

Mapping Poverty: National, Regional and County Patterns

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Executive Summary

Is poverty concentrated in certain 'blackspots'? If so, what is the extent of this concentration, what causes such concentration, and which areas are particularly at risk? These are important questions for policy analysts because of their implications for strategies to combat poverty and promote social inclusion.

These are the questions addressed by this report on the spatial distribution of poverty in Ireland. The report was commissioned by the Combat Poverty Agency to look at the following questions:

- Is poverty concentrated in particular areas?
- If so, what is the extent of that concentration?
- Where are the concentrations of poverty?
- Why are there concentrations of poverty?
- What are the characteristics of such concentrations of poverty?
- What can be done about reducing such concentrations of poverty?

The study brings together data from three national sources: the *2002 Census of Population*, the *2000 Living in Ireland Survey*, with very detailed information on income and living standards for a sample of 3,400 households, and the *2001-2002 National Survey of Housing Quality*, with a sample of over 40,000 households.

A key feature of the report is the concern with the causal processes underlying any association between area and poverty. Targeting of programmes to combat poverty needs to be fundamentally concerned with the causes of poverty rather than with patterns that are accidental. This is important from the point of view of area-based programmes, in particular. Without an understanding of *why* people in certain areas experience a greater risk of poverty, programmes to improve their situation cannot be properly targeted to those in need.

Key findings

There are clear regional and local differences in both the risk of poverty and in the levels of key related social indicators such as unemployment, education and social class. Further the differences in risk become larger as we move to lower levels of aggregation (e.g. from region to county level). The highest poverty risk is found in Donegal, Leitrim and Mayo and the lowest in the counties around Dublin. However, there is considerable diversity within administrative planning regions. Louth and Sligo, for instance, show much lower relative poverty risk than the other counties in the Border region. This points to the importance of avoiding broad generalisations based on administrative units which are based on historical and political rather than socio-economic categories.

However, the scale of differences based on geographic location is rather modest compared to the differences between socio-economic groups or people with different housing tenures. Furthermore, the pattern varies depending on the dimension of deprivation being considered. For instance, Dublin, which has a low income poverty risk, scores high in terms of housing and environmental deprivation. On the other hand, Donegal has a much higher income poverty rate than the national average, but it is less likely than average to suffer deprivation in terms of housing deterioration or environmental deprivation.

There are modest differences between urban and rural areas, but large differences by housing tenure. Local authority renters fare worst in terms of almost all measures of deprivation. This is largely due to a selection effect, whereby the dynamics of the housing market and public housing policy results in public and social rented housing being reserved for low-income households.

Evidence of multiple deprivation structured along spatial lines is extremely weak. Over time, income poverty rates for local authority tenants have increased sharply and, while their consistent poverty rate (which take account of living standard as well as income) has shown some decline, they have fallen farther behind home-owners. The decline in their numbers, however, means that they constitute a smaller proportion of the poor.

What accounts for the differences between areas in the risk of poverty and deprivation? The key factors accounting for poverty and deprivation are socio-economic: unemployment, non-participation in the labour force due to old age or illness, lone parenthood, low levels of education and social class. However, the study does indicate an additional effect of tenure type. Differences between geographic areas in terms of poverty and deprivation are largely due to differences between these areas in the socio-economic composition of their populations.

Implications

The study clearly demonstrates that poverty is a structural rather than a spatial phenomenon. It arises from socio-economic processes such as unemployment and low-paid work, low educational attainment, old age, child dependency and lone parenthood. The spatial distribution of poverty largely reflects spatial variations in these variables. Policies to tackle poverty must prioritise these structural issues. Area-based policies have little role in *targeting* poor households: most poor households do not live in clearly identifiable geographically concentrated areas. However, there may be a role for area-based initiatives in local authority estates, where they may enhance service delivery through promoting greater integration, community access and user involvement. The emphasis of such programmes should be on the efficient delivery of services and mobilisation of community resources, rather than targeting poor households.

Such locally-based programmes may also be used to provide an outreach mechanism to meet the multiple needs of vulnerable populations such as long-term unemployed, ex-prisoners, former drug users and early-school leavers. More attention should be focused on the added value of area-based interventions in relation to these objectives rather than as a simple targeting mechanism.