

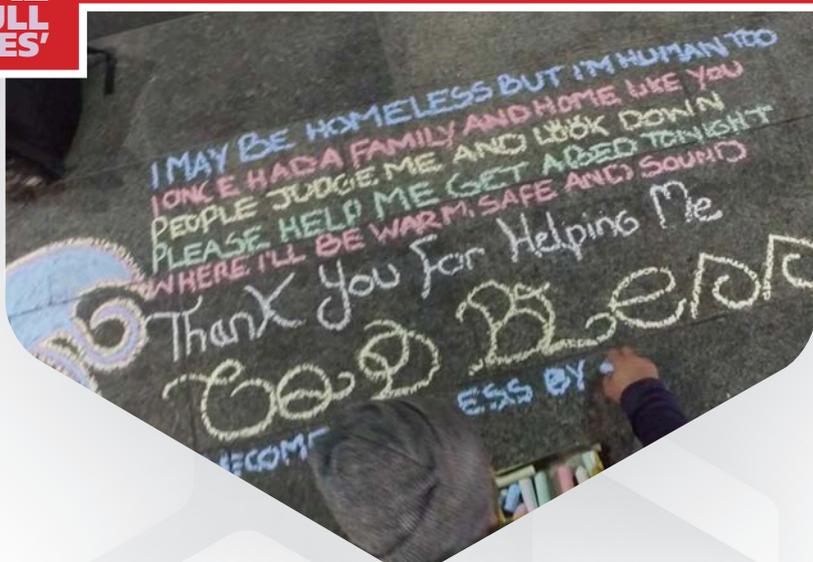


**'HUNGRY
BELLIES
ARE NOT
EQUAL
TO FULL
BELLIES'**

Exploring inequality
and deprivation in
Ireland



unite
the UNION



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**'HUNGRY
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Exploring inequality and deprivation in Ireland

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Executive Summary

Income is just a single measure of economic inequality, of which **TASC** cite 7 aspects. The other 6 are wealth, access to public services, taxation, family composition, capacities and the cost of goods and services. Economic inequality is rising in Ireland and those working on the front line are seeing the need for their services change and grow. According to **Social Justice Ireland** there are 680,000 people, including 200,000 children, living in food poverty. The reason why a wider assessment of inequality beyond mere incomes is necessary would appear to be obvious, but it can be stated as follows – if that which we all need to live including shelter, food, healthcare and other essential needs are removed from an assessment of inequality, and mere income is assumed to be given to us free of these needs, then of course inequality can be presented as falling.

If only real life worked like that. The collective impact of the testimonies here from **Basket Brigade**, **Inner City Helping Homeless**, **SPARK**, **Traveller Visibility Group**, the **Muslim Sisters of Eire** and **Penny Dinners** speaks to an Ireland of growing economic inequality. We already know that enforced deprivation rose in 2019. We know that pre-pandemic rents are at their highest rates ever, running between 48% and 68% of the median wage in Dublin. We know that close to 1 million people are waiting to see a Consultant. When the cost of essentials is removed from social welfare or workers incomes we see real, acute and growing need for support in providing shelter, food, fuel and healthcare. **ICHH** speak of:

‘an increase of over 400% between 2015-2019 in the number of homeless children’.

But those who aren't homeless struggle badly too. In addition to providing the stark title to this paper **Penny Dinners (Cork)** talk about:

‘poverty growing all the time, there is no equality where poverty is concerned’

They also tell us about the ‘trauma of inequality’, about workers struggling on a minimum wage or how ‘even some families with two people working are struggling’, they tell us about suicide, a lack of clothes, and emphatically tell us:

‘We know everything about inequality, and we know it's on the rise. 2020 was a long tough year for Penny Dinners. 2021 will be even tougher, probably our toughest ever’

To present inequality as currently falling in Ireland is not only wrong in this context, but it is a conclusion drawn and presented from incomplete and deeply flawed data. The data that has been presented elsewhere to argue that such a fall in inequality has occurred is interrogated in depth here:

- It is wrong to present the **‘Gini Coefficient’** as pointing to a fall in income inequality without any explanation of the serious and acknowledged systemic flaws in the ‘gini’ method. This method (gini) consists of a survey of a small number of self-selected households, such method being known to under-report high incomes
- A more universal set of figures based on actual taxation levels which points in the opposite direction, to a **rise in income inequality**, needs to be acknowledged and included

- Income inequality data itself does not suffice as a measure of economic inequality anyway. It is but one of at least seven aspects
- There are serious issues with the historic nature of data presented as showing falling inequality in any event, **with some key data relied upon dating back to the 'Celtic Tiger' period up to 2007** – before the financial crash of 2008, the unequal recovery, and now a global pandemic
- Other data which we present here that shows **'zero real income growth' from 2007 to 2017** but is ignored in the reportage, even though the source of that data is relied upon in other ways.

As Ireland emerges from this pandemic the cost of the necessary supports, healthcare, vaccination and recovery will be substantial. They will define the budget position of this and future Governments for a time to come. Who will pick up the tab? This question is put by Pat Leahy in his article in the Irish Times on 5 December 2020 when he states:

'how to pay for the larger State that will result from the pandemic. They will be faced with choices, and these choices will not always – or ever – be easy'.

This question is indeed relevant, and will become more so. But if economic inequality is not fully contextualised, explained and understood then there are real dangers that the cost, as in the past, will primarily be borne by those who can least carry it. Who will pay? Will it be the Travellers represented by **Traveller Visibility Group** who:

'are currently dealing with Travellers across the city (Cork) with multiple issues around health, mental health, education and accommodation'?

Or will it be those helped by **SPARK** who state that:

'2020 starkly showed the disproportionate impact care work has on Mothers. It is felt more acutely by lone parents. The National Childcare Scheme has had a hugely negative impact on lone parent families in greatest need'?

Or perhaps it will be the children helped by **Ber Grogan** and her **'Basket Brigade'** who find a growing need for:

'staples for a Christmas dinner such as meat, fresh veg, tins of veg, boxes of trifle, selection boxes etc.'

..that they provide? Perhaps it will be the people that:

'greeted them at the doors crying, children dancing in the rain, mothers breaking down crying, children waiting at the windows'

Surely in a fair and just society it cannot be the poorest that bear the burden. In this neoliberal era economic inequality is growing and the acute need and suffering of our most vulnerable is growing too. If we are to discuss and address the real current examples of actual growing economic inequality we must consider all the data, up to date, and marry it with the real lived examples of what is happening in our society today.

Introduction

An Oxfam report published in January 2021 entitled 'The Inequality Virus'¹ found that 87% of respondent economists think that coronavirus will lead to an increase, or a major increase, in income inequality in their country. This projected additional inequality is added to a 'world that was already extremely unequal', a world where 'a tiny group of over 2,000 billionaires had more wealth than they could spend in a thousand lifetimes', and where 'the richest 1% have more than double the income of the bottom half of the global population'.² It is also a world where 'the richest 1% have consumed twice as much carbon as the bottom 50% for the last quarter of a century, driving climate destruction'.³

In Naomi Klein's stellar work '*The Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*'⁴ the Author 'explodes the myth that the global free market triumphed democratically' and gives evidenced historical context to the neoliberal maxim, 'never waste a good crisis'. The global fiscal catastrophe of 2008 saw Ireland adopt a model of socialising private speculators' debts which was akin to socialism for the rich, (disaster) capitalism for the poor. And predictably now too, the disaster of a global pandemic is used to further embed inequality and profit a small elite at the expense of the vast majority.

The Oxfam report captures this reality best in outlining how:

*'Since the onset of the pandemic, many large corporations have put profits before workers' safety, pushed costs down the supply chain and used their political influence to shape policy responses. This has led to mega-corporations seeing their profits soar, driving up the wealth of their rich shareholders, while small and medium sized enterprises (SME's) and low wage workers and women are bearing the brunt of the crisis.'*⁵ *While the top 25 US corporations were on course to earn 11% more profits in 2020 compared with the previous year, small business in the US looked likely to lose over 85% of their profits in the second quarter of the year.'*⁶

¹ The Inequality Virus, Oxfam January 2021 - <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621149/bp-the-inequality-virus-250121-en.pdf>

² World Inequality Lab. (2017). World Inequality Report 2018. <http://wir2018.wid.world/>

³ T.Gore. (2020). Confronting Carbon Inequality: Putting climate justice at the heart of the COVID-19 recovery. Oxfam International. <http://www.oxfam.org/en/research/confronting-carbon-inequality>

⁴ <https://tsd.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine.html>

⁵ U. Gneiting, N. Lusiani and I. Tamir. (2020). Ibid

⁶ Oxfam America. (2020). Pandemic Profits Exposed. Media briefing, 22 July 2020. http://assets.oxfamamerica.org/media/documents/Pandemic_Profiters_Exposed.pdf

MYTHMAKING AND HUBRIS – A BAD IRISH HABIT

HUBRIS – EXTREME PRIDE OR ARROGANCE: Hubris often indicates a loss of contact with reality and an overestimation of one's own competence or capabilities, especially when the person exhibiting it is in a position of power.

This all feels very familiar. It feels like we have been here before. Prior to the global fiscal crash in Ireland in 2008 all was well with the Irish economy, or so we were told. Newspapers burgeoning with 'property porn', and other media, loudly heralded the 'Celtic Tiger' and presented the economy of this little island nation as nothing less than world beating. Our financial institutions were headed by people held up to us as paragons of fiscal rectitude and world leaders in their field. The likes of Sean Fitzpatrick and Michael Fingleton could do no wrong. They were feted by broadcast and print media as colossuses of the financial world, veritable wizards with inbuilt super powers leading the way for Ireland, showing the rest of the financial world how it was done. And what could possibly go wrong? Even if something bad happened somewhere, the financial system had 'checks and balances'. And wasn't the Central Bank in charge anyway? It was all so safe. Ireland was a world leader and we had so much cause to be confident, even proud. Hubris reigned supreme.

