

Employment, dependent children and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis

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Summary: As businesses begin to reopen and workers are called back to work - picking up and going back to work is not going to be as easy or straightforward as it sounds on paper for workers with children. Little consideration however appears to have been given by Government to the misalignment between the reopening of many sectors of our economy whilst access to childcare remains so limited.

This Research InBrief shows that a lack of access to childcare is likely to be a significant issue for a significant proportion of workers across the island of Ireland. Around 40% of workers in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland have dependent children. High proportions of workers with dependent children also work in households where all adults in the household work. The challenges presented by the fact that access to childcare is currently so limited given the continuing closure of childcare facilities and public health restrictions which prevent physical interaction with the wider family circle is likely to be particularly intensive for these households. It is argued that without Government intervention a lack of access to childcare will affect the ability of workers with dependent children to participate in the labour market, although it is expected that female workers are likely to be disproportionately negatively affected in this regard.

Furthermore, the evidence presented shows that almost half of families with dependent children in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland rely on their wider family circle to assist with childcare. This shows that the issue of a lack of access to childcare is unlikely to be solved through a reopening of childcare facilities and schools alone.

Introduction

When public health measures to tackle the Covid-19 crisis were implemented across the island of Ireland, creches and schools were closed and households were prevented from mixing with their wider family circle. Access to childcare for workers with children became an immediate, although much-understated, issue.

As the lockdown began however the fact that large proportions of employees were furloughed meant that childcare pressures were alleviated for many working households. Further to this,

the ability of others to work from home allowed many to combine work with childcare responsibilities. This meant that the challenges presented by a lack of access to childcare were in many respects eased.

However, as we ease out of lockdown, policy needs to recognise that childcare pressures are going to reappear and respond to the fact that a lack of access to childcare is going to remain an ongoing and pressing issue for many more months. To-date however, the roadmaps out of lockdown announced by the Irish Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government all unequivocally fail to recognise this. Indeed, the easing out of lockdown roadmaps put forward by the Republic of Ireland Government and the Northern Ireland Executive appear to have given no thought to the challenges presented by the misalignment between businesses reopening and access to childcare. However, as businesses begin to reopen and workers are called back to work - picking up and going back to work is not going to be as easy or straightforward as it sounds on paper for workers with children. Little consideration appears to have been given to the misalignment between the reopening of many sectors of our economy whilst access to childcare is so limited. Not only are childcare facilities and schools still closed, but we are also unable to physically interact with our wider family circles and have them assist with childcare.

Given the lack of policy intervention to address this society wide issue there is a serious risk that a lack of access to childcare will affect the ability of workers with dependent children to leave the home to participate in the labour market. Not only is this worrying in and of itself, but is likely to disproportionately impact female labour market participation and so exacerbate an already existing gender issue.

What is more, there is a lack of recognition that even if workers can continue to work from home, combining working from home with childcare is not a sustainable long-term option. The very assumption that workers with children can continue to do this for the foreseeable fails to recognise and give value to the work involved in childcare. It also ignores known inequities in the undertaking of childcare within the home. Females tend to be the predominant providers of childcare and recent research shows that females are more likely than ever to be facing what is known in the literature as the 'triple shift' (Close the Gap, 2020; Duncombe and Marsden, 1995).

The misalignment between businesses reopening and access to childcare

In the Republic of Ireland, for example, whilst businesses begin to ease out of lockdown from May 18th childcare facilities will only begin a phased reopening for all workers from July 20th.

Even then, the phased reopening means that creche, childminder and preschool facilities will only be opened one day per week to begin with. This will slowly increase to two days, three days etc. thereafter, as the evidence allows. Schools will not reopen until September, and again, this will occur on a phased basis, all the while social distancing guidelines need to be adhered.

The Northern Ireland Executive's roadmap out of lockdown does not mention when childcare facilities will begin to reopen - in fact, it does not mention childcare at all. When it comes to children the Executive's focus is on schools only which it says will begin in Phase 2 to expand provision to cover a wider definition of key workers as workplace activity gradually increases. And whilst no dates are given as to when we might move between the various phases, by Phase 4 the plan is to expand provision to accommodate all pupils on a part time basis with a blended learning approach involving a combination of in school and remote learning to facilitate the continuing need for social distancing. Phase 5 would see early year school provision expanded to a full-time basis, subject to scientific and medical advice.

