

Recession damages mental health of families, says new study

22 October 2015, by Fiona Tyrrell

New results from the Growing Up in Ireland Study on how the recent Irish recession impacted on families and children indicate that economic strain caused by unemployment and falling family incomes has damaged parental mental health and had knock on effects on child mental health.

The findings are based on analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland study, which is being conducted by a consortium of researchers led by Trinity College Dublin and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), and has been monitoring the development of almost 20,000 [children](#) and [young people](#) at various ages since 2007.

The analysis, by Professor of Sociology at Trinity Richard Layte, illustrates the main pathways through which poverty and deprivation hurt children. The study followed children from 2008 to 2010/11 and shows clearly how economic strain caused by unemployment and falling family incomes damaged parental [mental health](#). This in turn sours the relationship between partners as well as creating harsher, less warm parenting, according to his paper published earlier this week.

These poor relationships between parents and children were hugely damaging to child mental health, increasing levels of child anxiety and emotional problems as well as contributing to poor behaviour and conduct both at home and in the classroom, he explained. Anxious, unhappy children do worse in school, often with long-term consequences for both wealth and health.

Key Findings:

- Household income fell by 16% between 2008 and 2011 for GUI families.
- Unemployment among fathers rose from 5.6% to 13.8%. Unemployment among mothers rose from 5.6% to 6.5%.
- 29% of mothers reported cutting back on basics, 8% being behind with rent or

mortgage and 12% being behind with utility bills.

- The proportion reporting that they had some degree of difficulty in 'making ends meet' doubled, rising from 31% in 2008 to 61%.
- Adjusting for other changes in family circumstances over the period, worsening economic strain increased the risk of depression among both mothers and fathers.
- Parents who experienced increased psychological distress tended to employ harsher styles of parenting. This change was true for parents across levels of education.
- The relationship between mothers and fathers was highly sensitive to economic strain. Parents under strain reported more arguments, felt less close and were more likely to report that they were unhappy with their relationship.
- The effect of economic strain on perception of the relationship was higher among mothers compared to fathers.
- Worsened relationships between children and parents were associated with higher child anxiety and worse conduct as well as lower child happiness.
- Lower educational test scores were largely explained by worsening child conduct and emotional symptoms during the recession.

Professor Layte Trinity commented: "The Growing Up in Ireland Study is a tremendous investment which continues to provide key data on child development and what contributes to healthier, happier and better educated individuals. As the economy improves we need to think carefully about investing for the future. Ireland's prosperity depends on having an educated, creative and competitive workforce. By investing in children and young people we will be developing healthier, happier and more productive adults for all our tomorrows – and saving money in the process."

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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