

Increasing prosperity has prompted Irish kids to balloon 24 kilos since 1948

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Irish kids now weigh 24 kilos more than they did in 1948, reveals research published ahead of print in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

A rapid increase in prosperity has gone hand in hand with the surge in obesity in Ireland, dubbed the "Celtic Tiger" on account of its rapid economic growth, say the authors. But the current economic downturn is unlikely to reverse these trends, they suggest.

The researchers base their findings on three large scale national surveys of the heights and weights of schoolchildren between the ages of four and 14 in Ireland, which were carried out in 1948, during the 1970s, and in 2002.

During the 1940s, Ireland's economy was stagnant, and it certainly did not benefit from a post war boom. In 1948, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 0.432 billion Euros. But by 2002, its per capita GDP was over 130 million Euros, the second highest in Europe.

The serial measurements showed that over the decades, children grew taller. On average, 14 year old boys were 23.1 cm taller and girls 15.6 cm taller in 2002 than they were in 1948.

But the most dramatic increases were evident in their weight. 14 year old boys were 65% heavier, on average, in 2002 than they were in 1948, weighing in at 60.9 kilos compared with 37 kilos in 1948. And 14 year

old girls were 48% heavier, weighing in at an average of 58.7 kilos compared with 39.5 kilos in 1948.

Most of the increases in weight occurred from the 1970s onwards, the data show.

The authors point out that children in Ireland might have been undernourished in 1948, but their nutritional intake was comparable with that of the rest of Europe, because they were not subject to food rationing after the war.

"The data provide stark and compelling evidence on the evolution of the obesity epidemic in Irish children in tandem with the increase in economic prosperity," they write. But the current economic downturn is unlikely to turn round the tide of obesity, they add. If anything, it is likely to make matters worse.

"One can only speculate as to the effect that the current downturn in the Irish economy will have on the prevalence of obesity in Ireland," they say. "However, it is likely that, coupled with the increasing problem of food poverty and food insecurity, socioeconomic obesity gradients will be accentuated, and the underlying high prevalence of overweight and obesity will not be reversed."

Source: British Medical Journal

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