Those who dared speak out about the ever increasing levels of personal debt and property prices rising to absurd degrees could find themselves being described as both a '*left wing pinko*' by then European Commissioner Charlie McCreevy, and as being suitable for suicide ideation, by our then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. Consensus was everything, '*don the Green jersey*' was the mantra. And, even as a global crash loomed, the same voices told us we in Ireland were certain of a '*soft landing*'.

After the 'soft landing' had occurred with all the subtlety of a meteor crashing into the Earth we had time to reflect on just how such bizarre agenda setting had come to be not only common place, but the only permissible narrative. How had it happened, and how had it pertained right up until the day disaster finally struck? Yet the methodology was simple and transparent:

- **Firstly**, an 'Economist' or appointed 'expert' (often self-appointed but given the freedom of the airwaves nonetheless) would produce an 'economic analysis' to tell us that what we were seeing before our eyes – an impending catastrophe – was in fact a mirage. It might even have been a mirage brought on by our excessive 'partying'. This 'partying' was however to deflect us from the narrative that '*the fundamentals of the Irish financial system*' (and property market) were 'sound and robust',
- **Secondly**, the media would take that 'analysis' and bestow upon it legitimacy and gravitas, patronage and publication, together with unhealthy dollops of scorn for any naysayers questioning the chosen orthodoxy
- **Thirdly**, Politicians would then lift this economic hocus pocus and media spin and use it to define political direction. The recklessness in the financial and property markets was thereby encouraged well beyond the point of no return. This 'analysis' also formed the bedrock of the political

approach when disaster did strike. At that point a secondary narrative of protecting the gamblers and speculators that had driven the country off a cliff edge led to even the debts of unsecured bondholders being socialised. This was done to wide acclaim from the 'experts'. Margaret Thatcher would have approved of the accompanying narrative, *'There Is No Alternative – 'TINA'*

When this occurred there was a resolve afterwards that it would never happen again. It felt like, but was never formally expressed as, a social contract. We the people of Ireland had been lined up by reckless and unscrupulous vested interests and their cheerleaders, the economy had been stripped bare, our economic sovereignty ceded and our regulators exposed as simply a veneer behind which wrongdoing had been running amok. But now lessons would be learned and we would do better in future. Yet well over a decade on, it would appear nothing has been learned.

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, DEPRIVATION, POVERTY AND DISCRIMINATION ARE REAL

It is the view set out in this paper that economic inequality in Ireland in 2021 is horrendous and growing and that poverty, deprivation and discrimination are seriously and unacceptably high. All over our country real life heroes work at great personal cost and expense to ameliorate the impacts of this inequality, deprivation, discrimination and poverty. Every night the streets of our cities and towns see them doing soup runs, handing out food, hot drinks, blankets, tents. Medical advice is sought and given. There are life and death fights against poverty, fights for mere survival, taking place every day. Too many lose the fight. Homeless people dying on our streets was considered obscene when Jonathan Corrie died in 2015. It caused a national outcry. Politicians rushed to make it clear that it was unacceptable and the root causes would be addressed. Yet by 2021 we have now reached a point where homeless people die on our streets at an average of well over one death per week. Homeless people dying on our streets is now so routine that many deaths are barely even reported in the news. While shelter is now considered a sometimes unattainable luxury, relief and support is constantly provided by volunteers. Empathy and understanding, yes even love for our fellow man, woman and child, is given without question.

Except the need is questioned. On 5 December 2020 the Irish Times, once known as the 'paper of record' carried a gushing piece selling Ireland again as a world beating nation where wealth was rising, and inequality falling, at the same time. The article was based on a selective interpretation of data that was itself selectively assembled, but the narrative was clear – Ireland had broken the mould and was a world beater again. In a further echo of the past the article also then specifically targeted naysayers and sought to eliminate any further discussion on the matter by simply declaring *'the facts are the facts'*. The Irish Times subsequently refused to carry a lengthy rebuttal piece challenging those *'facts'*. Predictably, within days, a Politician from the establishment parties, Senator Jerry Buttimer, seized upon the narrative to celebrate these *'facts'* namechecking the 'paper of record' on the Oireachtas record in doing so. But falling inequality is not a *'fact'*. The opposite is the case. Increasing economic inequality, poverty, deprivation and discrimination is a fact as is set out in this paper.

In the first part of this paper we will outline, in considerable depth, the data underpinning these issues in order to construct a true picture of Irish inequality and deprivation, and how to measure it. We are grateful for the work of Dr. Conor McCabe in doing so and his 'deep dive' analysis into the relevant data makes up the first part of this paper.

We then move to analyse current economic inequality through the testimony of those who face it every day. We do so because, to selectively analyse data only (even substantial data as we seek to do) without considering the real lived evidence of those working on the ground addressing it – experts in their field – would not be an exercise in fully considering inequality in all its aspects. You can't just 'intellectualise away' inequality, poverty, discrimination or deprivation – attractive as the prospect may seem.

'You can't just 'intellectualise away' inequality, poverty, discrimination or deprivation – attractive as the prospect may seem'

The testimonies that make up the second part of the paper come from organisations and experts in the field with many years' experience. They are:

- Basket Brigade (Dublin)
- Inner City Helping Homeless (ICHH)
- Muslim Sisters of Eire (MSOE)
- Penny Dinners (Cork)
- SPARK (Single Parents Acting for the Rights of Kids)
- Traveller Visibility Group (Cork)

In this way the paper has, we submit, an important impact – ***it vindicates the work and sacrifice that Ireland's volunteers, through their toil and love, provide to our most needy and vulnerable people and families. It demonstrates that their work, and the need for it, is growing and not declining. Their work and relief is not only necessary but essential, not alone selfless but heroic, and it should never be undermined or forgotten. It must be vindicated and supported.***

We all owe these organisations and many others, and all the volunteers working in and with them, a great debt of gratitude.

On behalf of Unite Trade Union I thank them, and we submit this paper and their testimonies for your contemplation.

Brendan Ogle

Senior Officer – Republic of Ireland
February 2021

Measuring inequality in Ireland

THE BIG PICTURE

SETTING AN UNFAIR NARRATIVE

On 5 December 2020 the Irish Times published an article by Pat Leahy which said that inequality is falling in Ireland. RTE's Brainstorm website had published a similar article on 19 November, this time by the University College Cork (UCC) Economist Seamus Coffey. These were picked up by Fine Gael Senator Jerry Buttimer who spoke in the Seanad on 14 December. He referenced both authors and stated that they had both shown that in Ireland *'people are getting richer and we were becoming more equal'*.¹

The claims made by Leahy, Coffey, and Buttimer are misleading and unfair. They are unfair to all those suffering from economic inequality, deprivation or poverty. They are also unfair to those, mostly unpaid volunteers, who struggle might and main to provide necessary support to people suffering the real life impacts of economic inequality. There is a danger that, unless challenged, these claims will become accepted as facts. The purpose of this analysis which I have completed with, and for, Unite Trade Union in the Republic of Ireland is to show in detail where and why these claims are misleading, and to provide evidence of, and alternatives to, the **growing** inequality in our society.

This is not a straightforward process because the issues at hand are somewhat technical. Both Coffey and Leahy use specialist terms and methodologies and in the process gloss over the limitations, contradictions, and failings of the surveys they put forward in their articles as objective and unassailable evidence of their claims. In the words of Leahy, *'the data is the data, the facts are the facts'*;² while for Coffey, *'Everyone can have their own opinion on the best way forward, but they cannot have their own facts'*.³



¹ Seanad Debates, 14 Dec 2020. Vol. 273, No. 8: 546.

² Pat Leahy. 'Ireland is becoming more unequal? Wrong'. Irish Times. 5 Dec 2020. All subsequent quotes from Leahy are from this source.

³ Seamus Coffey. 'Why has income inequality fallen in Ireland?' RTE Brainstorm. 19 Nov 2020. All subsequent quotes from Coffey are from this source. [<https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/11/19/1179134-ireland-income-inequality/>]



Unfortunately, *'having their own facts'* is essentially what Leahy and Coffey have done, and unfortunately the distortions in their assumptions have already made it into the political arena.

This analysis will look at the claims of Leahy, Coffey, and Buttimer, with particular emphasis on those of Coffey as his work informs the statements of the other two. I will do so in some detail as it is necessary to delve deep into the manner in which material was found to fit the narrative and deliver statements as stark as *'the data is the data, the facts are the facts'*.

Before beginning I want to just say that there are solutions to growing inequality which involve greater investment in our social infrastructure, in particular in health, housing, childcare, and home care; stronger trade union legislation and membership; and a just transition towards a sustainable future. It is not rocket science: the barriers are simply ideological and political. But they can be overcome, with trade unions and communities working together to build a better world.

We also have to be honest however and say this from the outset: *there are sections of our society that will fight and resist these solutions in any way they can, because the way forward threatens the very inequalities that sustain their wealth and socially destructive activities. Inequality is a profitable business model for many. The political will to address it is missing for a reason.*

This analysis, and the lived experiences that follow it, are put forward as a counter to those sections of our society and their ways of thinking, and as a guide to the type of solutions we need today.

LEAHY AND INEQUALITY – IRELAND 'BUCKING A TREND'?

'In many countries, ordinary working people have seen their incomes stagnate while elites secured larger and larger slices of the economic pie' writes Leahy, but that *'Ireland has bucked this trend. Yes you read that right. Inequality is falling in Ireland and has been for years.'*

Leahy cites two main sources of information to back up this statement.

The first is the OECD. He says that data from the organisation *'published earlier this year found that while inequality had increased from one generation to the next in most countries, in Ireland it was the opposite'*.

