Key factors impeding or supporting child and adolescent well-being in Ireland:

a systematic review examining evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland cohorts

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Tuesday 04.11.2025

Growing Up in Ireland Conference, Dublin

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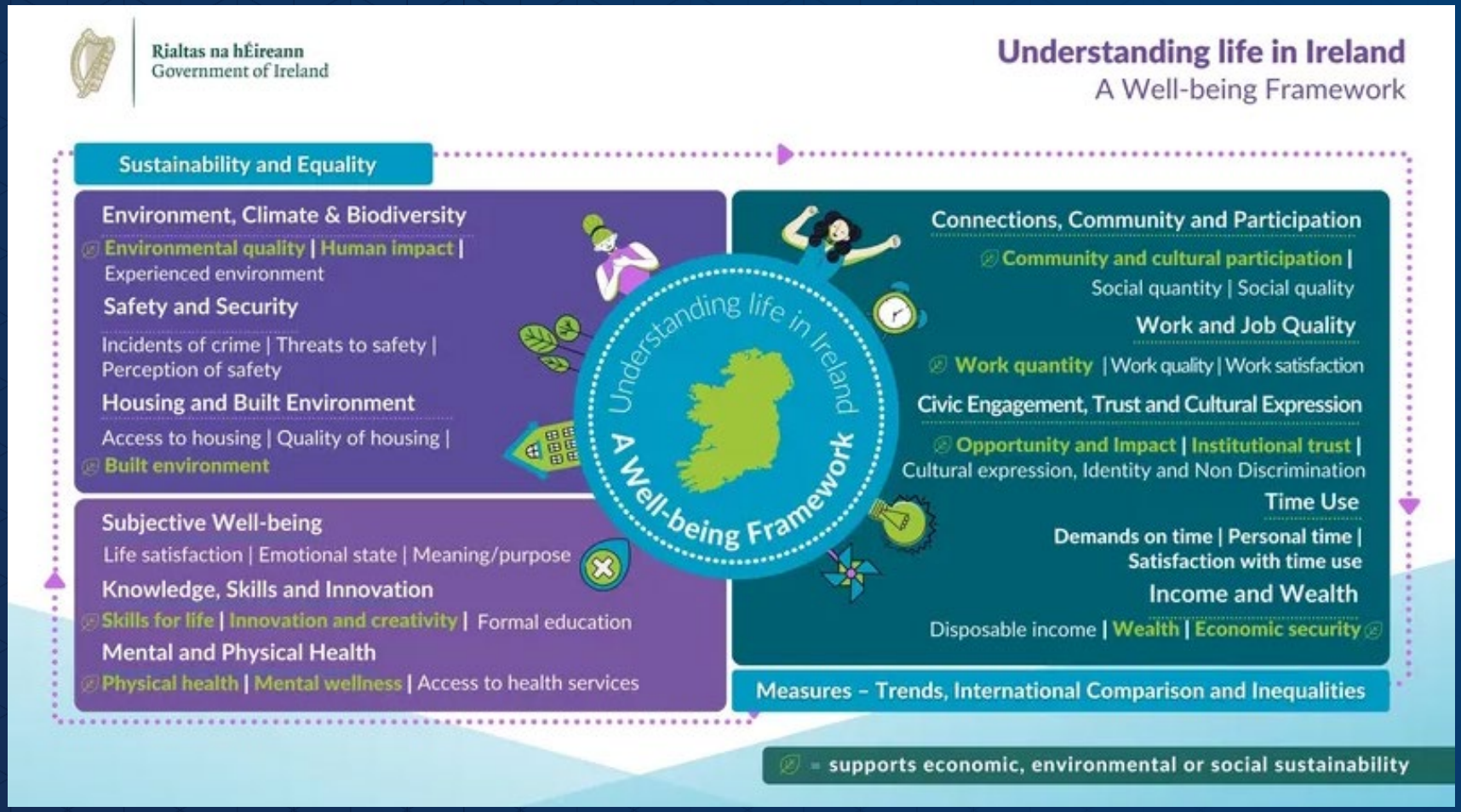
Background

2021: *Ireland's Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework*



Background

Generally: positive picture of well-being nationwide

BUT some alarming numbers:

E.g., Reduction in the percentage of school-aged children (10-17 years) who reported **feeling happy** with their lives at present between 2014 and 2022:

89.7% in 2014 → 78.5% in 2022

Disparities: lower levels of happiness reported by girls, children from immigrant backgrounds, and those with disabilities

From: The Irish Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) Study 2022 (2025)

Aim*

To identify the **key factors** which impede or support **child well-being**,
the extent to which these are **socially patterned**,
and the resulting **policy opportunities** for intervention

Drawing on findings from both the '98 and '08 GUI Cohorts

*Commissioned by the Department of Children, Disability, and Equality
(Full report will be published shortly)

Methods - Systematic review

26 databases (subject-specific + more general)

Search term "Growing up in Ireland"

Inclusion criteria:

- GUI data analysed (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods)

- All ages and developmental stages (infants, children, adolescents, young adults)

- Well-being outcomes in the broad sense:
  (1) physical health and development
  (2) education and cognitive development
  (3) socio-emotional development and well-being
  (4) civic and economic engagement

Methods – Well-being domains

Physical health and development	Education and cognitive development	Socioemotional development and well-being	Civic and economic engagement (>17y)
Commuting*	Academic self-image	Bullying, perpetation	Aspirations
Dental health	Aspirations, school choice, post-school educational attainment	Coping strategies	Attitudes to work
Diet, eating behaviour	Attitudes to school, school engagement, absenteism	Gambing, self-harm*	Concerns
Handedness*	Attitudes to school subjects	Hobbies, activities, interests	Employment
Health status	Childcare uptake*	Key relationships (e.g., with parents and peers)	Experience of discrimination
Long-term conditions, illness, and disability	Home learning environment*	Mental health/ anxiety/ depressive symptoms	Political engagement
Physical activity, sedentary behaviour	Neurodevelopment, expressive language*	Screen time	Volunteering
Sleep	Relationships with teachers	Self-esteem, happiness, self-concept	
Smoking, alcohol, and drugs	Shadow education*	Stressful events*	
Use of health services, vaccination	Verbal reasoning and numeracy, academic performance	Anti-social behaviour/contact with the criminal justice system	
Weight, height, BMI, obesity, overweight	Perception of skills learned in school		
	Subject choice in school		

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020

**Subdomains marked with an asterisk represent additional subdomains identified inductively during this review.*

Main results – Number of documents

Non-duplicate documents sourced from databases
(k = 825)

Documents excluded as not relevant to this review
(k = 487)

Thematic GUI reports included manually
(k = 15)

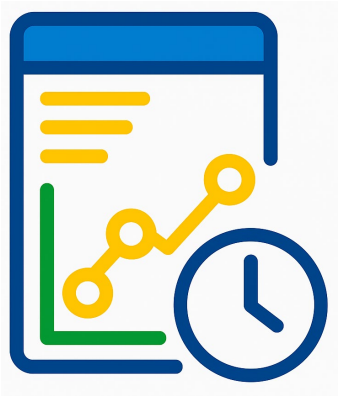
Relevant documents identified for this review
(k = 353)
Peer-reviewed journal article (k = 261)
Report (k = 45)
Thesis (k = 27)
Book or book chapter (k = 10)
Other (k = 10)

Document types excluded from in-depth analysis in this review (catalogued)
(k = 107)

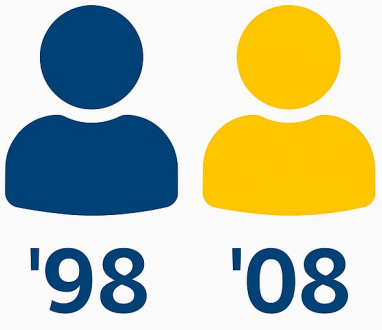
Final documents analysed for this review
(k = 246)
Journal articles (k = 223)
Selected GUI thematic reports (k = 23)

Main results – Study characteristics

Mostly quantitative methods used in articles / reports (98.2% / 100%)



Longitudinal or multi-wave analyses are common (60.1% / 56.5%)



