

IRELAND Country Summary

Introduction and Overview

Long one of the highly traditional agrarian, poorer, underdeveloped, small countries of Europe, Ireland had more than a century and a half of constant out-migration. However, its economy has taken off since an industrial development plan in the 1960s. It saw further growth after it joined the European Union (EU) in the mid-80s. Prior to the general 2001 economic downturn, it enjoyed an unusually high growth rate (between 7 and 8 percent, well above the European average), a booming high-tech sector, the return of some of its citizens, and optimistic prospects. Unemployment at the end of 2002 was still low in the European context (4.1%). It has attracted and accepted asylum seekers from Africa and Europe-and it feels it can afford the more active family policy of a post-industrial society.

In a sense, Irish family policies reflect several historical themes. As long one of the poorest countries in Europe, in a class with Greece, Spain, and Turkey, it faced extreme policy limitations. As a homogeneous, strongly Catholic country, family policy reflected Catholic doctrine, despite rigorous legal separation of church and state. And as a country in some ways in the Anglo-American orbit, Ireland has had a minimalist, means-tested, targeted approach to welfare policy. The heritage of these forces is still apparent, even as Ireland enjoys a per capita GDP (PPP), which compares well in Europe.

The new circumstances have accelerated family policy tendencies that began decades ago, reflecting changing roles of women, family change, and rapidly falling fertility. In 1992, Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and instructed Governmental departments to work towards implementation in their areas of responsibility. A final report (1998) from the Commission on the Family has stimulated some action; among other things, a Family Affairs unit was set up. Kiely (2003) reported that in the recent decade, Ireland has replaced a non-intervention approach with “a more proactive approach to protecting and supporting families in their diverse forms.”

Government Agencies

Most of the policies and programs here of interest are the responsibility of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. This includes all cash payments. Except for unemployment benefits (paid out of local department offices) and disability allowances, as well as supplementary welfare allowances (paid out of 8 regional health boards), the cash payments are made out of the Department's central offices (in Dublin and 3 other locations). The Department's services operate at the local level, through regional offices. The other major ministry involved, the Department of Health and Children, is responsible for health services and the payment of cash maternity grants. In 1999, eight regional authorities became responsible for operational decisions for health services.

Demographic and Other Social Trends

With a population of 3.8 million, Ireland is one of the OECD's and Europe's "small" countries, except for Luxembourg the smallest in the European Union. In total area, it is among the smaller countries.

The Irish national expert for the European Union's Family Observatory chose the following demographic developments to highlight in 1999:

"The 1996 census shows an increase in the total population of 2.7 percent over the 1991 Census. Contrary to most other European countries, this is not due to inward migration but to a comparatively high birth rate. Statistically, every woman born in Ireland had 1.92 children in 1997. However, birth rates are also declining in Ireland, though from an originally high level. More than 20 percent of the children are born out of wedlock. Ireland has the youngest population in the European Union. The share of those younger than 14 is 30.9 percent. In 1996, the share of those older than 65 was 11 percent. The projections for the year 2026 are 19 percent for this age group, indicating that the Irish population will remain young in decades to come" (Kiely, 1999, p. 33).

Ireland will be the last of the EU countries to show a population decline (2049) under current fertility rates (Eurostat, 2001). Total fertility in 2000 was 1.9, the highest in the European Union, but below replacement. To this we might add: The out-of-wedlock birth rate is now 25 percent of the total. The 0-14 age group constituted 23.2 percent of the population in 1997 according to a Council of Europe compilation, higher than other European countries. The mean ages of mothers at first births and for all births have been high in Ireland for decades and continue to be among Europe's highest. Despite current concern with lone parents, Ireland's rates are comparatively low (11 percent of all families, 11 percent of families with a child under 15, and 17 percent of all families with children). One in five households with dependent children is headed by a single parent, close to the U.K. rate.

Female labor force participation rates are well below EU and OECD averages, 56.2 percent in 2000, including 50 percent of mothers with children under age 15, but growing rapidly, especially among young married women. It has been mostly full-time employment, but the part-time portion increased over the past decade. Married and cohabitating mothers are more likely to be in employment than lone mothers, the situation in only a few industrial countries. Some 47 percent of lone mothers with children under age 5 were employed in 2001. Noteworthy in Ireland, as in the UK, is the comparatively low labor force participation rate for single women with children and the somewhat higher rates for married women with and without children. Fifty percent of those living with a husband/partner and children in 2001.) Severe shortages of childcare resources are believed to be a major factor.

Ireland, long one of Europe's high unemployment countries, was about average in the EU for 1997, with men and women equally affected. Large portions of the unemployed are long-term. However all Irish unemployment rates have declined significantly over the decade.

Male and female youth unemployment rates, below respective EU averages, have also fallen significantly over the past decade.