In both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland it is unclear when wider family circles will be able to physically interact.

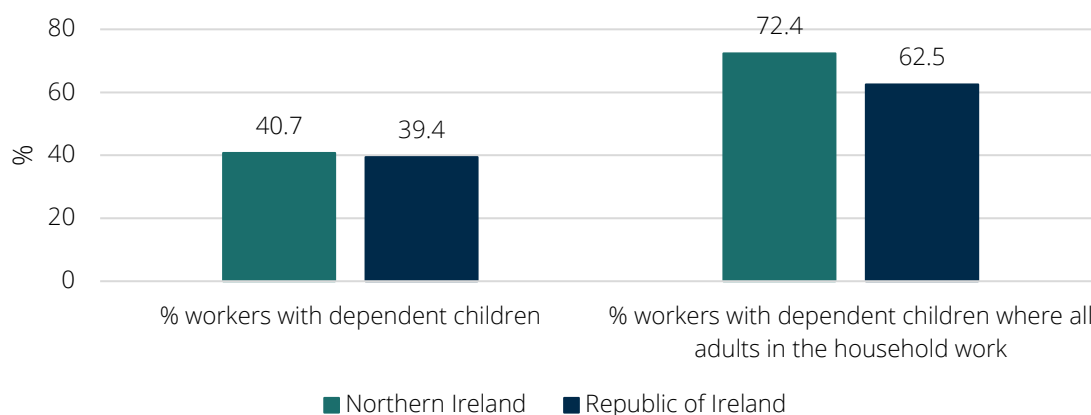
How big an issue is childcare for workers across the entire labour force?

To help us understand the need for Government intervention on the issue of childcare access it is instructive to take a precursory look at the proportion of our labour force who have dependent children. This helps to approximate how many workers are potentially affected by a misalignment between a return to work and a lack of access to childcare. Figure 1 below shows that approximately 40% of all workers in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland have dependent children. In terms of numbers of workers, this equates to around 900,000 workers in the Republic of Ireland and around 350,000 workers in Northern Ireland.

Further to this, we also present an estimate of the proportion of workers with dependent children who live in households where all adults are in employment. These workers are likely to have significant childcare needs that will certainly have been intensified as a result of the closure of childcare facilities and the inability to seek assistance with childcare from the wider family circle. Figure 1 shows that in Northern Ireland just over 72% of workers with dependent children under the age of 16 live in households where all adults in the household work. In the Republic of Ireland 62.5% of workers with dependent children under the age of 15 live in households where all adults in the household work (couple with dependent children households). Given this it is argued that without Government intervention a lack of access to

childcare will affect the ability of workers with dependent children to participate in the labour market.

Figure 1: Employment and dependent children



Source: Estimates for Northern Ireland are obtained from Q4 2019 data in the Northern Ireland element of the UK Labour force Survey. Estimates for the Republic of Ireland are obtained from 2019 data of the Labour Force Survey.

Note: It is worth noting that the data relating to Northern Ireland includes the number of workers with dependent children under the age of 16 who live in households where all adults in the household work. The data for Republic of Ireland counts only those who live in households comprised of couples with dependent children under the age of 15).

What sorts of childcare do families rely upon?

Next, we turn to look at existing data which details how families accessed childcare before the Covid-19 crisis. Doing so helps to understand the likely impact which the various different public health restrictions are having on a family's ability to access childcare. For Northern Ireland data are taken from the 2015/2016 Family Resources Survey. We look at the breakdown of childcare usage based on whether the child receives childcare from one of the following providers:

1. Nursery - this includes playgroups, pre-school, day nurseries, creches.
2. Family - this includes grandparents, non-resident parents/spouses, brothers/sisters, other relatives and family friends.
3. Childminder - this includes childminders, nannies and au pairs.
4. Out of School - this includes both out-of-school clubs and holiday schemes.
5. School - Reception or nursery places provided in either primary or infant schools.
6. Other - Forms of childcare not classified elsewhere.

