

EXPERIENCES OF LIVING BELOW THE
MINIMUM ESSENTIAL STANDARD OF LIVING

STORIES OF STRUGGLE

A VPSJ RESEARCH REPORT, COMMISSIONED
BY THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL



Society of St Vincent de Paul



MINIMUM
ESSENTIAL
BUDGET
STANDARDS
RESEARCH CENTRE

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A Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) research report, commissioned by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP), in its engagement with families and individuals living in poverty, encounters many complex situations that require a variety of responses. Such households are presented with constant challenges.

The impact of living on an inadequate income is multi-dimensional and it is difficult to identify the cause, the comprehensive nature, and the physical, psychological, and social toll of ongoing disadvantage, on the lives of children and parents. For this reason, SVP asked the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) to research the reality experienced by households with children, whose income falls below that required for a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). This is a standard which meets physical, psychological, and social needs at a minimum but socially acceptable level and is one below which nobody should be expected to live.

Using the MESL as a Means of Studying the Reality of Living with an Inadequate Income

This study draws on previous MESL research by the VPSJ. The Consensual Budget Standards methodology, which is used by the VPSJ, provides both qualitative and quantitative data on the goods, services, expenditure and income required for an MESL. Through working with multiple deliberative focus groups since 2004, in depth discussions with members of the public have produced a negotiated consensus on what people regard as essential for a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. The research places an emphasis on “needs not wants” and produces comprehensive, transparent, and itemised lists (over 2000 goods and services) detailing what is required to meet minimum needs and enable an acceptable standard of living.

This current project engages directly with households to shine a light on their struggle to make ends meet when income is insufficient, and to demonstrate the consequences of bringing up a family on an inadequate income. The aim of this report is to explore the lived experiences of families with an inadequate income, in the context of the wider MESL research, in order to give context and depth to the reality behind income inadequacy.

The executive summary deals with the following three areas:

- › Methodology
- › Findings
- › Conclusions and Policy Implications

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork for this study consisted of in-depth interviews with 30 households – 15 urban and 15 rural. The households consisted of both one-parent and two-parent families and a mixture of unemployed and employed parents. The income of the households ranged between 3% - 39% below that required for an MESL. This section in the main report deals with the following:

- › The selection process.
- › Particulars of households – composition, income, employment status, accommodation type.
- › The interview process and content.
- › Brief outline of the process used to analyse the data.

Summary of Households

- › 17 one-parent families, 13 two-parent families
- › 15 employed, 15 social welfare
- › 14 private rented accommodation, 7 social housing, 7 mortgage, 2 homeless.

Outline of Interview Content

- › Present experience, duration and cause.
- › Coping strategies, including sources of support.
- › Household expenditure - priorities, choices and substitutions.
- › Dealing with shortfall, including borrowing and the financial, emotional, physical and social impact of an ongoing weekly shortfall.
- › Perceptions of the ways out of their current situation.
- › Supports and resources considered most beneficial in the interim.

“I find life very hard, not being able to pay all my bills, always putting some on the long finger. The stress makes me sick. I’m always worrying knowing that my kids have to go without.”

3% – 39%

THE GAP BETWEEN HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND THE EXPENDITURE REQUIRED FOR AN MESL

30

HOUSEHOLDS



15

RURAL



15

URBAN



17

1 PARENT



13

2 PARENTS



15

EMPLOYED



15

SOCIAL WELFARE



14

PRIVATE RENTED ACCOMMODATION

7

SOCIAL HOUSING

7

MORTGAGE

2

HOMELESS

FINDINGS

This section is divided into the following:

- › Three Stories of Struggle
- › Drivers of Income Inadequacy
- › Strategies to Cope with Income Inadequacy
- › Differences between Urban and Rural Households
- › The Social, Emotional and Physical Impact of Income Inadequacy
- › Finding a Way Out of Income Inadequacy

This project engaged directly with families, to shine a light on their struggle to make ends meet when income is insufficient, and to demonstrate the consequences of bringing up a family on an inadequate income. The research also focuses on the extent of choice and constraint in people's lives and how families continue to cope in this context.

THREE STORIES OF STRUGGLE

The 30 families that participated in this study had different stories to tell about their experience of living with an inadequate income. Families varied in terms of their composition and duration and depth of inadequate income.

There were other factors that helped, or hindered, their ability to make ends meet. Families living below an MESL are not a homogenous group; they experience different levels of poverty and social exclusion. While each household's experience was unique, common themes and similar stories emerged. The content of the interviews indicated that the stories of families fell into one of three groups, those who cannot make ends meet, those who are struggling to make ends meet and those who are making ends meet with difficulty.

“I found a job as a Carer but I had to travel and I had to work days and nights. I couldn't continue working because of the different hours, I started with twenty hours a week and this went down to just eight. I couldn't afford childcare and travel. A combination of childcare and travel is a big expense for the odd hours.”

01.

the first story... cannot make ends meet

The first story describes the reality of the greatest number of households - half of the families interviewed. They are all experiencing deep income inadequacy¹ and the majority have been in this situation for over nine years.

The task of making ends meet was very difficult because there was simply not enough income to cover their outgoings. Parents spoke about times that their family have gone without sufficient food or heating, and did not have enough money to cover their housing costs and household bills. They discussed the reality of living from hand to mouth. They did not have any money at the end of the week to prepare for upcoming expenses and felt a lack of control over their lives. Their situations were unstable, and deteriorating, with some families having recently become homeless.

“I do as much planning and budgeting as I can. I’m happy if the rent, ESB and food bills are paid. I wish I could plan for months ahead... but it’s difficult to plan when you’re unsure about the basics.”

02.

the second story... struggling to make ends meet

The second story describes families who were able to more frequently afford adequate food and heating, as well as pay more household bills. They were partially making ends meet but with difficulty. Families continued to make sacrifices to ensure their basic priorities were covered (food, heating, housing costs and household bills); their wider MESL needs were neglected. Occasionally, their income stretched to cover other upcoming expenses, but this type of spending was minimal because this small amount of money would need a long period of time to accumulate.

Parents expressed that they felt “trapped” and “stuck” in their current circumstance. They were continuously scrimping and longer term expenses were accumulating. There was great uncertainty around the future as their situation was static and they focused on the weekly struggle to meet their short-term expenses.

03.

the third story... making ends meet with difficulty

A smaller number of households (four families) were in a more stable position than their counterparts in the previous groups; they could plan for some short and medium term expenses. The third story describes families whose situation seems to be slowly improving. They believed their situation to be temporary, and discussed recent, or forthcoming, positive changes that would increase their household income.

They are in the process of realising a plan that will improve their income. Despite future prospects of change, at the time of the interviews they were making sacrifices and substitutions in order to make ends meet, and were vulnerable to the unexpected. The long-term repercussions of living in this way would worsen their situation; however they could see the possibility of a “way out.”

For half of these families their income has only recently dropped below MESL level and they have financial resources to draw on to top-up their short-term income inadequacy. These resources are finite and will run out, so they draw on them sparingly thereby going without many of their wider MESL needs.

1. Families ranged between 11%-37% short of an MESL.

DRIVERS OF INCOME INADEQUACY

The high cost of housing impacted families' household income, and was the single most cited driver of income inadequacy, followed closely by family break-up, unemployment and low pay.

Families discussed the discrepancies between rental supports and actual rent prices. Annual rent increases meant families' incomes were falling further below the cost of their needs each year. Families were dissatisfied with accommodation in the private rented sector, because of problems with security of tenure, poor quality properties, overcrowding and much more.

The reasons families separated were often multi-faceted and complex. The majority of parents separated because of domestic abuse or drug and alcohol addiction problems. Some families were facing the financial fall-out from a separation.

Parents expressed high levels of motivation to take up work but faced barriers to employment. These included, but were not limited to: fearing the loss of social transfers, the associated demands on families with children, or a parent, with a disability, illness or behavioural problem and not being able to afford high childcare fees for young children.

Precarious work makes it difficult to plan and manage household finances. Additionally, families were employed in various low earning roles. Employed one-parent families were working on a part-time basis only, and this also lessened their earning potential.

For half of the households in this study, they were dependent on social transfers as their only income, and this income was not sufficient to meet their needs.

“I’m worried the car might break down, or the children will become ill, I’m praying the fridge won’t break. I don’t have enough money to plan for these uncertainties. What will I do? I don’t like borrowing.”

STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH INCOME INADEQUACY

Prioritising

Families endeavoured, firstly, to pay for food, housing costs and household energy. These items are referred to as their “basic priorities” throughout the report. Food is predominantly healthy home cooked meals but of a limited variety, repeating the same affordable recipes every week. Families discussed these priorities, in terms of a checklist, paying for them first before addressing any other urgent or out-standing bills.

Parents ensured they were meeting their children’s needs before addressing their own. This meant that parents’ needs were often severely neglected in the process. Families strongly prioritised the expenses associated with their children getting “a good education” and enjoying school.

Going Without

Families went without many of the goods and services required for an MESL. There was not any MESL budget area in which parents were not cutting back and making substitutions (food, clothing, personal care, health, household goods, household services, communications, social inclusion and participation, education, transport, household energy, personal costs, childcare, housing, insurance and savings and contingencies). This section of the main report highlights the recurring theme that rather than spend outside one’s limited means, families would make sacrifices. Families were not just going without these items on a weekly basis but over an extended period of time.

Developing Alternatives

This section of the main report examines the ways in which families find another method of meeting a basic need. Families had developed cheaper alternative methods that helped them to at least partially meet their needs, in the areas of food, clothing and social inclusion and participation activities. In spite of good management of limited resources, there were immediate and long-term repercussions for parents and children who continued to only partially meet their needs in this way.

Juggling, Borrowing and Saving

Going without goods and services that are deemed essential for a socially acceptable standard of living was the most common method adopted by families to deal with their ongoing weekly shortfall. This was combined with juggling payments, household bills and expenses.

An ongoing weekly shortfall meant that these tactics were not always successful, which led to families borrowing. There is a perceived hierarchy of different types of credit: the worst was moneylenders, followed by formal institutions (banks and credit unions) and then borrowing from friends and family, which is deemed the best method. Families borrowed “rarely” and if they were “stuck” or “desperate.” Although in the minority, some families borrowed regularly from family and friends, and were reliant on them on a weekly basis. Some parents that had borrowed from a bank or moneylender in the past, discussed their experiences of managing their debt.

Families discussed saving strategies. Their interpretation of saving was the ability to put money aside for predictable but less frequent costs. After their basic priorities were covered, then small amounts of money were put aside over an extended period of time to meet these costs. This enabled families to buy things outside of their immediate needs. Some families had successfully put aside money, from their weekly income, for the following: upcoming educational expenses, children's activities, summer camps, birthdays and Christmas.

Getting Support from Family, Friends, Schools and the Community and Voluntary Sector

The MESL budgets are based on meeting the needs of a household as a self-contained unit, and as such do not make any assumptions of support that can be drawn on, such as support from friends or family. In reality, families were better able to cope as a result of the ongoing practical, emotional and financial support they were receiving from their extended family members, friends and the community and voluntary sector. The availability of this type of support, especially from family, can make a considerable difference by meeting needs that would otherwise have gone unmet, due to affordability or competing budget demands. This form of support also acted as a "safety net" for families, especially those that had become homeless.

Families also praised the effectiveness of the supports in DEIS primary schools, and discussed the variety of supports available to them. Parents, with children in both primary and secondary school, illustrated the impact of the withdrawal of these supports, at second level.

“The children look for money for school trips, and we often have to say no to even five euro, we just don't have it, even though we budget carefully. We have to say “sorry we can't”... they are very good kids and we hate that they feel different.”

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL HOUSEHOLDS

This section outlines the differences for families living in a rural area, compared to families living in an urban area, with an income below that required for an MESL. The main differences are in the areas of transport, social isolation, heating and employment opportunities.

THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL IMPACT OF INCOME INADEQUACY

The range of goods and services that parents are going without combined with the length of time they have not been able to afford them had a cumulative impact on families.

Going without goods and services that are deemed essential, at a minimum level, has both short and long term repercussions. This is combined with the helplessness of knowing that it is not likely that their situation will improve in the near future, especially for families in group one (cannot make ends meet) and group two (struggling to make ends meet). A concern for all families was the long-term implications of just getting by, for their children, making sacrifices and not meeting their basic needs.

The most commonly cited symptoms of income inadequacy were high levels of stress and constant worry. Two-thirds of the families interviewed described how their health, mental or physical, had deteriorated as a direct result of living on a low income. Having limited resources and a strict household budget also meant that parents felt they were constantly disappointing their children. They talked about the emotional distress of not being able to provide for their children. Moreover, families were concerned about their children “not fitting in,” in terms of clothing or technology items. Families often felt lonely, sad, ashamed and embarrassed because of their low income. They isolated themselves on occasion because of this embarrassment.

Families are living on a day-to-day basis, and are confronted with difficulty when planning. They are vulnerable when confronted with the unexpected. There was great uncertainty surrounding the future, and they voiced their frustration at this matter.

The following are among the consequences for households, with children, living with an income that does not allow for weekly expenditure on the goods and services required for an MESL:

- › The decision of parents to “do without” in order to give priority to the needs of their children, and the long term impact on their physical, social and psychological needs (health, social participation and personal appearance).
- › The pressure to meet immediate expenses to the detriment of longer term and significant expenditure (insurance, household maintenance).
- › The guilt of letting children down (peer group pressure, education potential).
- › The strain of seldom or ever having a break (evening or day out, holiday).
- › The constant stress and strain of always struggling to make ends meet and knowing that there was little prospect of being able to do so in the current situation.
- › The cumulative impact on quality of life in which there is ongoing shortfall in all areas of household expenditure.

FINDING A WAY OUT OF INCOME INADEQUACY

Households held specific views regarding the way out of their distinctive situation. This section of the main report outlines the most commonly sought means of improving families' quality of life and increasing household income: housing, employment, childcare, and education.

Families who were homeless or renting privately had a long-term housing need and discussed how obtaining social housing would better their situation. Families who were repaying their mortgage also had issues with housing; they were struggling with repayments. Some of these parents wanted to "get rid" of their mortgages and pay a reduced rent for this reason.

The way in which employment could improve families' circumstances differed. Some parents simply wanted to "get a job." Other households viewed better paid employment, an increase in hours and more stable employment as their "way out."

Families emphasised the need for affordable and good quality childcare, to enable parents to gain employment, or increase their hours. Parents also requested access to childcare so that they could further their education.

One third of parents requested an opportunity to further their education. They added that the cost of going back to education was too high, and there is a need for more supports in this area. It was also important that the training they received matched the current skills required by employers, and would help them to find quality employment. The majority of parents emphasised the importance of their children's education and how it would be their "way out," in the long-term. Parents carried this hope for their children and actively promoted their children's interest in education

Interim Supports

The focus of this section is supports that would help to alleviate these families current struggles by immediately and effectively helping them to cope. The most common response from families was to reiterate their need for employment, social housing and affordable, accessible and good quality childcare. In this way, many of the interim supports requested overlapped with the longer term supports required by families to find their "way out." They highlighted the urgency of their need. Other interim supports listed included: "help with the basics," counselling, help with educational costs and greater supports for children in the form of affordable children's activities.

“I only wish I had not been so stupid, every day the debt hangs around my neck. I'm always worrying about how I'm going to get money and how am I going to pay back the loans and look after the girls? When will I be free?,”

CONCLUSIONS

- › Families living on an inadequate income work very hard to make ends meet by adopting a myriad of coping strategies to help deal with the shortfall. Dealing with income inadequacy requires discipline, resilience and sacrifice. The prolonged experience of not being able to make ends meet, in spite of their best efforts, can erode these personal qualities overtime, as living with an inadequate income is very stressful and emotionally draining. For some households it can be an overwhelming experience.
- › Many of the themes that emerged from the interviews reflect the social and economic developments in Ireland, which impact more negatively on the lives of people who struggle to make ends meet. Among these developments, there are the “drivers of income inadequacy” – the increase in the incidence of family break-up, lack of affordable childcare, the housing crisis and precarious employment.
- › Parents were aware of the importance of healthy eating, budgeting and the high cost of borrowing from sources such as moneylenders. However, having an inadequate income meant that, in spite of their best efforts, families simply could not always eat healthily, were sometimes unable to avoid high cost debt and often could not stretch their income to meet all of their needs.
- › The level of income in a household is only one of the factors explaining the extent to which a family is struggling to make ends meet. Having rent/mortgage arrears, debt, lack of savings, the extra costs associated with illness and living on a low income for a long period of time contributed to the difficulties facing families. On the other hand, having savings, access to effective public transport, selling or inheriting something useful and strong supports from family, friends and schools helped families with low incomes to make ends meet, albeit with difficulty.
- › Families without a network of support whether that is from families, friends, charities or schools particularly struggle to make ends meet.
- › Living below an MESL has an impact on the well-being of parents and children, with implications for mental and physical health, educational attainment, loss of confidence and erosion of resources such as savings. Feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment are all too common for parents who continually prioritise the needs of their children over their own and try to make sure they aren't missing out on experiences which others take for granted.
- › Parents were able to identify the supports and opportunities which they needed to achieve a better quality of life. However, the longer families have been living with income inadequacy, the harder it is for them to see or realise a way out.
- › The current rates of social welfare payments and the National Minimum Wage are inadequate, particularly for families with older children. While families experienced many non-financial benefits from employment, a job was not necessarily enough to ensure that a family could afford an MESL and would avoid struggling to make ends meet.
- › The expenditure patterns of the households in this study indicate clearly that they are living in poverty because they do not have an income which allows them to have an MESL – a standard of living generally regarded as one below which nobody should be expected to live.

