11 item measure (Roantree et al., 2024; CSO, 2024).²⁰

²⁰ See Table 5.1 in <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/poverty/>.

Notably, the material deprivation levels among children are higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland throughout the period but converge in the latest two-year moving average (see Figure 3.4).

5.1 WHICH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ARE MOST VULNERABLE TO POVERTY?

There are strong similarities in the children most vulnerable to poverty in both jurisdictions. The children at greater risk of income poverty and deprivation in both jurisdictions are living in lone parent households, in larger families (three or more children) and living with someone with a disability. Living in households where the Household Reference Person (HRP) has below-degree qualifications, or especially where the HRP has no qualifications, also increases child poverty risks in both jurisdictions. However, the association between child income poverty and the education level of the Household Reference Person is significantly stronger in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland.

The employment status of working-age adults in families significantly impacts the risk of child poverty in both jurisdictions. Families where the HRP does not work or where no working-age adults are employed are at increased risks of poverty and deprivation in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, but with some nuances. Focusing on the results from the joint model for 2019-2023 we find first, the risk of child income poverty is somewhat higher when the HRP is employed in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland. This indicates a greater prevalence of in-work poverty in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. Secondly, although the risks of child income poverty are high and quite similar for workless households in both jurisdictions, they are somewhat higher in Northern Ireland than in Ireland when there is at least one employed person in the household. In the case of material deprivation, household joblessness (and unemployment of the household head) has a significantly stronger association with child deprivation in Ireland.

There is less consistency in the relationship between poverty and the age of the child across jurisdictions and across poverty measures (income and deprivation). For income poverty, older children (aged 12-17) have a higher risk than the youngest children in both Northern Ireland and Ireland. However, those aged 5-11 have the lowest risk in Northern Ireland when other social and demographic characteristics are controlled. In the case of material deprivation, it is the youngest children in both jurisdictions that have the highest risk. In Ireland, this effect disappears when labour market status is controlled, suggesting that higher deprivation among young children is due to lower employment of adults in their households.

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of family composition as a risk factor for child poverty, especially lone parenthood, family size and the additional needs of older children and very young children. They also identified children at high risk of poverty that are not captured by household surveys, these included children living in Direct Provision, homeless families and members of minority ethnic groups including Travellers and Roma children. The stakeholder discussion also identified differences in the risks and experiences of those living in urban and rural areas, which could not be analysed in the version of the Family Resources Survey available to us. Those in rural areas were seen as facing additional costs in terms of transport, energy and food. It was also highlighted that voluntary and community provision were not equally available in rural areas. Stakeholders also highlighted the extent of intergenerational disadvantage in some extremely deprived urban settings.

5.2 EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JURISDICTIONS

To further explore the differences between Northern Ireland and Ireland, a joint model of income poverty and deprivation was conducted for the most recent timeframe and with more restricted variables. Without controls, income poverty is higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland. When social and demographic characteristics are controlled the higher rate of child income poverty disappears, suggesting that the composition of the population in Northern Ireland accounts for the difference, including family composition, prevalence of disability and education levels (see Table 1.1). The higher poverty risk in Northern Ireland re-emerges when employment status is controlled, which suggests that within employment categories Northern Ireland families fare worse.

The picture for child deprivation is different. Without controlling for composition, the child deprivation level is the same in Ireland and Northern Ireland in the most recent period. When social and demographic characteristics are controlled, children in Northern Ireland are half as likely to be deprived as children in Ireland. This means that while the population of Ireland have more favourable characteristics overall (e.g. higher HRP education, fewer children living in lone parent households, lower disability in the household), when we compare those with the same characteristics, children in Ireland fare worse.

For example, we find that the deprivation level for children in lone parent households in Ireland is almost three times higher than their counterparts in Northern Ireland. Children living in large families with three or more children are more than twice as likely to be deprived in Ireland as those in Northern Ireland.

The joint model also confirms that household employment status is more strongly linked to child deprivation in Ireland than Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland the

difference between households where the HRP is at work and those not at work is statistically insignificant.

The higher levels of child deprivation in Ireland, despite lower income poverty levels than Northern Ireland, suggests that families in Ireland have been less able to convert income into an adequate standard of living compared to families in the same position in the income distribution in Northern Ireland. This could be attributable to a higher cost of living in Ireland (see Figure A.3.1).