The second is the UCC economist Seamus Coffey. He has *'written extensively about this phenomenon'* says Leahy, *'and what is truly remarkable about Ireland, as Coffey points out, is that the falling inequality has come at a time of strong economic growth. In other words, we are getting richer, and also more equal at the same time.'*

The third source that Leahy cites is the independent 'Think-tank for Action on Social Change' (TASC). Quoting the report he says

'TASC, the left-wing economic think tank, publishes an annual survey of inequality, and in the 2020 edition, commented on Ireland's "non-conformism" to the "trend of rising inequality in most countries", suggesting the explanation lay in the extraordinary economic progress of the Celtic Tiger period. Whatever the reason, the TASC report says, "while inequality was on the rise elsewhere, it was falling here".'

Leaving aside his political positioning of TASC it appears that Leahy's source for the OECD is from these two reports – so with that in mind we will deal with the OECD at the same time as Coffey and TASC.

The current Irish phenomenon of *'getting richer and also more equal at the same time'*, according to Leahy, *'is the product of good decisions made over a period of time, by patience, by far-sightedness, by the gradual accretion of acts of good government'*. It shows that Irish governments are not right-wing but social democratic, and good at it as well.

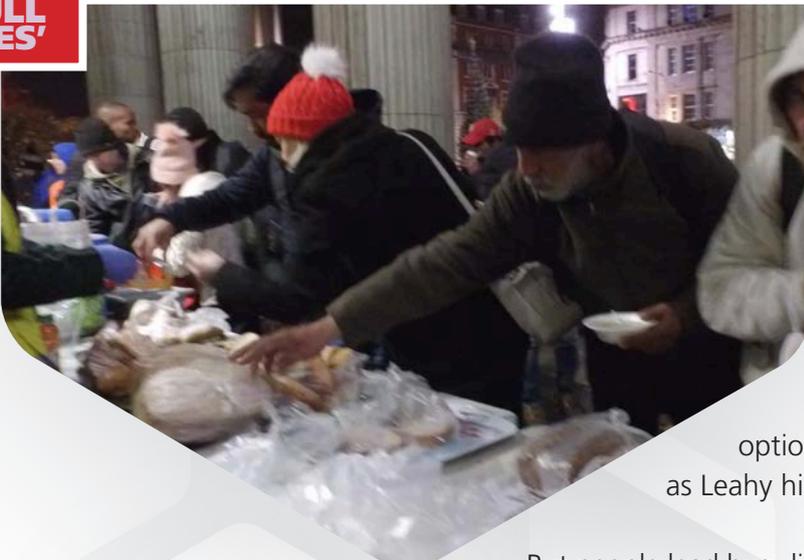
According to Leahy, these facts are drowned out by the voices of *'powerful special interests'*. These are *'the professions, the multinationals, the public sector trade unions (currently lining up for another pay deal) or Ireland's remarkably prolific NGO sector'*.

He believes that these facts are important because the Irish government – either this one or the next one – will have to decide *'how to pay for the larger State that will result from the pandemic. They will be faced with choices; and these choices will not always – or ever – be easy'*.

This is the core of his argument: Ireland is getting richer and more equal; this has only been achieved by very few countries; the Irish state has managed to do this because of the far-sighted vision of successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil-led governments; and we need to keep that in mind as we face into the future with some rocky roads and tough decisions ahead.

Finally, he says that when it comes to falling inequality in Ireland, *'the data is the data, the facts are the facts.'* It is, beyond doubt, a real thing according to Leahy. The evidence is there: we need to just accept it and move on by keeping to the same policies and the same political parties in government as we have now.

Once we go looking for the evidence, however, we find that here are significant problems with Leahy's article. The manifesto is clear, but the 'data' and 'facts' that underpin it is quite another story.



Unfortunately, given the nature of those issues, it requires a deep dive into the data and reports that underpin his argument. This takes time and energy as well as a familiarity with the core documents, their terminology and methodologies, which for the average reader is not usually an option. But it is vital. The stakes are high, as Leahy himself pointed out.

But people lead busy lives. They expect articles in the Irish Times on inequality to be at least authoritative. So when one is published that says that inequality in Ireland is falling and that this is simply a fact, they are usually not in a position to question that statement, even if it goes against their actual, everyday experience.

The purpose of this section is to do just that: to test Leahy's argument against the evidence he relies upon, and see whether it stands up and is, indeed, just 'the facts'.

It also involves finding the evidence he cites, which as we will see is not a straightforward process by any means. But put on your seatbelt, we will get there!

Before we even get to the evidence, however, we have to deal with terminology as used by Leahy: in particular, the word 'inequality' itself.

THE USE OF THE WORD 'INEQUALITY'

In his article, Leahy uses three different terms for inequality as if they are interchangeable. But they are not.

He starts off with economic inequality. He says that '*One of the most corrosive trends in western democracies – a social and economic problem that has impoverished millions of ordinary people and fuelled the rise of far-right populists from the US to Britain to Europe and beyond – is the rise of economic inequality*'.

Leahy does not provide a definition of the term but according to TASC, economic inequality '*refers to the unequal distribution of material resources — that is the resources people need to attain goods and services to satisfy their diverse needs and to flourish as individuals*'.⁴ It is clear therefore that this refers not only to income, but also to access to essential services such as health, education, childcare, homecare, and housing. It also relates to personal capacities and how this affects inequality, such as illness or disability.

TASC says that '*economic inequality is about more than income, since it is only one of the material factors that affect people's ability to flourish. Income disparities may matter less in a society with strong universal public services than in a society without them*'.⁵

⁴ Nat O'Connor and Cormac Staunton. *Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland*. Tasc: Dublin, 2016: 12.

⁵ O'Connor and Staunton: 12.

When measuring economic inequality, it looks at seven distinct yet interrelated factors. These are: income; wealth; public services; tax; capacities; family composition; and the costs of goods and services.⁶

In his article, Leahy goes from economic inequality to immediately talking about incomes, which is only one element of economic inequality. He then moves on to equate income inequality as 'inequality'. What started off as a complex, interconnected dynamic involving income, wealth, services, personal capacities, and access to public services, tax, and family composition, is therefore reduced to income alone.

Leahy has to do this because the main evidence he provides comes from the economist Seamus Coffey and his writings on income inequality.

Leahy says the following in his article:

'The UCC economist Seamus Coffey has written extensively about this phenomenon [Ireland having the biggest fall in income inequality]. And while many of the issues surrounding this debate – because of the obvious political implications – are contested territory, the data is the data, the facts are the facts... And what is truly remarkable about Ireland, as Coffey points out, is that the falling inequality has come at a time of strong income growth. In other words, we are getting richer, and also more equal at the same time. This is a neat trick, managed by very few... only Ireland had high income growth and falling inequality.'

Leahy does not say to which specific articles by Coffey he is referring; however, but on 19 November 2020 RTÉ's *Brainstorm* website published an article by Coffey which tallies with Leahy's line around high income growth and falling inequality, and so it is to that we must now turn our attention.

SEAMUS COFFEY AND INEQUALITY

In his article for RTÉ, Coffey gives a definition of inequality. He says, *'When used on its own, "inequality" is typically a shorthand for inequality in disposable income, the money available for households after the addition of social transfers, the deduction of taxes, and before any bills have been paid'*.

This differs significantly from that used by TASC, and as with Leahy, it equates the length and breadth of inequality with only one particular element only: disposable income.

He also gives a definition of market income, which he says is 'income earned from labour and capital'. Finally he explains the 'gini coefficient', which he says 'measures the difference between the actual income distribution versus a distribution with perfect equality. If everyone has the same income, the gini coefficient will be zero; if one person has everything, the gini coefficient will be one'.

⁶ O'Connor and Staunton: 13.

Coffey then makes three core statements:

- Ireland is the only country in his sample to achieve both high income growth and falling income inequality
- Ireland has one of the most progressive income tax systems in the OECD and our tax system has a greater impact on the gini coefficient relative to all other OECD countries
- Repeatedly stating that inequality is rising does not make it so; people cannot have their own facts

To make his arguments, Coffey uses a research paper published in the Journal of Income Distribution in 2018, entitled *'Rising Income Inequality and Living Standards in OECD Countries: how Does the Middle Fare?'*⁷ It was written by Stefan Thewisswen and colleagues (hereafter referred to as "Thewisswen"). He also cites work by Barra Roantree of the Irish Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), and although he does not reference the source itself, it appears to be a paper entitled *'Understanding Income Inequality in Ireland'* from March 2020.⁸

We can already see that there is a problem regarding verification of Leahy's argument. In his original article he cited Coffey; now we have reached Coffey but, frustratingly, we have to dig further to get to the actual, verifiable data. And so we will.

THEWISSWEN AND RISING INCOME INEQUALITY

The purpose of the Thewisswen paper is to *'examine how income inequality and median household incomes have evolved over time and the extent to which rising inequality is associated with changes in median incomes'*.⁹ Its overall purpose is to *'investigate the extent to which rising income inequality is associated with stagnating middle incomes'*.¹⁰

To do so, it draws upon the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) database and the OECD Income Distribution Database to get figures for equivalised disposable household income, which it then adjusts via national consumer price indices and purchasing power parities, converting all income to 2011 PPP-adjusted dollars. Equivalised disposable household income is a statistical process whereby household incomes are added together and then 'equalised' using a series of statistical weights and measures.

It then uses not one, but two indicators of income inequality. The first is the gini coefficient which it calculates from micro-data in the LIS and OECD databases. The second is the income share going to the top 1%. The data for this is not sourced from the same database as household income as *'both the LIS and OECD databases really have difficulty capturing what is happening at the very top of the income distribution'*; so the authors *'draw on the World Inequality Database, which uses data from the administration of income taxes together with the national accounts'*.¹¹

⁷ Stefan Thewisswen et al. 'Rising Income Inequality and Living Standards in OECD Countries: How Does the Middle Fare?' Journal of Income Distribution 26, no.2 (2018): 1-23.

⁸ Barra Roantree. 'Understanding income inequality in Ireland'. March 2020. [http://www.ssisi.ie/SSISI_173_03-Roantree_paper_PDF.pdf]

⁹ Thewisswen: 2.