Government of Ireland² definition of poverty and social exclusion:

“People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.”

“My eight-year old daughter said “mummy I want a birthday party” and I had to say “you’re a big girl now; you don’t need a birthday party.” It was very difficult to see the disappointment on her face. I had to explain that we don’t have the money.”

“My daughter, who is such a good child, asked for €5 for lunch on a school trip. I could not find €5 in the house. All she said was “don’t worry, I’ll manage”.”

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- › Social welfare payments and the National Minimum Wage should be benchmarked against the cost of a socially acceptable Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). This is a standard which meets physical, psychological and social needs at a minimum but socially acceptable level.
- › Recognise the higher costs faced by families with older children by introducing a higher rate of Qualified Child Increase for children aged over 12.
- › Progress made in recent national budgets to improve the rates of social welfare payments and the National Minimum Wage need to continue, and accelerate.
- › The Minimum Income Standard and the MESL data complement other poverty measures and should be considered in addition to the “at risk of poverty” and “consistent poverty” measures.
- › Families should be prevented from enduring prolonged periods of income inadequacy through the timely provision of information and supports such as education, training and affordable childcare.
- › There is a need to invest in high quality, affordable and accessible services, including housing, education, childcare, healthcare and transport in order to mitigate the impact of income inadequacy and to help families to find a way out of income inadequacy.
- › Both DEIS and non-DEIS schools at primary and second level should adopt cost effective practices which reduce the costs associated with education for parents, as outlined in Circular 0032/2017.
- › End the voluntary contribution system in non-fee paying primary and secondary schools, beginning with the restoration of the capitation rates to 2010 levels.
- › Additional financial supports and reforms to the SUSI grant criteria are needed so that mature, part-time and non-traditional learners can take up educational opportunities.
- › Continued work is needed so that families on low income can access affordable, low cost credit such as the “It Makes Sense” loan being provided by some Credit Unions
- › Families must be supported to balance paid employment with family life, recognising the challenges faced by lone parents and the need for family-friendly employment practices as well as affordable, good quality childcare and afterschool care.
- › The challenges faced by families in rural areas, including lack of employment opportunities and high transport and fuel costs, must be addressed.

“Children should have happy memories and photographs of happy times, my daughter hasn’t any. People need happy memories, don’t they, especially children?”

INTRODUCTION

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP), in its engagement with households and individuals living in poverty, encounters many complex situations that require a variety of responses. Such households are presented with constant challenges.

The impact of living on an inadequate income is multi-dimensional and it is difficult to identify the cause, the comprehensive nature, and the physical, psychological, and social toll of on-going disadvantage, on the lives of children and parents.

For this reason, SVP asked the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) to research the reality experienced by households with children whose income falls below that required for a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). This is a standard which meets physical, psychological, and social needs at a minimum but socially acceptable level and is one below which nobody should be expected to live.

USING THE MESL AS A MEANS OF STUDYING THE REALITY OF LIVING WITH AN INADEQUATE INCOME

This study draws on previous MESL research by the VPSJ. The Consensual Budget Standards methodology, which is used by the VPSJ, provides both qualitative and quantitative data on the goods, services, expenditure and income required for an MESL. Through working with multiple deliberative focus groups since 2004, in depth discussion with members of the public produced a negotiated consensus on what people regard as essential for a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. The research places an emphasis on “needs not wants” and produces comprehensive, transparent, and itemised lists (over 2000 goods and services) detailing what is required to meet minimum needs and enable an acceptable standard of living. The data is reliable and transparent.

To date, the VPSJ has focused on the provision of data which is primarily quantitative in nature. The results of the VPSJ’s MESL research have been used to evaluate the adequacy of social transfers and the rate for the national minimum wage. The data has not yet been used to explore questions that are qualitative in nature e.g. the consequences of living with an inadequate income that does not allow for an MESL or to explore what people can afford when their income does not allow for an MESL, compared to the MESL budgets. The VPSJ is cautious in making definite comparisons.

The MESL budgets are based on a socially negotiated consensus by members of the public on what is required in order to have an MESL. They are not prescriptive and allow for different choices. An ongoing inadequate income will determine choices and alternative ways of meeting a need. This study, interprets the patterns and choices of expenditure of households in the context of the MESL data. It throws light on the choices that people make when they have to cut back on essentials, and the impact of these choices on the quality of life of households.

“I can’t get control, we can’t make plans, it’s like being in a deep hole, no matter what we do we can’t get out of it, we climb up and fall back in.”

Minimum Essential Standard of Living

This standard of living is one that at a minimum level meets physical, social and psychological needs. It is a standard which focuses on needs, not wants and enables people to participate in society. It is a standard for the whole population and is one below which nobody should be expected to live. It is also a unique benchmark, grounded in the lived experience of people, which complements other poverty measures.

How is a Minimum Essential Standard of Living Determined?

The VPSJ uses the Consensual Budget Standards methodology. This methodology involves the facilitation of a series of deliberative focus groups sessions with members of the public from different socio-economic backgrounds who represent the household type under consideration e.g. two parents and two children, a pensioner couple, single adult living alone. The methodology enables the development of a consensus on the goods and services required for this standard of living. Experts are consulted as required e.g. nutritionists.

Minimum Income Standard (MIS) – What is it?

MIS focuses on the income people need, from work and or social transfers, to afford a Minimum Essential Standard of Living. People who have an income below the minimum are unlikely to achieve this standard of living.

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork for this study consisted of 30 in-depth interviews with parents, 15 from urban areas and 15 from rural areas, and took place between October 2017 and April 2018. Participants were recruited through educational, social and community organisations, as well as, SVP social media channels, which were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study and a guarantee of confidentiality.

Potential interviewees participated in a telephone conversation to establish their income from work and/or social transfers and their housing and childcare costs. The responses allowed for a calculation to be made of their income, in terms of that required by the particular household to afford an MESL. In light of the outcome of the telephone conversations, participants whose income fell below that required for an MESL were invited to engage in face to face interviews. The income data provided during the telephone conversation corresponded with that given in the course of the interviews.

ADVISORY GROUP

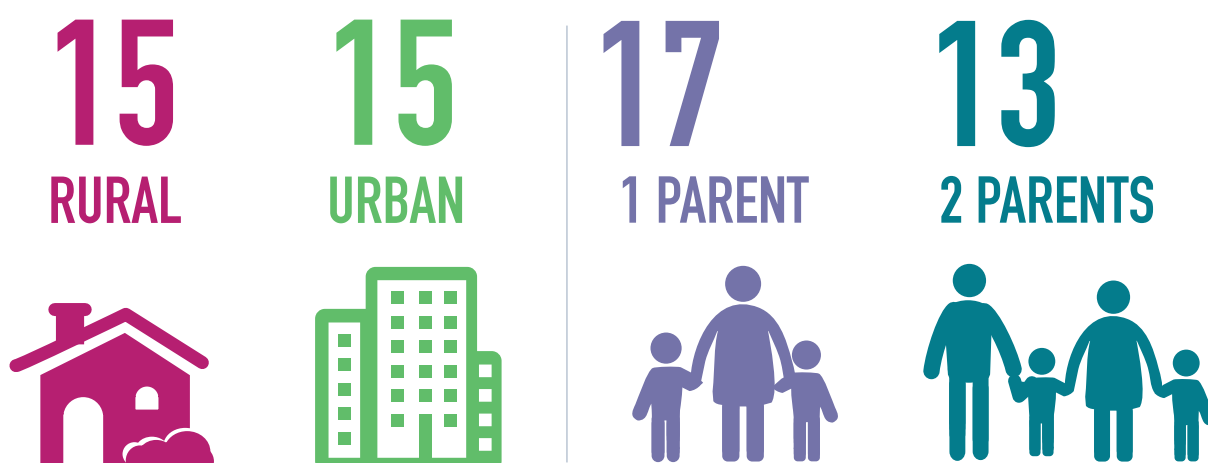
An advisory group was formed consisting of representatives of the SVP (urban and rural), members of the SVP National Social Justice Committee, representatives of One Family, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) and of the VPSJ. At its first meeting, the group discussed the content and focus of the interviews and identified areas requiring particular attention. The group met on two further occasions to discuss the data emerging from the interviews and the shape of the report. The purpose of the third meeting was to review the findings and conclusions.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews took place in four areas of the greater Dublin region, in Co. Longford and Co. Cavan. The rural interviewees lived at a distance from the nearest large town (10 – 15 km). The interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours. With the exception of four participants who were interviewed in their homes, the interviews took place in a venue accessible to the participants. One representative of each of the 17 one parent households and one representative of each of the 13 two parent households were interviewed, and of those interviewed three were male and twenty seven were female. The guarantee of confidentiality enabled interviewees to participate in the process in an engaged and relaxed way.

The focus of the interviews was on the experience of living with an income below that necessary for an MESL. Income and expenditure issues were considered in detail. Although participants were not requested to provide financial statements, a number did so.

30 HOUSEHOLDS



Outline of Interview Content:

- › Present experience, duration and cause.
- › Coping strategies, including sources of support.
- › Household expenditure - priorities, choices and substitutions.
- › Dealing with the shortfall, including borrowing and the financial, emotional, physical and social impact of an ongoing weekly shortfall.
- › Perceptions of the ways out of their current situation.
- › Supports and resources considered most beneficial in the interim.

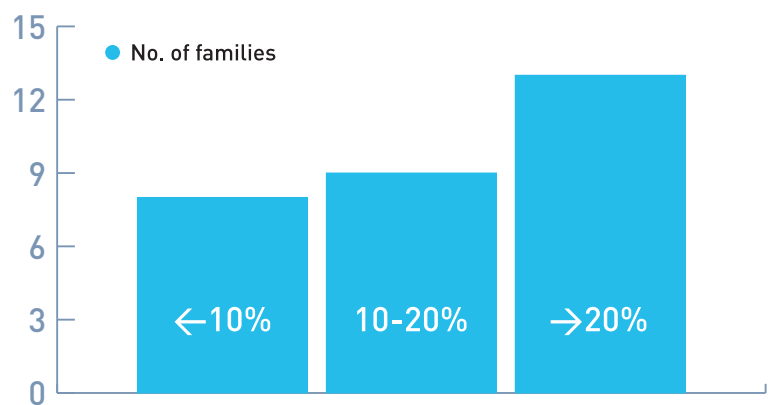
The following graphs present details of the income, employment and accommodation circumstances of the households interviewed

Graph 1 shows the extent to which the income of households fell beneath that required for an MESL and the number of households that register at a particular level.

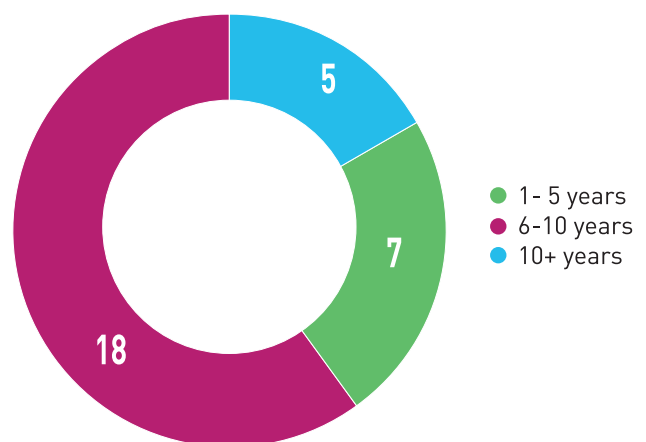
Household incomes were based on the income derived from employment, full or part-time, social welfare transfers and/or a combination of employment and social transfers. Expenditure need included the cost of goods and services contained in the MESL budgets, and included the cost of housing and childcare.

Of the households interviewed living in an urban area, the duration of the period of inadequate income for five households was between one and five years, for eight households it is between six and 10 years, and for two households it is in excess of ten years.

Graph 1 Percentage Gap between Household Income and MESL need



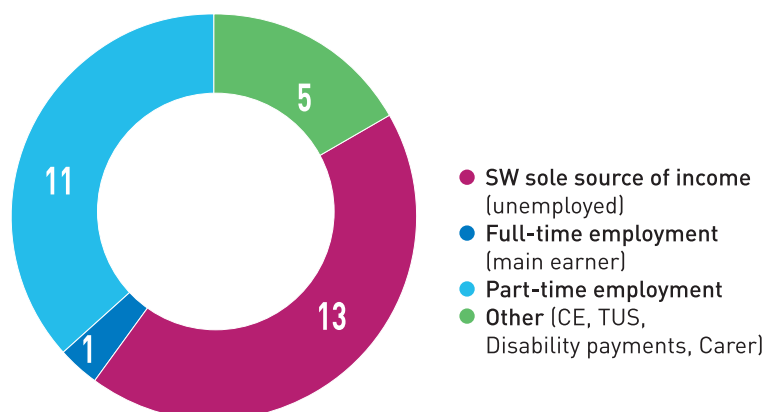
Graph 2 Duration of the Period of Inadequate Income



Of the households interviewed living in a rural area, the duration of the period of inadequate income for two households was approximately two years, for 10 households it was between six and 10 years, and for three households it was in excess of 10 years. For eighteen of the thirty households interviewed, the duration period fell between 6 – 10 years.

This graph shows that social welfare is the only income for almost half of the households in this study.

Graph 3 Households



Household Types, Family Size, Employment Status and Housing Tenure

| | | |
|--|--|----|
| Household Type | One parent family | 17 |
| | Two parent family | 13 |
| Family Size | 1 child | 5 |
| | 2 children | 12 |
| | 3 children | 4 |
| | 4+ children | 9 |
| Employment Status (one parent families) | CE programme | 1 |
| | Working part-time | 5 |
| | Unemployed | 10 |
| | Full-time carer | 1 |
| Employment status (two parent families) | 2x Parents work part-time | 1 |
| | 1x Parent works part-time | 5 |
| | 1x Parent works part-time, 1x parent receiving Disability Allowance | 1 |
| | 2x Parents unemployed | 3 |
| | 1x Parent receives Disability Allowance, 1x parent Carer | 1 |
| | 1x Parent participating in TUS programme (full-time), 1x parent unemployed | 1 |
| | 1x Parent full-time employment | 1 |
| Housing Tenure | Private rented | 14 |
| | Social housing | 7 |
| | Mortgage | 7 |
| | Homeless | 2 |

The majority of households had three children or less than three children. The ages of the children ranged from three months – 17³ years.

Eight of the urban households and seven of the rural households had at least one parent in employment. The remaining fifteen households were dependent on social welfare for a weekly income. The majority of the households represented in the study were accommodated in the private rented sector. The number of households with a mortgage was greater in rural areas.

Analysis of Interview Data

The content of the interviews was transcribed and then analysed, using a thematic framework approach.

The interview questions provided a lens, through which the challenges and hardships associated with the daily experience of trying to make ends meet, could be explored. In an effort to demonstrate the range of experiences encountered, families were grouped according to whether households:

- › **Group one:** cannot make ends meet.
- › **Group two:** struggling to make ends meet.
- › **Group three:** making ends meet with difficulty.

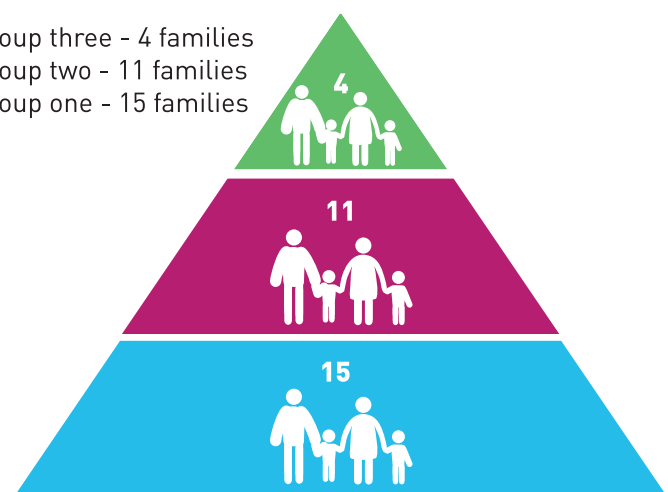
The majority of families are split between groups one and two.

