



Exploratory study: filling in the knowledge gaps and identifying strengths and challenges in the effectiveness of the EU Member States' minimum income schemes

Country Fiche - Ireland

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February 2022



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Exploratory study: filling in the knowledge gaps and identifying strengths and challenges in the effectiveness of the EU Member States' minimum income schemes

Country Fiche - Ireland

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, **2022**

ISBN **ABC 12345678**

DOI **987654321**

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Summary

Ireland's minimum income provision is complex: There is a range of different programmes for different population categories such as the unemployed, lone parents, those who are ill or disabled. Two main schemes are 1) Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) – the key minimum income scheme of last resort, and 2) Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) – the main non-contributory allowance for people of working age.

Eligibility is primarily based on a test of means, habitual residence in the State (where applicable)¹, and being registered for work.

Given that these programmes are all based on a means-test, there is a possibility of non-take up, yet there is little information on non-take up of minimum benefits and it is not possible to provide a figure.

In terms of problems associated with the coverage of relevant vulnerable populations, asylum seekers are among the groups that are particularly affected by the 'Habitual Residence Condition' (HRC)². Homeless people, even if they satisfy this condition, might still be among the groups to have difficulties in access to benefits due to issues such as proving where they reside.

The level of benefits seems somewhat adequate against the 40% poverty threshold (corresponds to e.g. 109% of the threshold for a single adult 97.4% for single adult with one child) but falls short of a minimum standard if one looks at the other threshold set at 60% (72.6% of the threshold for a single adult and 73% for single adult with one child).

The activation services in Ireland are, generally speaking, targeted to recipients of the JA and are provided by the country's Public Employment Service (PES), *Intreo*. The frequency and timing of engagement through *Intreo* is based on a 'Probability of Exit' (PEX) into employment score, whereby people with a lower PEX score receive services sooner and more frequently.

When it comes to the links to social services and integrated provision, in Ireland the idea of access to 'quality services' as a cohering and integrated idea is under-developed generally. Being on a minimum income scheme per se carries no preferential access to social services. Although this bears no necessary relationship to being a minimum income recipient, tests of means are used as a criterion for access to health services on a free of charge basis through the medical card and GP visit card,.

But there are links to other benefits and anyone who can demonstrate need can apply for a range of means-tested and discretionary assistance, such as Rent Supplement, Fuel Allowance, Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, Exceptional Needs Payment etc.

In relation to the governance of the minimum income schemes in Ireland, decision making and organisation of social benefits are at national level under the auspices of the Department of Social Protection. For JA, the benefits are administered at the local level by the *Intreo* centres and local branch offices and service delivery takes place here. SWA is administered by the Community Welfare Service of the Department of Social Protection, located at various service centres.

There are no regular evaluations (beyond customer service monitoring) carried out on impact and effectiveness that is shared publicly – this is done on an ad-hoc basis from

¹ There is no requirement to satisfy the habitual residency condition for emergency needs payments (to assist people with once-off expenditure they could not be reasonably expected to meet out of their weekly income) or urgent needs payments (payment for an urgent need to people who would not normally be entitled to Social Welfare Allowance).

² The HRC is largely based on five criteria taken from a decision of the European Court of Justice Case C 90/97 *Swaddling v UK*

time to time for selected programmes/schemes. The most recent impact assessment is promising in that some of the secondary benefits that the recipients of SWA and JA might be entitled to reduce deprivation.

From the evidence considered here, it can be suggested that the minimum income benefit level for the households with the greatest risks be prioritised further for uprating – namely, households with (especially older) children and working-age households headed by one adult (there is some movement in that respect – recent budgets have increased rates for child dependents and in particular older children). A second recommendation would be for a systematic process to assess the adequacy of these and other benefits and services on a regular basis and that the decisions around whether and when to uprate the benefit levels should be made on the basis of the evidence from this process overall.

The following sections, first, outline the features of the MI support in place; secondly, describe the eligibility criteria and coverage and consider the adequacy of the financial support provided and the links with other benefits; thirdly, examine the extent of integration with labour market measures to help those supported into employment; fourthly, consider the access provided for the people concerned to social services; fifthly, summarise the governance mechanisms in place; and, finally, review the evidence on the impact on reducing poverty and assisting beneficiaries to find work.

An annex outlines the underlying situation in terms of the relative number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion and the changes that have occurred over recent years, as well as the characteristics of the people concerned – their gender, age, employment status, education level, country of birth and the structure of the households in which they live. As such, it provides the context in which MI support is operating and indicates the groups on which support needs to be targeted.

1 Description of national schemes providing minimum income support³

Minimum income provision in Ireland is complex, consisting of a range of different programmes for different population categories. Hence, as well as a general scheme of last resort, particular sectors of the population of working age for which targeted minimum income programmes exist include: the unemployed, lone parents, those who are ill or disabled, and carers. In practice then, minimum income provision in Ireland serves a diverse set of needs and also quite a diverse population. The trend has been towards rationalisation but from a minimum income perspective categorical provision is still the norm. Within this complex and fragmented system of minimum income provision in Ireland, in this report two main schemes will be analysed: the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) as the key minimum income scheme of last resort and the Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) as the main non-contributory allowance for people of working age⁴.

In Table 1 the total expenditure for the programmes is presented.

Table 1. Expenditure (gross) for SWA and JA, 2018-2020

MI scheme	2018	2019	2020
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³ Where there have not been any changes, scheme descriptions and assessments rely on: Daly, M. (2015). ESPN Thematic Report on minimum income schemes – Ireland. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15160&langId=en>

⁴ Other schemes include One-parent Family Payment, Disability Allowance etc.

Supplementary Welfare Allowance	€111,820,000	€120,180,000	€115,210,000
Jobseeker's Allowance	€1,840,750,000	€1,629,030,000	€1,656,960,000

Source: Department of Social Protection 2021

1.1 Eligibility

Supplementary Welfare Allowance: This discretionary payment is one of 'last resort'. It is divided into two main parts. The first is a basic weekly allowance for eligible people who have little or no income or whose weekly income is below a threshold considered basic; the second is assistance to people with low incomes who may qualify for a weekly supplement to meet special regular needs (such as housing or fuel related costs) or help in an emergency or with exceptional needs (these are listed under related payments – information here relates to the 'basic' allowance). The basic payment cannot be combined with other core payments such as Jobseekers Allowance – it is often paid on a short-term basis until people have their application for one of the other programmes processed. The payment is regarded as a social advantage for the purposes of Article 7 of EU Reg 492/2011 (Free Movement of Workers). Under these regulations those who retain workers status are exempt from satisfying the Habitual Residence Condition when claiming this payment. Those who have been in employment here, even for short periods, can qualify for Supplementary Welfare Allowance without the need to satisfy HRC. Where the employment lasts for less than 12 months, that entitlement exists for up to six months, i.e. for as long as the person retains worker status under the residence provisions.

Eligibility depends on means, residence and work conditions.