¹⁰ Thewisswen: 2.

¹¹ Thewisswen: 5.

Thewisswen uses this data to produce a table of 31 countries showing changes in average median income, average change in gini coefficient, and the average top 1% share. The data range for each country varies, with some going back as far as 1977.

With regards to the household income data on Ireland, Thewisswen focuses on the period 1987 to 2007 (14 years ago and before the financial crash), noting that the annual change in median disposable incomes in Ireland was 4.52%.¹² Ireland also experienced an average change in the gini coefficient of -0.13 points. In other words, Ireland experienced a rise in median incomes and a fall in disposable household income (adjusted to individual allocations) from 1987 to 2007.

In his article for RTÉ, Coffey himself builds a new graph around this table which he labels as *'Income Growth and Inequality Changes 1980s to 2010s'* – even though Thewisswen has data for Ireland from 1987 to 2007 only.

While data for other countries in some cases goes up to 2013, that is not the case for Ireland – and yet Coffey provides no caveat to the reader (nor any alternate source of data), leaving them to presume that the data survey must include Ireland for the 2010s. Indeed, he says in his article, *'In the three decades since the 1980s [i.e. from the 1990s to 2010s], Ireland is the only country in the sample to achieve both high income growth and falling income inequality'*.

As we will see later, the period 2008 to 2017 was very different from the period 1987 to 2007. A data survey that ends at the cusp of the Celtic Tiger is different to one that takes in the economic crash, the bailout of the banks, the arrival of the Troika, and the unemployment and emigration that followed in their wake, as well as the muted recovery and now a global pandemic.

When we look at the OECD's income distribution database, for example, we see that Ireland's gini coefficient was at 0.295 in 2008, and 0.295 in 2017 – essentially stagnant for ten years.¹³

All that Coffey has shown with his graph is that median incomes rose in Ireland from 1987 (when unemployment was at 16.9%) to 2007 (when unemployment was at 4.8%), and that inequality as measured by the gini coefficient fell as a result.



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¹² Thewisswen: 10.

¹³ OECD. Income Distribution Database. <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=IDD#>

However, in addition, the second measurement of inequality in the Thewisswen paper is that of the share of income going to the top 1%. Thewisswen says,

***'Most of the English-speaking countries where top income shares rose particularly rapidly (namely Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA) also saw overall inequality rise markedly. Ireland is an exception: the share of the top 1% increased rapidly but overall inequality declined.'*¹⁴**

But Ireland is one of a number of states where of the two measures of inequality referenced, one shows inequality falling in Ireland (the gini coefficient, which Coffey uses), while the second one shows income inequality rising (the share of income to the top 1%, which Coffey does not use). The other states are Denmark, France, and Portugal.

Thewisswen is aware of the inconsistency in data, this inconsistency between the two measurements of inequality – the gini coefficient and the share of income going to the top 1%, and not only references it but seeks to consider the reasons for it: *'it may arise for a variety of reasons: changes at the top may be missed in household surveys to a varying extent across countries and the gini measure is in any case more sensitive to changes occurring around the middle than at either extreme of the distribution, so the gini may mostly reflect inequality within the "bottom 99%"'*.¹⁵

On top of this he adds,

***'It is important not to lose sight of differences [between states] in the search for a common, consistent pattern and overarching story. Furthermore, available estimates of changes in inequality are subject to error, and different sources and indicators do not always tell the same story, so caution is required in using these data, not least in studying their relationship with household income growth.'*¹⁶**

But we know that despite TASC setting out 7 components of economic inequality Coffey and Leahy focus solely on 'income', and go to some efforts to do so.

Throughout the paper, Thewisswen refers to issues with the household surveys that are used to calculate the gini coefficient. With that in mind, it is important to look at that methodology of measurement in an Irish context.

¹⁴ Thewisswen: 8.

¹⁵ Thewisswen: 9.

¹⁶ Thewisswen: 16.

GINI COEFFICIENT

Unlike taxation based measurement of income the gini coefficient for Ireland is not based on information on the 1.7 million households in the state but on a small sample of them – 4,183 to be exact (around 0.2 per cent of the total).

The survey, as it itself makes clear, is voluntary. In 2019 the CSO invited over 9,000 households to take part in the survey but in the end only 40% agreed. Almost 2,000 households refused outright, while another 2,800 gave various reasons listed as 'other' by the CSO.¹⁷

This means that while the CSO conducts a random selection of private households for the initial catchment, within that random selection there is a form of self-selection, or self 'de-selection'. There are households that will not share their income data, while there are others that will – and it is only those that freely volunteer the information that end up in the survey.

Even here the issues with the gini co-efficient do not end. The data from each household is collected throughout the year by interview. The CSO employs around 100 people to carry out this work, but often they call to a house and not everyone is at home. They then conduct interviews 'by proxy' – that is, information is provided by *'another resident of the household due to unavailability of the person in question'*.¹⁸ Up to 50 percent of all interviews for the income survey are by proxy, which gives rise to issues *'with the quality of data for proxy responses for certain variables'* according to the CSO.¹⁹

The voluntary nature of the survey, as well as issues with the interview process, lead to statistical bias. *'Changes at the top [incomes] may be missed in household surveys'* wrote the authors of the 2018 paper,²⁰ while Robert Sweeney in his report on inequality for TASC said that such surveys *'have well-known limitations when it comes to the measure of income, and hence inequality. Being voluntary, non-response is a problem among the rich in particular, and high incomes tend to be underreported when they do respond.'*²¹

These issues help explain the difference between the gini coefficient, which is based upon a voluntarist and incomplete sample survey of 0.2 per cent of Irish households, and the growth in income share to the top one per cent, which is calculated from data provided by the Revenue Commissioners of every income tax return in the state (over two million tax units). Only one of these is genuinely national in scope, and it happens to be the one which suggests rising income inequality. It is also the one that Coffey ignores.



¹⁷ CSO. Standard Report on Methods and Quality for the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2019. CSO, 2020: 55.

¹⁸ Standard Report: 30.

¹⁹ Standard Report: 30.

²⁰ Thewissen: 8.

²¹ Robert Sweeney. The State We're In: Inequality in Ireland 2020. Tasc: Dublin, 2020: 13-14.

Getty Image



It is no surprise then to hear that the data collected from household surveys has to be 'cleaned up' by the CSO before it ends up in the final survey. This requires the use of various statistical weights and assumptions to compensate for missing data. It produces a final product which is tentative and provisional in its findings and should not be used without caveats. None of these caveats sit very well with definitive and far reaching statements such as 'the facts are the facts'.

In the end the gini coefficient is calculated through a random sample survey of 0.2 per cent of all households in the state; within which there is a high degree of self-selection, or due to the thousands of households selected that refuse to share their financial information; with up to 50 per cent of the data collated not through direct engagement but through interview by proxy; with the raw data then subject to a series of statistical weights, measures, and guesswork in order to compensate for gaps in the interviews; before being put through a formula with its own weights and measures in order to produce a so-called measure of inequality.

This is why, in the words of Thewisswen and colleagues, 'our findings can only be suggestive, but they do imply that neither of the popular grand narratives featuring so strongly in current debates – that high or rising inequality consistently boosts or reduces real economic growth for the middle – reflects the variety of experiences actually observed across the rich countries in recent decades.'²²

Having gone through the Thewisswen paper, we can say the following about Coffey's use of it:

- He presents inequality in disposable income as shorthand for inequality when this is not the case
- He presents data from the Celtic Tiger years as if it pertains to today
- He neglects to mention that while one measurement showed inequality falling in Ireland up to 2007, the other showed it on the rise
- He neglects to mention the methodological issues with household surveys as highlighted by Thewisswen

The Thewisswen paper is only one source used by Coffey. We now turn our attention to the second one.

BARRA ROANTREE AND INEQUALITY

In his paper, Roantree also highlights the fact that 'household surveys tend to undersample those in the extreme tails of the income distribution. As a result, they are not a reliable source of data for examining the nature of income inequality at the very top'.²³ With that caveat in place, he then sets up three different though interrelated databases for measuring income inequality. The first is

²² Thewisswen: 17.

²³ Roantree: 2.

market income, which he defines as 'household income before taxes, transfers or pensions'.²⁴ Under this measurement, Ireland's gini coefficient *'was the highest (most unequal) in the EU-28 at 0.544, followed closely by Portugal, Bulgaria and Greece'*.²⁵

The second is market income plus welfare benefits and pensions ('gross household income'). When these are factored in, Ireland's gini coefficient *'falls slightly from being the most to the 5th most unequal country'* in the EU-28.²⁶

Thirdly he looks at gross household income minus taxes on income ('disposable income'). He finds that *'it is only when taxes are deducted from gross income to get disposable income that inequality in Ireland falls significantly relative to other EU countries'*.²⁷ It leaves Ireland *'the 13th most unequal country of the EU-28 as measured by the gini coefficient for disposable income, mid-table and just above the median of 0.296'*.²⁸

As with Coffey, Roantree also makes the argument that income inequality has improved since 1987. In making his calculations, Roantree runs into a problem in that the CSO's Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC),²⁹ his main source of data, only goes back to 2003. In order to go back to 1987, he reverts to the publication, *Poverty, Income and Welfare In Ireland*, which was published by the ESRI in 1989.³⁰ This was also a sample survey, initially of 5,850 households, but after 24 per cent refused to participate they were left with a pool of 3,294, once non-responses were factored in.³¹ *'The refusal rate was somewhat higher than that found in most other Institute surveys'* it said, *'presumably due to the sensitivity of the subjects covered in this survey and the complexity of the questionnaires involved.'*³² As with the SILC, the random sample survey was subject to a significant form of self-selection as those who did not want to discuss their finances effectively left the room.