176 potential common themes were initially established. A number of these themes were common to both urban and rural households. Others were specific to either (urban or rural). A number of themes were also identified which were specific to the three groups (see above). These common and specific themes were used as reference points in the analysis of the interviews and considered under each of the following headings:

- › Three Stories of Struggle
- › Drivers of Income Inadequacy
- › Strategies to Cope with Income Inadequacy
- › Differences Between Urban and Rural Households
- › The Social, Emotional and Physical Impact of Income Inadequacy
- › Finding a Way Out of Income Inadequacy

The findings are presented in following section of this report.

- Group three - 4 families
- Group two - 11 families
- Group one - 15 families



3. This study focuses on the children with ages that ranged from three months – 17 years.

FINDINGS

This section is divided into the following:

- › Three Stories of Struggle
- › Drivers of Income Inadequacy
- › Strategies to Cope with Income Inadequacy
- › Differences between Urban and Rural Households
- › The Social, Emotional and Physical Impact of Income Inadequacy
- › Finding a Way Out of income Inadequacy

This section of the report explores the experiences of families whose income is below the expenditure required for a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL).⁴ This project engages directly with households to shine a light on their struggle to make ends meet when income is insufficient, and to demonstrate the consequences of bringing up a family on an inadequate income. More specifically, this section explores the lived experiences of families with an inadequate income, in the context of the wider MESL research, in order to give context and depth to the reality behind income inadequacy.

4. An initial telephone survey was used to obtain information on families, including: family composition, household income (from employment and/or social transfers) and their housing and childcare costs. Income was based on self-analysis and self-reporting. This information allowed us to calculate the households' MESL expenditure need, using the MESL budgets for each specific family composition, and making adjustments for the effect of secondary benefits. Families' actual housing and childcare costs were substituted for the housing and childcare costs that are usually allocated in the MESL budgets. Each household's income was calculated as a percentage of their MESL need – to calculate the depth their income fell short of meeting an MESL. The 30 families interviewed ranged between 3%-39% short of an MESL. Therefore, this study encompasses families that fell exceptionally short of meeting the standard, and those that were closer to meeting the standard.

THREE STORIES OF STRUGGLE

It emerged, from the interviews, that families' income was in fact inadequate, in that many of their minimum needs were going unmet. Despite this commonality, the families that we spoke to had different stories to tell about their experience of living with an inadequate income. Families varied in terms of their composition and duration and depth of inadequate income.

There were other factors that helped, or hindered, their ability to make ends meet. While each household's experience was unique, common themes and similar stories emerged. To aid our understanding of the lived experience of these families, those with similar daily experiences are grouped together; there were broadly three different stories.

The first story describes families who have been in this situation for over nine years, and are all experiencing deep-income inadequacy. Their situation is slowly deteriorating in that they cannot meet their basic physical needs (food, shelter and warmth) on a regular basis. The second story describes families who are partially meeting these basic physical needs. The majority have been in this situation for less than seven years. Their situation is static, with no signs of future improvement and their wider MESL needs are austere neglected. The first and second story demonstrated the cumulative impact of having an inadequate income over time.

The third story is of families whose situation seems to be slowly improving. For half of these families their income has only recently dropped below MESL level and they have financial resources to draw on to top-up their short-term income inadequacy. These resources are finite and will run out, so they draw on them sparingly thereby going without many of their wider MESL needs. Families in the third story believed their situation to be temporary.

01. CANNOT MAKE
ENDS MEET

02. STRUGGLING TO
MAKE ENDS MEET

03. MAKING ENDS MEET
WITH DIFFICULTY

01.

THE FIRST STORY:
CANNOT MAKE ENDS MEET

Life was very difficult for these families because they had recently gone without sufficient food or heating, and regularly did not have enough money to cover their housing costs or household bills. They were continuously making sacrifices, and parents were aware that their children's needs were not being met, which they prioritise over their own. They discussed the reality of living from hand to mouth.

This group of families had the deepest level of income inadequacy.⁵ Half the families that we talked to were in this situation, 10 one parent and five two parent families. The majority of these 15 families did not have a parent in employment. A small number, less than a third, had a parent in employment. The families ranged in size from one-child households to the largest household interviewed – seven children.⁶ Most of the children, in this group, are of school age, primary or secondary.⁷ A number of children were unemployed young adults living in the family home.⁸

Group Characteristics

The task of making ends meet was difficult because there was not enough income to cover their outgoings, and as a result they would regularly forgo essential items. Families had to make continuous sacrifices, in an effort to make their budgets stretch:

“I used to have life insurance but when the rent increased I had to let it go... everything except basic costs are out of my grasp now.”

“We only buy clothes for the child, and we wait until there are holes in something before we replace it.”

Families explained how they lived on a day-to-day basis; they did not have any money left at the end of the week to prepare for upcoming expenses, or to make contingency plans for the unexpected. This also acted as a barrier to taking steps towards a more adequate income. Consequently, they felt a lack of control over their lives, and great uncertainty about the future, with some families having recently become homeless.

Families recalled a recent time that they had gone without adequate food or heating, or could not afford a household bill: “I often have to make the choice between eating or heating.” Their capacity to stretch their budgets further than these priorities was limited.

“We get paid on Monday and often have no money left after paying the bills and doing the weekly shop. I worry how we will get through the week, how can we look after a child?”

“I’m not coping well; I’m going from day-to-day with no or little food some days... our gas will be turned off soon because we’ve no money.”

The pressure of living with an inadequate income, on a day-to-day basis, induced stress. Parents were stressed and worried about their inability to pay upcoming expenses, and the repercussions for their families. They also expressed concern about the future because they believed their situation was deteriorating.

5. Their income ranged between 11%-37% short of an MESL.

6. The family that consisted of seven children had only one under the age of 17 years. The remaining six children were either unemployed or attending a course. They were not permanent residents. While they contributed to household expenses when resident, their presence increased the strain on household expenses.

7. Three are pre-school age, 20 are in primary school, 15 are in secondary school and two are in further education.

8. Although, a small number of households had young adult children living in the home, this study is confined to the analysis of the reality of children who were under 18 years old.

“We still owe €1800 for the course and we keep getting letters. We set up a payment plan but we won’t have made all the payments before the course ends and we won’t get the diploma unless the fees are paid, but we have to keep going and finish the course, to get a job somewhere.”

“I can’t get control, we can’t make plans, it’s like being in a deep hole, no matter what we do we can’t get out of it, we climb up and fall back in.”

Children’s needs were prioritised by families across the board; but it was more difficult for parents, in this group, to meet their children’s physical, social and psychological needs. In terms of social inclusion and participation needs, children had no or limited activities. In rural areas, more children were partaking in free or low-cost sporting and cultural activities such as Gaelic football with their local GAA club and Scouts. However the regularity of their attendance was contingent on whether or not their families could afford the petrol required to bring them there.

“Everything they do has to be in the house... When I can afford it I pay for swimming and boxing lessons, these are their main activities; swimming and boxing are €3.50 per lesson. I would love them to go regularly but I can’t afford it. I would love them to join a sports club, sports are good for kids.”

02.

THE SECOND STORY: STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET

Families in this group experienced greater stability because they were able to more frequently afford adequate food and heating costs and pay pressing household bills. Their income sometimes stretched to cover less frequent but known upcoming expenses.

Families still had to make many sacrifices and substitutions in order to make ends meet, and were doing without things generally regarded as essential in multiple aspects of their daily lives. The situation of families was static; they could cover some basic expenses but described themselves as “stuck” and “trapped,” not knowing whether or not their lot could improve.

There were eleven families in this position, six of these had an income that came within 10% of meeting their household’s minimum needs. There were higher levels of employment and fewer barriers to employment for families in this group. The majority of households had at least one parent in employment. This group is made up of six one parent families and five two parent families. Families had between two and five children, most families had two children and their children were of school-going age.⁹ There are no infants in this group and no unemployed adult children living in the family home.

Group Characteristics

This group can be characterised by higher levels of employment and fewer barriers to employment. Some parents had formal qualifications, training and previous work experience (childcare, business administration and carer qualifications, and training in specific trades e.g. plastering).

The affordability of childcare was a limiting factor for the families with younger children, and parents went to significant lengths to avoid high cost formal childcare fees. Parents had to make arrangements and structure their working time to avoid unaffordable childcare costs. In two parent families, either one parent remained at home to mind their children, or both parents were employed only for the hours their children were at school (incurring summer childcare costs). One parent families were similarly restricted in the hours they could work, and were reliant on informal childcare from grandparents. The inability to afford childcare had repercussions for these parents:

“I work nights and my parents mind my children while I’m working, they spend the night at their grandparents. Then I sleep while they’re at school, but I get little sleep, especially at the weekends and school holidays.”

“More women like me would work full-time if there was free or more accessible childcare, especially during the summer holidays, if there was a proper childcare scheme for low income families.”

Families were restricted in their opportunities to move away from partial social welfare dependency. They could not take up more hours at work without incurring high cost childcare fees. This was a double edged sword; their income was limited from having to structure working around avoiding incurring high cost childcare fees. However, being able to gain employment and avoid the additional cost of childcare was moving them closer to income adequacy, than their counterparts in the previous group.

Parents also feared they would lose their benefits if they increased their working hours. For some parents, increased work intensity did not directly result in increased financial gain in the past:

9. Three in pre-school, 12 in primary school, 13 in secondary school and two in further education.

“People are afraid to be honest when asked about their income, being honest can mean no Medical Card and a higher rent.”

“I agree with some of the adjustments between Social Welfare and work but I think increasing rent and reducing the Carer’s Allowance is not fair. Dublin city council increased my rent by €15 and my Carer’s Allowance was reduced by €15.”

Families were able to more frequently afford adequate food and heating costs and pay more household bills. In essence they were making ends meet more frequently, and experienced increased stability. Occasionally, there was a small amount of household income left to pay for some known but less frequent expenses. This type of expenditure was minimal and for specific upcoming expenses, as this small amount of money would need a long period of time to accumulate. It was also generally spent on better fulfilling their children’s needs and as a result the number of families with children engaging in regular activities increased (as a percentage per category). However, families still expressed that their children were going without; they often had to deny them anything that was not an essential such as certain food, clothing and more.

“We don’t have Sky TV, Netflix, or internet, the children are understanding but I don’t want them to be without, or fall behind.”

“[Our son] is sixteen years old and he has a weekend job, he has to have one if he wants expensive trousers and runners. I give him the normal amount which is €10 and he makes up the rest.”

The parents interviewed expressed that they felt “trapped” in their current circumstance. They prioritised paying for what they “must always have” and were glad to be able to “put food on the table and a roof over [their] heads.” They were continuously scrimping and focused on urgent upcoming costs, while longer term ones were accumulating. They could not afford “anything extra.” They stated that their circumstance was static, and they felt “stuck.” Incurring arrears and paying back informal loans to family and friends, added to this feeling.

“Saturday and Sunday are the worst days, we’re praying to get by with food and fuel, I try to budget to manage but it’s impossible... especially with children, I had to spend €20 in the hospital last week with one child.”

There was great uncertainty around the future: “I’m nervous about the future; we’re only managing on a day-to-day basis.” This induced stress and worry. Families were not in a financial position to enact a long-term plan and focused on the weekly struggle to meet their short-term expenses. Many of these families felt as if their situation was more likely to deteriorate than improve.

“I do as much planning and budgeting as I can. I’m happy if the rent, ESB and food bills are paid. I wish I could plan for months ahead... but it’s difficult to plan when you’re unsure about the basics.”

“It is sometimes very difficult to cope; we’re doing without anything extra. First I pay the bills and then I use what is left over for the shopping ... it can be a nightmare.”

“Life’s not easy... I can’t see a way out... when I get paid I immediately pay rent, bills and anything that is urgent... when I’m struggling, which is most of the time, I feel down, sad and depressed.”

The presence of support from family, friends and the community and voluntary sector provided important back-up for families in this group, especially where families were unemployed:

“When I separated from my husband... I went to the Women’s Refuge Centre; the people here were very good to me, they helped me find an apartment.”

“My mam paid for all our kitchen equipment, all the basics, and for our TV. I got €100 towards furniture from the SVP”

The three unemployed one parent families, in this group, have a strong informal support network. Another factor that contributed to their ability to cope was that the duration of their situation of inadequate income was relatively short term (compared to unemployed one parent families in the previous group).

03.

THE THIRD STORY: MAKING ENDS MEET WITH DIFFICULTY

Families in this group believed that their circumstance was improving, and of a temporary nature. Their situation was transient and they tended to have financial resources to help off-set their temporary income shortfall.

These households were in a more stable position than their counterparts in the previous two groups; they were able to regularly provide food and heating for their families, and cover weekly housing costs, household bills and some of their wider MESL needs. Despite future prospects of change, at the time of the interviews, they fell short of an MESL and still had to make regular sacrifices and substitutions to make ends meet.

This is the smallest group, with only four families coping relatively well, despite having an income below that required for an MESL.¹⁰ There are three two parent families and a single one parent family in this group, making this the only group in which there are more two parent families. All of the families have at least one parent in employment, or a parent that will soon return to employment. Families have between one to four children, predominantly of school going age.¹¹

Group Characteristics

The families in this group stand out primarily for two reasons. Firstly, the temporary or relatively recent nature of their situation, and secondly because they believed their situation was improving. They are in the process of realising a plan that could improve their income, and better their family’s situation. They discussed recent, or forthcoming, positive changes:

“When I go back to work, I’ll go on a twenty hour contract, so I can work part-time and take care of my baby. [My employer] are very good to me, I’ve been working with them for 10 years.”

“My husband has work and we’re getting FIS, my friend’s family have FIS and it makes a huge difference for stresses... full-time employment for at least one parent with FIS is my family’s way out.”

10. Their incomes ranged between 4%-39% short of an MESL

11. There are no unemployed adult dependent on their parents.

Families in this group were in a more stable and secure position in that they were more able to afford adequate food and heating, and could plan for short-term and medium-term expenses. However, they were making sacrifices and substitutions in order to make ends meet and were vulnerable to the unexpected. The long-term repercussions of living in this way would worsen their situation; however, they could see the possibility of a “way out.”

The parents interviewed discussed the resources, inner and material, that they drew on to help them cope. They had a supply of resources that explain how they survived a period of low income without entering into a longer-term poverty trap (like families in group one and two). Much like the families in group one and group two, their inner resources included organisational skills, budgeting skills and resourcefulness:

“[Working in accounts] prepared me to be a good manager of money, and to budget well... after I pay the mortgage, and bills, I have €70 per week plus child benefit. I shop in Aldi and allocate €50 weekly for food, for myself and my baby.”

“I have to watch every penny... I always go to second-hand shops, and I buy cheaper food... I learned how to find free things I can bring the kids to, like festivals in the park.”

These families also had a strong support network of family and friends.

Significantly, these families also drew on financial resources, not available to families in the previous groups. A lone parent, living in an urban area, sold her car to help abate her temporary situation of low income. Families received a lump sum of money in other ways: from a redundancy payment and to a lesser extent from the Community Welfare Officer, which protected them in a similar way. In short, they had extra money that helped to bridge the gap between their income and their MESL expenditure need for a period of time. These resources are finite, and will run out.

DRIVERS OF INCOME INADEQUACY

The parents interviewed discussed the factors they believed contributed to them getting into a situation of inadequate income, as well as the factors that contributed to them staying in this situation. The high cost of housing impacted families' household income, and was the single most cited driver of income inadequacy, followed closely by family break up, unemployment and low pay.

Housing is an omnipresent theme throughout the interviews that intensifies family's struggles. Additionally, the inability to access affordable and good quality childcare forced families into unemployment, or restricted the hours they could work. Most of the families interviewed could identify a specific event that lowered their total family income or earning potential, such as: being "let-go," reduced working hours, rent increases, family separation, a car accident, the birth of child with special needs or a parent's illness. This section will outline the chief drivers of income inadequacy uncovered in the interviews.

HOUSING

"We broke up after eighteen years in a permanent relationship. After the break up, the landlord told me that he wanted to sell the house we were living in, it was three weeks before Christmas. We had to move into [homeless accommodation] and now we are staying with my sister."

"[My husband, my two sons and I] live in a one bedroom apartment; the rent is €600 a month. The rent will increase to €800 from January."

"My land-lord continuously increased the rent. The original rent was €1,100 per month, it was increased on two occasions by over one-hundred euro each time and finally the rent was raised to €1,620 per month. €520 higher than the original rent. I just kept paying the original rent. Then I received a letter for €3,500 of arrears, and a demand to leave the accommodation."

Families discussed the discrepancy between rental supports and actual private rent prices. There were ongoing issues regarding the chronic lack of availability of rental accommodation within the rent support limits.¹² Families stated they were paying "top-up" payments to their landlords. Two families became homeless because they could not afford these increasing top-up payments to their landlords. Annual rent increases meant families' incomes were falling further below the cost of their needs each year.