Articles: more '98 Cohort data

Reports: both '08 and '98 Cohort data

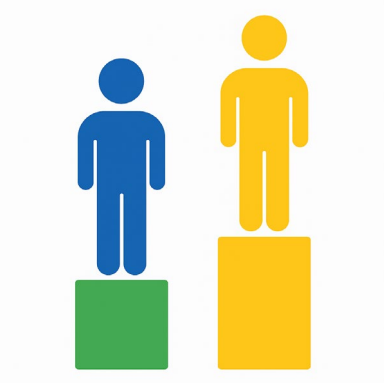
Socio-emotional development & well-being domain (most)

Civic/ economic domain (least)

Physical health and development K=79 articles / K=13 reports	Education and cognitive development K=75 articles / K=13 reports	Socioemotional development and well-being K=112 articles / K=18 reports	Civic and economic engagement K=4 articles / K=3 reports
Commuting K=1 article / K=0 reports	**Academic self-image** K=5 articles / K=1 report	**Bullying, perpetation** K=7 articles / K=0 reports	**Aspirations** K=4 articles / K=1 report
Dental health K=2 articles / K=0 reports	**Aspirations, school choice, post-school educational attainment** K=6 articles / K=1 report	**Coping strategies** K=2 articles / K=0 reports	**Attitudes to work** K=0 articles / K=0 reports
Diet, eating behaviour K=5 articles / K=3 reports	**Attitudes to school, school engagement, absenteism** K=8 articles / K=6 reports	**Gambing, self-harm** K=2 articles / K=0 reports	**Concerns** K=0 articles /K=0 reports
Handedness K=1 article / K=0 reports	**Attitudes to school subjects** K=2 articles / K=3 reports	**Hobbies, activities, interests** K=6 articles / K=4 reports	**Employment** K=0 articles / K=1 report
Health status K=12 articles / K=4 reports	**Childcare uptake** K=2 articles / K=3 reports	**Key relationships (e.g., with parents and peers)** K=21 articles / K=10 reports	**Experience of discrimination** K=0 articles / K=0 reports
Long-term conditions, illness, and disability K=3 articles / K= 2 reports	**Home learning environment** K=2 articles /K=0 reports	**Mental health/ anxiety/ depressive symptoms** K=74 articles / K=12 reports	**Political engagement** K=0 articles / K=1 report
Physical Activity, sedentary behaviour K=16 articles / K=5 reports	**Neurodevelopment, expressive language** K=17 articles / K=2 reports	**Screen time** K=12 articles / K=4 reports	**Volunteering** K=0 articles / K=1 report
Sleep K=2 articles / K=0 reports	**Relationships with teachers** K=1 article / K=0 reports	**Self-esteem, happiness, self-concept** K=24 articles / K=6 reports	
Smoking, alcohol, and drugs K=4 articles / K=3 reports	**Shadow education** K=1 article / K=0 reports	**Stressful events** K=4 articles / K=0 reports	
Use of health services, vaccination K=14 articles / K=1 report	**Verbal reasoning and numeracy, academic performance** K=40 articles / K=6 reports	**Anti-social behaviour/ contact with the criminal justice system** K=1 article / K=2 reports	
Weight, height, BMI, obesity, overweight K=40 articles / K=4 reports	**Perception of skills learned in school** K=0 articles / K=0 reports		
	Subject choice in school K=0 articles / K=0 reports		

5+ articles
10+ articles
20+ articles

Main results – Physical Health and Development Domain



Socioeconomic gradients in health status, obesity, and physical activity levels

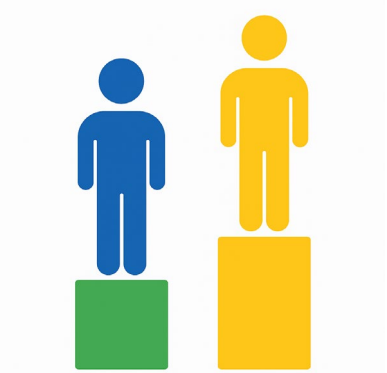
Lower physical activity among girls, children with illness, disabilities, higher BMI, disadvantaged backgrounds

Healthcare use shaped by SES, health needs, and caregiver factors

Public health cover improved GP access

SES = socioeconomic status

Main results – Education and Cognitive Development Domain



SES inequalities in development and cognitive outcomes visible from age 3, widening over time