The methodologies used to collate and frame the data in the 1987 report differ from those of the SILC. This leads Roantree to adapt and modify some of the findings in order to 'fit' the SILC data. He also draws upon the 1997 *Living in Ireland* survey which again was designed in the absence of SILC definitions. I mention these methodological disjoints simply to show that the findings as presented are not as clean and straightforward as Coffey makes out. Indeed, it seems foolhardy to say *'you cannot have your own facts'* when in reality that is what Roantree has done: no matter how methodological his approach, the underlying surveys used different sampling, bias, weights, and assumptions which Roantree has had to **'fit'** together.

²⁴ Roantree: 5.

²⁵ Roantree: 7.

²⁶ Roantree: 11.

²⁷ Roantree: 11.

²⁸ Roantree: 11.

²⁹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/socialconditions/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc/>

³⁰ T. Callan, B. Nolan, B. Whelan, D. Hannan, and S. Creighton. *Poverty, Income and Welfare in Ireland*. No. 146. Dublin, ESRI: 1989.

³¹ Callan et al: 42.

³² Callan et al: 43.

Even here, there are issues. While Roantree's headline figure has inequality falling over the past thirty years, a more nuanced picture emerges when we delve into the decades themselves. Roantree writes that the first period,

***'between 1987 and 1997 can be characterised as regressive, with disposable incomes rising almost twice as fast at the top of the distribution as the bottom. The second – between 1997 and 2007 – can be characterised as progressive, with disposable incomes rising by more at the bottom than the top as well as at a remarkably rapid rate; more than 10 per cent across the distribution. The final phase – between 2007 and 2017, encompassing both the recession and subsequent economic recovery – can be described as neutral, with zero real income growth across the distribution.'*³³**

We can see that the heavy lifting, so to speak, in a drop in disposable income inequality, occurred from 1997 to 2007 – the height of the Celtic Tiger years when Ireland experienced de facto full employment. Since 2007 there has been no improvement in disposable income inequality as measured by Roantree. It has been static, as we saw with the figures from the OECD.

Finally, unlike Leahy and Coffey, Roantree fully acknowledges that disposable income inequality is only one measure of inequality. He says that *'there are certain areas where our knowledge is limited [and that among these is] the composition and extent of incomes at the very top...we also know little about the joint distribution of income, consumption and wealth in Ireland. International research has shown that wealth is much more unequally distributed than income, which is in turn more unequally distributed than consumption.'*³⁴

Roantree highlights some of the other factors that are crucial to any holistic measurement of inequality, such as wealth, and the ability to attain essential goods and services. Although he does not mention all seven areas of economic inequality that TASC highlights, nonetheless he makes sure to inform the reader that his paper is but one aspect of inequality. Such balance and nuance is absent from Coffey's article, which is determined to present net disposable income inequality as the only measurement, despite what the research he relies upon says.

This provides a completely different scope to assess the article by Seamus Coffey that Pat Leahy relies upon to make his argument that Ireland is becoming richer and more equal. The main findings in Coffey's article are based on statistics from the Celtic Tiger years, and ignore the fact there was no net drop in the gini coefficient from 2008 to 2017. Nor does it take into account the tentative and circumstantial nature of the gini coefficient due to the methodological shortcomings in the household surveys that underpin it – shortcomings that *underestimate* the earnings of those at

³³ Roantree: 4.

³⁴ Roantree: 14-15.

the top. How can we measure income inequality based solely on a survey that is known to underestimate earnings at the top? These shortcomings are well-acknowledged by the experts – indeed, Thewisswen goes out of his way to try to compensate for them by bringing in figures for the top 1%. None of this seems to matter to Leahy or Coffey.

There is, however, one more source that Leahy draws upon: the 2020 TASC report on inequality. This also needs to be analysed as Leahy is not entirely straightforward in his handling of the material, or in his political positioning of TASC which describes itself as an ‘independent think tank’.

TASC and Inequality

The full title of the TASC report cited by Leahy is *The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2020*. The key line used by Leahy is contained in the full paragraph quoted below.

‘The wealth of available evidence points to a trend of rising inequality in most countries. Ireland’s non-conformism can be explained, in part, by its unique development trajectory. Plagued by high unemployment for most of the latter 20th century, the emergence of the Celtic Tiger expanded access to the labour market, with many well-paying jobs. While inequality was on the rise elsewhere, it was falling here.’

The last sentence is the one that Leahy quotes to prove his point. However, the very next paragraph in the report which Leahy doesn’t use qualifies the statement, to say the least:

‘Another explanation for Ireland’s stability is that it is only apparent, and that inequality has actually been increasing [my emphasis]. The data presented so far have ultimately been drawn from surveys, which have well-known limitations when it comes to the measure of income, and hence inequality.’

Leahy quotes the line that inequality may be falling but neglects to quote the line that says that inequality may be also on the rise.

Furthermore, he sidesteps the historical nature of the data – the focus on the Celtic Tiger period which ended thirteen years ago – as well as the comparative nature of the surveys themselves. In other words, inequality may only appear to be falling in Ireland because of its rise in other European states and that historically Ireland has come from a low-income equality base.

This point was made by the Author of the report, Robert Sweeney, in a letter he wrote to the Irish Times in response to Leahy’s article. He said that ‘Ireland’s performance with respect to its peer

group is more a product of poor performance elsewhere than falling inequality here. If we compare the level of inequality in Ireland with European levels in the 1980s and 1990s, we find Ireland to have higher inequality than about two-thirds of countries in Western Europe.³⁵

As we already saw, Sweeney in his report for TASC highlights the methodological distortions that are inherent in household surveys. The full quote is below:

'Being voluntary, non-response [in these surveys] is a problem among the rich in particular, and high incomes tend to be underreported when they do respond. Official statistics, which also rely on surveys, therefore tend to underestimate inequality. If incomes at the top are becoming more concentrated, the problem may get worse as there is a greater incentive to hide and underreport. There is evidence that the discrepancy between income reported in surveys and the higher incomes reported to tax authorities is growing. That would suggest that the underestimation of inequality is becoming more pronounced.'³⁶

This means that all three academic papers cited either by Leahy or Coffey – Thewisswen, Roantree, and TASC – have highlighted the problems with the collation and calculation of the gini coefficient from these surveys. Yet, despite this, not once does Leahy, or indeed Coffey, make this known to the reader.

All the discussion on inequality up to now has been on income. We can see that there are significant methodological flaws in the way the data those measurements are based upon is created and processed. And yet, as TASC highlighted in its 2015 report on economic inequality, income inequality is only part of the picture. We also need to look at wealth; public services; capacities; family composition; and the costs of goods and services.

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY – A REALITY CHECK

Leahy, Coffey, and Buttimer are using the wrong tools to ask the wrong questions to come up with the wrong answers.

They are ignoring the constitutive elements of economic inequality. Indeed, they have to do this, otherwise they cannot say that Ireland is becoming more equal – even though that statement is based on disposable income statistics from 13 years ago that are calculated from a survey of 0.2% of households where high-income earners self-censor their earnings.

We have been here before. In the years leading up to the 2008 crash, Irish economists and policy makers used their wisdom to miss the obvious: that we were in the midst of a speculative bubble; financed through the foreign borrowings of private banks; where a blanket guarantee was seen as the solution.

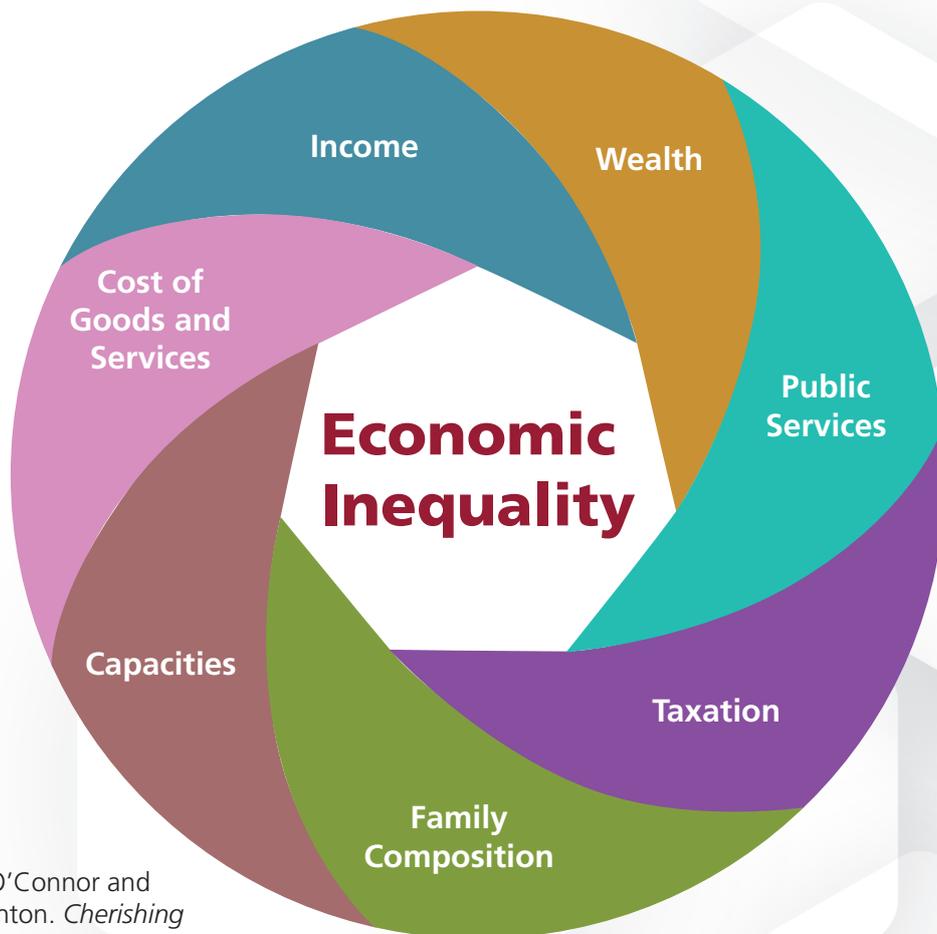
³⁵ Robert Sweeney, 'Measuring inequality'. Irish Times. 12 Dec 2020.