Families were dissatisfied with the accommodation options in the private rented sector, because of problems with security of tenure, poor quality properties and overcrowding. For some families in private rented accommodation, there was also lower energy efficiency. Houses were poorly insulated or the method of heating the home was wasteful: "the problem is that we can't heat it properly, especially in the bad weather" and "the big range eats up all the fuel, the house is a cold house so I spend extra money on fuel to keep our home warm."

Less than one quarter of families, were in social housing. All of the families in the private rented sector, and homeless families, had a long-term housing need. Families discussed their desire for housing ("housing would change my life") and social housing delays. One lone parent living in social housing was at times sharing her home with her six children and six grandchildren, because her offspring could not afford private rented accommodation.

There was a strong current throughout the interviews that parents wanted a place to call their "home," so they could create a stable environment and routine for their children. They believed this could be achieved with the permanency of social housing.

12. As reported in The Simon Community's "Locked Out" Survey (March 2018)

FAMILY BREAK UP

“My husband became addicted to drugs and spent all our family money. I trusted him, I thought he was paying the mortgage, but he didn’t pay it. He cleared off to the UK because he didn’t want to face the consequences. He has a new partner now, and he doesn’t want any contact with the children, and doesn’t pay any maintenance. It’s very hard on the children, they’re teenagers and they feel rejected.”

“When we were together he was an alcoholic, abusive and violent. I have a barring order from him now, he has no access to the children and he doesn’t pay maintenance... We’re hoping to move house to the other side of the city, to feel safer. He drives by our home... having to work more for clothes and school books is nothing major, compared to our previous situation. I’m so grateful for peace and safety. I try to keep everything going; I keep the children’s needs first and go without anything that’s not an essential.”

The reasons families separated were often multi-faceted and complex. The majority of parents separated because of domestic abuse or drug and alcohol addiction problems.

Family separation can have negative financial implications. Some families were facing the financial fall-out from a separation, which can be due to the loss of the main earner or issues with childcare resulting in the loss of all earners (or a reduction in social welfare payments coming into the household). So much so, some new one parent families found themselves in danger of losing their family home. On the other hand, it meant that a partner was getting out of that difficult and dangerous situation (e.g. domestic abuse).

“I am very happy at present, less stress and less fear from being beaten and shouted at. My children never saw their father hit or beat me. My ex-husband gives us eighty euro a week, or every two weeks, as a maintenance payment, when he feels like it. I try very hard to manage but when he doesn’t pay maintenance I have to borrow from my brother. The children sometimes spend Saturday and Sunday with him, but he lets them play outside without checking on them and doesn’t give them any proper food.”

The vast majority of one parent families interviewed did not receive any support from the father of their children, including maintenance payments. The small number, who did receive financial support, received it on an irregular basis. Only two one parent families, of those interviewed, received occasional practical help from their ex-partners.

For the majority of two worker families there was an emphasis on coping together as a team. One parent families did not have this support. However, for some two parent families, having an inadequate income was a source of stress on the relationship.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Parents expressed high levels of motivation to take up employment, education or training but feared the loss of social transfers, especially the Medical Card.

The associated demands on families with children, or a parent, with a disability, illness or behavioural problem restricted some households earning potential. Those with a disability or illness were dependent on social transfers. Caring duties also meant that some parents could not gain employment at all, or only part-time.

“I did a FETAC level 5 course and I’m a trained Childcare Worker but I got a bad back injury and had to stop. I started working in retail, instead of childcare, and then I had to stop working when my first child was born. I’m waiting until my son starts primary school then I’m going back to work. I can’t afford childcare.”

Another barrier to work was not being able to afford childcare for young children. Even if families found work that coincided with school times, the hours they could work were restricted and they would incur childcare costs in the summer months. Childcare affected income more often by constraining earnings rather than by increasing costs: the high cost of childcare meant that parents, especially lone parents, were not in employment. Families with young children requested affordable and good quality childcare. The unemployed one parent families interviewed reluctantly accepted that opportunities would be limited until their children were older.

LOW PAID EMPLOYMENT AND PRECARIOUS WORK

“I found a job as a Carer but I had to travel and I had to work days and nights. I couldn’t continue working because of the different hours, I started with twenty hours a week and this went down to just eight. I couldn’t afford childcare and travel. A combination of childcare and travel is a big expense for the odd hours. I got small jobs locally after that, I would take anything I could get but one shop closed down and in another job the owner couldn’t afford to keep a paid worker.”

Precarious work makes it difficult to plan and manage household finances. Occasionally, the weekly income of families in precarious employment did not cover the related commuter and childcare costs. Many one parent families found work as carers, which necessitated working evenings, nights and weekends – those without informal support felt this more difficult.

Two parent dual earner households were in low paid employment and their combined wages did not result in income adequacy. Some parents’ combined wages meant they were not entitled to any social transfers, in-work supports or benefits such as the Medical Card. Two parent single earner families were also in low paid employment and some of their spouses were dependent on social welfare payments.

Generally, families in this scenario also received the Working Family Payment (WFP), and retained benefits such as the Medical Card.

Employed one parent families were employed on a part-time basis only, and this lessened their earning potential. The majority were also in low paid employment.

Families were employed in various low earning roles that included: hotel porters, food service assistants, factory workers, entry-level administrators and carers. Others were trades people that had been impacted by the economic downturn and could not be sure of getting work.

SOCIAL WELFARE – SOLE SOURCE OF INCOME

Half of the households in this study are dependent on social transfers as their only income¹³; the majority of these are one parent households. This income was not sufficient to meet the cost of their needs. Some of the drivers of income inadequacy, discussed above, contributed to these families entering a situation of social welfare dependency and therefore, a situation of inadequate income.

The MESL data provides a unique evidence based benchmark against which to assess the adequacy of social welfare supports, by measuring the extent to which social welfare payments enable individuals and households to afford an acceptable minimum standard of living, which allows for participation in the social and economic norms of Irish society.

13. 13 families are unemployed and social welfare payments are their only income, three families are receiving Disability Allowance or Carers Allowance. One of these five families has one parent also in employment, so this family is not solely dependent on social transfers for their income.

STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH INCOME INADEQUACY

PRIORITISING

Families endeavoured to pay for food, housing costs and household energy, first. Food is predominantly healthy home cooked meals but of a limited variety, repeating the same affordable recipes every week. Families discussed these priorities, in terms of a checklist, paying them each week/month before addressing any other urgent or outstanding bills.

They ensured they were meeting their children's needs before addressing their own. This meant that parents' needs were often severely neglected in the process. For example, some parents went without a meal, on occasion, in order to provide their children with "good food" and parents would forgo clothing for themselves in order to have better quality or more variety of clothes for their children: "I put the kids first, and try not to let them see the struggle." Families had a desire to give their children more. They limited spending on their own needs in order to compensate for what their children were going without. Families especially prioritised the expenses associated with them getting "a good education" and enjoying school.

"I do as much planning and budgeting as I can. I'm happy if the rent, ESB and food bills are paid. I wish I could plan for the future."

"When I add up my expenses, I know I cannot take my kids on a treat, there's just not enough money."

"Books and uniforms are expensive, but it's the price of getting a good education, my children's education is important to me. My son is excellent at maths, I'm very proud of him."

"The children's needs come first, and then my top priorities are putting food in the fridge and paying the bills."

"My kids do without lots of things, even when the ice-cream van comes I can't let them have an ice-cream: "mam, how come other kids can have an ice-cream? We hardly ever get one."

"I plan on a day-to-day basis but also keep the kids' future in mind; I want college for them both. They are putting in the work in school and they know how important education is for their future, they're great children."

For the families in group one (could not make ends meet), after these initial priorities were paid for, most of the money in the household budget was accounted for. Families in this group were at times struggling to afford these top priorities: "they had to go to school without breakfast, because I had no milk and no money to go get some."

For the families in group two (struggled to make ends meet), these initial household priorities were, more often than not, within their grasp. An increase in household income resulted in families spending more money on better fulfilling their children's basic needs, as well as social inclusion needs.

In group three (made ends meet with difficulty), although the basic priorities were covered by the family income, they had to think carefully about spending: "I have to watch every penny and I have to keep the long term in mind."

GOING WITHOUT

Families went without many of the goods and services required for an MESL. There was not any MESL budget area in which parents were not cutting back (food, clothing, personal care, health, household goods, household services, communications, social inclusion and participation, education, transport, household energy, personal costs, childcare, housing, insurance and savings and contingencies).

This section highlights the recurring theme that rather than spend outside one's limited means families would make sacrifices and substitutions. Families were not just going without these items on a weekly basis but over an extended period of time.

Families had to be organised, in terms of food, with meal plans and shopping lists often based on special offers in supermarkets. There was an emphasis on home cooking and a healthy diet. Families were limited in terms of variety of food that they could afford.

Within the MESL budgets there are three annual trips to McDonald's, an occasional take-away as a break from cooking and infrequent treats, such as biscuits. These aspects of the budgets were not a reality for the families interviewed.

Clothing is made to last years, and is mostly second-hand from family, friends or second-hand shops: "I have not bought any clothes for three years, but I had to buy a pair of socks on Saturday, I had to, all the other pairs are full of holes." Families felt pressure from their adolescent children to buy branded clothing. Fitting in amongst their peers was at the heart of the problem; they wanted particular clothes and shoes for conformity rather than practical reasons.

"I buy very little clothing for myself and only from the SVP shops; only for these shops my family wouldn't have two pairs of shoes each. I buy one pair of good shoes for my children but my older boy says he wants leave school and work, so that he can have name brand runners."

"Most of our clothes are from the two local charity shops but my sister buys brands and passes them on to my daughter. She really helps by passing on clothes."

Families went without sufficient personal care items. They prioritised soap, toothpaste and shampoo but some went without haircuts, moisturiser, make-up, perfume and more. One lone parent talked about the impact this was having on her self-esteem: "Personal care? I go to the hairdresser once a year for a hair cut only. I used to look after my appearance but I lost confidence in myself."

An annual visit to the GP and dentist was not a reality for the families interviewed. Some parents and children were developing issues with their oral health but could not afford the dental treatments required: "my son has a problem with his teeth, we need five thousand and he's not eligible for the 13-16 free dental care, the system doesn't recognise his care as urgent but his face is affected." The cumulative impact of not going to a GP was beginning to take a toll on some parents: "I have a pain in my shoulder from lifting in the warehouse where I work, I'm afraid to go to the doctor in case there is more money involved." As well as, not going to regular maintenance check-ups, families were unlikely to go to their GP or dentist when they had a problem that required attention because of the costs they believed they would incur.

Families' social inclusion and participation needs are neglected. None of the families had an active social life. Only two parents, out of forty-three, engaged in a regular paid social activity: a weekly exercise class and "bingo." They stated they would like "to go out more" as a family but there were competing budget demands that took precedence. Some children had no regular sporting or cultural activities. Parents tried to engage them in other ways, but were not always successful: "he's sick of going to the park."

"No social life, apart from singing in the cathedral choir."

"At night I watch TV and on Saturdays I walk with the kids to see my father, in the city."

"I don't have one; I go to mam's for a chat."

In terms of communications, the use of mobile phones was contingent on the ability to afford credit that month because of competing budget demands. For this reason, they opted for pay-as-you-go plans. Often families could not afford to have internet in their homes. Those that had access to the internet used it to help them budget and save by researching the cheapest methods of acquiring new goods and services, as well as purchasing inexpensive clothing and other items online. It was usually originally acquired for educational purposes for children and parents in education, but also for children's social inclusion and participation needs.

Families could not afford to replace or repair old or worn out household goods, appliances or furnishings. They were concerned about the impact that an upcoming breakdown, repair or service would have on the household's weekly income:

"It's very difficult to replace worn out things, I haven't replaced anything for eleven years."

"I'm worried the car might breakdown, or the children will become ill, I'm praying the fridge won't break. I don't have enough money to plan for these uncertainties. What will I do? I don't like borrowing."

Half of the families interviewed had no form of insurance, none of the families had health insurance and only five families had life assurance (as a stipulation of their mortgages). A small number of households (4) did not have health insurance and were not eligible for a Medical Card. Families were grateful that their children were healthy partly because they believed they would not be able to afford treatment if they became ill. A number of families were required to have car insurance because they had a car.

Families in private rented accommodation had a long-term housing need because they were paying high rent, had insufficient space for their family, sharing a home with another family, lacked security of tenure, inefficient heating and other more case specific problems:

"I try to see the positives; we have a roof over our heads, beds to sleep in, food and heat most of the time... The landlord is supposed to be responsible for the house but the council told him he was responsible for the freezer when it broke down, he took it away and hasn't replaced it. He also took the washing machine."

"There are six of us with two bedrooms, living room, kitchen and bathroom. We have one small heater and we move it from room to room."

Families living in a rural area needed a car for transportation but several families could not afford one, and this led to social isolation: "I lost the car before Christmas because I wasn't paying tax. I'm stuck in the house and I get depressed, my family [don't live locally] and there's only one bus a day from here and bus fares are expensive, so I see little of my parents... It's my first time without a car since I was nineteen." For those in a rural area with a car, transportation was contingent on being able to afford petrol that week. Families had to restrict their journeys for this reason.

Children attending school were excluded from the full educational experience. One parent said “I have to think, my kids are not getting what others are,” and this was the sentiment held by the other parents interviewed, especially parents with children in secondary school. They sensed that their children felt different to the other children in their class:

“Instead of enjoying summer I am thinking how I can get the new school bags and new jackets they want, kids want to be like other kids.”

“It’s one trip after another and my kids have to stay at home when the other kids go on a trip because I don’t have the money. They understand that they can’t go on school trips because I can’t afford them ... they will only be young once.”

“The school’s ask for a lot, our oldest daughter is very understanding, she’s ambitious and very good at school, she recently asked for five euro to spend on a school trip, an educational one, and I couldn’t find five euro.”

“There’s pressure from school to pay for different things, like fifty euro towards their tree planting efforts, and the school are making a plaque with the names of those who contributed. Our names will be absent and the children will be upset but I couldn’t afford the fifty euro.”

“The children look for money for school trips, and we often have to say no to even five euro, we just don’t have it, even though we budget carefully. We have to say “sorry we can’t”... they are very good kids and we hate that they feel different.”

“The problem in Leaving Cert and Junior Cert is that parents are paying for grinds. We can’t afford grinds. One child wants to be an accountant and the other an engineer; they need help with their maths.”

Another method of “going without” was pre-pay. The benefits, of using pre-pay and instalment plans, outweighed the additional expense often attached to these methods. Fewer lump-sum payments meant there was less of an impact on their weekly income. For pay-as-you-go phones and electricity, families stated that they were less likely to use more than they could afford and they could cut back when necessary. One parent said: “I think pre-paid is the best way for our situation; you know when the meter is running low. You have an element of control over your bills.” However, this meant they could not avail of the long-term savings associated with online monthly billing and lump-sum insurance payments etc.

Going without and juggling bills were the first responses, by parents, to a weekly shortfall. An on-going weekly shortfall meant that this method was not always successful alone.

DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVES

This section examines the ways in which families find another method of meeting a basic need. Families had developed cheaper alternative methods that helped them to, at least partially, meet their needs in the areas of: food, clothing and social inclusion and participation.

The most infrequent substitution made by families was buying larger quantities of cheaper, often processed food in the place of healthy home cooked meals.

Second hand clothing meant that families could afford to replace worn out clothing more regularly, and that children had a bigger variety of clothes: “if it wasn’t for the SVP shops my children wouldn’t have two pairs of shoes.”

Informal support often came in the form of family and friends passing on their children’s clothing, and this proved to be useful for many families with growing children.

The role of TV in the household was multi-faceted; families spent the bulk of their leisure time at home, watching TV together and with friends. Families often refer to it as a way to “relax” and “unwind” in the evenings. It became apparent that having a TV was important to families trying to manage with limited resources. The standard in the MESL budgets (for social inclusion and participation activities) includes opportunities for parents to go swimming or play football, and have a night out together twice a year. The budgets also include a family outing to the cinema (three times a year) and an annual trip to the pantomime, as well as, a small summer trip in Ireland. These regular activities for the family, combined, were not a reality for families with an inadequate income. Parents were limited to watching TV as their main leisure activity.

The MESL budgets do not include “pet costs” for families with children. Families who had pets explained that the cost of keeping a pet was worth funding because they are important for family life. Families viewed having a pet as a cheaper method of meeting some of the family’s needs and a good management of limited resources: “it’s a reason for the kids to leave the house, to walk the dog and he brings the family together.”

“I buy the cheapest food, mostly processed is what I can afford but once or twice a month I make a big pot of stew. I get the best deals and offers which are often chicken nuggets, burgers and fish fingers. Good food is expensive. I don’t want them to go hungry so I buy what will fill them.”

“The TV is important for relaxing, we only have three stations.”