Social Protection

The '90s have seen continuous efforts to update Irish social protection in line with the country's improved economy and new demographic realities. On-going debates and contests about legislation developed and still continue with reference to divorce, abortion, intervention with regard to child abuse. The actions have been in the direction of slow liberalization. A variety of steps were taken the better to "support families" and to reflect "a growing recognition of a variety of family forms not based on marriage (Kiely & Richardson, 1996, p.78). Income support benefits were improved in most programs, beyond inflation rates, but remained modest, and many fragmented, categorical, inequitable programs were integrated in a gender-neutral one-parent allowance (1997). While there was no major policy thrust on reconciling work and family life, an EU directive led to improved parental leaves. Childcare lagged badly. Commissions, task forces, and researchers produced reports recounting the advantages of traditional families but calling for acceptance of diverse types and urging that children not be penalized because of the types of families in which they found themselves (Kiely, 1998). Benefit systems do not distinguish between "family" (not defined in the laws) and "household," or cohabitating couples with children and married couples.

Inevitably, independent national poverty studies do not necessarily match international databases. Irish studies using a measure relative to the median income show a rise in child poverty (to 29.3%) from 1973-1980-1987-1992, reflecting growing unemployment and particular impact on multi-child families and lone-parent families. However, international comparative studies (which also adjust for PPP) show a relative rate of 16.8 percent, giving Ireland the 6th highest child poverty rate among 23 OECD countries for 1995. In another calculation, using the U.S. "absolute" poverty line, Ireland, with the 15th highest per capita GDP among 16 European countries (plus Australia), had the 4th highest child poverty rate, exceeded by U.K., Italy and Spain. The lone-parent child poverty rate in Ireland was 46.4 percent (but only 8 percent of children were in lone-parent families) and the rate in other families was 14.2 percent. A 1997 Irish study found one in four children below the poverty line, half the median income (Kiely, 2003). Despite an anti-poverty strategy based on promoting high employment, the government concluded in 2001 that this would not eradicate all poverty.

From 1994, Ireland began a period of unprecedented economic growth, the fastest in the EU; in 1997, the government adopted a national anti-poverty strategy and is targeting results both in terms of a "relative" definition and measures of deprivation.

The Irish government collects 33.9 percent of the GDP in revenue and expends 35.0 percent of GDP, a low percentage among most European welfare states, but exceeding Japan and Australia.

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As is consistent with their per-capita GDPs, Ireland and Spain expend the smallest amounts per capita for all social expenditures among EU countries. Greece and Portugal are bit ahead (just above 3000 ECU's per capita). Consistent with this, Ireland expends a little less out of its GDP for health services than most EU countries (about as much as U.K., but proportionately like Luxembourg and Finland, with much larger GDPs). It also spends a bit less than the OECD average on education. Within its social welfare budget, however, it is one of the top EU spenders, in a group with Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Luxembourg in the share of social expenditures allocated to family benefits (1999). It is also relatively high on the share of social expenditure for unemployment, and balances it out by being below European rates for old age and survivors benefits. Means testing was involved in 35 percent of social expenditure in Ireland in the 1990s. This is a high proportion in an EU where 10 ½ percent was the 1996 average.

Child, Youth and Family Policies

Maternity, Paternity, Parental, and Family Leaves

Under 1997 legislation, Ireland has an 18-week, paid maternity leave, (8 unpaid weeks may also be taken), with replacement of 70 percent of salary to a guaranteed minimum and a specified maximum. At least 4 weeks must be taken before childbirth. This benefit is not taxable. Since the end of 1998, in response to an EU directive, a parent may also take up to 14 weeks of unpaid parental leave at any time until a child is 5. The days may be combined or spread out in various ways. Another paid leave may be used for family emergencies (3 days in 12 months or 5 days in 36 months). Adoptive parents also have a right to leave, its coverage varying with age at adoption. (There is also a low-level 'health and safety benefit,' income-tested, related to night work or breast feeding).

Maternity leave eligibility is based on satisfying social security contribution requirements.

Some trade unions have negotiated brief paternity leave around the time of childbirth.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

As was the case in U.K. and the U.S. in an earlier era, Ireland moved into the 1990s with little formally provided childcare except for children with special needs. Various task forces and reports explored possible initiatives by the private sector, employers, and government. Only gradually was there statutory authority for regulation. Several commissions noted that adequate and accessible childcare provision was a counterpart of increased maternal employment. By the late 1990s only 2 percent of the 0-3 group were in care and 55 percent of the 3-6s. However, the Irish reporter for the EU Family Observatory noted in 1996 that 54 percent of the 4s and 99 percent of the 5s were in school (the compulsory school age is 6). There are special enrichment programs ("Early Start") for children at risk and there is special funding for pre-school for Traveller children-with size and scope of these efforts unreported. There is no public provision for "out-of-school day care," so parents make their own arrangements. It has been estimated that 60,000 children attend private day care facilities (Kiely, 1998). Childcare is defined as an investment priority in the National Development

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Plan, 2000-2006. Kiely reports that thus far, government subsidies are limited on the supply side and that provision, therefore, largely depends on the market (Eurostat, 2001).

An allowance for low earners supports those who would be "Home Earners."