- **Means:** Claimants must satisfy a test of means. This means that their income needs to be below the basic SWA rate (see 1.3 Adequacy). There is a one-to-one income test that reduces the benefit by the entirety of net family income⁵. The main items taken into account for the means test are all cash income and the value of 'benefit and privilege' for those aged 24 years or younger who are living with a parent. It relates only to the resources of immediate household. The first €5,000 of the value of capital or investment (other than the family home which is not taken into account) is disregarded for the purposes of means assessment⁶.
- **Residence:** Entitlement is conditional on satisfying habitual residence conditions, which includes the requirement that a person is legally resident in the State⁷ for the purposes of entitlement to social assistance and have a close link to the state. There are no additional local or regional residence requirements.

⁵ Including Jobseeker's Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance, Jobseeker's Transitional Payment, One-Parent Family Payment and Working Family Payment; Child Benefit is excluded from the means test.

⁶ Full details of the means test for JA are available at https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/supplementary_welfare_schemes/supplementary_welfare_allow.html

⁷ EU/EEA and Swiss migrant workers who have been working in Ireland can access basic SWA and supplements without having habitual residence assessed, provided they have the right to reside in Ireland. However, people from the EU/EEA or Switzerland who move to Ireland in search of employment are subject to the habitual residence test in the normal way while looking for work.

- **Work:** In order to qualify for SWA, a working age person must be registered for work with their local Intreo (Ireland's national Public Employment Service agency) office. Those who are in employment for more than 30 hours a week or in full-time education are not normally considered to qualify. Therefore the recipients must be actively looking for work; registered with the public employment services; have signed an integration contract or employment plan; participate in activation measures, such as training or job experience programmes.

Jobseeker's Allowance: JA is the main non-contributory allowance for people of working age. To qualify, a person must

- be habitually resident in Ireland (explained above);
- be fully unemployed (or work for 3 days a week or less), available and capable for and genuinely seeking work;
- aged over 18 and under 66 years (below the statutory retirement age);
- satisfy a means test. The means test examines the following types of income: cash income (including income from work), property personally used, capital (savings and investments) and property not personally used, benefit and privilege from living with parents⁸. The resulting total household means is deducted from the relevant maximum rate for recipients to find the actual amount of Jobseeker's Allowance they are entitled to.

1.2 Coverage

There is no direct measure of coverage since the population in need is not known. Table 2 shows the number of recipients of SWA and JA for the last 3 years for which data is available.

Table 2. Number of recipients of SWA and JA, 2018-2020

MI scheme	2018	2019	2020
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	16,269	15,779	11,747
Jobseeker's Allowance	140,337	123,633	125,703

Source: Department of Social Protection 2021

In terms of problems associated with the coverage of relevant vulnerable populations, the 'Habitual Residence Condition' mentioned in the previous section raises concerns about access to benefits for certain groups. Asylum seekers are among the groups that are particularly affected by this as they do not satisfy habitual residence conditions and accordingly are not eligible for the general schemes such as JA and the Basic payment under SWA. They are supported under an alternative system, where their housing and food are provided directly, they receive a weekly cash allowance (€38.80 per adult and €29.80 per child) and, where this is insufficient, receive Exceptional Needs Payments (ENP) and Urgent Needs Payments (UNP) under the SWA scheme⁹.

⁸ Full details of the means test for JA are available at https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/irish_social_welfare_system/means_test_for_social_welfare_payments/means_test_for_jobseekers_allowance.html

⁹ Following the publication of the white paper on ending Direct Provision in February 2021, plans are in place to provide a minimum income payment to these applicants who have been waiting more than 4 months for a decision on their application for international protection and choose to live independently in the community.

There are two other problems reported regarding eligibility for SWA. One points to the 'discretionary element' of this benefit. The Irish Minimum Income Network (2014) notes that the uncertainty involved in the application process acts as a barrier for some people who think they will not be eligible anyway. Another, and related, problem is about the appeal process. Ireland Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) (2017) raises concerns about the length of this process that might take as much as 5 months, resulting in the exclusion of potentially eligible people. There is evidence that the certain requirements create problems also for homeless people, such as difficulties with getting payments due to not having a permanent address or not being able to prove residing in a relevant social welfare catchment area (The Irish Times 2020). In order to minimise this problem, the Department provides a c/o address to homeless claimants¹⁰.

Given that the minimum income programmes are all based on a means-test, there is a risk of non-take up. However, no recent information exists on non-take up of the minimum income benefits which are the focus of this report. In terms of attempting to increase take-up of minimum income benefits, a range of the usual strategies are utilised on a periodic basis. These focus especially on information campaigns through a variety of media and formats, using both remote and face-to-face methods.

1.3 Adequacy

There is no direct measure of adequacy of the benefit level and no official procedures exist to assess the adequacy of minimum income or other benefits. The underlying rationale of setting the benefit levels goes back to some 30 years ago when there was a Commission on Social Welfare to investigate the issues in Irish social welfare system. Here the logic was that the payment level needed to be 'adequate in relation to prevailing living standards'. The arbitrary nature and difficulty of setting a standard for adequacy was acknowledged, but a '£50-60 per week' range for a single person was estimated by using several indicators. There is also a scarcity of evidence on the adequacy of minimum income provisions. In this context, it is helpful to consider the comparison of minimum income benefit levels with poverty thresholds and also minimum income sufficiency standards.

In regard to national median income, the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2019 (the latest available) yielded a nominal median income of €43,552 a year and an equivalised disposable nominal income of €23,979. The nominal at risk of poverty threshold (i.e. 60% of the median) for one adult and no children stood at €14,387; the real value, i.e. at 2012 prices, of the at risk of poverty threshold for 2019 was €14,047 and this represents an increase of 4.0% on the real value for 2018 of €13,505 (Central Statistics Office 2021). The threshold for a household consisting of two adults and two children was €33,378 (compared with €31,837 a year earlier). Table 3 and 4 below show the level of income support provided by SWA and JA and Table 5 shows the relativities between the payment rates of SWA for the different household types and a number of benchmarks.

Table 3. SWA rates (weekly) (2021)

Age	Maximum personal rate	Increase for an adult dependant	Increase for a child dependant
Aged 25 and over	€201	€134.70	€38 for a child aged under 12

¹⁰ There is a protocol for the SWA payment of homeless people and includes rough sleepers as well as people staying in other houses.

Aged 18-24 and living independently	€201	€134.70	€45 for a child aged 12 or over
Aged 18-24 and not living independently	€112.70	€112.70	People aged 18-24 with children qualify for the maximum personal rate of €201

Source: Citizens Information (2021a)

Table 4. JA rates (weekly) (2021)

Age	Maximum personal rate	Increase for an adult dependant	Increase for a child dependant
Aged 25 and over	€203	€134.70	Child aged under 12 €38 (full-rate), €19 (half-rate)
Aged 18-24 and living independently	€203	€134.70	Child aged 12 and over €45 (full-rate), €22.50 (half-rate)
Aged 18-24 and not living independently	€112.70	€112.70	People aged 18-24 with children qualify for the maximum personal rate €203

Source: Citizens Information (2021b)

Table 5. Payment levels of SWA as proportions of various benchmarks for different household compositions

	As % of the national at-risk-of-poverty threshold (60%) for household type	As % of the national extreme at-risk-of-poverty threshold (40%) for household type	As % of the gross minimum wage (of a single earner) ^
Single adult	72.6	109	50.5

Single adult with one child *	64.9	97.4	60
Couple *	73	109.6	84.3
Couple with two children ***	65.2	97.8	105.2
Couple with three children ****	62.2	93.4	114.8

Note: Calculations (by the author) here are based on SWA rates (calculated annually based on weekly rates) in Table 2 and CSO (2021) and the Nominal at risk of poverty thresholds from the CSO 2019

** child aged under 12*

*** one adult and one adult dependant*

**** one child aged under 12 and one child aged above 12*

***** two children aged under 12 and one child aged above 12*

^ calculated for an employee aged over 20

Neither SWA nor JA are automatically adjusted for inflation. Rates may be varied by Government as part of the annual Budget process. During the pandemic, SWA recipients whose employment or family situation had changed due to COVID-19 could ask for the status to be reassessed (and their payment potentially recalculated) by the Social Protection Office. Re the JA and unemployed people; a special Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) of €203, €250, €300 or €350 per week (depending on the categorisation of prior weekly earnings) was introduced in 2020 and is being phased out by spring 2022¹¹. This payment is compatible with other welfare payments.