“We’ve had no social life for a long time. In our spare time we stay at home and watch T.V.”

“I like to listen to the radio and watch TV at night time like C.S.I when the children are in bed.”

“Everything [my children] do has to be in the house because there is no money for clubs or activities. We have a small dog and we love him. He is something for the kids, he makes up for some of the things they can’t have.”

Birthdays, Christmas, First Holy Communion and Confirmations are examples of the special occasions discussed by the families interviewed. Occasions that should be celebrations instead were described as a severe strain on financial resources, as well as, a source of stress and worry. Most families had a minimalist approach to spending on occasions: instead of a children’s birthday party they would buy a birthday “cake from Aldi.” However, some families felt it was necessary to ensure these events were celebrated, especially for teenagers:

“My older girl wanted to go out with a few friends for her birthday. I had to borrow.”

“When my daughter makes her confirmation in May, we hope to go to a hotel for food, it was booked before my husband lost his job, I can’t disappoint the child. For a large family, finger food and chicken nuggets and chips for the children it will cost €450. I can’t let the child down; we need happy memories and photographs of happy times. It’s very hard... I don’t want to let the children down.”

Some families were dependent on informal support for these occasions. Alternatively, they managed the additional expenses by making tough choices in order to save small amounts throughout the year, or by borrowing.

In spite of being a good management of limited resources, the alternatives these families had developed, had immediate and long-term repercussions for parents and children because they were only partially meeting their needs.

JUGGLING, BORROWING AND SAVING

All the families interviewed were deprived of items that are deemed essential for an MESL, and going without these items is one method of dealing with the shortfall. This is combined with juggling payments, household bills and expenses. The following are some of the responses families gave when asked how they deal with a weekly shortfall:

“Go without, with the exception of food, I always try to have enough food in the house even if only bread and butter and milk.”

“Do without, struggle until next week’s wages arrive; ensure the basics are available, food and heat.”

“I try not to get into debt which can mean doing without anything but the very basics, no sports, some school demands we just can’t meet them. I pay one bill this week and other bills the next week.”

“We scrape by, do without. When I’m desperate, I’ll phone my mother who’ll send a postal order, or sometimes I get into arrears with payments ... I’m scared of money lenders, digging yourself into a bigger hole.”

“I always make sure there is some food in the fridge and some oil in the system, and then we just do without or delay paying the bills.”

“Do without or don’t pay some bills one week.”

BORROWING

There is a perceived hierarchy of different types of credit. The worst being “money lenders” because of their high interest rates, their reputation to “hound and cheat you,” and for some families they had caused “serious trouble in the past.” This is followed by formal institutions (banks and credit unions), and then borrowing from friends and family, which is deemed the best method. Families can get small amounts of money with no interest, and they can pay back their relatives quickly to avoid accumulating debt. Families borrow “rarely” and if they are “stuck,” “desperate” or “can’t avoid it.” Although in the minority, some families borrowed regularly from family and friends, and were reliant on them on a weekly basis.

“We borrow from my wife’s father every Monday and repay him every Wednesday...we did go to Provident and we ended up in arrears.”

“I borrow almost every week from my family, and pay them back the following week. One week borrow the next week pay back... I borrowed from money lenders in the past and found the interim payments very high.”

“We had to keep using our old car, and dad said we were pumping money into it, so he helped us get a newer car. He gave us €3,000 towards the car and the garage lent us the rest, €5,800, we have to pay them back.”

Families also borrowed from friends and family for lump-sum payments. In rural areas, families needed to make lump-sum payments for the maintenance of their car, or when purchasing a newer model.

Borrowing formally from institutions is not a common method of dealing with the shortfall. Most households are reluctant to borrow formally, because the long-term nature of their situation meant a loan would not act as a “way out” in the same way that gaining employment might. Families expressed a concern that borrowing could worsen their situation in the long-term, with high repayments. Some families were unfortunately already experiencing the repercussions of a loan.

Just over a quarter of households were re-paying a debt, mostly from a bank or credit union but a small number were re-paying a high-cost loan provider (money lender). Families went to money lenders because they felt it was their only option at the time.

“Provident, it’s the only way to survive at Christmas, when you can’t save much during the year. I’m always robbing Peter to pay Paul; I pay one bill this week and another the next week.”

“It was in the past, but I’m still paying Provident. The interest is very high but I had to go somewhere.”

“I only wish I had not been so stupid, every day the debt hangs around my neck. I’m always worrying about how I’m going to get money and how am I going to pay back the loans and look after the girls? When will I be free?”

“I’m up to my eyes in debt... I’m trying to reduce my debt but finding it almost impossible, I went to the insolvency people and insolvency is the worst solution.”

SAVING STRATEGIES

The families interviewed discussed their saving strategies. Their interpretation of saving was the ability to put money away for predictable but less frequent costs. After their basic priorities were covered then small amounts of money were put aside over an extended period of time to meet these costs: “I try to put four euro in the credit union every week, and five euro of the child benefit money, for a rainy day.” This enabled a number of families to buy things outside of their immediate needs. The majority of families had no savings at the time of the interviews, but a number saved using a bank or credit union account.

Some families had successfully put aside money, from their weekly income, for the following: upcoming educational expenses, children’s activities and summer camps, birthdays and Christmas.

Half the families, in group three (made ends meet with difficulty), had savings from before their current situation of inadequate income, and these were now being used to help offset some of their weekly shortfall. They chose to use this money sparingly to meet only their most pressing needs each week, continuing to live below MESL level. This was to ensure that they would consistently have enough money for their basic priorities (food, heating costs, household bills and children’s needs) over time.

GETTING SUPPORT FROM FAMILY, FRIENDS, SCHOOLS AND THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR

The MESL budgets are based on meeting the needs of a household as a self-contained unit, and as such do not make any assumptions of support that can be drawn on, such as support from friends or family. All of the families interviewed discussed the ways in which they were receiving on-going practical, emotional and financial support from extended family members, friends and the community and voluntary sector. Many families were heavily dependent on this form of support.

Family, friends and neighbours provided accommodation, food, clothing – “hand me downs” – childcare, household goods, gifts, regular financial support and much more. Practical support, such as the provision of childcare from grandparents meant a one parent family could gain employment. It was a vital support for families, as employment would have been more difficult to manage and less financially viable if paying formal childcare fees.

Financial support varied from irregular small amounts of money, when families were desperate to make ends meet, to regular small top-ups. It was uncommon that families received a larger sum of money to cover a big expense, but it did occur. Help with lump-sum payments, such as car insurance, meant the difference between a family having a car or being reliant on lifts and taxis, especially in rural areas.

Extended family and friends offered emotional support, and parents discussed the benefits of being able to pick up the phone and talk to someone, visit and talk over a cup of tea, or watching TV together. Parent’s social inclusion activities were visits for “a cup of tea” or “a natter,” and walks with their family and friends.

Having a family that can be drawn on in this way is not a resource that everyone has equal access to, but other forms of supports were available. The support from community and voluntary organisations was especially effective for the households with limited familial support. They provided them with safe accommodation, food, aid in emergencies, financial support, contributions to educational expenses, information, toys and activities, and trips for children.

The majority of families are currently benefitting from the support of one or more community and voluntary sector organisations, such as charities, local family resource centres and women’s support agencies. Families with teenagers discussed the consistent support they were receiving from local youth centres, where their children could partake in a variety of activities and youth programmes. The level of dependency on these organisations decreased as a percentage per category from group one (could not make ends meet) to group three (made ends meet with difficulty).

“My brother helps me in ways, sometimes. I cook large meals and freeze them; I have a meal plan that gives stability but not variety... when my freezer broke down my brother put our food in his freezer.”

“We moved in with my sister... she’s very good to me; all of her children have grown up. I give her a hundred euro a week towards food and accommodation, but she sometimes gives me forty back if I’m short for other things. She’s very good to me... she does the shopping and cooking, the children get healthy food like stew and good meals... then the older ones have education costs, they need money for school trips, my sister sometimes helps with these costs. The kids are very good about not asking for money... without my sister, I don’t know what I would do.”

“The SVP have helped enormously with food and fuel, and gifts for the children at Christmas. The SVP are a wonderful and practical help, they call over for a cup of tea. Often I don’t see an adult from one day to the next, they call in for company.”

The combined effort of support from family and voluntary organisations worked to lift families into a better position. The provision of practical support, financial help and emotional support from family, but also from friends, neighbours and charities can make a considerable difference to how families make ends meet, with an inadequate income.

This form of support can make a difference to how a family is coping by helping to meet needs that may otherwise be neglected, due to affordability or competing budget demands. The provision of goods and services meant that families were closer to meeting their MESL needs. Additionally, families were given things that are included in the MESL budgets but they would otherwise have not been able to afford, such as a computer or a day trip.

This form of support also acted as a “safety net” for families. In times of difficulty, family, friends and charities would step in and provide a dinner or a place to stay. This was especially relevant for those that had become homeless. They moved in with their extended family members temporarily, until they could find a “way out,” or they could leave homeless accommodation to visit family members and use their facilities. This provided a vital support that cushioned them from the full impact of homelessness, and a protracted period of living in homeless accommodation.

“The SVP made it possible for me to do a FETAC level 5, which made me a qualified Carer. I couldn't do the course by day because I had to work so then the SVP gave me €400 towards the €500 course fee for the night course. I did it over two years. I'm grateful for their help, and I no longer need to ask them for help. It wouldn't have been possible without the SVP. They still call over every Christmas to give me vouchers and see how I'm getting on.”

FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SUPPORTS

Families with children in DEIS primary schools discussed the wide variety of supports available to them, such as: home school community liaison services, school meals programme, school books grant scheme and clubs: homework clubs, breakfast clubs etc. Children also benefitted from school sports, school activities, financial aid for school uniforms, books and more. Instalment payment plans were also used to help offset the impact of lump sum payments and lessened the blow of having to pay up front. The Home School Community Liaison Officer is described as “very supportive” and one parent attributes having no education costs to the work of this teacher. One lone parent said: “she understands me and gets me help; she understands my problems and does something about them.” Families praised the effectiveness of these supports.

These primary school supports also helped to meet children’s social inclusion and participation needs (e.g. school sports). Families voiced their appreciation for the birthday parties organised by the school where families could “club together” to reduce the cost. This is a significant support as a number of families could not afford birthday parties for their children.

“Thank God the primary school provides breakfast and lunches, so I only have to worry about dinners... the school is very good when I can’t afford a uniform, they help me out... I didn’t have the fifty euro when it was due for the book rental scheme so I send in five euro a week for books.”

One lone parent with children in both primary and secondary school discussed the inconsistencies in the cost of education. This parent talked about DEIS primary school supports, and how they helped her to cope. Similar to the other families with children in secondary school, she then discussed the extra expenses associated with secondary education.

Secondary school was considered to be more expensive by parents: “it’s unaffordable” and “for rich kids or better off families.”

This parent was considering enrolling her daughter in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme due to issues of affordability, to reduce educational expenditure. The LCA is designed for students who do not wish to advance directly to third level education and whose needs are not adequately catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes.¹⁴ However, her daughter has considerable academic potential having obtained “three honours and four passes in her junior certificate.” This potential will not be developed, in the same way as that of her peers in the general Leaving Cert programme. In short, she will lose out because of the cost of second-level education.

Families articulated that their young children enjoyed attending school and participating in school life, despite the challenge of access and meaningful educational participation.

14. Department of Education and Skills (2018)

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL HOUSEHOLDS

This section outlines the differences for families living in a rural area below an MESL, compared to families living in an urban area below an MESL. Geography, or location, can create additional and different needs.¹⁵

“I’m constantly worrying about the car, and the car is a must because there is only one bus a day.”

“A car is essential where we live because it’s a rural area, a long distance from the town.”

“What if the car breaks down and I can’t get to work?”

Previously, MESL focus groups have identified additional and different costs associated with living in a rural area. The single most significant rural addition to the requirements for an MESL, across household types, is a car. A car was deemed an unavoidable essential, despite the financial burden, due to the lack of sufficient public transport. In addition to this, the rural areas examined were not connected to the natural gas grid, and thus rural home heating costs were higher due to the requirement to predominantly rely on home heating oil.¹⁶ The experience of the rural households interviewed reflected the wider findings in the MESL research.

Rural households required a car because public transport was infrequent, unreliable and expensive. Not having a car in a rural area led to families becoming socially isolated, as well as, being dependent on lifts for access to basic amenities.

“The Fuel Allowance limits the heating [oil] to thirty minutes in the morning and an hour and a half in the evening.”

“I can’t afford to fill the oil tank, I can fill a barrel with kerosene from time to time, or get fifty euro of brickets or coal. It’s a big home but very cold and [my daughter] is asthmatic.”

“I have to cut down on many things, like filling the tank with oil so I buy coal and logs for an open fire.”

Parents, in rural areas also discussed how they struggled to heat their home in winter months. They could not afford to “fill the tank” and subsequently bought 20L barrels of home heating oil to top up the tank. They would periodically buy barrels, when they could afford to, because they did not have the lump sum required to fill the tank. This left them worse off in the long run, paying a poverty premium, because the price per litre is higher for barrels.¹⁷ Additionally, there are safety issues when filling the tank directly themselves. The consensus was that the Fuel Allowance was insufficient. Regular heating costs are less efficient than oil, but more affordable than filling the tank. Similarly, barrels of oil, while less cost effective than filling the tank, were a cost that was manageable on a regular basis.

The parents, living in a rural area, with qualifications, skills for employment and work experience explained that there was a lack of available work in their locality. Some of these families were impacted by the economic downturn, and listed it as the cause of their situation of low income, having lost their job “in the recession.” There were less job opportunities locally than their urban counterparts. Some parents were waiting for new businesses to open in their area, so they could apply for a job there.

15. As reported in “Minimum Essential Budgets for Households in Rural Area” (2010) and updated in (2012).

16. As reported in “Minimum Essential Budgets for Households in Rural Area” (2010) and updated in (2012).

17. In the most recent SEAI Domestic Fuel Cost Comparison (April 2018), the average consumer price for Kerosene (typical discounted price) is €0.69 per litre. The 20 litre barrel at €15 works out at €0.75 per litre

THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL IMPACT OF INCOME INADEQUACY

Families in all three groups are consistently going without. This section discusses the cumulative impact of living below a socially acceptable standard of living, over time.

Going without goods and services that are deemed essential, at a minimum level, has both short and long term repercussions. This is combined with the helplessness of knowing that it does not look likely that their situation will improve in the near future, especially for families in group one (could not make ends meet) and group two (struggled to make ends meet).

The most commonly cited symptoms of income inadequacy were high levels of stress and constant worry. Life on a low income was described as “survival” as “it’s hard having to always struggle.” There were a range of sources of stress and worry that included: the daily pressures of budgeting, housing and childcare difficulties, educational expenses, the added expense of upcoming special occasions and events, general maintenance or repair costs and much more. This stress and worry impacted parents’ ability to eat and sleep. The need for constant vigilance around money can be extremely stressful.

Two thirds of the families interviewed described how their health, mental or physical, had deteriorated as a direct result of living on a low income. Families are putting their long-term health at risk in order to avoid medical costs and remain employed: “I’m afraid he won’t get a better job because he’s fifty-seven years old. He works with ice all day, now he has a problem with his bones and can’t sleep at night with it.”

In terms of mental health, one parent described the cycle for low income families: “worry brings stress and stress brings health problems.” Another parent, on anti-depressant medication after suffering from post-natal depression, attributes the severity of her condition to the stress of coping on a low income:

Having limited resources and a strict household budget meant that parents were faced with disappointing their children. This had an impact on almost all of the parents interviewed; it was a difficult experience for parents.

They talked about the emotional distress of not being able to provide for their children and explained that they would say “not right now” rather than an outright refusal because it was emotional and “heartbreaking.” Moreover, families were concerned about their children “not fitting in,” in terms of clothing or technology items.

“It’s a constant struggle and a lot of suffering; I keep going by focusing on the children. It’s a great stress when the unexpected happens, my house flooded in 2010 and the insurance covered the costs but now I don’t have any insurance... stress, anxiety and I can’t sleep. My daughter can sense that I’m worrying - I try to cover it up all the time, which adds to the stress.”

“I suffer from a lot of stomach problems from stress, I’m permanently stressed ... I’m either feeling stressed, guilty or getting worked up.”

“I find life very hard, not being able to pay all my bills, always putting some on the long finger. The stress makes me sick. I’m always worrying knowing that my kids have to go without ... I’m under horrible stress ... I don’t want to get out of bed most mornings... I’m worried sick about Christmas and I don’t want the children to know. I can’t take the younger one to see Santa. Christmas is way too stressful, between finding money for food and presents. The kid’s father helps with presents, I’m grateful for that, otherwise I would go mad.”

“I suffered from post-natal depression. I was lying awake at night thinking, how am I going to pay for this and that? It was hard to cope with such a shock. I work shifts, so I didn’t know how I would manage. Then one day I knew, I just have to get on with it.”