5.3 LIMITATIONS

The main limitation of this research emerged from the data. Following Brexit, Northern Ireland was not included in the EU-SILC data; however a new agreement of cooperation has now been signed between the UK Office for National Statistics and Eurostat. In the meantime, we had to use a less detailed version of the SILC data, accessible from the Irish Social Science Data Archive, to be able to integrate the Northern Ireland component of the UK's FRS data for our comparative analysis. We note, however, that we only had about 4,000 observations per year in the FRS for Northern Ireland. In order to provide enough cases for the statistical analysis when looking at the recent period, we pooled together two years of SILC data (2022 and 2023) and FRS data (2021/2022 and 2022/2023).

Secondly, the official poverty measures in the UK and Ireland use different equivalence scales to adjust income for household size. Previous research has shown that the choice of equivalence scale can influence the level of poverty (Doorley et al., 2024; Mysíková et al., 2021); therefore we have applied the same equivalence scale to both datasets. There is also the possibility that some further small differences might remain between the two surveys in the income components used in the construction of the household income, for example the treatment of private pension contributions.

In Ireland, the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) has collected deprivation indicators since 2003 to design a measure of deprivation used by the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) based on 11 essential goods and services that households cannot afford. Similarly, Northern Ireland's Family Resources Survey includes some deprivation items, though only five are comparable between the two surveys: arrears on bills, inability to keep the home warm, paying for a holiday, replacing furniture, and money for personal spending. The selection for these items is not based on statistical evidence of performance for capturing overall deprivation but only on their availability in both surveys. This means that the deprivation rates used here do not match the official deprivation figures for Ireland. We conduct some sensitivity tests to determine whether our findings are robust to excluding different items (see below).

Since we are using two distinct surveys, some variables may differ slightly. These differences can come from variations in definitions, population coverage, and changes over time. For instance, the disability variable illustrates this issue. The method of identifying disability in the FRS has changed since 2012/2023. The FRS's approach to identifying disability differs also from that of SILC, as does the target population. In the FRS, disability is identified for all household members, whereas in SILC it covers only individuals aged 16 and above. The FRS measure of disability is therefore more likely to report higher prevalence of disability in Northern Ireland. Additionally, some useful indicators, such as urban/rural location or ethnicity, were only available in one of the datasets.

Finally, both surveys are private household surveys, which exclude many individuals who are likely to be at high risk of poverty, such as those living in institutions, and emergency accommodation. As noted above, the number of homeless children in emergency accommodation has risen considerably in both jurisdictions. The number of children in direct provision has also risen significantly in Ireland, with the most recent figures suggesting that there were just over 9,000 children in IPAS centres in Ireland.²¹ Additionally, many other groups and their children are either underrepresented or present in insufficient numbers in these surveys, including minority ethnic groups like Roma and Travellers, and undocumented immigrants. This underlines the importance of collecting data on these groups to highlight the challenges they face.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Ireland and the UK are often described as having similar welfare and family regimes. However this comparative report has highlighted important differences in their welfare systems, family supports and services that influence the level and distribution of child poverty.

Child benefit levels are higher in Ireland, but households in Northern Ireland receive a higher level of means tested benefits, and these benefits extend further up the income scale according to Doorley et al. (2024b). The UK's two-child limit on welfare was widely identified in our consultation with stakeholders as a significant factor contributing to rising child poverty. This was recently supported by findings from Stewart et al. (2023). There was strong agreement that this should be reformed, and that the mitigation of the benefit cap introduced by the Northern Ireland National Assembly should be continued.

²¹ IPAS Weekly Accommodation and Arrivals Statistics. No equivalent figures could be found for NI. The total number of international protection applications is significantly higher in Ireland (32,623) than Northern Ireland (2,765); see asylum-seekers-receipt-support-datasets-sep-24.xlsx. The rate per 1,000 population is also somewhat higher in Ireland (6.2) than Northern Ireland (1.4).

Some stakeholders in Ireland also criticised the temporary nature of cost-of-living crisis measures introduced in both jurisdictions. Doorley et al. (2023) showed that uprating core social welfare payments in line with inflation would have provided better protection against poverty compared to the impact of the ‘once-off’ measures.

In Northern Ireland, the five-week waiting period for Universal Credit often drives families into debt, sometimes forcing them to seek high-interest loans or dangerous debt. While it was acknowledged that there is a discretionary payment that can be claimed to cover this waiting period, stakeholders noted that there is a lack of knowledge among the public and consequently the take-up is low.