Family and Child Allowances

Gradually, after recommendation from a commission in the mid-80s and several incremental measures that left the system fragmented, Ireland raised all cash transfers. Focusing on protecting "basic income for children" there was major improvement in child benefits, which are universal, with further increases planned for 2003 and decreases in various dependent allowances (those connected with unemployment benefits, for example). The idea was to cut poverty among children and to deal with unemployment and poverty "traps" inherent in the dependent allowances. The age for child benefits was raised from 16 to 19 for students and the disabled. The grant starts with the first child and the payment is higher for third and subsequent children. Benefits are doubled for triplets or other multiple births. These are universal benefits, government financed, and not taxable. There also are special cash birth grants in instances of multiple births. There is a monthly add-on for children with handicaps living at home. Overall, income transfers in Ireland are more effective in reducing post-transfer poverty than they are in most EU countries (Kiely, 2003; Kiely & Richardson, 1994).

In 1997, Ireland pulled together a variety of fragmented and inconsistent programs addressed to lone parents in a new one-parent payment. (It also enacted legislation requiring spouses to maintain each other and their children) (Kiely, 1998). The current "one parent family payment," as it is called, is a means-tested scheme with quite low benefits, seen as a supplement. There were 50,000 beneficiaries at the end of 1997. Irish policy has gradually moved towards encouragement of work for mothers as a way out of poverty, after a long period of attempting to make it unnecessary for mothers to go out to work. This benefit allows the recipient earnings to a ceiling that does not affect the allowance, or to another ceiling with a partial allowance. There is also a 10-week adoption benefit at 70 percent of earnings, to a maximum.

Another family benefit program in this vein (for lone parent or two-parent families) is "family income supplements (FIS)" to help families with children on low pay. The benefit is equal to 60 percent of the difference between net income and an income limit for a family of that size: parents must be working at least 19 hours weekly and have a child under age 18 (22 if in school).

Child and Family Tax Benefits

Tax concessions for widows/widowers, caring for a disabled child and for lone parenthood. No special tax deductions for family-related expenses, a child's education, or child care. Child additions to tax exemption limits for taxpayers on low incomes moved to individualized taxation over the past three years from previous joint-taxation system.

Other Child Conditioned Income Transfers

There are dependent-child supplements to old-age and permanent disability benefits and for survivor benefits. There also is a means-tested, non-contributory orphan's pension. There also

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are dependent-child supplements to unemployment insurance, and to the means-tested unemployment assistance. See above re: "Family Income Supplement."

There also is a "continued dependent child payment" in the instances of unemployment extending beyond 12 months. It may continue for 13 weeks.

"Supplementary welfare allowance," not limited to families with children, is a statutory entitlement with benefit levels set nationally, but with some discretion for community welfare offices for lump-sum payments and weekly rent or mortgage supplement. The program is for people with little or no means who if employable are registered for work, not normally for people working or in school. There are special allowances for families with children. Grants are determined by household structure and numbers of children.

Non-cohabitating widows and widowers receive benefits for dependent children in their care, as do lone parents of low income who need to work.

Child and Adolescent Health

All primary school children have the right to a free school health service, including dental care and treatment for a list of illnesses, regardless of parental income. The population at large is entitled to free (1/3 of the population) or subsidized health care, except for GP services and prescription drugs, which are charged on a means-tested basis. Those not entitled to free service and/or wanting a private hospital, or other private care, take out private health insurance. Those with incomes above the "free" threshold are entitled to a range of free or subsidized services, including maternity or infant care. All infants are entitled to a full course of immunizations in their first 16 months either in a local health clinic or by the family doctor. There is concern with gaps in take-up and a government campaign is aiming at 95 percent (Kiely, 1998).

Irish vital statistics compare well on standard rates although they are not leaders: infant mortality, 6.3 percent; low birth weight, 4.13 percent; neo-natal mortality, 4.6 percent (1995).

Teen-age births are few and out-of-country abortion data probably not valid.

School-Aged Children: Policies and Programs

The primary school day must cover at least 5 hours and 40 minutes for 183 days per year. The secondary school year, for 167 days, may not last over 6 hours daily. As noted earlier there are no public provisions for out-of-school child care.

While overall attendance rates are good, there are high truancy and dropout rates in secondary school (ages 12-16) in disadvantaged areas. This is a subject of current governmental attention-and of a variety of special initiatives.

Compulsory education begins at age 6, but almost all 5s and half the 4s attend infant classes in primary school. The school-leaving age has been raised to 16 from 15.

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Educational achievement is better than in many countries with comparable levels of GDP but the proportions with upper secondary or higher education is below the EU average; men and women have similar educational attainments. Government has undertaken a variety of initiatives with regard to truancy and school dropouts.

Click here to view in PDF format a table on the ages at which children and youth are legally entitled to carry out a series of acts in EU countries.

Reconciliation of Work and Family Life

See above re: Parental Leaves and Child Care. In 1998 the Commission on the Family stated that the government and "social partners" identified "bringing about a suitable balance between work and family life as a key issue for the new century."

Housing Benefits

There are no statutory housing rights but recipients may qualify for rent supplements under the Supplementary Welfare Assistance scheme, mortgage interest relief under the tax system, or a local authority income-tested/socially assessed differential rent scheme.

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