“My eight-year old daughter said “mummy I want a birthday party” and I had to say “you’re a big girl now; you don’t need a birthday party.” It was very difficult to see the disappointment on her face. I had to explain that we don’t have the money.”

“My kids ask me “mom can I have this” and I have to say “no sorry” if the thing isn’t an essential. I’ve no money left for treats like sweets or little things to make the kids happy. It’s hard when I’m always saying “sorry but no.”

“It’s very frustrating, I feel guilty about letting the kids down. My oldest son wouldn’t go to school before Christmas because he felt different, even though he’s doing well and his teachers speak highly of him. He has been offered a soccer scholarship but he has to pass the Leaving Cert. so this is a big worry. His future is at risk.”

Families were living on a day-to-day basis, and were confronted with difficulty when planning. They were vulnerable when confronted with the unexpected. There was great uncertainty surrounding their future, and they voiced their frustration at this matter. In most cases, they did not have the resources to plan their way out of their situation of low income, or to ensure they did not fall into deeper income inadequacy.

Families often felt lonely, sad, ashamed and embarrassed because of their low income. They isolated themselves on occasion because of this embarrassment; some parents could not attend events because they lacked appropriate clothing or did not “feel good”. One parent gives an example of his wife becoming isolated from her friends: “my wife wants to keep the house nice; she can’t invite her friends over because she’s ashamed of our home. It needs decorating and painting but we don’t have the money for it.” In rural areas, families without a car are physically and socially isolated. Families were focused on surviving rather than partaking in life. For the most part, as well as the feelings of being different, parents could not afford to go anywhere as they did not have the time or money after accounting for their children’s needs.

“It’s very stressful - without money I can’t do anything. I’m cut off from my friends; I’ve no connection with people.”

“I go with the kids to art therapy, speech therapy and counselling. There is one on three days of the week. That’s my social life, going with the children.”

Homeless families discussed the impact of losing their home, how their lives changed. It was impossible for parents in homeless accommodation to establish a routine for their children. The lack of facilities available to them meant they were highly dependent on their extended family.

The overwhelming impact of continued income inadequacy led to some parents having a “breakdown.” One lone parent is a recovering drug addict getting help for her heroin addiction; she discussed the events that lead to her relapse:

For another parent, her partner abruptly left her “after eighteen years and seven children together,” shortly afterwards they became homeless. She was diagnosed with depression and put on medication, she adds: “I am on anti-depressants and the amount has been increased.”

Families in group two (struggled to make ends meet) and group three (made ends meet with difficulty), shared how they felt about the wider context of their situation of income inadequacy. They were disheartened and “losing faith in the system,” one parent stated: “larger society have no idea, and don’t care, about how hard it is for people on a low income, rich people don’t have a clue what it costs to live, will it ever change?”

“I’m homeless; I’m staying in a hotel. I was in a rented apartment and the rent was €750 per month, but it was increased by €200 to €950 ... Rent Allowance was increased from €550 to €650 but I couldn’t afford the extra €100 rent ... My son died in homeless accommodation from cot death syndrome ... this had a big impact on me and my daughter personally. When my baby died I relapsed for a short period of time. I lost my self-confidence, I’m embarrassed about being homeless and it’s stressful.”

FINDING A WAY OUT OF INCOME INADEQUACY

Households held specific views regarding their way out of their distinctive situation of inadequate income. This section looks at some of the commonly sought methods of improving their quality of life and increasing household income.

HOUSING

All of the families currently in the private rented sector had a long-term housing need and discussed how obtaining social housing would better their situation. It was also a top priority for those who were homeless.

Families who were re-paying their mortgage also had issues with housing. They were struggling with repayments, and this would be an ongoing problem because they would have their mortgage for many years to come. This was heightened in scenarios where a two parent family had purchased a house together and had since separated. These families were faced with struggling to make the same repayments on a single income, and other issues. Some of these families wanted to get rid of their mortgage and pay a reduced rent for this reason. Their mortgages were part of the reason their incomes were limited, and to be free of it completely would be a relief for parents. They were not aware that this option was available to them through the national mortgage-to-rent scheme.¹⁸

“I have to get a house for my family; nothing can be done until we have our home. Then I will get a job and begin to save and plan. It’s impossible to plan in homeless accommodation. I want my daughter to have a routine and stability.”

“My husband let the mortgage go into arrears before he cleared off to the UK... I hope the court won’t go against us in spite of our arrangement, it’s a constant worry.”

“When my mother died, nineteen years ago, I bought my father’s share of the house. I’ve been in court because of arrears but I believe I have secured the house. The bank’s court expenses have been added to the arrears ... I can begin to plan when I’m fifty nine and the mortgage is paid ... banks need to understand the human impact of a mortgage, and become more flexible with repayments.”

“[My two children and I] left our family home but my ex-husband still lives there. My name is still on their mortgage and I’ve been informed this means we will be taken off the housing list. The Community Welfare Officer has promised to do his best but our future is uncertain. I would like to go on HAP but I’m not sure if I will be eligible. We’re renting now.”

18. Under the national mortgage-to-rent scheme, people who are having trouble paying their mortgage to a private lender can switch from owning their home to renting their home as social tenants of a housing association, which buys the home from the lender (further information available at: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/housing/owning_a_home/mortgage_arrears/mortgage_to_rent_scheme.html)

EMPLOYMENT

The way in which employment could improve families' circumstances differed. Some simply wanted, to "get a job," part-time or full-time employment. Other families required employment specifically for the hours that their children were at school. Other households deemed better-paid employment, an increase in hours and more stable employment as a way of improving their situation.

"I would love to be able to go back to work full-time but if I did the family would lose entitlements, and they're more valuable than extra money."

Some families already in part-time employment wished to move to full-time employment. The reasons they could not make this move were threefold: the possibility of losing/reducing entitlements acted as a disincentive, the extra hours were not available and the added expense of childcare (the majority of these cases were in group two – struggled to make ends meet).

Families in employment discussed the benefits of working, other than financial gain. It helps them to cope with their situation of low income in other ways. The benefits of working were plentiful; work was described as an "outlet" and a "distraction." It was also viewed as a place to make friends and get emotional support. Families expressed that working made them "happy," gave them a sense of purpose and had a positive influence on their children. One lone parent with two children discusses the non-monetary benefits of working:

"Work is a great place to meet people and it can help with forgetting your own and your children's problems. I feel good about work. At dinner time, the kids talk about school and I talk about work. I want them to think in terms of work. A good idea is to have a back to work scheme for parents when their youngest child turns seven and a proper childcare scheme for low income parents."

CHILDCARE

Families avoided high cost formal childcare fees by one parent becoming a stay-at-home parent, one or both parent/s working for the hours their children were at school or by making informal childcare arrangements, such as grandparents minding their children.

Families with young children emphasized their need for affordable and good quality childcare, as a "way out." They prioritised childcare because they needed it to gain employment. Affordable childcare would have enabled unemployed one parent families to gain employment or increase their hours, and make both parents (from a two parent family) being employed financially viable. Parents also requested childcare so that they could continue their education, and then gain employment. Families that could not afford childcare were restricted in their opportunities to earn and to further their education.

"Free childcare."

"Childcare, so I could get a job or an education, which would give me a qualification."

"I need help with childcare so I can work."

EDUCATION

One third of the families interviewed voiced that furthering their education would act as their “way out.” They added that the cost of going back to education themselves was too high, and there could be more supports in this area, especially for low income one parent families. It was also important that the training they received matched the current skills required by employers, and would help them to find high quality employment.

While a small number of parents prioritised their own education as a way of transcending their circumstance, the majority of families emphasised the importance of their children’s education and how it would be their “way out,” in the long-term. Families carried this hope for their children and actively promoted their children’s interest in education by prioritising educational costs, and celebrating educational achievements. In some cases, extended family members helped with the cost of educational trips and recreational activities for children in school, a combined effort to make the school experience a pleasant and lasting one. However, a weekly shortfall meant that families could not always afford to do this.

INTERIM SUPPORTS

In the interviews, families were asked: “what sort of supports or resources would be most beneficial to you at this point in time?” The focus of this question is supports that will help alleviate their current struggle, and immediately and effectively help them to cope, as oppose to longer term measures that will eventually support them in finding a “way out” of their circumstance.

The most common response from families was to reiterate their need for employment, social housing and affordable, accessible and good quality childcare. In this way, many of the interim supports requested overlapped with the longer term supports required by families to find their “way out.” They discussed the urgency of their need for these supports.

The interim supports emphasized by families slightly varied by group. Families in group one (could not make ends meet), emphasized their need for “help with the basics.” Families in group two (struggled to make ends meet), requested greater supports for children and “someone to talk to.” Lastly, families in group three (made ends meet with difficulty), highlighted the need for assistance in meeting children’s educational costs, and had more specific requests such as, local libraries with computers and parenting courses.

Interviews with families with children in education highlighted the extra expenses attached to education. Families required immediate assistance with educational costs, because their children were currently excluded from school projects and activities that they could not afford. Families also specifically requested: a higher rate of Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA) and more in-school supports: “free lunches, free school trips.” Families with children in third-level education highlighted the inadequacy of the SUSI grant. This study found that families prioritise educational spending, therefore better interim supports in this areas would free up money to meet other MESL needs.

Across all three groups, families wanted support that would help better meet their children’s needs. In the past, most families had received vouchers for clothing, toys from charities, as well as access to affordable children’s activities, and these were the most frequently cited request for children (outside of childcare). Almost two-thirds of families were already benefitting from affordable local children’s activities. One parent added: “breakfast clubs, homework clubs and generally more clubs for kids and teenagers to keep them occupied and away from trouble.” A more specific request was support for children who are victims of abuse.

Families who were living in a rural area specifically requested improved public transport, in the form of more frequent and affordable buses. Alternatively, if the lack of public transport cannot be addressed, they requested a method of helping people to purchase their own car and pay car insurance, tax and maintenance costs at an affordable rate, paying off these costs over time. For those who already had a car, they requested an “affordable mechanic,” as the cars they can afford are older and need regular maintenance.

“I need someone to talk to, I can’t afford counselling.”

“It’s difficult raising older children, they need someone to listen to them.”

“It’s difficult to talk to [my family], I’m the only one not to have done well, not to have a house, they don’t really understand how I feel or my situation, I need someone independent.”

One third of families had at least one family member who voiced a desire for affordable professional counselling services or “someone to talk to.” Those that were already receiving counselling discussed the positive impact it had for their family. One parent explained how “it is a terrible weight, not being able to talk about worrying.” It became evident throughout the interviews that families were grateful to have “a listening ear.” At the end of one interview, a parent disclosed: “this is the first time someone really listened and wanted to understand me and this was good for me. It’s the only time I’ve told my story.”

The supports¹⁹ administered by the DEASP representative (formerly known as the Community Welfare Officer) were availed of by only two families in this study (both families are living in a rural area). In total three families living in a rural area mentioned their local “Community Welfare Officer” and only one family living in an urban area. Half of the four families that mention the “Community Welfare Officer” are only planning to contact him/her:

“The SVP introduced me to the Community Welfare Officer; I hope to go with my SVP friend to see if I can get help with First Holy Communion costs.”

“I’m planning our move into social housing. I’ll go to the Community Welfare Officer and the SVP for help. I’m also going to contact Oxfam for furniture when a house becomes available.”

19. The majority of the work carried out by Department of Social Protection’s representative, (formerly known as the Community Welfare Officer), involves the administration of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme. The types of payments made under this scheme include: weekly Supplementary Welfare Allowance, Rent Supplement, Mortgage Interest Supplement, Diet and Heating Supplements, Back to School Clothing and Footwear Scheme and exceptional needs payments for items such as buggies, clothing, funeral costs and so on. In addition to administering community welfare services, CWO’s will actively refer individuals to other state agencies and/or voluntary organisations if it is appropriate to their client’s needs. For example, the CWO’s may refer clients to the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) or the Department of Social and Family Affairs (this information is from hse.ie and welfare.ie).

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that living on an income below that required for an MESL creates pressure and strains in all the areas of family life and takes a particular toll on parents who give priority to meeting the needs of their children.

In the course of the interviews it was clear that households are dealing with several concurrent challenges. Among these are the efforts of parents to provide a home, nutritious food, seasonal clothing, and adequate household heating as well as meet the cost of education, health care transport and social activities – all in the context of an inadequate income.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The interviewees gave insight into the totality of the experience of living with an inadequate income and the cumulative impact of never having enough to make ends meet. The resilience and discipline of parents in responding to very difficult situations is evident in the interviews. Parents use every means in their power to meet their children's needs.

However, the prolonged experience of not being able to make ends meet in spite of their constant endeavours can erode their personal capacity to constantly exercise restraint and discipline. As a result, some parents are overwhelmed by the experience of constant struggle and their awareness of the consequences for their children.

Many of the themes which emerged from the interviews reflect the social and economic changes in Ireland today which impact more negatively on the lives of people who struggle to make ends meet. Among these changes are drivers of inadequacy – family break-up, lack of affordable childcare, the housing crisis and precarious employment. Family separation often leads to a significantly reduced income. The lack of affordable childcare makes it difficult for parents to seek employment and to avail of educational opportunities. The lack of social housing, and in particular local authority housing, as well as increases in private rental costs meant that some households become homeless. The uncertainty about hours meant that some parents could not continue in a precarious work situation. The majority of the unemployed parents were anxious to obtain work but the uncertainty about hours and conditions was an obstacle in particular for one parent households. The unintended interactions between social welfare entitlement and income from employment meant that for some households the loss of an entitlement outweighs the financial value of being employed. The decision not to seek employment was usually made reluctantly and only with the well being of children in mind. An income derived purely from social welfare did not meet the cost of an MESL for households with children.

Households which had informal or formal supports found it a little less difficult to face the reality of living with a low income. The informal supports came from family and friends. The former, in many cases, provide assistance with accommodation, childcare, food, clothing and with some more expensive household items. Some parents, with child care provided by family members, could look for and remain in employment. Friends, on the whole, extended a different level of support. Going for a walk, having a chat over a cup of tea or watching TV together often gave parents the encouragement and motivation 'to keep going.' The opportunity to share and talk through problems was recognised to be particularly valuable and a number of parents said they did not have this opportunity. Parents with children at DEIS schools spoke with great warmth of the understanding and support extended to them by the staff and in particular by the Home School Liaison Teachers. While Secondary Education was described as very expensive, demands for money were minimum in DEIS schools and payments by instalments were arranged.

Employment was also appreciated as a way of coping with inadequacy because of the outlet, companionship and sense of purpose it offered in addition to the financial gain. Support, both financial and emotional, from charities were in some cases the only support received by a small number of families. Others also availed of the assistance provided by charities and spoke highly of the volunteers who responded with understanding and generosity.

In order to manage the cost of living when the income was inadequate to meet the cost of an MESL it was necessary to make decisions about priorities when buying goods and services, recognise what can be done without and identifying possible alternatives. The households made choices in favour of basic items such as food, accommodation, household energy, education, health care of children and children's social activities. Some of their other choices involved cheaper brands and reduced quantities. In all decision making, priority was given to the needs of children. Going without was a feature of everyday life.

This included going without variety in meals, items of new clothing, personal care for adults (e.g. visit to the hairdressers), replacement of old or damaged furniture, insurance payments apart from car and life assurance for mortgage holders. Parents also had no choice but to find the cheapest alternatives for basic items e.g. processed food, second-hand clothing. A large TV compensated for the lack of access to leisure activities. For some households doing without meant not having a healthy meal for every weekday, not having adequate heating and not paying for health care for adults.

Shortfalls in income was dealt with by “going without,” – juggling bills and borrowing. Parents tended to borrow from family and friends and for the most part were adamant about repayments. A small number made occasional efforts to save but borrowing from institutions was not common.

The impact of living with an inadequate income was for parents a constant experience of guilt and anxiety about letting their children down with both immediate and long-term consequences. Many parents referred to deterioration in their mental and or physical health. Constantly having to say “no” to their children, or “not now” and “not this week”, not being able to plan for the future made parents feel sad, inadequate, and embarrassed. Some felt very isolated. They could not afford to go out, others referred to relationship difficulties in their marriage because of always having to watch the money.

When asked about the future and possible means to achieve a better quality of life parents stressed opportunities for employment, access to affordable childcare, back to education programmes which would help towards up skilling and affordable housing. They gave similar answers when requested to identify interim supports.

Differences between urban and rural living were seen in terms of public transport, household energy and opportunities for employment. Because of the lack of public transport a car was an essential for rural households in order to prevent isolation and to ensure access to schools, shops and employment. Parents in rural areas found it a struggle to heat their homes in winter. They did not have access to gas heating and could not afford to fill the oil tank. As a result they bought 20 litre barrels of home heating oil which meant paying a poverty premium. (The price per litre was higher for a barrel of oil.) The fuel allowance was insufficient to meet a substantial amount of the cost. Some parents commented on the employment situation. In a number of rural areas there is an increase in the availability of low skilled and high skilled jobs but a dearth in employment which requires skills at an intermediate level.