³⁶ Sweeney. State We're In: 14.

There is no point in pretending economic inequality is going away. It is real, and it will remain an issue for as long as it affects Irish society. In other words, either we are interested in tackling inequality as it is actually lived and experienced, or we are not.

This section takes as its starting point the approach towards economic inequality as expressed by TASC in its 2015 publication, *Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland*. To restate:

'Economic inequality refers to the unequal distribution of material resources — that is the resources people need to attain goods and services to satisfy their diverse needs and to flourish as individuals [and that] in order to get a more rounded picture of economic inequality in Ireland [we need to look at] income; wealth; public services; tax; capacities; family composition; and costs of goods and services.'



Source: Nat O'Connor and Cormac Staunton. *Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland*. Tasc: Dublin, 2016: 25

When we start to look at economic inequality in this way, as it is lived and experienced, a much more realistic view of inequality in Ireland emerges than that proffered by Leahy, Coffey, and Buttimer.

DEPRIVATION AND POVERTY RATES

On 2 September 2020 the CSO published a report which found that the enforced deprivation rate in Ireland had increased in 2019 to 17.8 per cent.³⁷ *'Enforced deprivation is defined as not being able to afford two or more deprivation indicators such as keeping the home adequately warm or buying presents for family/friends at least once a year'* said Eva O'Regan, Statistician with the CSO. *'The percentage of people considered to be experiencing enforced deprivation in 2019' she added, was 'up from 15.1% in 2018.'*

The report was drawn from the same survey as that which underpins income inequality, and so is subject to the same limitations. However, as we are focusing on those on low and middle incomes, the findings are more robust because, as we have seen, it is at the high end of incomes that structural discrepancies arise. With that in mind we can see what it discovered.

- It found that 34.4 percent of those in rented accommodation were in deprivation, up from 27.4 percent in 2018. Women were more likely to experience it, while over one in five children were living in deprivation.
- It also found that the proportion of the population experiencing three or more types of deprivation items increased from 9.9 per cent in 2018 to 12 per cent in 2019.
- At the same time the report found that the 'at risk of poverty' rate fell to 12.8 per cent in 2019 from 14 per cent in 2018. The CSO calculates at risk of poverty rate as the share of people whose income was less than 60% of the national median income.

So how is it that the number of people in deprivation can increase while the level of poverty decreases? This brings us back to the way in which these terms are defined and calculated. We can see that there is a difference between poverty as measured as net income, and poverty as measured once we need to start paying for essential goods and services.

This is why it is vitally important to talk about the inequalities people actually experience when they need vital social services and end up paying a disproportionate part of their income on them, or worse they are not in a position to access them at all.

This goes back to the Irish model of welfare provision, which is to provide a social welfare payment but little by way of shared social services when compared with other European countries.

When coupled with low wages and enforced short-time hours, we have the phenomenon of a working poor which is only hinted at in the CSO's surveys and its questionnaire.

Put bluntly – whatever your wages, if you have no money left after rent/mortgage, food, bills, taxation, healthcare, transport and supporting your family then you are poor.

These surveys mask the real story here, which is the lack of investment - for ideological reasons – in those key essential services that would alleviate poverty as experienced after people receive their wages or welfare payment. Let us look at some elements.

³⁷ CSO. 'Press Statement Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2019'. CSO. 2 September 2020. [<https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2020pressreleases/pressstatementsurveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc/enforceddeprivation2019/>]

HOUSING AND RENTS

We are in the midst of a housing and rental crisis. The national average rent stands at €1,256 per month, with the average rent in Dublin at €1,758 per month.³⁸ Dublin and the greater Dublin area account for 53% of all tenancy agreements.³⁹ In Dublin 63.2% of rents are over €1,500 a month as compared to only 10.8% in the rest of the country.⁴⁰

The most recent figures from the CSO put the median wage in Ireland at €593 per week⁴¹ or €2,570 per month. This puts median rents at between 48% and 68% of the median wage – a crippling and unsustainable burden on people's income, and one that is not captured by statistical tools such as the gini coefficient.

As Dr. Rory Hearne points out, the *'housing crisis has also been caused by wider government policy from 2010 to encourage the entry of global investors and vulture funds (via various tax incentives, lobbying and fire sale of assets) into Ireland in order to offload toxic loans from NAMA and the banks.'*⁴² This has led to land-hoarding by investors with government approval.

According to the CSO, *'Dublin residential property prices have risen 92.5% from their February 2012 low, whilst residential property prices in the Rest of Ireland are 84.9% higher than at the trough, which was in May 2013.'*⁴³ By way of contrast, from 2012 to 2019 average yearly earnings rose by 10.6%.⁴⁴ The outcome of increased unaffordability is a housing and homelessness emergency.

Focus Ireland is clear as to the reasons behind it: *'Ireland does not have a public housing system to meet the needs of the society.'*⁴⁵ It says that

'In the last decade the lack of social housing provision combined with private house building grinding to a halt has meant more people than ever are renting their homes. Almost one in five households now live in a privately rented home compared to one in ten [a decade] ago. This has led to enormous pressure on the private rental market which has resulted in constantly rising rent levels and a lack of properties to rent.'⁴⁶

³⁸ Residential Tenancies Board. Rent Index Q3 2020. Dublin: RTB, 2020: 4.

³⁹ Rent Index Q3 2020: 8.

⁴⁰ Rent Index Q3

⁴¹ CSO. 'Earnings – FAQ's'. [<https://www.cso.ie/en/methods/earnings/earnings-faqs/>]

⁴² Rory Hearne. 'Why fixing Ireland's housing crisis requires a change of policy'. RTÉ. 8 October 2018. [<https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2018/1005/1001663-housing-crisis-government-policy/>]

⁴³ CSO. 'Residential Property Price Index October 2020'. [<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rppi/residentialpropertypriceindexoctober2020/>]

⁴⁴ See CSO, Statbank, 'Average Annual Earnings and Other Labour Costs'. [<https://data.cso.ie/>]

⁴⁵ 'Why are so many becoming Homeless?' Focus Ireland. [<https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness/>]

⁴⁶ 'Why are so many becoming Homeless?'

Getty Image



The prioritising of private landlords over public housing is official government policy and gives lie to the belief that only income should be measured to define inequality rates. People are working and cannot afford a roof over their heads. It is preposterous to claim that Ireland is becoming a more equal place until we consider the roof over our heads; yet this is what certain politicians, economists, and journalists would have us believe.

People need housing and it has to be paid for from incomes. To quote Pat Leahy, 'the facts are the facts'.

HEALTH CARE

In January 2020 there were 300 fewer beds in the public health system than a decade ago, despite a 9% increase in population during that period.⁴⁷ On the first Monday of the year *'there were 760 patients waiting on trolleys in hospital emergency departments or on wards, the worst since records began'*.⁴⁸ In October there were 612,817 people on outpatient care waiting lists⁴⁹ – 12% of the entire population. While COVID-19 was blamed in part for the figure, Professor Alan Irvine, president of the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, said that *'Month after month, waiting list records are getting worse yet we continue to fail to accept key flaws that are causing the problem. There is general acceptance that more consultants and more beds to care for patients is the solution.'*⁵⁰

The facts bear out Professor Irvine's conclusion. The waiting lists were at over 700,000 before the arrival of COVID-19.⁵¹ In September 2019 there were close to a million people – one in five of the population – on waiting lists to see a consultant.⁵² Around 20% of all consultant positions were unfilled or only temporarily filled. The Irish state entered the COVID-19 pandemic with an under-resourced and understaffed health system that was suffering from decades of underinvestment. The subsequent lockdowns were generated in part to avoid a complete collapse of the system itself.

This underinvestment is ideological in nature and linked to the protection of the private healthcare system. In an interview with the journalist Maev-Ann Wren in 2002, the former Health Minister Brendan Howlin let the cat out of the bag on this issue. Public waiting lists. He said, were important in order to put 'constant pressure' in the public system 'to be less than the best.'⁵³ He went on to explain what he meant by that statement:

⁴⁷ Sarah Burns. 'Hospital beds crisis: 'It's like trying to put out a fire with a teacup' Irish Times 7 January 2020; CSO. Population and Migration Estimates April 2020. 20 August 2020. [<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2020/>]

⁴⁸ Burns, 7 Jan 2020.

⁴⁹ Shauna Bowers. 'Almost 613,000 people now on hospital outpatient waiting lists'. Irish Times 13 November 2020.

⁵⁰ Bowers, 13 November 2020

⁵¹ Fergal Bowers. 'Number of people on hospital waiting lists at all-time high'. RTE News. 14 August 2020. [<https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0814/1159232-ireland-hospital-waiting-list/>]

⁵² 'Consultant shortages causing 'a spiral of burnout, stress and emigration'. thejournal.ie. 21 September 2019. [<https://www.thejournal.ie/cobalt-shortage-ireland-burnout-4819005-Sep2019/>]

⁵³ Maev-Ann Wren. *Unhealthy State: Anatomy of a Sick Society*. Dublin, New Island Press, 2003: 99.

***'The government wanted a chunk of the population – 30 per cent or thereabouts – to pay for private health insurance, but in order for that to happen, they really required the public system to be inferior. Why else, if it was first rate, would people pay for a private system?'*⁵⁴**

Almost twenty years on and we can still see the same strategy at play – despite the government parties signing up to Sláintecare, the Dáil Committee programme for a single tier public health system. The 2020 Programme for Government relegates Sláintecare to sometime in the future, with no additional funding for implementation until at least after 2022. As Roisín Shortall, the main architect of Sláintecare, said, *'all momentum is going to be lost [as a result] and public healthcare in this country will be set back years and years.'*⁵⁵ It is hard not to conclude this is exactly the point: inequality equals profit. Access to elective procedures in the Irish health system remains an issue of payment and private insurance for that reason. As I said at the beginning, there are powerful interests making profit from inequality.

