

Impacts of Using Data to Report on Child Well-Being

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While the protection of vulnerable children continues to be an over-riding concern of legislators, policymakers, practitioners and the public, there is also a recognition that children's lives must be understood and described in a broad and comprehensive way that reflects their overall well-being. This has resulted in a strong movement in the area of children's well-being and alongside that, an increasing focus on its measurement through the development of child well-being indicator sets.

Approaches to developing child well-being indicator sets tend to be data-driven, policy-driven, and/or theory-driven (Hanafin & Brooks, 2005; Ben-Arieh et al., 2001; Niemeijer, 2002; Rigby & Kohler, 2002). In developing a national set of child well-being indicators in Ireland, these three approaches were combined for the purpose of providing a framework to improve understanding

and indicator areas (especially subjective well-being); lack of comprehensiveness when reporting on the indicator area; and lack of availability of some data over different time periods.

2. **Quality of the data available**, particularly in respect of the extent to which the data source provides national coverage; the timeliness of the data; comparability of the information between different geographical areas; and the level of certainty regarding the accuracy of the information.
3. **Harmonisation of variables**, especially in respect of demographic considerations such as social class and geographic classifications and the application of international or national measures. A lack of harmonisation of variables is problematic because it limits opportunities for comparison and even a minor

- benchmarking progress across different groups and regions, nationally and internationally
- highlighting policy issues
- describing, monitoring, and setting goals
- assigning accountability
- an explicit signal that children are important in the community
- an impetus and focus for improvements in data about children's lives.

For example, the first report in Ireland highlighted high levels of alcohol usage among Irish teenagers compared with their international peers resulting in a strong policy focus on the area, including a national consultation with children and young people. Other reports have highlighted challenges around bullying and school absences, all of which help to inform both public and policy debates in the area. More recent reports have included information about children's Body Mass Index and the findings highlight the increasing problems around nutrition and physical activity under consideration by the Taskforce on Obesity. Future reports are likely to include data at a geographically disaggregated level, thus informing local initiatives.

The impact of reporting on children's lives inevitably leads to improvements in data. In Ireland, the development of a national set of child well-being indicators and State of the Nation's Children reports led to several significant improvements in survey, administrative, and census data. We built on our experiences in developing a national set of child well-being indicators and reporting on children's lives to develop a strategic approach to data and research around children's lives in Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011) and these publications can be accessed at: <http://bit.ly/19M7xL7>

In conclusion, it is important to recognise that while indicator sets can be very helpful in raising awareness, informing debate, and improving understandings of children's lives, there are limitations. Responses to findings are unlikely to be possible simply on the basis of the information identified in the State of the Nation's Report and more considered understandings are required to facilitate the development of new policies.

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of children's lives, predominantly through the publication of the State of the Nation's Children reports. The development was underpinned by a broad theoretical understanding of children's lives and the inclusion of the views of children (Hanafin & Brooks, 2009a). It was also informed by the work of Moore (1997) who identified a number of criteria for reporting on children's lives. These include: comprehensiveness; inclusive of all ages; positive and negative dimensions of children's lives; reflective of social goals; objective and subjective measures; and the measures should take account of well-being and well-becoming.

Since 2006, the indicator set has been used to present biennial State of the Nation's Children reports (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2007, 2008, 2010) and through that a number of challenges in reporting on children's well-being have emerged. These challenges (Hanafin & Brooks, 2009b) relate to the:

1. **Availability of data**, where key issues arising included an absence of any data in respect to some areas of children's lives; an unequal distribution in the availability of data across different age groups (particularly the middle childhood period)

definitional difference can create this problem. In Ireland, for example, the first trimester of pregnancy is defined as up to 12 weeks compared with the World Health Organisation which defines it as up to 14 weeks. This minor difference means that comparisons cannot be made across this variable.

4. **Issues arising on how the report should be compiled**, including recognising the importance of taking a partnership approach with key stakeholders; balancing an ambition to produce the best possible report while recognising the limitations of the data; acknowledging challenges and deficits arising; and presenting the data in a way that is accessible, unbiased, and that does not compromise the credibility and value of the report.

The Impact of Reporting on Children's Well-Being

There are a number of positive impacts in reporting on children's lives on a regular basis and these include:

- providing an understanding of the well-being of children that is valid and reliable
- tracking changes over time