The following are among the consequences for households, with children, living with an income which does not allow for the weekly expenditure on the goods and services required for an MESL.

- › The decisions of parents to ‘do without’ in order to give priority to the needs of their children and the possible long terms impact on their physical, social and psychological needs (health, social participation and personal appearance).
- › The pressure to meet immediate expenses to the detriment of longer term and significant expenditure (insurance, household maintenance, rent payments).
- › The guilt of letting children down (peer group pressure, education potential).
- › The strain of seldom or ever having a break (evening or day out, holiday).
- › The constant, stress and strain of always struggling to make ends meet and knowing that there was little prospect of being able to do so in the current situation.
- › The cumulative impact of that quality of life in which there is ongoing shortfall in all areas of household expenditure.

CONCLUSIONS – KEY MESSAGES

- › Families living with an inadequate income work very hard to make ends meet by adopting a myriad of coping strategies to help deal with the shortfall. Dealing with income inadequacy requires discipline, resilience and sacrifice. The prolonged experience of not being able to make ends meet, in spite of their best efforts, can erode these personal qualities over-time as living with an inadequate income is very stressful and emotionally draining. For some households this can be an overwhelming experience.
- › Parents were aware of the importance of healthy eating, budgeting and the high cost of borrowing from sources such as moneylenders. However, having an inadequate income meant that, in spite of their best efforts, families simply could not always eat healthily, were sometimes unable to avoid high cost debt and often could not stretch their income to meet all of their needs.
- › The level of income in a household is only one of the factors explaining the extent to which a family is struggling to make ends meet. Having rent/mortgage arrears, debt, lack of savings, extra costs associated with illness and living on a low income for a long time contributed to the difficulties facing a family. On the other hand, having savings, redundancy payments, access to effective public transport, selling or inheriting something useful and strong supports from family, friends and schools helped families with low incomes to make ends meet, albeit with difficulty.
- › Families without a network of support whether that be from families, friends, charities or schools particularly struggle to make ends meet.
- › Living below an MESL has an impact on the well-being of parents and children, with implications for mental and physical health, educational attainment, loss of confidence and erosion of resources such as savings. Feeling of guilt, shame and embarrassment are all too common for parents who continually prioritise the needs of their children over their own and try to make sure they aren't missing out on experiences which others take for granted.
- › Parents were able to identify the supports and opportunities which they needed to achieve a better quality of life. However, the longer families have been living with income inadequacy, the harder it is for them to see or realise a way out.
- › The current rates of social welfare payments and the National Minimum Wage are inadequate, particularly for families with older children. While families experienced many non-financial benefits from employment, a job was not necessarily enough to ensure that a family could afford an MESL and would avoid struggling to make ends meet.

Government of Ireland²⁰ definition of poverty and social exclusion:

People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.

The expenditure patterns of the households in this study indicate clearly that they are living in poverty because they do not have an income which allows them to have an MESL – a standard of living generally regarded as one below which nobody should be expected to live.

20. Government of Ireland (2007), National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 www.socialinclusion.ie/documents/NAPinclusionReport.pdf

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- › Social welfare payments and the National Minimum Wage should be benchmarked against the cost of a socially acceptable Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). This is a standard which meets physical, psychological and social needs at a minimum but socially acceptable level.
- › Recognise the higher costs faced by families with older children by introducing a higher rate of Qualified Child Increase for children aged over 12.
- › Progress made in recent national budgets to improve the rates of social welfare payments and the National Minimum Wage need to continue, and accelerate.
- › The Minimum Income Standard and the MESL data complement other poverty measures and should be considered in addition to the “at risk of poverty” and “consistent poverty” measures.
- › Families should be prevented from enduring prolonged periods of income inadequacy through the timely provision of information and supports such as education, training and affordable childcare.
- › There is a need to invest in high quality, affordable and accessible services, including housing, education, childcare, healthcare and transport in order to mitigate the impact of income inadequacy and to help families to find a way out of income inadequacy.
- › Both DEIS and non-DEIS schools at primary and second level should adopt cost effective practices which reduce the costs associated with education for parents, as outlined in Circular 0032/2017.
- › End the voluntary contribution system in non-fee paying primary and secondary schools, beginning with the restoration of the capitation rates to 2010 levels.
- › Additional financial supports and reforms to the SUSI grant criteria are needed so that mature, part-time and non-traditional learners can take up educational opportunities.
- › Continued work is needed so that families on low income can access affordable, low cost credit such as the “It Makes Sense” loan being provided by some Credit Unions
- › Families must be supported to balance paid employment with family life, recognising the challenges faced by lone parents and the need for family-friendly employment practices as well as affordable, good quality childcare and afterschool care.
- › The challenges faced by families in rural areas, including lack of employment opportunities and high transport and fuel costs, must be addressed.

APPENDIX

STORIES OF STRUGGLE

The following are three of the 30 stories from parents, detailing their personal experience of living with an income below that required for an MESL.

MICHELLE, ONE PARENT FAMILY, TWO CHILDREN (PRIMARY SCHOOL AND SECOND LEVEL SCHOOL AGE), UNEMPLOYED

Michelle did a CE scheme work placement and found that there was “very little support to get a job afterwards” but “eventually found a job as a Carer.” She could not continue working due to the varied hours, combining days and nights. She said that “a combination of childcare and travel is a big expense when you’re only working odd hours.” Michelle then “got small jobs” and she would take “anything” she could get locally. In one case, she attracted local customers but when the business was established the owner took on his wife as an employee and let Michelle go. Another shop that she worked in had to close down.

Following this, her second child arrived and now affordable childcare is a “big problem.” She is waiting until her youngest child is older and then her eldest child will take care of her after-school. Michelle also fears that if she gains employment she will lose her entitlements.

Michelle has “no family support.” She receives on-going support from SVP and she “can rely on them to help out.” She adds: “they have been very good but I can’t push my luck.” Michelle’s neighbour also helps her by taking care of children on occasion. Michelle also regularly borrows from her, and pays her back every Thursday when she gets her social welfare payments.

Michelle is surviving with “no or little food on some days.” She tries to get “good food” for her children and cooks casseroles, pasta dishes and shepherd’s pie. Sometimes Michelle’s money “runs out” and there is “only bread left in the house.” Michelle’s children will ask her for a meal, crisps, a banana or an apple, and she says “sorry we have no money just now.” Michelle is grateful that her daughter was able to avail of school meals whilst in primary school. Michelle’s gas will be turned off soon because she has “no money” to cover the bill. Michelle’s rent is in arrears, and the monthly payment has increased for this reason.

The primary school that her youngest child is attending help Michelle with school books and uniforms, by using instalment plans. She adds: “the school is very good when I cannot afford a uniform, they help me out.” Her eldest daughter is in secondary school and her uniform is expensive. Michelle tries to pay towards both uniforms on a weekly basis but she had to borrow money for her older child’s “school clothes.” Michelle prioritises educational costs: “I want my kids to have a good education; I don’t want them to be dependent like me.” Michelle would like her daughter to stay in school but she “may have to get her into a FÁS programme where she can do the leaving cert and there is less money to shell out.”

Michelle doesn’t go to a hairdresser and doesn’t have any make-up. She would like to buy her older daughter a make-up kit. She also has no insurance. Her children have “very little activities” but her eldest daughter attends a youth centre where they offer a variety of activities one evening a week. Michelle has no social inclusion or participation activities; she sits quietly with no T.V. Michelle recalls one occasion where her family won a pass to a theme park, she says: “we had the time of our lives; I said it was her birthday present.”

At Christmas, her family gets help from SVP: “they are very good with vouchers for Christmas dinner” and she has “managed to buy some toys from” that her younger daughter wanted. Michelle will borrow for her older daughter’s gifts. Her daughter tells Michelle that she is to blame for them not having enough money - “teenagers can be difficult.”

Michelle borrowed in the past, and is still in debt: “when I was young and stupid and the banks were throwing money at ya, I borrowed €30,000 from the banks, that’s now down to €1,900. I only wish I had not been so stupid. Every day the debt hangs around my neck.” Michelle says she is “always worrying” and wondering “when will I be free” – “how am I going to get money” and “how can I pay back the loans and look after the girls?”

She is under “terrible stress”, she “can’t sleep” because her “mind is racing.” She feels as though the “walls are closing in on [her].” Michelle says: “I live day-by-day and try to take things as they come.

RUTH, TWO PARENT FAMILY, TWO CHILDREN (PRIMARY SCHOOL AND SECONDARY SCHOOL AGE), 1X DISABILITY ALLOWANCE AND 1X EMPLOYED

Ruth's husband suffers with his mental health and receives Disability Allowance. Ruth is employed part-time, at twenty-five hours per week. She describes her children as "good kids, no real trouble with them." She says that at times it can be hard raising children when their father cannot help. Ruth's son attends a psychologist because, he has a behavioural disorder. The psychologist is "a very good listener" and Ruth talks to him when she feels "desperate."

When Ruth's mother died, nineteen years ago, Ruth bought her father's share of the family home. Ruth is struggling with mortgage repayments and has been in court because of arrears, but believes she has secured her home. The bank's court expenses and her arrears have been added to her mortgage.

Ruth's family are supportive despite the fact that "they are all just getting by themselves but they do their best." Ruth often has to borrow from her extended family, she borrows almost every week and pays back the following week – "one week borrow, the next week pay back."

Her sister-in-law gives her children's clothing to Ruth. On Sundays, Ruth's family visit her for a "proper Sunday lunch." Ruth wishes she could afford to have a Sunday lunch for her family. Her sister-in-law will also look after Ruth's seven year old, on the rare occasion that it is necessary. She also has some very good friends. Work is a great "outlet and support" for Ruth, and she "would go crazy without work and the people [she] knows there." Ruth doesn't like "always needing to get help."

Ruth says: "I am very glad to be able to put food on the table and have a roof over our heads." She wishes she could buy meat other than mince and chicken, her weekly dinner menu is limited to three possibilities. Ruth buys very little clothing for herself and only from "SVP shops." She adds: "only for these shops my family would not have two pairs of shoes each." She buys one pair of good shoes for her children. Her eldest son would like to leave school and "work so he can have name brand runners." They cannot do house repairs, and they don't go on holidays. In terms of savings Ruth has "none – no money."

The school that her youngest child attends is "great" and "there are no demands for money." On the other hand, her eldest child's secondary school is "always asking for money." She prioritises educational spending and she has aspirations for her children, she wants them to enjoy a better quality of life than they currently have.

It costs ten euro per month for Ruth's husband's medication (prescription charges). Their children are healthy. Ruth has a pain in her shoulder from lifting in the warehouse where she works, however she is afraid to go to the doctor in case there is "more money involved."

Ruth's older son has a gym membership. Her younger child has no children activities at present. She hopes to get money to send him to the "taekwondo club." This is important to Ruth because her son usually "just wants to stay at home but he wants to go to this club." She adds: "he's sick of going to the park." Ruth can "just afford to go for a walk or visit a friend for a cup of tea or visit her mother-in-law for a natter."

For her children's birthdays, she is saving to give her eldest son money to go to the cinema with a friend. For her youngest child, the school organise a birthday party and Ruth sends some things for the party. She will also buy a small cake from Aldi for the home celebration. At Christmas, Ruth gets money from her family and friends to get gifts for her children.

Ruth gets "very depressed at times" and feels there is a "dark cloud" overhead. She says she "has to stop being depressed" and finds walking helpful. She can never pay for a treat or nice clothes for her children and she feels "guilty." She would like for them all to be able to go out together, as a family. She adds: "I can begin to plan when I'm fifty-nine and the mortgage is paid."

STEPHEN, TWO PARENT FAMILY, FOUR CHILDREN (1X PRE-SCHOOL AGE, 2X PRIMARY SCHOOL, 1X SECONDARY SCHOOL), 1X EMPLOYED

Stephen is a qualified cabinet maker but he was made redundant in the recession. Where he lives "was badly hit, there are no carpenter jobs available." He adds: "I keep trying, I could get work in Dublin but my wife and four children are [here] and I would lose money on travel and accommodation in Dublin, if I went to work there." Stephen is now working in an administrative role "thirty-nine hours a week" and is paid the National Minimum Wage. His wife stays at home and takes care of their children.

Stephen is "always juggling this and that, the mortgage is a weight around our necks." They "do without; struggle until next week's wages arrive" and "ensure the basics are available, food and heat." Stephen says "you're very lucky if you have fifty euro left over at the end of the week." "There's tension at home knowing the kids can't have what other kids have" and Stephen's wife "wants to keep the house nice." He says: "she can't invite friends in because she's ashamed of our home, it needs decorating and painting but we don't have the money for it."

Stephen's family are not in a position to help financially. He says: "we rely on ourselves, I do without myself, I don't want to be under obligation, I want the children to learn not to expect others to rescue them." Stephen's wife's family "sometimes" give them food and clothes.

In terms of food Stephen says he will "buy cheaper" and shops in Aldi. His children "like chicken, spaghetti bolognese, shepherd's pie, pasta, rice and boxty sausages." Stephen did not have problems with clothing "when the kids were small but older kids want brands and they are under peer pressure." He adds: "my fourteen year old son is a man's size and clothes for him are expensive." Stephen and his wife will only buy clothes for themselves when they have nothing left to wear.

Stephen says there is not enough money for "personal care" for his wife: "my wife goes to the hairdresser once a year, she spends very little on make-up, we put the kids first." They have a "back boiler" to heat their home, it takes coal and "it's very good heating and hot water." Stephen struggles to afford heating, he says: "I get pieces of wood from around the place; I go looking for wood around." They don't buy oil or gas. Stephen's family have Medical Cards, one child has asthma and another has a skin condition so prescription charges can be high. Stephen has life-insurance as a stipulation of his mortgage and it costs "seventeen euro per month." Stephen can do many of his household repairs using the skills he developed as a professional carpenter.

They cannot afford to have birthday parties for their children or “day-trips for the children.” Stephen says: “they like to go to the cinema, dancing, parties, we try to make this possible in a fair way; it’s not easy.” Stephen and his wife “never go out together, it never lets up.” They don’t drink and if there is a family wedding, only one of them attends. He adds: “we have no holidays but we go to Bundoran every year for the day with the whole family. This is the highlight of the summer.”

Stephen says that education costs “can be high” especially “secondary school uniforms,” he adds: “my son’s uniform with the crest cost €250 and shoes are the biggest expense, we get them in Pennys or Dunnes.” “There’s a book lending scheme in the primary school but not in secondary school” and they face problems with “changes in text books because they changed a few pages.” Their children will “look for money for school trips, and [they] often have to say no to even five euro.” Stephen says: “we just don’t have it even though we budget carefully; we have to say “sorry we can’t” so often. They are very good kids and we hate that they feel different.” Stephen’s family are “always struggling with registration school expenses, and the children do swimming and its eighty euro for each child up front, so far two of them have had to learn.”

Stephen has never been behind in mortgage re-payments and although he is “always in credit with the bank” they would not give him a loan “for a newish car.” Fortunately, a local mechanic let me have a car for weekly payments.” He needs a car to get to his job, and spends €30 per week on diesel.

Stephen and his wife start saving for Christmas in September; they have “none” at present “but have some of the redundancy money in the bank.” Stephen believes that their “life is under control but we are always under pressure, in case costs get out of hand.” Stephen adds: “what if the car breaks down and I can’t get to work? We have to keep some money for a rainy day.”



MINIMUM ESSENTIAL STANDARD OF LIVING

The VPSJ's Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) budget standards research is derived from working with members of the public to reach agreement on the minimum needed to live and partake in the social and economic norms of life in contemporary Ireland.

Through working with multiple focus groups, deliberative in-depth discussions with members of the public produce a negotiated consensus on what people regard as essential for a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. The research places an emphasis on “needs not wants,” and produces comprehensive, transparent and itemised lists (over 2,000 goods and services) detailing what is required to meet minimum needs, and enable an acceptable minimum standard of living. An MESL is a tight standard.

These items are categorized into fifteen budget areas: food, clothing, personal care, health related costs, household goods, household services, communications, social inclusion & participation, educational costs, transport, household heating costs, personal costs, childcare costs, insurance costs and savings & contingencies.

This understanding of an acceptable minimum standard of living embodies the concepts which underpin the human right to an adequate standard of living, and reflect the Irish Government's definition of poverty, which emphasises the ability to have a “standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally” and to participate in normal activities. The MESL translates these concepts and ideals into a practical and tangible measure and provides an evidence based benchmark, grounded in lived experience, against which to measure the adequacy of social welfare supports and minimum rates of pay.