WAGE INCOME

One of the more frustrating aspects of the analysis presented by Leahy, Coffey, and Buttimer is that when the data from the household surveys is used as intended, it can actually tell us something about the *particular, specific elements* of economic inequality under discussion.

One of these elements is earned income – or market income as it is labelled. As Roantree points out, Ireland has the highest level of inequality in earned income before tax in the EU28, becoming the fifth highest after social transfers are factored in. Ciarán Nugent of the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) has conducted a study of market income as measured by tax returns. He found that from 2004 to 2015 there was strong *'evidence of an increase in market income inequality'*.⁵⁶ *'The ratio of gross income at the 90th to the 10th percentile showed a much wider gap between these two points in the distribution in 2015 than in 2004'* he wrote, *'with little improvement in the recovery post-2012'*.⁵⁷ Robert Sweeney in his 2020 report for TASC wrote that *'wages, the most important component of market income, are unequally distributed in Ireland. There are many people working in jobs that are poorly paid, widening the gap between top and bottom.'*⁵⁸

One way of tackling inequalities in earned income is through trade unions and collective bargaining. In a report in 2011 the OECD said that the decline in trade unions and collective agreements has had the knock-on effect of a widening of the distribution of earnings or incomes.⁵⁹ Its 2019 publication, *Negotiating Our Way Up: Collective Bargaining in a Changing World of Work*, said that *'Strengthening the bargaining power of low-wage workers is one of the core missions of collective bargaining, so it is not surprising that empirically collective bargaining is associated with lower levels of inequality'*.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Wren: 99.

⁵⁵ Marie O'Halloran. 'Sláintecare 'relegated to sometime in the future' in programme for government'. Irish Times 17 June 2020.

⁵⁶ Ciarán Nugent. *Income Inequality in the Republic of Ireland (2004-2015)*. NERI WP 2019/No 61 (March, 2019): 17.

⁵⁷ Nugent: 20.

⁵⁸ Sweeney. *State We're In*: 7.

⁵⁹ OECD. *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*. OECD, 2011: 99.

⁶⁰ OECD. *Negotiating Our Way Up: Collective Bargaining in a Changing World of Work*. OECD, 2019: 113.

Even the OECD accepts the importance of trade unionism in tackling inequality – a point yet to be accepted by many commentators and policy makers in Ireland today. In fact it is a point which attracts much ideological opposition, often from those who feign an interest in addressing inequality.

It is important, therefore, that trade unions are allowed to do their job. This requires legislative change – including giving trade unions the right to be heard; the right to meet their members in the workplace; and the right to recruit members in workplaces where there are no trade unions. If we want to be serious about tackling income inequality, these legislative changes are necessary and long overdue.

Conclusion

The approach of Leahy, Coffey, and Buttimer is akin to calling the election before all the votes are in. They have looked at the numbers from one particular source and said: 'stop the count, we have a result'. In conclusion:

- Leahy and Coffey present inequality in disposable income as shorthand for inequality when this is manifestly not the case
- They present data from the Celtic Tiger year as if it pertains to today.
- They neglect to mention the methodological issues with household surveys as highlighted by Thewisswen, Roantree, and Sweeney
- Coffey neglects to mention that Thewisswen presents two measures of income inequality; one showing it falling and the other showing it on the rise
- According to Roantree, the period from 2007 to 2017 showed 'zero real income growth'; this is not mentioned by Coffey or Leahy.
- There is no discussion of wealth inequality – even though we know from international research that wealth is more unevenly distributed than income
- Enforced deprivation rose in 2019
- Women were particularly affected by it
- Over one in five children are living in deprivation
- Rents are at their highest level ever – running at between 48% and 68% of the median wage in Dublin
- There are close to a million people waiting to see a consultant

DEPRIVATION – REAL LIVED CURRENT EXPERIENCES

My intention in assisting Unite with this analysis is to demonstrate that easy narratives provided to set a political context that plays down the real and growing levels of economic inequality and deprivation in our country cannot be relied upon. We can never again allow a false narrative to be the precursor to the fiscal handling of an economic emergency such as the one the pandemic is creating. Where economic arguments are put from the left, right or centre they must be robust and sustainable. The homelessness, food and fuel poverty, healthcare issues, and living standards of our most deprived and of our working poor are real, painful and need to be addressed. They cannot be spun away, diminished or ignored.

The paper will now give a wider much needed context to the discussion through looking at our going at the real lived current experiences of some of our most heroic workers, volunteers and charities working on the frontline of inequality, poverty, deprivation and discrimination.

Dr. Conor McCabe
Independent Researcher
February 2021

'It is easy for us to live in our own little bubbles and donate.....but handing something over to someone's home really brings the need and the inequalities to the fore'

Basket Brigade

'Year on year ICHH is needed more and more and the biggest change we have seen is the increase in families and children who have become homeless'

Inner City Helping Homeless

'On a typical night, we feed approximately 500+ people including children, single mother's, women, expectant mothers looking for baby essentials, families living in emergency accommodation, newly repatriated refugees, and the elderly'

Muslim Sisters of Éire

TESTIMONIALS

BASKET BRIGADE

EMERGENCY CHRISTMAS RELIEF FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE

I co-ordinate an annual volunteer-run event called Dublin's Basket Brigade. We are not an official charity but a group of volunteers who come together each winter (if possible) to make up and deliver Christmas food hampers to families and individuals around Dublin. We link in with official charities and community workers/volunteers who know families or people who need a bit of help over the Christmas and provide us with details.

I actually volunteered for the first year of it, 14-15yrs ago now. It is a Tony Robbins International event and someone was running the first one in Dublin. It was during the boom and we did about 20 hampers. The organiser left Ireland so I decided to get the event up and running the following year and have done so ever since. Before the recession, it was the 'Celtic Tiger' years but we were shocked to see the levels of poverty and deprivation of some families around Dublin even then. Then after 2008 the recession hit and things got worse for many. Then the economy started to recover but the need was still there. We link with a lot of supported accommodation organisations, with charities supporting lone parents, people with mental health difficulties, etc. The past decade has seen a huge increase in families in homelessness so we were also trying to support them, except without maybe the meat or fresh veg because the cooking facilities available to homeless people is clearly very different.

The relief is needed because Christmas can be such a stressful and expensive time for many, parents are saving for toys and clothes and the food shopping is something practical that we can help with.

The need has grown and changed over the years. We have families living in homeless accommodation, hotels, hubs where their access to cooking facilities and storage is different. We always try to provide the staples for a Christmas dinner, such as meat, fresh veg, tins of veg, boxes

of trifle, selection boxes, etc. We try to have as many non-perishable goods as possible and also always have tissue products such as kitchen towels and toilet rolls, sanitary products. Most of our families are single mums but there are some single dads and it is rare that there are two-parent families. We try to link with a number of different charities to spread the opportunity for help. We did hampers for 'ALONE' for a number of years but in 2020, with COVID-19, they couldn't risk taking deliveries. There has been absolutely no improvement over the years. We now do between 100 - 200 hampers each year but could easily do more. It is entirely volunteer organised.

This Christmas (2020) our help was still needed but had to be organised in a Covid-safe, socially distanced way. We had to change how we ran the event but it was still a success, with everyone who pledged to make and fill hampers turning up on the day. Nobody let us down. People are always very generous but there was certainly a sense this year of how stark Christmas would be for some, so those who still had work, money, etc wanted to help more than ever.

There is always feedback of high emotion but this year seemed particularly special for people. Volunteers reported back that people were greeting them at the doors crying, children dancing in the rain, mother's breaking down crying, children waiting at the windows for them. It is always emotional but this year was more so. I also had some volunteers surprised at the 'need' they saw in the homes. It is easy for us to live in our own little bubbles and to donate to charities online and on the street but I think that personalised way of handing something over to someone's home really brings the need and the inequalities to the fore.

We will absolutely need to do this work again in 2021.

Bernadette (Ber) Grogan

INNER CITY HELPING HOMELESS (ICHH)

ICHH was established in 2013 as a direct response to the increase of people sleeping rough across Dublin City Centre and surrounding areas. ICHH initially was solely an outreach service but as the homelessness and housing crisis has escalated from that point onwards the need for ICHH and additional services became clear.

Now in 2021 ICHH still provide a seven nights a week, 365 days a year outreach service. Alongside this we have a food distribution service providing hundreds of food hampers per month of non-perishable food as part of our European FEAD Grant (Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived) through Food Cloud. *According to Social Justice Ireland there are 680,000 people, including 200,000 children, living in food poverty. We support families who are not only homeless but also living with food poverty so the inequality gap in the country is increasing year on year.*

As well as these services ICHH offer case management support with our case managers who assist with people's housing/accommodation needs. We have an in house mental health support team, BABS (Be Aware Be Safe) who are inundated with people in need of mental health support as a result of homelessness.

The Ombudsman for Children report titled No Place Like Home spoke to children in emergency accommodation, some as young as seven with suicidal thoughts. This is a result of the accommodation they are put into when they need homes to grow and develop. ICHH are also very active from an advocacy perspective as part of the National Homeless and Housing Coalition and the Raise the Roof campaign. Throughout the year we offer ad hoc support at Easter, Christmas and for children returning to school after the holidays.

There has been zero improvement in society or economically that would result in the need for ICHH to be reduced. The inequality gap in this country has continuously increased and even more so throughout COVID-19 with so many people losing jobs and ending up on the PUP payment. The high numbers suffering from food poverty in this country highlights just how big that gap truly is.

Ireland has been set up as a tax haven and the government have rolled out the red carpet to REIT (Real Estate Investment Trusts), investment funds, vulture/cuckoo funds. Many of the properties being built are being bought from the plans by these funds as 'build to rent' investments. Many



still sit empty as the value of the land the home is built on is increasing 10-12% a year so these portfolios increase year on year without even putting a tenant into one of the units.