It can be observed from Table 5 that the level of benefits seems somewhat adequate for the selected 40% threshold but clearly falls short of a minimum standard if one looks at the other threshold set at 60%. Beyond these benchmarks, it is useful to look at the work on Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) in Ireland that has been researched and calculated by a faith-based NGO (Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice). This is derived using the Consensual Budget Standards methodology through which detailed baskets of over 2,000 goods and services for 16 areas of expenditure vital to a household's minimum needs are compiled for a number of different types of households¹². The evidence on JA reveals inadequacies, although the extent to which this is the case will be different for different household compositions. In their MESL 2021 Annual Update, the NGO examines social welfare adequacy with an evaluation of 214 test urban household cases (Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice 2021a). Of these, 147 were 'inadequate' cases in 2021. Some household examples are shown in Table 6. Income adequacy seems to be an even bigger issue for those living in rural

¹¹

https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/unemployed_people/covid19_pandemic_unemployment_payment.html

¹² Focus groups are held for each household type. In a series of sessions the groups arrive at a negotiated consensus about the goods and services a household requires to have a minimum essential standard of living. Experts are consulted in order to ensure that the negotiated consensus meets basic criteria e.g. nutritional standards. In order to ensure reliability and validity three different focus groups are established for each household type.

Ireland. For example, for the two adults with one infant urban household (third type in Table 6), the inadequate amount increases from €13.70 to €62.31 for the equivalent rural household.

Table 6. *Estimated Income Shortfall for a Range of (Urban) Household Types on the Basis of the Minimum Income Standard*

Household type	Calculated income adequacy (weekly, in Euros)
1) Single adult on Jobseeker's Allowance, no children	-48.82 (Inadequate)
2) Single adult on Jobseeker's Allowance with two children (one primary- and one secondary-school age)	-76.84 (Inadequate)
3) Two adults (one Jobseeker + one Stay at Home) with one infant	-13.70 (Inadequate)
4) Two adults (one Jobseeker + one Stay at Home) with four children (two primary- and two secondary-school age)	-141.95 (Inadequate)

Source: *The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2021b)*

Note: Calculated as the difference between household income (Jobseeker's Allowance plus any secondary benefit i.e. Child Benefit, Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, Fuel Allowance, Rent Supplement) and MESL expenditure. Household members have full medical cards. For details of the calculations please see <https://www.budgeting.ie/urban-budgets/income-scenarios.html>.

Regarding the poverty reduction potential of the benefits – there is evidence from the Central Statistics Office (n.d.) showing that in 2020, if all social transfers were excluded from income, the at risk of poverty rate would have gone up from the actual 13.2% to 37.9%. But this data include many other benefits that are irrelevant here (e.g. old-age benefits, disability benefits etc.). Apart from the this, there are two (relatively) recent impact assessments to note here that have a more detailed analysis. Although not directly evaluating the specific MI schemes examined in this report (SWA and JA), these benefits are at least partially included in their analysis, and this currently is the only evidence available.

The first one is Watson and Maître (2013). Using Irish SILC data, the authors consider the impact of transfers on the difference between market income and the poverty threshold (note that this was on all social transfers rather than just minimum income schemes). The evidence showed that this period was marked by the increasing importance of transfer income to Irish households, with notable changes especially in transfer income as a proportion of total income. The causal process at work here was two-fold: increasing payment rates for social transfers between 2004 and 2009 and a shift in the type of payment received (especially as the economic crisis set in). This research generally highlighted the effectiveness of Irish social transfers, in their own right and in terms of improvement over time. The report indicated that social transfers reduced the pre-transfer poverty rate by 53% in 2004, rising to 63% by 2007 and 71% by 2011 (Watson and Maître 2013: 37). The main causal factor was the increasing generosity of transfer payments over the period studied, especially means-tested transfers. While greatest improvements in poverty reduction were recorded for those of retirement age, with a 95% effectiveness rate (compared to 84% for

working-age adults), the biggest percentage (relative) improvement in poverty reduction effectiveness since 2004 was for children (20% improvement).

The second, and the more recent one, is Maître et al. (2020). Again drawing on Ireland's Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) using the 2017 wave, the authors evaluate the association between material deprivation and social transfer receipt in the areas of housing, medical cards and childcare. Information on benefit receipt is gathered from administrative sources using participants' Personal Public Service number (as opposed to self-report). Among the transfers they study, most of the ones under housing payments are the supplementary benefits that can be received by SWA and/or JA recipients if they fulfil any additional eligibility criteria that might exist: Rent Allowance, Rent Supplement, Mortgage Interest Supplement, Exceptional Needs Payments and Heat Supplement (measured together), plus a second set of housing-related allowances such as Fuel Allowance – all of which were described under the section 1.4 below. When the effects of housing transfer on deprivation are simulated, it is seen that transfers reduce deprivation – receipt of housing transfers increases the odds of experiencing no deprivation by 1.48 percentage points. Furthermore, vulnerable groups, such as lone parents and people living with a person with a disability, report the highest benefit from housing transfers when compared to other working-age adults. Whereas the authors note that observed effects here are rather marginal, the impact of the more recent schemes such as HAP, which have emerged to fill the gap in the private rental sector, was not evaluated here. As these payments helped recipients with the increasing housing costs, the actual impact today is likely to be bigger.

Overall, from the evidence considered here one can see the potential of SWA and JA in terms of poverty reduction; but the inadequacy of the payment rates especially for certain household types (and an even bigger inadequacy for the same household types in rural Ireland) means that even further poverty reduction can be achieved with higher rates. It can be suggested that the minimum income benefit level for the households with the greatest risks be prioritised for uprating – namely, households with (especially older) children¹³ and working-age households headed by one adult (there is some movement in that respect – recent budgets have increased rates for child dependents and in particular older children).. A second recommendation would be for a systematic process to assess the adequacy of these and other benefits and services on a regular basis and that the decisions around whether and when to uprate the benefit levels should be made on the basis of the evidence from this process overall. In other words, the benchmark should be adequacy. The Department of Social Protection should continue to engage with the work done by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice on the MESL and other NGO activities (for example around an adequate minimum wage by the Living Wage Technical Group¹⁴) for this purpose.