Differences emerged in education and early childhood care, with Northern Ireland offering long-standing supports like free school meals and books, which were more recently provided on a universal basis in Ireland. These were seen as playing a very significant role for families experiencing poverty in both jurisdictions. However, stakeholders also emphasised additional education costs, such as school uniforms. There was a call to make these supports universal in Northern Ireland, as they are in Ireland, to avoid stigma and hardship caused by fluctuations in income that put people above the eligibility threshold.

The plight of children and their families living in homelessness in Ireland and in Direct Provision in both jurisdictions were also emphasised by stakeholders. The study highlighted the challenge of quantifying the number of children living in these conditions particularly for homelessness and the importance of gathering and providing data to assess the extent of the issue. Large scale policy addressing housing supply and affordability is necessary to address the housing issues faced by both groups. Stakeholders also suggested targeted measures such as the extension of child benefit payments to asylum seekers, or to introduce targeted actions around housing, given the high number of children living in emergency accommodation in Ireland. Previous ESRI research has highlighted the impact of poor housing, broadly defined, on child wellbeing (Laurence et al., 2024).

The results show that childhood poverty is strongly associated with the educational qualifications of the HRP. Thus, one crucial way of breaking the circle of poverty is to provide a wider access to both initial education and life-long learning opportunities. Previous research as part of the Shared Island programme has shown that early school leaving and educational inequalities are higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland, and advocated action to address this (Smyth et al., 2022). Previous research also highlighted the importance of adult education/life-long learning for women wishing to return to the labour market (Hingre et al., 2024). Access to affordable childcare is essential for parents of younger children to support access to training, education and employment.

Improvements to training and labour market supports for those at greater risk of unemployment are also important in addressing child poverty (Roantree and Doorley, 2023). The link between child poverty and disability is also related to both welfare support and access to labour market for people with a disability. Stakeholders noted the low rate of employment for those with a disability in Ireland, which points to the need for greater accommodations in the workplace, including flexible working arrangements (see Kelly and Maître, 2021). The higher levels of disability and ill health in Northern Ireland has been noted in previous research (NESC, 2022; Devlin et al., 2023a). The poorer mental health of the population in Northern Ireland has been linked to the exposure of the population to trauma during the Troubles. Greater investment in mental health support is necessary to address the needs of parents and also the growing needs of children (Smyth and Russell, 2024). The relationship between health and poverty is two-directional and measures to directly address poverty through income supports will also be beneficial for children's mental and physical health.

Focusing on the role of social welfare benefits, Roantree and Doorley (2023) used microsimulation models to analyse the effectiveness of four policies in reducing child poverty in Ireland: increasing Child Benefit for all families; increasing the additional welfare payments for Qualified Children; enhancing the Working Families Payment; and introducing a second, targeted tier of Child Benefit for low-income families. They found that the second tier of Child Benefit would be most effective for reducing child poverty. Similarly, analysing child poverty across 30 European countries, Bárcena-Martín et al. (2018) found that cross-country differences in child poverty was firstly due to differences in social protection systems, followed by individual characteristics. The study found that higher expenditure on social protection (as a percentage of GDP) is associated with reduced child poverty. Moreover, net of the scale of welfare spending, countries that targeted spending on families/children had lower child poverty than those that targeted household income (means-tested expenditure).

Finally, an important issue arising from stakeholder discussions was that of leadership and policy focus. In Ireland, the deadline for achieving the national target to reduce the number of children in consistent poverty by 70,000 was extended from 2020 to 2025. In late 2023, the Department of Social Protection launched a public consultation to establish a new child poverty target, which has yet to be determined as of the end of 2024. In Northern Ireland the long-promised anti-poverty strategy has yet to appear. The new child poverty unit in Ireland was welcomed by stakeholders as a step in the right direction. There was agreement across both sets of stakeholders of the need to translate policy ambitions into measurable progress for children on the island of Ireland.