Year on year ICHH is needed more and more and the biggest change we have seen is the increase in families and children who have become homeless for the first time from the private rental market. There was an increase of over 400% between 2015-2019 in the number of homeless children. The average cost of putting a family of four through emergency accommodation for a year is €69,000. For context, that's for a room in a hotel or B&B or hub, the capital docklands development is marketed as Dublin's most desirable address and the rents are from €2,500 to €6,000 per month and include a concierge and onsite gym. How is this ok?

The need for ICHH support continued right throughout the entirety of 2020. The biggest difference we saw due to COVID-19 was the need for food support. People were locked down in emergency accommodation and weren't being

provided with proper meals by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive units. *At one point during lockdown 1 the ICHH were providing 2,000 hot meals per week to people and we also supported pensioners in pensioner complexes with hot meals and food hampers as they were told to cocoon but weren't properly supported with food. We have continued our other services as normal right throughout COVID-19 with as many meetings as possible done via phone or zoom, but we were needed every step of the way. Again due to covid, job losses and PUP payments we expect to be needed just as much in 2021, in fact more than ever.*

ICHH always aim for a day that homelessness is eradicated and we aren't needed but instead we get further and further away from that point. *The inequality gap is bigger than it ever was, all we continue to see is the top 5% of earners get richer and richer as the rest of the country get further and further away. Anyone that says there's no inequality gap should spend a week with our teams and they would see that isn't the case.*

Brian McLoughlin

'The inequality gap is bigger than it ever was, all we continue to see is the top 5% of earners get richer...as the rest of the country get further and further away'

Inner City Helping Homeless

'At one point during lockdown 1 ICHH were providing 2000 hot meals per week'

Inner City Helping Homeless

MUSLIM SISTERS OF ÉIRE

Muslim Sisters of Éire is a grassroots non-profit all female organisation established in July 2010. Muslim Sisters of Éire, which initially and still does address issues relating to diversity, race-integration, and women in society through our conferences and events. We aim to contribute towards community cohesion and fight negative stereotypes that most media outlets portray about Muslim and migrant women.

We aligned our focus with poverty relief and have been working closely with many direct provision centre's across Ireland for our yearly projects, including our toy drives and ongoing refuge outreach and integration support. Our longest running project is the weekly feeding of the homeless outside the GPO every Friday.

Our presence has made it easier for Muslim women, especially for Muslim women travelling in town due to our presence every Friday night. We hold a soup run that feeds up to 500 people. The majority of our volunteers are visibly represented as Muslim women. This has created an interest both in the media and with the wider public, initially questioning 'who we are', and 'what are we doing here'? We initially received racist and passive-aggressive backlash from people, even service users who would gladly accept our food, but tell us to go back to where we came from. Throughout the years, this has significantly reduced due to the love, perseverance and dedication of our volunteers. We have established a camaraderie with the homeless population who look forward to us every week and connect with our volunteers. The wider Irish public have also accepted us and this is evident in their financial donations, the loving and supporting comments and support we receive, the hot meals they help us provide and their supporting of our events and posts.

The need for our organisation and its work has only ever increased during the last 10 years. Islam in Europe has been a prominent feature in

many news reports across the EU, especially the perspectives and narratives regarding Muslim women, the Hijab (headscarf) and the Niqab (face veil). Through our work we aim to fight stereotypes through our engagement, our featured documentaries, news articles, television and radio segments.

Our work increased both in its demand and its necessity during 2020. On a typical night, we feed approximately 500+ people including children, single mother's women, expectant mothers looking for baby essentials, families living in emergency accommodation, newly repatriated refugees, and the elderly.

On a typical night, we feed approximately 500+ people including children, single mother's women, expecting mothers looking for baby essentials, families living in emergency accommodation, newly repatriated refugees, and the elderly. Throughout 2020, we have been providing food hampers to families both in the public and private sector, this includes homeless families in family hubs and families living in direct provision centres. Periodically throughout the year we continued with our soup run operating under a pandemic safety plan ensuring social distance is observed, providing every single service user with a face mask and hand sanitiser, and offering pre-packed homemade hot meals. The amount of rough sleepers out on the streets during the pandemic is heartbreaking, we need to do more to protect our vulnerable communities.

For as long as there is a single homeless person sleeping on our streets, women facing racial abuse, single mothers in need and anyone who needs help or who approaches us for help then the work will only increase this year. We are already seeing an increase in the number of service users every Friday night and in the amount of families seeking hampers and vouchers.

Lorraine O'Connor

PENNY DINNERS – CORK

Penny Dinners was set up in famine times by the Church of Ireland. In later years it formed a committee and became multi denominational, and it remains that way today.

As great as the need was for setting it up, the need is just as great if not even more today.

Poverty is growing all the time, there is no equality where poverty is concerned. Hungry Bellies are not equal to full bellies. Struggling to make ends meet every week, every month is not equal to the rich getting richer.

We at Penny Dinners are busier than ever.

There is also mental health inequality caused by anxiety and fear brought on by not being able to pay mortgages, rent, utility bills, health care etc. *Food poverty is rampant throughout the land so it beggars belief that anyone could think equality exists. Again the hungry bellies of men, women and children show us that this definitely is not the case. Even some families with two people working are struggling.*

How can there be equality when we have so many on minimum wage? How can there be equality in people not being able to heat their homes? *Who in their right mind believes we are becoming an equal society?*

We see pain and hurt every single day. We see the trauma of inequality. *We see the trauma of 450/500 people that come to our door looking*

for hot food every single day. We see the trauma of the homeless families and individuals in hotels, B&Bs, hostels and couch surfing when we call with their food every single day. We see the trauma of families and individuals when we deliver weekly hampers to keep them going.

We see the trauma of our elderly, our special needs families, our most vulnerable who are cold because they cannot afford to keep their homes heated. We see the trauma of families not being able to cover the costs of uniforms, school books, school bags, shoes, warm jackets etc.

We know trauma and we know inequality is one of its greatest causes. We see trauma when someone can't afford to bury a loved one, inequality even in death.

We see trauma when someone dies from suicide, inequality often being a major cause. We see inequality every day. We know it exists because we know what it looks like.

We are not strangers to each other.

We know everything about inequality and we know it's on the rise. 2020 was a long tough year for Penny Dinners. 2021 will be even tougher, probably our toughest ever.

Catriona Twomey

'We see the trauma of 450/500 people that come to our door looking for hot food every single day'

Penny Dinners – Cork

'Who in their right mind believes we are becoming an equal society?'

Penny Dinners – Cork

SPARK

SINGLE PARENTS ACTING FOR THE RIGHTS OF KIDS

SPARK was set up in December 2011 in direct response to the cuts and changes to lone parent income supports in Budget 2012.

Budget 2012 introduced changes that were fully implemented in 2015. *These changes led to a doubling of poverty among working lone parents between 2012 -2017¹. Access to education and training have also been negatively impacted. There have been some attempts to mitigate some of the damage since, however the situation for lone parents has significantly deteriorated since 2012.*

2020 starkly showed the disproportionate impact care work has on Mothers. It is felt more acutely by lone parents. The National Childcare Scheme has had a hugely negative impact on lone parent families in greatest need. There has

been some progress made in reversing some of the most regressive elements of Budget 2021 but there is still a long way to go. *We believe parents of teenagers have been particularly let down and face unfair choices around balancing their child's needs and family income.*

During 2020 we experienced a significant increase in our workload. Lockdown restrictions were particularly hard on lone parents who were already living in material deprivation and had only one parent to manage the needs of the family. The lockdown impacted many lone parents who were in low paid precarious employment, and many fear they will not be returning to employment in the short to medium term.

Louise Bayliss

'During 2020 we experienced a significant increase in our workload'

SPARK

'...we need to continue to raise our voices to ensure our families are considered as we continue in treacherous times'

SPARK

¹ Working, Parenting and Struggling, Society of St Vincent de Paul report, 2019.

TRAVELLER VISIBILITY GROUP (PROVIDING TRAVELLER OUTREACH AND SUPPORT IN CORK)

The Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) was founded in 1992 by a group of Traveller women to address issues in health, accommodation, education and employment that impacted on the lives of Travellers in Cork City and to challenge the structural racism that was the root cause of these issues. The TVG worked from a community development approach, not the charitable model adopted by the settled people working on behalf of Travellers, prior to the setting up of the TVG.

Statistics prove that issues for Travellers have gotten and continue to get progressively worse and we believe this is caused by the lack of political will to develop social policy that acknowledges our ethnicity. Our culture continues to be eroded and we believe this has had a detrimental impact on the health and in particular the mental health of Travellers. It has been state policy for 50 years to assimilate and absorb Travellers into the sedentary population. Travellers have resisted assimilation but have paid a heavy price in the level of exclusion and racism now experienced by the community.

The work we have been doing has created awareness of the issues among Travellers and our allies in the settled community. We are organized and continue the struggle for equality and human rights. Now more than ever we need stay focused and reach out to the Traveller community and try to support them to take a

stand against the very high levels of racism and discrimination they are facing on a daily basis.

Our organisation has never experienced the high volumes of calls and requests for support that we received during 2020. Due to the Covid restrictions and lockdowns Travellers in private rented accommodation have found themselves extremely isolated and have been reaching out to our project to make links with other service providers. Travellers living on halting sites in severely overcrowded conditions are living in fear of contracting the corona virus and not having any space to isolate or sanitize. Our organisation has been the link for the Traveller community and public health and the local authority.

I know there will be a need for our organisation to continue this work in 2021 and beyond. I believe we will be even more stretched in our work this year because on top of the obvious issues that Travellers are facing, we will now have to deal with the backlash and fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are currently dealing with Travellers across Cork city with multiple issues around health, mental health, education and accommodation. We also have to deal with negative media coverage of Travellers and Covid. The spread of misleading information that cause stress and fear among the community.

Breda O'Donoghue



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