1.4 Links with other benefits

Under the second part of the SWA those receiving the benefit – and anyone who can demonstrate need (by putting in a separate application) even if on other benefits - can be eligible for a range of means-tested and discretionary assistance. These schemes relate to: rent, heating, back to school clothing and footwear, exceptional needs and urgent needs.

Rent Supplement is a payment to those on social welfare schemes (not just social assistance schemes) to contribute towards rental payments in the private rented sector. Recipients of minimum-income payments must contribute towards their weekly

¹³ The increased costs associated with older children not being matched by a sufficient increase in benefit.

¹⁴ See <https://www.livingwage.ie>

rental payments from their income: €30 a week for individuals and €40 a week for a couple – therefore these amounts are reduced from the rent supplement payment. Since 2014 a new Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) has existed for those with long-term housing needs which: a) transfers the support responsibility for this sector of the housing-need population from the Department of Social Protection to the local authorities and b) bases housing assistance on the local authority differential rent means test. The significance of this is that under the latter the full-time employment restriction does not apply, therefore removing a key barrier to benefit recipients taking up employment¹⁵.

A Fuel Allowance may be paid to help with the cost of home heating. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household – it is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household. To be eligible, JA recipients must have been receiving their allowance for 390 days – for SWA recipients this period is 455 days¹⁶. Also, a Heating Supplement may be paid in respect of exceptional heating needs (e.g. exceptional heating costs due to ill health, infirmity or a medical condition) where the claimant satisfies general conditions of entitlement to SWA. In order to qualify a claimant must live alone or only with an adult or child who qualifies for a payment.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is a once a year payment to parents of school going children who are either on certain social welfare payments or in training or education.

Exceptional Needs Payment is a discretionary usually once-off payment to meet unusual circumstances. The examples given in the official documentation include items such as special clothing in the case of a person who has a serious illness, bedding or cooking utensils for someone setting up a home for the first time, costs in relation to funerals, visiting relatives in hospital or prison.

Urgent Needs Payment is a single payment to help meet essential, once-off, exceptional expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. The examples given in the documentation include costs arising from a fire or flood.

2 Links with labour market activation

Because of the categorical nature of minimum income provision in Ireland, only some of the schemes have a relationship to inclusive labour market goals and provisions. In other words, not only are the programmes targeted on particular groups, but also there is a sharp divide between those deemed eligible for work and those not. This means that since the relevant service for activation - *Intreo* - generally focuses on activating those on the live register (where the unemployed are registered), there is an exclusion of people on other working age welfare payments such as the Supplementary Welfare Allowance. These recipients may voluntarily wish to access the labour market and other support available through these services but there is no targeting or enabling them to do so and indeed no capacity that is reserved for them. It would be a positive development were such services opened up to these recipients of minimum income schemes, but it should also be noted that SWA is generally seen as an interim benefit for immediate assistance while recipients await decisions of applications for other claims (e.g. Jobseeker's Allowance). As the activation services in

¹⁵ There was also a 'Mortgage Interest Supplement' scheme, which, since 1 January 2014, has been closed to new entrants (without affecting people who were getting Mortgage Interest Supplement before this date).

¹⁶ For both JA and SWA a person must be in payment for the same period to qualify (65 weeks). JA is calculated on a 6-day payment week and SWA on a 7-day basis. With effect from September 2022 there will be a reduction of the qualifying period for Jobseeker's and Supplementary Welfare Allowance recipients from 15 to 12 months.

Ireland are more or less exclusively targeted at recipients of the Jobseeker's Allowance, it is this scheme, which is most relevant for the discussion here.

The activation plan for JA recipients centres around job search and education and training services. Here at the centre of this ecosystem is *Intreo* (Ireland's PES agency as explained above), which co-operates with several other actors such as SOLAS (State's designated Further Education and Training agency), Local Enterprise Services and voluntary service providers. For various schemes offered there are also interdepartmental working groups involving the Department of Social Protection, the Department for Further and Higher Education and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The main services offered to MI recipients are directed self-help and job search guidance, one-to-one employment service engagements and referral to employment and training supports.

To describe the activation regime for JA recipients, it starts with an immediate profiling when a claim is made. Based on the information provided by the recipient (e.g. age, gender, marital status, children, perceived health, spousal earnings, employment/unemployment history, willingness to relocate, location, transport and education history) (O'Connell et al. 2009), a 'Probability of Exit' (PEX) score is calculated to determine whether the person has a low, medium or high probability of exiting Live Register/activation service and take up employment – or in other words exiting benefit receipt. The frequency and timing of engagement through the *Intreo* service is based on this PEX score, whereby people with a lower PEX score receive relevant services sooner and more frequently. In general, the process works as follows: clients who are deemed eligible for Jobseeker's Allowance and Benefit are: called for a Group Information Session within 2 weeks; then scheduled for a one-to-one interview with an officer after the information session to develop a Personal Progression Plan. Activation review meetings are then held on a one-to-one basis to review the Personal Progression Plan and give further guidance support as required. There is a contract in place, which commits both the service recipient and provider to a number of responsibilities and is closely related to the Personal Progression Plan which charts steps into employment and which is also binding. The Plan is updated over time and is monitored. Normally, recipients must go to *Intreo* monthly to 'sign on' to declare that they are still unemployed and are looking for work; but this requirement was suspended until January 2022 due to the Covid-19 public health measures.

If jobseekers fail to comply with the Personal Progression Plan they may be subject to sanctions (in relation to benefit reduction or suspension). A recipient may:

- 1) be refused a JA payment if they do not meet all the conditions that apply to the payment;
- 2) be disqualified from a payment for a period of time in certain circumstances;
- 3) have their payment reduced (and subsequently stopped altogether for a period of time) if they do not attend meetings or participate in appropriate employment schemes, training or work experience.

The penalty rates for JA in 2020 were the following (these do not apply to people over 62): a reduction in weekly payment from €203 to €159, or from €157.80 to €124.80, or from €112.70 to €87.70, depending on the existing amount of benefit payable. If a recipient faces a penalty and continue not to meet the conditions, then they can be disqualified from the JA payment for up to 9 weeks (one cannot be disqualified before at least 21 days on penalty).

There might be changes to the benefit during the transition to work or participation in training/education programmes. If the recipient takes up employment 3 days a week or less, their JA is tapered in line with their earnings (the recipient must still meet the relevant income requirements). An earnings disregard of €20 per day for a maximum of 3 days per week is allowed for each member of a couple; the remainder of the

earnings are assessed at 60% to give the weekly means amount (OECD 2020). The weekly means amount is then deducted from the maximum Jobseeker's Allowance applicable to the person's situation to calculate the appropriate Jobseeker's Allowance payment. There is no allowance in the case of 4 or more days of employment as this is one of the main eligibility criteria. In the case of participation in training/education programmes, the relevant allowance is paid and the JA allowance is suspended for this duration. If the recipient receives a Qualified Adult Dependant payment, this is not suspended, but neither do the dependants receive any extra training/education allowance (but they may be eligible for other allowances such as a travel allowance).