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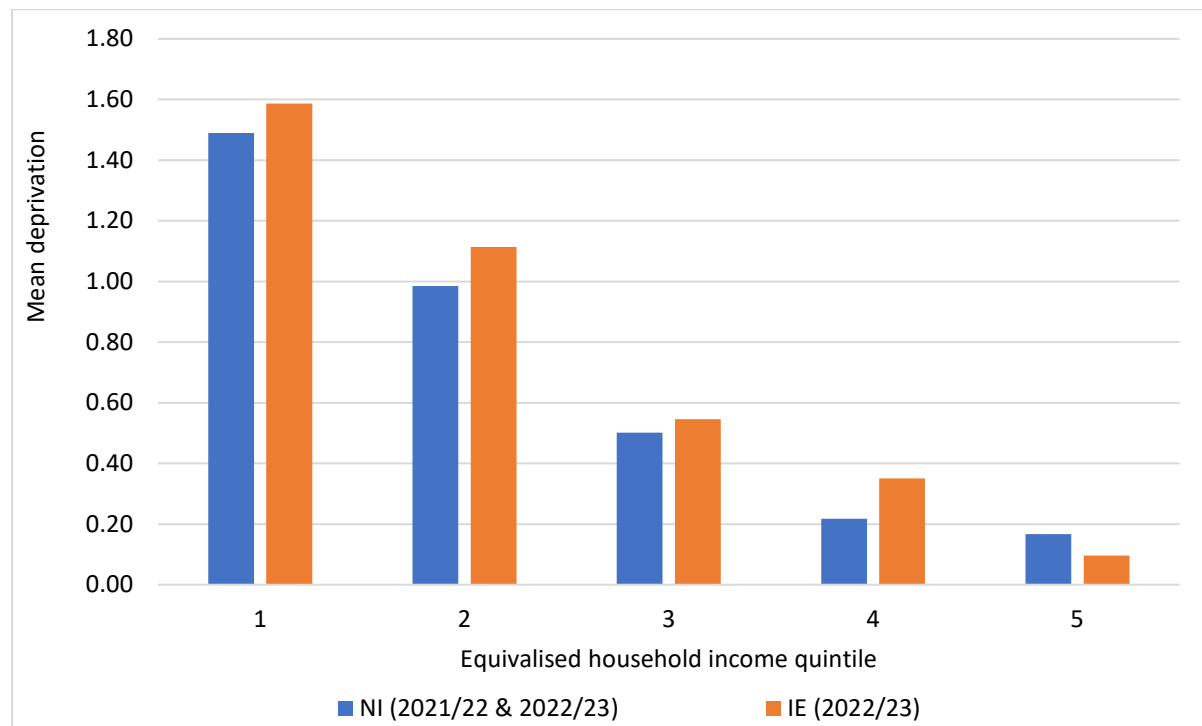
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APPENDIX

FIGURE A.3.1 MEAN DEPRIVATION (SCALE 0 TO 5) BY EQUIVALISED HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN NI (2021/2022 AND 2022/2023) AND IE (2022-2023)



Source: FRS and SILC data.

TABLE A.4.1 PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF CHILD AROP ASSOCIATED BY REGION AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

	Margin	std. err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Margins from Figure 4.1: age child						
IE & age 0 to 14	0.13	0.01	14.87	0.00	0.11	0.14
IE & age 15 to 17	0.17	0.02	11.51	0.00	0.14	0.20
NI & age 0 to 14	0.13	0.01	10.89	0.00	0.11	0.15
NI & age 15 to 17	0.19	0.02	7.97	0.00	0.14	0.23
Margins from Figure 4.1: number of children						
IE & 1 child	0.07	0.01	8.20	0.00	0.05	0.09
IE & 2 children	0.11	0.01	11.34	0.00	0.09	0.13
IE & 3 or more children	0.23	0.02	10.47	0.00	0.19	0.28
NI & 1 child	0.10	0.01	7.70	0.00	0.08	0.13
NI & 2 children	0.09	0.01	7.78	0.00	0.07	0.12
NI & 3 or more children	0.24	0.03	9.11	0.00	0.19	0.29
Margins from Figure 4.1: household type						
IE & one adult with children	0.24	0.03	7.91	0.00	0.18	0.30
IE & two adults with children	0.12	0.01	12.36	0.00	0.10	0.13
IE & other households with children	0.13	0.02	6.83	0.00	0.09	0.16
NI & one adult with children	0.23	0.03	8.03	0.00	0.17	0.28
NI & two adults with children	0.12	0.01	9.20	0.00	0.10	0.15
NI & other households with children	0.14	0.02	5.82	0.00	0.09	0.19
Margins from Figure 4.1: disability in household						
IE & no-one with a disability	0.12	0.01	13.43	0.00	0.10	0.14
IE & someone has a disability	0.18	0.02	9.32	0.00	0.14	0.22
NI & no-one with a disability	0.15	0.01	10.55	0.00	0.12	0.17
NI & someone has a disability	0.13	0.02	7.09	0.00	0.10	0.17
Margins from Figure 4.1: HRP education level						
IE & HRP degree or above	0.07	0.01	8.95	0.00	0.05	0.08
IE & HRP below degree level	0.18	0.01	12.76	0.00	0.16	0.21
IE & HRP no qualifications	0.56	0.08	7.02	0.00	0.40	0.71
NI & HRP degree or above	0.08	0.01	5.72	0.00	0.05	0.11
NI & HRP below degree level	0.21	0.02	9.78	0.00	0.17	0.26
NI & HRP no qualifications	0.28	0.05	5.93	0.00	0.19	0.38
Margins from Figure 4.1: HRP work status						
IE & HRP at work	0.10	0.01	11.29	0.00	0.08	0.11
IE & HRP not at work	0.19	0.02	8.11	0.00	0.15	0.24
NI & HRP at work	0.14	0.01	10.58	0.00	0.12	0.17
NI & HRP not at work	0.17	0.03	4.88	0.00	0.10	0.24
Margins from Figure 4.1: household work intensity						
IE & at least one adult in work	0.10	0.01	13.43	0.00	0.09	0.12
IE & no adults in work	0.29	0.05	6.13	0.00	0.19	0.38
NI & at least one adult in work	0.14	0.01	10.53	0.00	0.11	0.17
NI & no adults in work	0.28	0.05	5.5	0.00	0.18	0.38