Parental expectations associated with educational outcomes and aspirations

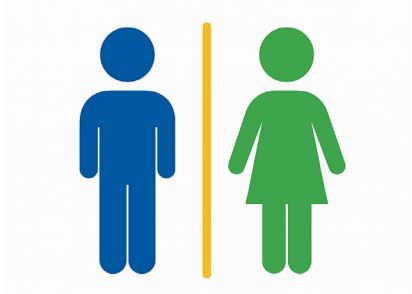
Girls, less advantaged children, and SEN students struggle more with transition to secondary education (↓ academic self-image);

Academic success and self-image at age 9 are protective

SES = socioeconomic status

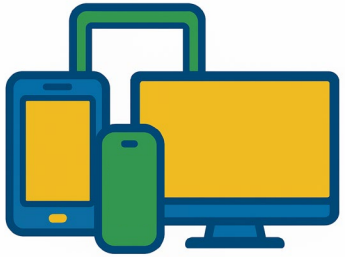
SEN = special educational needs

Main results – Socioemotional Development and Well-being Domain



Girls demonstrate higher internalising difficulties

Boys higher antisocial behaviour



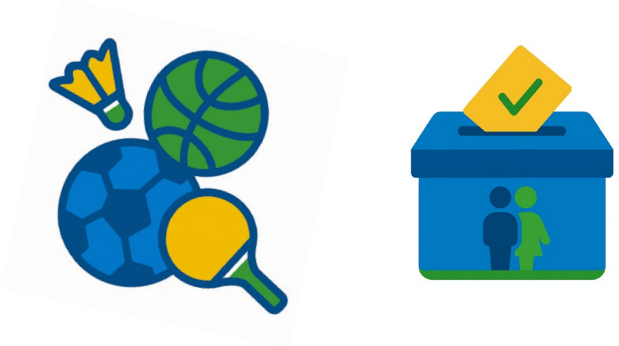
Higher digital engagement linked to lower physical activity and socio-emotional well-being

Strong relationships, safe facilities, structured sports are linked with higher socio-emotional well-being

Bullying, family adversity (e.g., lower SES, parental illness, stress) with lower well-being

SES = socioeconomic status

Main results – Civic and Economic Engagement Domain (17+ y)



Rural youth engage more in sports volunteering

Urban youth has higher political participation

Higher education participation/ aspirations shaped by early performance, self-concept, parental expectations

Caregiving roles linked to lower higher-education progression

Main results – Cross-Domain Patterns

Socioeconomic disadvantage linked to poorer outcomes across all domains

Other vulnerable groups: children with SEN, a chronic illness, or prenatal exposure to smoking, children born preterm, victims of bullying

Sex differences: Girls: ↑ internalising problems, ↑ literacy
Boys: ↑ behavioural difficulties, ↑ maths, ↑ sports

Neighbourhood safety, green spaces, and amenities were associated with physical activity, socioemotional outcomes, and civic engagement

Main results – Cross-Domain Patterns

Cohort differences: ↑ mobile phone ownership, ↓ physical activity, ↑ emotional issues in ’08 Cohort

Policy influences (e.g., medical card, free GP care, and maternity leave) shaped health outcomes and service use

Economic crises, including the recession (2008–2013) and COVID-19 pandemic, were linked to elevated risks across domains (+++ already vulnerable children)

Future Research Priorities

Explore under-studied areas: e.g., civic engagement, sleep, coping strategies, relationships with teachers

Longitudinal (pathway) analyses spanning more than one or two waves

Conduct cross-cohort comparisons ('98 / '08/ '24) which can promote understanding of the impact of societal changes such as technological shifts, economic fluctuations, and policy reforms in child and adolescent outcomes over time

Policy Implications

Targeted policies to reduce socioeconomic disadvantage,
e.g., medical card access, Pandemic Unemployment Payment, remote learning access
! Especially in times of financial hardship !

Investment in social infrastructure: safe areas, recreation, after-school programmes, accessible and affordable housing and childcare

Supporting mental health and social relationships

Summary & Takeaways

A wide range of individual, family, peer, school, neighbourhood, and socio-political factors are associated with child and youth well-being outcomes

Well-being in Ireland is multifaceted and socially patterned

Align policy, funding and research to investigate underexplored areas, longitudinal patterns, cross-cohort differences, and evaluate impacts of societal and policy changes

Persistent inequalities require targeted interventions

Thank you for your attention!

For more details:
see the full review Report + Appendix (Nov 2025)

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