Related to the effectiveness of activation measures for JA beneficiaries, there was a recent evaluation of *Intreo* reforms (Elish et al. 2019), to analyse whether *Intreo*, the current PES introduced in 2012, is more effective than its predecessor, known as National Employment Actions Plans (NEAP) PES system. The result of this evaluation is not directly relevant as it does not compare groups of JA recipients who did or did not receive activation services, but still, there are some lessons to note. The evaluation, which was conducted only one year after the activation process reforms were introduced, established some short-run impacts. The results show that the introduction of *Intreo* had only some marginal impacts on exits from the Live Register, but it led to the early identification of invalid unemployment claims, providing evidence of clear efficiency gains of having services delivered under a single point of contact.

3 Links to social services and integrated provision of targeted social services

Being on a minimum income scheme *per se* carries no preferential access to social services in Ireland. Although this bears no necessary relationship to being a minimum income recipient, tests of means are used as a criterion for access to health services on a free of charge basis through the medical card and GP Visit Card. Entitlement to health services in Ireland is primarily based on residency and means. Any person, who is accepted by the HSE as being ordinarily resident in Ireland is entitled to either full or limited eligibility for health services. Medical cards are awarded to persons who, in the opinion of the Health Service Executive, are considered to have full eligibility status as they are unable to provide health services for themselves and their dependants without undue hardship. In certain circumstances, the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card, even though an applicant exceeds his or her income threshold, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from an illness or undue hardship exists. Medical Card provision is primarily based on financial assessment. In accordance with the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. The HSE assesses each application on a qualifying financial threshold, which can be found in the [Medical Card and GP Visit Card National Assessment Guidelines](#). This is the amount of money that an individual can earn a week and still qualify for a card. It is specific to the individual's own financial circumstances. The HSE conducts a financial assessment based on an applicant's household income after tax, PRSI and the Universal Social Charge (USC) have been deducted. Certain expenses are also taken into account. If a person's sole income is derived from a social welfare payment, even where this is more than the current means threshold, he/she will be awarded a medical card. In addition to medical card holders, all children under the age of 6 and persons aged over 70 are entitled to a GP visit card which provides for GP services without charge for the card holder. Limited eligibility persons may also qualify for free GP care where they have been means assessed by the HSE that it would be unduly burdensome to arrange to provide general practitioner medical and surgical services for themselves and their dependants.

The same is true for education services and housing¹⁷. The idea of access to 'quality services' as a cohering and integrated idea is under- developed generally; provision of services does not fall within the general understanding of social protection in Ireland, which tends to be strongly income support (Daly 2020). One exception is activation-based services, discussed above, which have recently been on the rise). There is little or no integrated planning across the 'social services' (education, health, housing, social protection); there is no assessment of the need for social support of MI recipients. Hence, there is little to report on this topic. Of course, there are, on the face of it anyway, reasons why there should be a stronger link between being on a minimum income scheme and access to services. There is evidence of service inadequacy – with deterioration over the period of austerity policies. This seems to be attributable mainly to supply and administration issues rather than necessarily a problem in access for the 'needy population' (Social Justice Ireland 2015), yet the matter of the 'passporting' between minimum income support and quality social services should be given consideration in Ireland, for issues of social justice and also because it might spearhead reform.

4 Governance mechanisms

Decision-making and organisation of social benefits are at national level under the auspices of the Department of Social Protection. Under that, decisions regarding a person's entitlements are made by a Deciding Officer.-It is open to a person at any time to request a review of any statutory decision made by the Department and any new evidence or information provided to the Department will be considered as part of this review.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements, insurability of employment and certain decisions made under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme. If a person is dissatisfied with any decision made by a Deciding Officer or Designated Person (SWA) with regard to their entitlement, they may appeal that decision to an Appeals Officer. Decisions in relation to exceptional needs and urgent needs payments are not appealable to the Social Welfare Appeals Office but can be appealed directly to a designated review officer within the Department.

Jobseeker's Allowance is administered by staff at the department's network of *Intreo* Centres/Branch Offices throughout the country. At the local level, the benefits are administered by the *Intreo* centres and local branch offices and service delivery takes place here. This is a one-stop shop for both JA income support scheme and activation/employment services. The service offered by *Intreo* encompasses external contracted service providers delivering services in some 150 locations. It also encompasses a network of co-operation with the State's Further Education and Training Services and Local Enterprise Services and with voluntary service providers. *Supplementary Welfare Allowance* is administered by the Community Welfare Service of the Department of Social Protection, located at various *Intreo* Service Centres (currently there are 26 offices administering SWA). Designated Persons are appointed to decide a person's entitlement to SWA and the amount of any such allowance.

The Department of Social Protection is responsible for the monitoring. In terms of customer service monitoring, the Department currently has in place a "Customer Service Strategy 2020-2022". The strategy develops and implements, under the guidance of the Customer Service and Staff Support Programme Board, key actions to deliver enhanced customer service to the Department's customers, including benefit claimants and recipients, via the four main channels i.e. telephone, face to face, digital and post. Each of these four strands of service has their own detailed individual action

¹⁷ Number of people at the intersection of service and benefit receipt is not available .

points and metrics¹⁸. For JA, microdata is collected by the Department and is supplied on a weekly basis to the national statistical office (the CSO) to keep the Live Register updated.

The Department provides data annually to a think-tank to carry out impact assessments of proposed budgetary measures/reforms, but it is understood that these are only made available for internal use. As part of the annual budgetary cycle, the Department also undertakes its own ex-ante and ex-post social impact assessments of the main welfare and direct tax budgetary policies, which includes the estimated impact on the at risk of poverty rate. Published outputs of this analysis include the annual Tax Strategy Group Social Protection paper¹⁹ and the annual Budget Social Impact Assessment²⁰. There has been a culture of conducting evaluations on an *ad-hoc* basis from time to time for selected programmes/schemes²¹. This lack of regular evaluations (beyond customer service monitoring) carried out on impact and effectiveness that is shared publicly is one of the weaknesses in the governance of social benefits. Another weakness relates to the appeals system in place. Although it is reported that this has improved significantly in the recent years, as noted above under section 1, due to ineffective governance structures, the time to process an appeal is still lengthy (IHREC 2017).

5 Impact of MI schemes

This country fiche has summarised the characteristics of the main MI schemes in Ireland – the SWA and JA. The complex provision introduced here indicates a number of strengths and challenges. Arguably the biggest strength is that the available data presented above suggests that the MI benefits have a considerable poverty-reduction effect. The evaluations cited here found that social transfers reduced income poverty rate in Ireland by as much as 70% in 2011 and increased the likelihood of experiencing no deprivation by some 1.5 percentage points in 2017. However, two caveats must be raised. First, as the available evidence did not exclusively focus on SWA or JA, it is not possible to show exactly how much of the impact in poverty reduction came from the MI schemes discussed here. Second, and more importantly, relevant evidence is old now and given the rising at-risk-of-poverty trends in Ireland during the pandemic (Eurostat 2021), it is difficult to make similar claims for the current period. This lack of recent data speaks to the gaps in knowledge about the effectiveness of MI schemes. Although there are efforts to close this gap by carrying out ad-hoc evaluations on some of the programmes, there is need for a more systematic approach to creating an evidence base on this matter.