Source: FRS and SILC AMF data.

TABLE A.4.2 PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF CHILD DEPRIVATION ASSOCIATED BY REGION AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

	Margin	std. err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Margins from Figure 4.2: age child						
IE & age 0 to 14	0.22	0.01	18.91	0.00	0.20	0.25
IE & age 15 to 17	0.22	0.02	12.52	0.00	0.18	0.25
NI & age 0 to 14	0.14	0.01	10.52	0.00	0.11	0.16
NI & age 15 to 17	0.15	0.02	7.09	0.00	0.11	0.19
Margins from Figure 4.2: number of children						
IE & 1 child	0.22	0.02	11.23	0.00	0.18	0.25
IE & 2 children	0.21	0.02	13.83	0.00	0.18	0.25
IE & 3 or more children	0.24	0.02	11.62	0.00	0.20	0.28
NI & 1 child	0.14	0.02	7.95	0.00	0.10	0.17
NI & 2 children	0.13	0.02	8.03	0.00	0.09	0.16
NI & 3 or more children	0.15	0.02	7.16	0.00	0.11	0.20
Margins from Figure 4.2: household type						
IE & one adult with children	0.57	0.03	16.61	0.00	0.50	0.64
IE & two adults with children	0.18	0.01	14.78	0.00	0.15	0.20
IE & other households with children	0.16	0.02	8.35	0.00	0.12	0.20
NI & one adult with children	0.27	0.03	9.07	0.00	0.21	0.33
NI & two adults with children	0.11	0.01	9.35	0.00	0.09	0.14
NI & other households with children	0.20	0.03	6.88	0.00	0.14	0.26
Margins from Figure 4.2: disability in household						
IE & no-one with a disability	0.20	0.01	16.99	0.00	0.17	0.22
IE & someone has a disability	0.33	0.03	13.15	0.00	0.28	0.38
NI & no-one with a disability	0.11	0.01	9.06	0.00	0.09	0.14
NI & someone has a disability	0.23	0.03	8.82	0.00	0.18	0.28
Margins from Figure 4.2: HRP education level						
IE & HRP degree or above	0.14	0.01	12.68	0.00	0.12	0.16
IE & HRP below degree level	0.29	0.02	16.71	0.00	0.25	0.32
IE & HRP no qualifications	0.46	0.09	5.03	0.00	0.28	0.64
NI & HRP degree or above	0.09	0.02	5.62	0.00	0.06	0.12
NI & HRP below degree level	0.18	0.02	8.53	0.00	0.14	0.23
NI & HRP no qualifications	0.26	0.05	5.69	0.00	0.17	0.35
Margins from Figure 4.2: HRP work status						
IE & HRP at work	0.20	0.01	15.48	0.00	0.18	0.23
IE & HRP not at work	0.32	0.03	11.59	0.00	0.26	0.37
NI & HRP at work	0.13	0.01	10.66	0.00	0.11	0.16
NI & HRP not at work	0.14	0.03	4.40	0.00	0.08	0.21
Margins from Figure 4.2: household work intensity						
IE & at least one adult in work	0.21	0.01	18.34	0.00	0.18	0.23
IE & no adults in work	0.40	0.05	7.67	0.00	0.30	0.51
NI & at least one adult in work	0.13	0.01	10.69	0.00	0.11	0.16
NI & no adults in work	0.19	0.04	4.92	0.00	0.11	0.26

Source: FRS and SILC AMF data.



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