In essence the MESL provides an alternative, and complimentary, measure for assessing relative poverty – as understood in terms of ability to participate in normal activities and have a dignified minimum standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by society generally. The MESL uniquely shines a light on the extent to which individuals and households can afford a standard of living which enables participation in the social and economic norms of Irish society. An income below the MESL threshold means individuals and households must choose which essentials to go without, in order to make ends meet.

The VPSJ's MESL research has been ongoing since 2004, establishing the budget standards data for a broad range of household types and compositions in urban and rural areas, over the course of multiple research projects. The data is updated annually, to reflect current prices, and the contents of the expenditure budgets are periodically reviewed. The MESL dataset now covers 90% of households across urban and rural Ireland, providing a unique, current and up to date resource that demonstrates the expenditure and income required for a socially acceptable minimum standard of living in Ireland.

HOUSEHOLD TYPES

The MESL dataset covers six broad household types

- > Two parent household types, with 1 to 4 children
- > One parent household types, with 1 to 4 children
- > Single Adults, of working age
- > Cohabiting Couple, of working age
- > Pensioner, living alone
- > Pensioner Couple

COST OF A CHILD

The data establishes the MESL needs at four distinct stages of childhood

- > Infant
- > Pre-School
- > Primary School
- > Second Level

Further information on the household budgets, including the core MESL expenditure need for the full range of urban and rural household compositions is available on the VPSJ's Minimum Essential Budget Standards Research Centre website, www.budgeting.ie. The Minimum Income Standard calculator, www.MISc.ie, can be used to examine the minimum expenditure and income needs of the full range of household compositions in urban or rural areas, with a specific housing cost and employment scenario.

EXPENDITURE PATTERNS WHEN LIVING BELOW AN MESL – PRIORITIES AND CHOICES

This section of the report looks briefly at the priorities and expenditure needs of households in the context of the MESL Budgets. These budgets were developed by a series of focus group sessions in the course of the main studies (2006, 2010, and 2012).

Through the process of a socially negotiated consensus, members of the public established what constituted a minimum essential standard for each of the following areas – food, clothing, personal care, health related costs, household goods, household services, communications, social inclusion and participation, education, transport, household energy, personal costs, childcare costs, insurance and savings and contingencies. In the course of the interviews it became obvious that the majority of the households had no choice but to severely reduce the quantity and quality of the goods and services.

FOOD

The MESL food budgets, which were developed by focus groups and reviewed by nutritionists, emphasise the importance of a balanced nutritious diet and variety in menus. They also take into consideration the social element of food and allow for a meal out three times a year.

The ambition of the majority of parents in this study is to ensure their children have good food in order to be healthy. Many of the parents said: “once I have paid the rent, the heating, and food I can relax. What’s left over has to go on other things.” However, many also find that the “weekly shop” does not last the week and healthy eating becomes more difficult: “I always try to have some eggs, bread, and milk in the house and that has to last from Wednesday to Saturday.” One mother explained that occasionally she has only toast to offer the children when they are hungry, another said: “of course I want a healthy diet for my kids but I have to be happy that they are not going hungry.” One mother stated that good food is expensive: “my kids love a stew. I make one which lasts two days but that is all I can afford – two days of healthy eating.”

Parents buy fruit and vegetables when they can and meat is usually limited to mince meat, which can be served in shepherd’s pie and spaghetti bolognese. Food choices are limited. While the majority of participants shop in ALDI and speak of the “Super Six,” they refer to the monotony of their diet. Parents frequently had to cut back on basic food items for themselves. For the majority of households eating out was just an aspiration. The lack of money and not the lack of dietary knowledge determined the weekly expenditure on food. Food was seen as one of the areas of expenditure in which households could exercise discretion when they were under financial pressure.

CLOTHING

The MESL Clothing budgets allow for expenditure on seasonal indoor and outdoor clothes and take a realistic position on life-span. For the majority of households, clothes items, which were limited in number, were replaced when they reached the end of an extended life span or when they no longer fitted the children.

What was striking in regard to this area of expenditure is the frequency with which parents said: “I have not bought any clothes for years.” They often went on to tell the lifespan of some of the items they were wearing. One man would wear his work clothes all week and a pair of jeans and a good shirt on Sundays and special occasions, these were all the clothes he had. Shoes are only bought by adults when the ones they have “expired.”

Most adults get their clothes from second hand shops. Some of the children’s clothes are also bought there or in low cost shops like Penneys. Clothes are bought on a strictly need to buy basis although the needs of children are primary: “I try to get [my teenage son] some brand items at Christmas. I also tell the family if they want to get him a present get him a particular item.” Another mother told us the only way her school going son could get a brand item was to get a part-time job. Parents maximised the life span of items, bought in charity shops, reminded family members of possible gifts, received hand downs from sisters’ children, were conscious of peer pressure on their children, and did without new clothing themselves for years. These households did not have a clothing budget. For the most part they bought clothes when there was no alternative but to do so.

HOUSEHOLDS GOODS AND SERVICES

The MESL budget for household goods specifies the number, life span and range of goods (from furniture, soft furnishings, bed clothes, electrical appliances, crockery, cleaning materials etc.) required. For households in this study, in terms of life span goods were made to last as long as possible, and they only replaced items when there was no choice but to do so. A number said that they were ashamed of the appearance of their home and hesitated to invite friends inside the house.

Replacing old or damaged furniture and floor coverings, as well as bed clothes, did not figure on the agenda of the households interviewed. Some said they knew replacements were needed and that the house “needed painting but for some years things would have to keep getting shabbier.” Replacing items such as fridges, cookers and washing machines was a major difficulty for some households and meant getting into debt: “I just don’t like borrowing. I am still paying them back the loan on the cooker.” Having an income below the MESL, meant that where larger purchases were concerned, households could not find the full price and had either to cope with instalments or to borrow from a family member. This meant that the household with an inadequate income would have to spread payments over a longer period and as a result pay a premium price – more than the actual cost of the item

HEALTH

The MESL health budget covers over the counter items and main care e.g. GP, dentist and optician visits, as well as prescriptions. The focus groups, in the main MESL research, regarded the cost of health insurance as the most important concern when households were not entitled to a Medical Card.

They maintained that the need for basic health care insurance was a physical need and reached a consensus in deciding that a low cost private healthcare scheme should be included in the health budget. The fact that many households cannot afford private health care was not seen as a reason for ignoring an important need. While the majority of parents in the current study were aware of the guidelines regarding GP, Dentist and Optician visits, those who did not have a Medical Card accepted that some guidelines could not be observed by them. They had to take risks and hope for the best.

Most of the households had Medical Cards. They stressed the value of this entitlement and said that: “nothing is worth the risk of losing a Medical Card.” In houses where there is not an entitlement for all the members to have a Medical Card the adults try to treat themselves and avoided going to the doctor. The same applied to visits to the Dentist. In a number of cases where they were problems in getting dental treatment for children parents made further cut backs in expenditure in areas such as food and household energy or got loans in order to meet costs. While parents take risks with their own health they are very careful about that of their children. Expenditure on over the counter health care items was an anxiety for parents when they had not budgeted for such costs in a particular week. Many parents said: “thank goodness the children are healthy. What would we do if they were delicate?”

TRANSPORT

The MESL budgets allow for expenditure on public transport and on car ownership. The cost of transport for interviewees in urban areas depended on the proximity of the household to schools, public bus routes, shops and other services.

Households that lived within walking distance of their extended families and services spent very little on transport. Money which would normally be spent on visiting relatives who lived in other parts of the city was spent on other basic household items. While most of those households were resigned to travelling by foot this was not a matter of choice. One parent pointed out: “there are times when you just have to go by bus. When my son was in hospital I had to find the cost of bus fares for myself and the other kids.” Some mothers who worked as a carer needed a car to travel to different clients. When the hours of work were precarious the car could no longer be afforded and the mother could no longer work. One parent had an old car which was a constant source of anxiety. However she saw it as a necessity in order to bring her six children to visit grandparents or to attend the hospital. Bus fares for all six her were out of the question. She also used the car to bring the children to the sea or to a park during the summer; otherwise they could never have a day out during the summer. Holidays were a luxury they could not afford.

The majority of the households which lived in rural areas had no choice but to have a car to take the children to school and to do the weekly shopping. For those in employment or attending a course the car was an essential requirement: “there are only three buses a day and none of them would get me to work in time.” For all households dependent on private transport the car was a main source of worry and stress.

“We can’t do without a car but I keep asking myself where will I get the petrol money this week or for the insurance costs or the NCT. I have a heart attack when I hear a noise in the engine. I just don’t have the money for a mechanic.”

Running a car means cutting back on other essentials e.g. social participation. In a number of cases the car is used only for essential journeys: “I have not seen my mother for weeks. I can’t afford the petrol. She understands but it is hard on us both.” When running a car is impossible the family are confined to the local area and become dependent on family or friends: “you don’t want to be obliged to people or to be always asking but there are times when we have no choice and I feel awful. Not having a car means you are isolated.”

HOUSEHOLD ENERGY

To cope with the cost of keeping the house warm the majority of the urban households used prepaid electricity. While they recognised that this form of payment was more expensive than monthly billing, the prepaid method “gives control and peace of mind.” A number referred to the increased expenditure required in severe weather conditions and the need to cut back on other basic expenditures. The problem for households in rural areas dependent on oil central heating could be acute on occasions. The majority of households could not afford to fill the tank with oil and had to resort to buying containers of kerosene which resulted in paying a higher price per litre of oil.

PERSONAL CARE

The MESL Personal Care budget allows for personal hygiene items, cosmetics, and hair care. Parents spent the minimum on toiletries and relied on special offers and gifts from the family. Many of the mothers cut their children’s hair and either cut their own or asked a friend to do so. Some managed to go to a hair dresser once every one or two years to have it professionally cut. They were conscious of the need to look well for their own self-esteem but simply said “there is not the money.” They would have liked to have the items in the MESL Personal Care budget and saw the need for them but it was beyond their capacity to meet these costs.

EDUCATION

The MESL education budget allows for expenditure on the following – uniforms, books, computer and stationery and educational trips. Households with an inadequate income also have to meet these costs. The commitment of the majority of parents to their children’s education meant they make every effort to contribute to essential expenditure. This can mean ignoring their personal needs.

Parents whose children attended DEIS schools were very pleased with the support and understanding they received from the staff. Home School Liaison Teachers were available to listen to the concerns of parents. One mother said she could not have coped without the listening ear of the Home School Liaison Teacher. Second level education was regarded as very expensive: “always looking for money for books, school trips and other items.” The school uniform was also seen as a major burden and parents questioned the reason for school crests on clothing and the availability of school uniforms only in specialised shops.

A number of parents mentioned that as soon as Christmas was over they started to save for the new school year when they would face major bills for uniforms, books, subscriptions, school bags etc. The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, while welcome was seen as inadequate in meeting clothing and books costs. The majority of parents saw education as the way out of poverty for their children and were determined to keep them at school. Some worried about their capacity to do so. Transition year was also seen as a particularly costly experience although parents wanted their children to participate in order to benefit and not to be different. To quote one parent: “education may be the way out of poverty but the cost keeps going up.”

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

The MESL Budgets allow for some expenditure on social inclusion and participation. The cost of engagement in sports, entertainment, family outings, toys and holidays is taken into consideration at a minimum but socially acceptable level. The focus groups recognised this need and responsibility for adults and children to engage in society. While acknowledging the potential of every person to contribute to the life of local community, they also clearly identified the negative consequences of isolation e.g. loneliness, depression, ill health and anti-social behaviours.

The majority of adults in the study simply said: “we have no social life.” They did not have an evening out. For the most part, two parents households relaxed by watching TV or a DVD “while having a can or two.” A number of parents referred to walking as their main physical activity. This was a necessity rather than a choice. A chat and a cup of tea with a friend or family member was a common weekly activity for many of the one parent households. Parents looked forward to the day when “we could go out for a meal or even just to the pub for a drink”. The lack of adult company and the sense of isolation “gets me down at times”.

Parents were very conscious of the importance of social activities for children and young people. They worried when they saw their children “feeling different.” Many blamed themselves for not being able to afford the cost of membership of clubs or the entrance fees to cinemas and other cultural activities. While they were resigned to their own non-existent social life they made constant sacrifices to ensure that the children had an opportunity to mix with their peers in one or two leisure activities. In areas where there was access to cost free clubs and activities some of the young people enjoyed a combination of activities – those which were free and those which required a fee. However only a small number of households were in that position – five out of the 30 households and they included a parent who was employed. Parents cut back on their weekly shopping to find money for membership of sports clubs and dancing classes and for the related costs of ‘gear’ e.g. football boots, dancing shoes.

Visits to the Zoo or cinema were extremely rare. As a treat young children were brought to a play park. Birthday treats for a minority consisted of being given a small sum of money to go out with a few friends. For the majority the celebration consisted of a birthday cake.

HOLIDAYS

Only three of the thirty households had a holiday. With the help of family members these households saved for the fare to Eastern Europe in order to visit parents. One parent remarked on the pain of hearing her children say each summer “mum when can we go on holidays?” She felt dishonest when each year she responded “hopefully next summer.” One of the parents who owned a car did so in order to bring her children for days out during the holidays. She maintained that it was less expensive to own a car (an old one which was a constant anxiety) than to pay bus fare for six children. The weekly days out were seen as a substitute for holidays.

CHILDCARE

The greater majority of households do not pay childcare costs because the mother is unemployed or cannot afford the expense. For two households assistance with child care was given by family members. In one case a sister helped out occasionally and in the second case the family looked after children during the school holidays and received a weekly contribution of €50. In order to allow the mother in a one parent household to remain in employment she paid €60 a week towards after-school activities and €50 a week for participation in summer camps or projects. None of the households were in a position to afford formal childcare services. Only two could call on the family for assistance and this was due to distance from the original family home and because of the age of elderly parents. One of the parents responded to her need to obtain childcare by taking some creative steps which were less expensive than formal childcare services. She enrolled her children in afterschool activities and in holiday time in clubs or camps. Many of the parents who said they did not need to pay childcare costs would have liked to have been able to do so as means to obtaining employment or to attending an education course. However the costs of childcare were prohibiting them.

INSURANCE

The MESL take car, life assurance, and home contents insurance into consideration. Members of the focus group in the main research saw insurance as a minimum need. They also included private health insurance which is discussed in the section dealing with health.

Of the fifteen urban households ten could not afford any insurance, three had car insurance, one had life insurance and one had insurance for the house contents. Of the fifteen rural households 11 had insurance and of those four- also had life insurance because of mortgages and four of the fifteen could not afford insurance.

Parents saw the need and value of having insurance “but even thinking about such expenditure is not reality for us.” Another mother summed up the response of those who could not contemplate the cost of insurance. “Of course I would like to have insurance for the furniture. If there was a fire tomorrow what would we do. Insurance costs money and we don’t have that kind of money. So we keep our fingers crossed and try and not think of the worst.”

SAVINGS AND CONTINGENCES

The MESL budgets allocate a small amount of money - €5 per head, per week, for both Savings and Contingences. Members of the focus groups in previous studies were in strong agreement on the need to include a minimum sum of money in the household budgets. They saw the need to take into consideration the cost of goods and services which were not included in the budgets because they were related to emergencies, the unexpected and special family events. Of the 15 urban households eight could not afford to put any money aside. They usually had a shortfall at the end of every week. Three parents made small weekly payments into the Credit Union to meet the extra costs of education, Christmas and birthdays. Four parents made periodical attempts to begin to save but their efforts had been unsuccessful because of emergencies.

9 of the fifteen rural households could afford to save on a regular basis; however five were attempting to save. One of the fifteen, 1 had a post office account into which she tried to pay into every week. This was an effort to prepare for Christmas, First Communion and Birthdays. Two households had €400 – €500 in the Bank and three parents had accounts in the Credit Union into which they lodged occasional small sums of money. Another household lodged their redundancy payment in order to meet future emergencies.

Prioritising Needs

Families with a weekly income, which does not allow for an adequate standard of living, are constrained in their expenditure choices in comparison with households which have an adequate or high income. Many are obliged to limit their expenditure in basic budget areas e.g. food, clothing and household energy. A larger number had to make cut-backs in less crucial areas of household expenditure. They are also obliged to make choices between areas of expenditure e.g. social inclusion and participation, education and insurance. However all the households in the study prioritised the essential necessities for living: “a roof over our heads, food on the table and enough heat to make sure we don’t freeze to death.” For all households there was the refrain: “the children come first” and “I am an expert juggler.” Many parents made this or a similar statement. None could meet all the financial responsibilities in the same week “you pay one bill this week and hope to pay another next week.”

For many households the weekly reality of never being able to make ends meet leads to considerable strain and stress. The degree of this stress depends on a number of factors – the level of income, the pattern of arrears, the amount of financial assistance from families and the degree of emotional support. Parents who in the past had experience of a better quality of life or had a mentor from whom they learned how to find inner and outer resources had developed some coping strategies which enabled them to “get by for the time being.”

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