

Research highlights the impact of the recession on stress within families

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Growing Up in Ireland publishes a new report on the lives of children who were 3 years old in the middle of the Great Recession. The report seeks to understand how the economic recession affected experiences of economic strain and stress within families and how this, in turn, was associated with parenting and the socio-emotional and behavioural

adjustment of 3-year-olds. The report was authored by Professors Elizabeth Nixon and Richard Layte from Trinity College Dublin and Maeve Thornton, formerly of the ESRI.

This report will help to inform [policy-makers](#) and others involved in providing services for families whose lives may be affected by economic strain or [family](#) stress.

This report drew on the Cohort '08 data from Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) – the national longitudinal study of children. GUI is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, with a contribution from The Atlantic Philanthropies. The study is managed and overseen by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in association with the Central Statistics Office. It is carried out by a consortium of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin.

Changes in Family Economic Circumstances

The findings revealed considerable variation in the extent to which families experienced changes in their economic circumstances from 2008 to 2011.

- In line with the national average, 14 percent of fathers were unemployed in 2011, an increase from 6 percent in 2008, and men in the lowest fifth income category in 2008 were over 8 times more likely to have been made redundant than men in the highest fifth income category.
- 65 percent per cent of families indicated that household income had been reduced as a result of the recession, 14 percent of families were in arrears on their utility bills and 9 percent in arrears on their rent/mortgage.
- Mothers reported that 61 percent of families experienced

economic strain ("difficulty in making ends meet") in 2011, up from 44 percent in 2008.

- The experience of economic strain was more common among one-parent families, in families of mothers with lower levels of education, where one of the parents was made redundant, where working hours or social welfare were reduced. By far the greatest impact on economic strain came about as a result of having to cut back on basic necessities, not being able to afford luxuries, and being in arrears on the rent/mortgage and utility bills.

Depression of mothers and fathers

An important way in which economic strain can affect children is through its impact on parental symptoms of depression and different economic factors affected symptoms of depression.

- Being made redundant or having working hours or social welfare reduced were not directly associated with [depressive symptoms](#) – whether these affected depression depended upon whether mothers felt economically strained as a result of these economic events.
- Altogether, 4.5 percent of fathers were classified as 'depressed' in 2011, a slight increase from 2008 (3.5 percent).
- The strongest economic predictor of fathers' depressive symptoms was being in arrears on utility bills: 8.1 percent of fathers in arrears on utility bills were classified as being depressed, in comparison with 3.8 percent not in arrears. Economic factors were only weakly related to mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction, but strong relationships emerged between mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction.

Stress and parenting

The relationship between parents and children was measured in terms of the levels of warmth and hostility reported by parents in their interactions with the children.

- The findings revealed that both mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms and marital dissatisfaction had negative associations with their parenting in terms of higher levels of hostility and lower levels of warmth, with the strongest effects evident for the effects of depressive symptoms on hostility. Economic factors were not strongly directly associated with parenting: however, for fathers not being able to afford luxuries was associated with higher levels of warmth. It may be that, in the context of a shortage of luxuries, parents instead divert their resources to having better interactions with their children.

Children's emotional and behavioural difficulties

- Children's socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties were greater where the mother experienced depressive symptoms. The mother's marital dissatisfaction was associated with higher emotional difficulties. Mothers' hostility and lower warmth were also associated with greater difficulties for children.
- Once mothers' depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction and parenting were accounted for, fathers' depressive symptoms, marital satisfaction and warmth had no further impact on the child's emotional and behavioural difficulties. Only fathers' hostility remained a predictor of children's behavioural but not emotional difficulties.
- One conclusion arising from the analysis is that economic hardship has an important influence on parental depressive

symptoms and marital satisfaction, but has a weak association with parenting. Instead, economic hardship affects parenting and children's emotional and behaviour difficulties, indirectly, through effects on depressive symptoms.

Implications for policy

The findings of the report indicate that the strongest predictors of economic strain were being behind with mortgage/rent and utility bills and having to cut back on basic necessities. If the policy objective is to minimise the impact of economic strain on children and their parents, actions to safeguard these basic necessities for families should be a priority.

The findings from the report also suggest that parental mental well-being plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between economic circumstances and children's relationships and outcomes. Higher levels of mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms and marital dissatisfaction were associated with higher levels of hostility and lower levels of warmth in interaction with children. This spill-over effect suggests that a worthwhile avenue for intervention might centre on supporting parents to maintain positive approaches to parenting, even in light of their own personal difficulties.

Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, the lead author of the report, said:

"The findings of the research suggest that economic hardship had important negative effects on the mental health of parents and the quality of the relationship between parents, and these effects may spill-over to affect how parents interact with their young children.

Interventions to support the well-being of parents are likely to be particularly important when they are facing economic stress. As well as dealing with the underlying problem (e.g. the loss of employment or drop in income), the research indicates that supports for parents' mental

health are also likely to facilitate positive parenting."

Commenting on the publication of this new report, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr. Katherine Zappone said:

"I welcome this new report from Growing Up in Ireland. The findings highlight the need to address economic strain in families and support parental mental health. These are among the issues that are core to 'First Five', Ireland's first ever cross-Departmental strategy to support babies, young [children](#) and their families, being led by my Department – in particular through its commitment to tackle early childhood poverty and to develop a new model of parenting support."

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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