

An Equal Start? Poverty and Social Exclusion in Early Childhood

Introduction

In 2024, by all accounts, the 'boom is back'. Ireland presents as the post-pandemic poster child of economic resilience and recovery. Employment rates are at an all-time high, we are spending more money than ever before, and the government boasts a bumper budget surplus of €25 billion to be put aside for a rainy day. Despite this bright economic forecast, dark clouds of inequality loom, and the benefits of economic growth have yet to trickle down to Ireland's most vulnerable citizens, in particular, children living in the shadow of poverty.

Children are the largest demographic group at risk of poverty and deprivation in Ireland (CSO, 2024). Despite its position as one of the wealthiest countries in the world, over 260,000 children have first-hand experience of financial distress and the persistent, harmful impact of poverty (ibid.). Since 2022, an additional 30,000 children have been experiencing material deprivation, with particularly high rates of income poverty for households where the youngest child is aged five or younger (Roantree et al., 2024). Thousands of families are struggling to keep their homes warm and to provide nutritious food for their children. One-off costs such as a broken washing machine, urgent car repair, or worn-out furniture can generate significant financial stress and tough choices about where money can be spent.

Preventing and combating child poverty: The European Child Guarantee

While poverty is most commonly 'measured' by a family's income, it is more than just lack of money: it is lack of access to adequate housing, healthcare, educational opportunities, and community involvement that deepens and intensifies inequality and social exclusion. Research



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As Ireland prepares for a new Programme for Government in 2025, with obligations at EU level to reduce child poverty and combat social exclusion, this article comments on the increasing numbers of children experiencing material deprivation, which is detrimental to their development and well-being. The Equal Start model offers hope of greater access and participation in early childhood education and care, but is it enough to address inequality for our youngest citizens?

exploring intergenerational poverty in Ireland speaks of far-reaching harmful effects across the lifespan and the importance of investment in interventions to reduce and prevent the harmful effects of inequality (Curristan et al., 2022).

The EU Child Guarantee aims to reduce child poverty and social exclusion based on three pillars: access to resources, access to quality services, and children's right to participate (European Commission, 2021). Ireland signed up in 2021, committing to combat social exclusion by ensuring children have access to the services and supports they need for the best possible start in life. Despite this and the establishment of a dedicated Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach in 2023, there has been little progress on targeted support for children experiencing poverty and deprivation.

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The recent Budget 2025 included a cost-of-living package purported to offer several measures to address child poverty. However, only half of the €2.1 billion cost-of-living measures were directed to low-income families, with the remainder allocated to universal measures such as energy credits, double child benefit payments, and free school meals and books. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) has said that Budget 2025 is unlikely to impact the increased rates of child poverty and material deprivation, describing the overall budget packages as a 'missed opportunity' to lift thousands of children out of poverty (Curran, 2024).

An 'Equal Start' for children experiencing disadvantage?

If the political mantra of making Ireland 'the best country in which to be a child' is to be realised, then the government must prioritise investment in housing, education, healthcare, pathways to parental employment, and targeted income assistance for children and families at risk of poverty.

The Equal Start funding model, launched in May 2024, was established to improve access to and participation in high-quality early childhood education and care for children experiencing poverty. Equal Start provides early childhood settings operating in areas of socio-economic disadvantage with an increase in Core Funding (8%–15% increase based on minimum staff hours). It hopes to assist 'priority cohorts', including children living in homeless accommodation, Traveller and Roma children, and those seeking international protection. Participating services will also receive additional support, including;

- » access to 'family link workers' and Traveller and Roma advisory specialists
- » participation in Early Talk Boost, a programme to support children's early language development
- » training in Meitheal, a case coordination process that brings together expertise, knowledge, and skills to meet the needs of the child and family in their local community (DCEDIY, 2024).

The introduction of Equal Start is a crucial step in meeting Ireland's obligations under the EU Child Guarantee and policy commitments in *First 5*, the 10-year whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children, and their families (2019–2028). Despite this, Equal Start received just €17.2 million in Budget 2025, a disappointing allocation which appears particularly paltry when compared to other budget priorities such as €19.82 million for greyhound racing, €27 million for preserving national monuments, and €9 million for phone-storage pouches in schools.

This low level of investment in a much-needed model that hopes to disrupt inequality raises fundamental questions about the government's prioritisation of reducing child poverty and meeting obligations under the EU Child Guarantee. As Ireland prepares for a new Programme for Government in 2025, we can only hope that the sunny economic outlook and rainy-day fund can be redirected towards better outcomes and brighter futures for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

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