Despite the promising numbers on poverty alleviation, the complexity of the MI provision in Ireland remains a challenge. As explained above, SWA and JA are the main schemes here, but there exist many smaller individual MI programmes, and without necessarily being integrated into each other. There are concerns that this fragmentation is creating barriers for the most disadvantaged groups' access to benefits, due to reasons such as simply not being aware of support schemes available. A more simplified system might be helpful in increasing the take-up of unclaimed means-tested benefits for these most vulnerable groups (ICF International 2015). That said, at this time there is no concrete intention to make big changes. Another point is that the idea of access to 'quality services' as a cohering and integrated idea is under-developed generally in Ireland. It is not clear that having a direct link between minimum income receipt and service access would be superior to the means-testing

¹⁸ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a6957-customer-service-strategy-2020-2022/>

¹⁹ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/d6bc7-budget-2022-tax-strategy-group-papers/>

²⁰ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/be955a-social-inclusion-division/#monitoring-and-evaluation>

²¹ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/5683a-labour-market-analytics/>

that is currently in place but the matter of the 'passporting' between minimum income support and quality social services should be given consideration.

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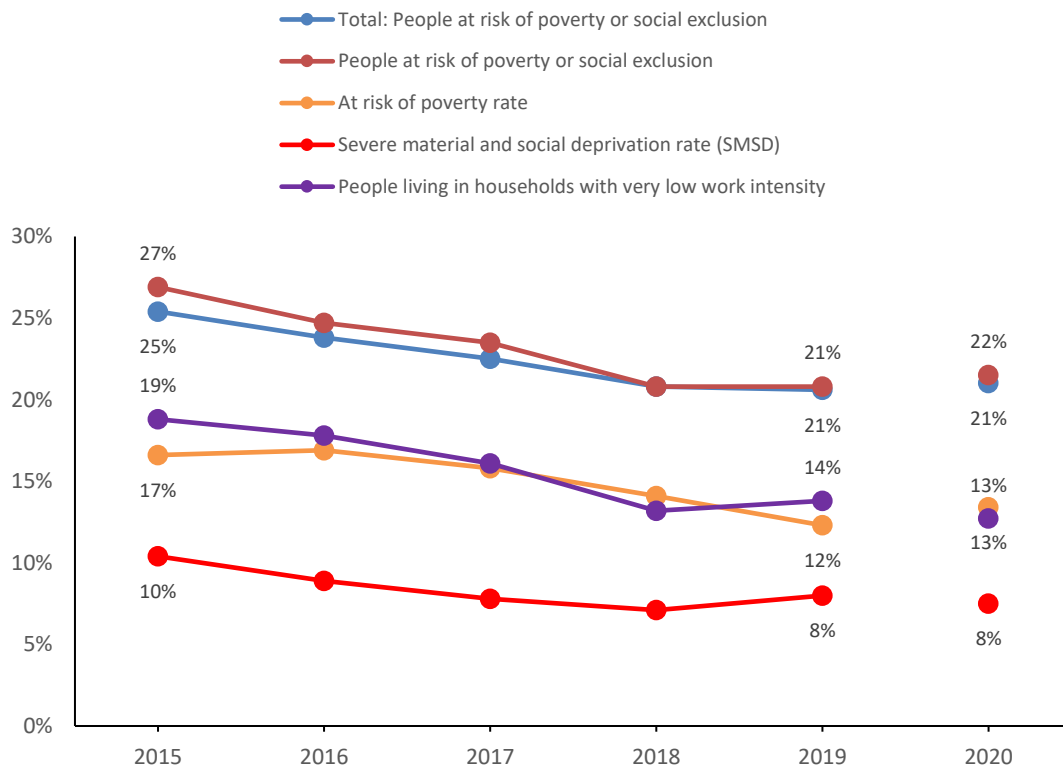
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7 Annex

Figure 1. AROPE indicator and components, Ireland, 2015-2020 (%)

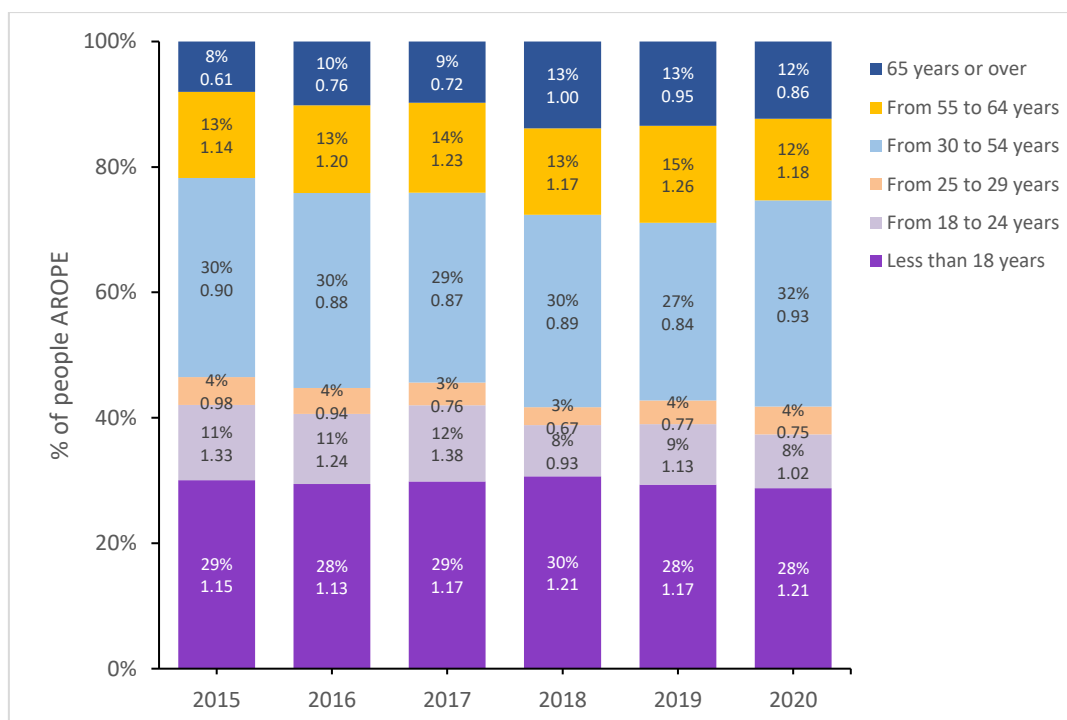


Note: The line for "Total: People at risk of poverty or social exclusion" indicates the trend for overall population, while the other lines show the figures for individuals aged 0-64. Break in the series in 2020, so the data for this year cannot be directly compared with those for earlier years.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_peps01n], [ilc_li02], [ilc_mdsc11] and [ilc_lvh11n]. Data downloaded on 14/02/2022.

- In 2020, the share of total population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in Ireland stood at 21%, marginally lower than for those aged 0-64(21.5%), reflecting a slightly lower risk among those aged 65 and over. Over the period 2015-2019, both shares fell markedly (by 6 percentage points in the case of those aged 0-64).
- Most of the people aged 0-64 at risk of poverty or social exclusion (13.4 %) had household disposable income of below 60% of the median (I.e. they were at risk of poverty). The share fell in line with the AROPE rate between 2015 and 2019.
- A similar proportion of those in this age group at risk of poverty or social exclusion lived in households with very low work intensity (12.7% of those aged 0-64), this proportion also falling in line with the AROPE rate.
- A much small proportion, 35% of those at risk of poverty and social exclusion, 7.5% of those aged 0-64, were affected by severe material and social deprivation. This proportion fell too between 2015 to 2019 but by less.