As shown in Table 1 below childcare provided by family is the most common type, accounting for almost half (47%) of all childcare usage. This is followed by nursery care which accounts for just over one quarter (26%). Almost one fifth (18%) of household's report that they obtain their childcare from the out of school category, while childminders account for just 4% of childcare used in Northern Ireland. This percentage may be higher in rural areas which have fewer nursery and creche places. Schools provide 4% of childcare places with 1% classified as other.

For the Republic of Ireland data are taken from the 2016 Childcare module from the Quarterly National Household survey. The results from this survey show that 30% of those with dependent children aged under 12 rely on non-parental childcare. This figure is likely to be higher for working parents with dependent children. In terms of who provides non-parental childcare the results presented in Table 1 below provide a breakdown of whether childcare is provided from one of the following:

1. Family/Friends (paid and unpaid)
2. Childminder
3. Creche/Montessori/Playgroup/Afterschool
4. Other types of childcare

Similar to the results for Northern Ireland it is clear from Table 1 below the majority of non-parental childcare in the Republic of Ireland is provided by family/friends (50%). Just over one-third of children receive care from a childminder/nanny, whilst one-quarter of all children attend a creche/playgroup/Montessori or after-school.

Table 1: Family usage of childcare by type of childcare

Northern Ireland		Republic of Ireland*	
	%		%
Family	47	Family/Friend	50
Nursery	26	Childminder	34
Out of School	18	Creche/playgroup/after-school	25
Childminder	4	Other type of childcare	2.6
School	4		
Other	1		

Source: Data for Northern Ireland is from the 2015/16 Family Resources Survey. Data for the Republic of Ireland is from [QNHS Childcare Module Quarter 3 2016](https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-chi/qnhschildcarequarter32016/). Available online at:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-chi/qnhschildcarequarter32016/>

Note: * Percentages for the Republic of Ireland data total

to more than 100% because some children use more than one type of childcare.

It is clear from the above data that families rely on a range of different means to meet their childcare needs. However, the data makes clear that family is key in how families access childcare. This dominant reliance on family is particularly important in the context of current public health restrictions whereby wider family circles are unable to physically interact with each other. This has important consequences for policy, which when it comes to any of the discussion around childcare has focused only on the reopening of childcare facilities such as nurseries and creches, as well as the reopening of schools.

What are the gendered implications of a lack of access to childcare?

Given the fact that substantial proportions of the labour force both in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have dependent children it is clear that a lack of access to childcare will have a widespread impact. That being said, it is a well-known fact that women's

disproportionate responsibility for childcare within the home affects their ability to enter and progress equally in the labour market. This inequality however is being exacerbated by the lack of access to childcare owing to the Covid-19 crisis. Indeed, research has highlighted that without access to childcare gendered patterns of care are being replicated during lockdown, and in many cases magnified (Close the Gap, 2020). Women report that they are expected to assume full responsibility for childcare while working from home, while their partners are able to concentrate fully on paid work. Other women in the study reported that, as their partners are still going out to work outside of the home, they are left to balance work and childcare on their own.

Given that we already know that access to childcare is a critical enabler of women's labour market participation to ensure that an already existing gender issue is not further entrenched attention needs to be given by policy makers as to how families with children, and in particular women will be supported to remain engaged in the labour market when they may be unable to access childcare.

Conclusion

This Research InBrief shows that a lack of access to childcare owing to Covid-19 public health restrictions is likely to be a significant issue for a substantial proportion of workers across the island of Ireland. Around 40% of workers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have dependent children. Furthermore, the evidence presented shows that high proportions of workers live in households where all adults in the household work for whom a lack of access to childcare is likely to be particularly challenging.

The data presented in this Research InBrief makes clear that family is key in how families access childcare. The dominant reliance on family is particularly important in the context of current public health restrictions whereby wider family circles are unable to physically interact with each other and policy discussion remains focused on the re-opening of creches/nurseries and schools. Until families are able to interact with each other it is unlikely that in large-part the challenges presented by a lack of access to childcare are going to be resolved.

References

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