Figure 2. Division of people aged 0-64 in at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age group, Ireland, 2015-2020 (%)

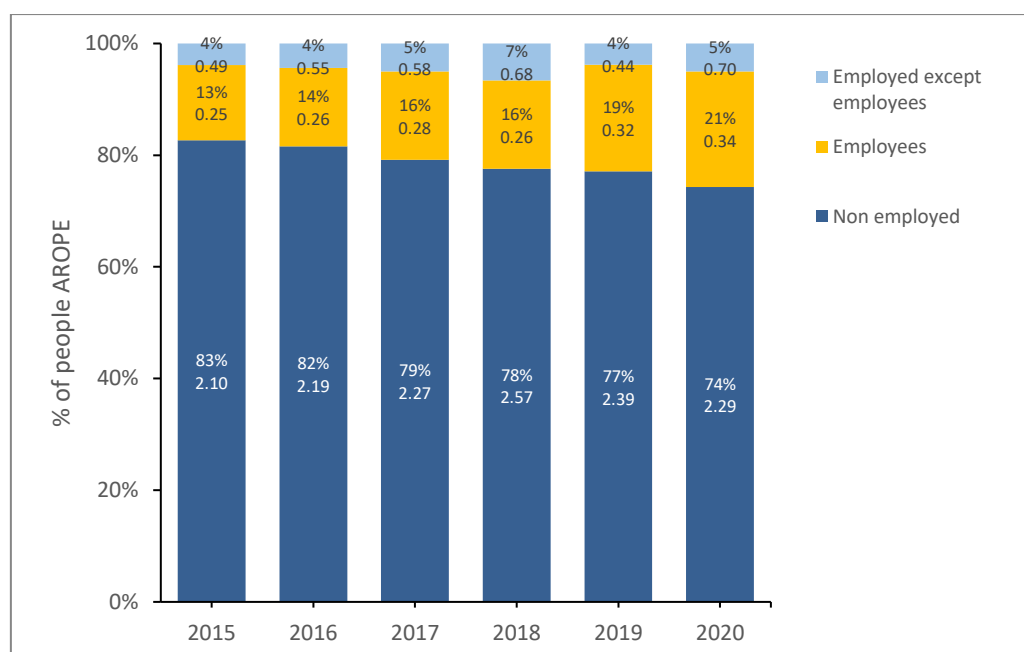


Note: Break in the series in 2020, so the data for this year cannot be directly compared with those for earlier years. Figures below the percentage figures in the bars show the ratios of the share at risk to the share of the age group in total population, which indicate the relative likelihood of the age group being at risk.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_peps01n], own calculation. Data downloaded on 14/02/2022.

- More women than men aged 0-64 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2020 (52% of the total). Since women made up a similar share of total population as men, this implies that women in this age group were more at risk than men, which was the case throughout the period 2015-2020.
- Older people aged 65 and over are less likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion than those younger and these made up only 12% of the total at risk in 2020.
- By contrast, those aged 55-64 nearing retirement are more likely to be at risk than younger age groups, which was consistently the case over the period 2015-2020
- Children under 18 are also more likely to be at risk than average and these accounted for 28% of the total at risk in 2020.
- Young people aged 18-24 were more likely to be at risk too in 2020, though only 8% than those aged 30-54. This seems to have been the case for much of the period 2015-2019.

Figure 3. *Division of people aged 18-64 at risk of poverty or social exclusion by most frequent economic activity status, Ireland, 2015-2020 (%)*

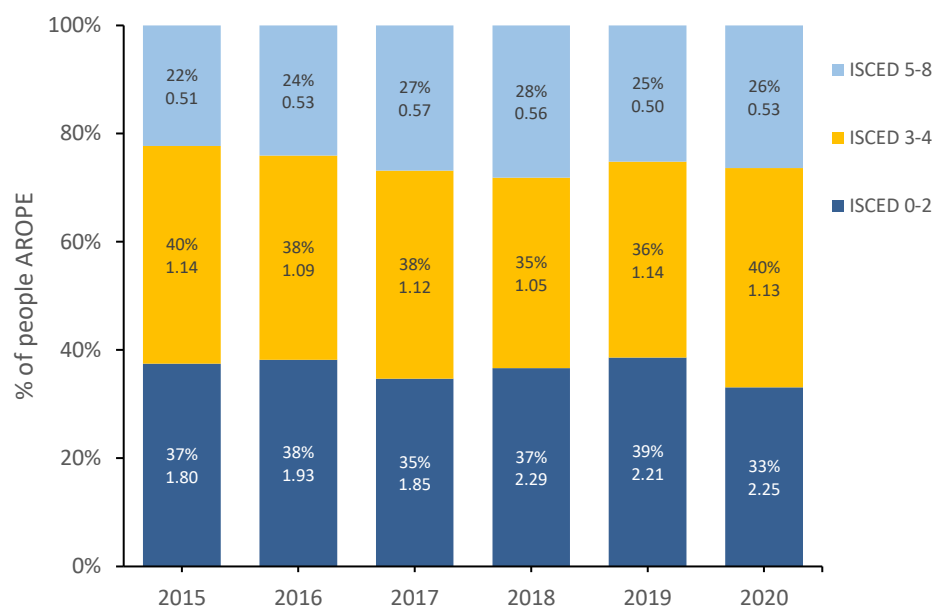


Note Break in the series in 2020, so the data for this year cannot be directly compared with those for earlier years. Figures below the percentage figures in the bars show the ratios of the share at risk to the share of the age group in total population, which indicate the relative likelihood of the age group being at risk.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_peps02n] and [ilc_lvhl02], own calculation. Data downloaded on 14/02/2022.

- People not in employment made up three-quarters of the total aged 18-64 at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2020.
- The proportion which the non-employed account for has tended to decline over time because of their shrinking numbers, but the likelihood of them being at risk increased over the period 2015 -2019.
- The self-employed (those employed other than employees) are more likely to be at risk than employees, but made up only 5% of the total of working-age at risk in 2020.

Figure 4. *Division of people aged 18-64 at risk of poverty or social exclusion by education level, Ireland, 2015-2020 (%)*

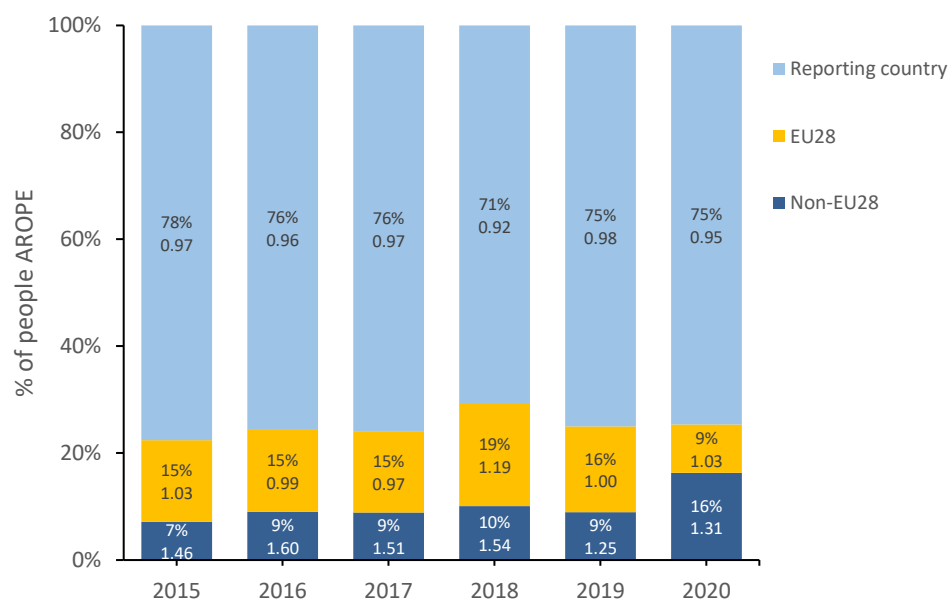


Note: Break in the series in 2020, so the data for this year cannot be directly compared with those for earlier years. Figures below the percentage figures in the bars show the ratios of the share at risk to the share of the age group in total population, which indicate the relative likelihood of the age group being at risk.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_peps04n] and [ilc_lvps04], own calculation. Data downloaded on 14/02/2022.

- People aged 18-64 with only basic schooling (ISCED 0-2) are considerably more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion than those with higher education levels, these accounting for a third (33%) of the total in this age group at risk in 2020.
- Those aged 18-64 with tertiary education (ISCED 5-8) are significantly less likely to be at risk than those with lower education levels, Nevertheless, they made up just over a quarter (26%) of the total at risk in 2020.

Figure 5. Division of people aged 18-64 at risk of poverty or social exclusion by country of birth, Ireland, 2015-2020 (%)

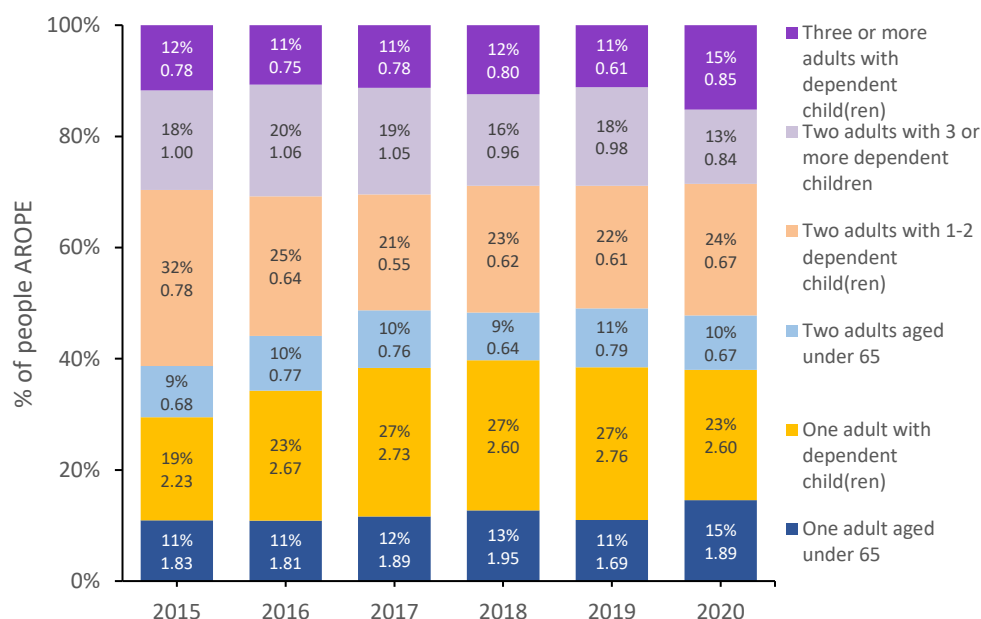


Note: Break in the series in 2020, so the data for this year cannot be directly compared with those for earlier years. Figures below the percentage figures in the bars show the ratios of the share at risk to the share of the age group in total population, which indicate the relative likelihood of the age group being at risk.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_peps06n] (Data downloaded on 14/02/2022) and EU-SILC microdata, own calculations.

- Those aged 18-64 born outside the EU are significantly more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion than those born in Ireland. In 2020, they made up 16% of the total at risk.
- People born in other EU countries (here including the UK) are slightly more likely to be at risk than those born in the country, but they accounted for only 9% of the total at risk in 2020.

Figure 6. *Division of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by household type, Ireland, 2015-2020 (%)*



Note: Break in the series in 2020, so the data for this year cannot be directly compared with those for earlier years. Figures below the percentage figures in the bars show the ratios of the share at risk to the share of the age group in total population, which indicate the relative likelihood of the age group being at risk.

Note that the chart does not include all household types. In particular, it excludes those aged under 65 living in a household with three or more adults without children, who are difficult to distinguish in the published data.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_peps03n] and [ilc_lvps02], own calculation. Data downloaded on 14/02/2022.

- People under 65 living alone were substantially more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion than others. This is especially the case for those with children. Together those with and without children made up 38% of the total at risk in 2020, those with children accounting alone for almost a quarter of the total (23%). This proportion increased significantly over the period 2015-2019.
- Couples with 1-2 children are no more likely than couples aged under 65 without children to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion and both being much less likely than other household types to be at risk.
- Couples with three or more children are more likely to be at risk than couples without, but their risk was less than average in 2020 when they made up only 13% of the total at risk..
- Accordingly, the relatively high risk of poverty or social exclusion among children indicated in Figure 2 above seems very much concentrated among those in lone parent households.

Table 7. At risk of poverty rate before and after social transfers, excluding old age benefits, for those for people aged 0-64, Ireland, 2015-2020

	Before social transfers, excl. old-age benefits (%)	After social transfers (%)	Effect of social transfers on arpop rate (%-point change)
2015	37.7	16.6	-21.1
2016	35.4	16.9	-18.5
2017	33.6	15.8	-17.8
2018	31.6	14.1	-17.5
2019	31.8	12.3	-19.5
2020	32.4	13.4	-19.0

Note: Break in the series in 2020, so the data for this year cannot be directly compared with those for earlier years.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_li02] and [ilc_li10]. Data downloaded on 14/02/2022.

- Social transfers had the effect of reducing the at-risk-of-poverty (arpop) rate by 19 percentage points in 2020, cutting the number at risk by 159%. This is more than in most of the preceding 5 years, when nevertheless, the effect of social benefits was to reduce the number at risk by well over 50%.

Table 8. At risk of poverty rate and persistent at risk of poverty rate for those aged 18-64, Ireland, 2015-2020

	At risk of poverty rate (%)	Persistent at risk of poverty rate (%)	Persistent rate as % of annual rate
2015	16.1	11.6	72.0
2016	16.0	11.6	72.5
2017	15.3	9.2	60.1
2018	13.3	9.6	72.2
2019	11.5	8.2	71.3

Note: No persistent at risk of poverty rate data for 2020.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC indicators [ilc_li02] and [ilc_li21]. Data downloaded on 14/02/2022.

Over 70% of people of working age (18-64) at risk of poverty in 2020 were at persistent risk, i.e. they were consistently at risk for a number of years rather than being at risk for only one year, or temporarily. The same was the case in three of the preceding 4 years, the exception being 2017 when the proportion was 60%.

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