



# POLICY SUBMISSION

**Submission to the Central  
Statistics Office on 2001 Census**

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## 1. Introduction

The Combat Poverty Agency (hereafter referred to as the Agency) is a statutory body whose central aim is to promote a more just and inclusive society through working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion. The Agency has four functions: policy advice, project support and innovation, research and public information.

The Agency welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the CSO on Census 2001. As one of the primary sources of national social and demographic data, the Census is an important source of information on social exclusion and poverty related issues. However, it is the Agency's view that the Census could be strengthened as a source of information on these subjects.

The importance of relevant, accurate and timely information, and the CSO's commitment to providing such, is highlighted in its Statement of Strategy 1998 – 2000<sup>1</sup>. Such information plays a vital role in the formulation and development of many public policies. This is no less relevant to social and anti-poverty policies than those relating to the economy, industry etc.

Social and demographic statistics in Ireland have been traditionally underdeveloped for a number of reasons, including the high costs associated with household surveys and the higher priority placed on economic statistics.<sup>2</sup> However, in a period of rapid social and demographic change such as Ireland has experienced over the past decade, such statistics are of increasing importance if public policies are to be developed that can meet the challenges of such change in a fair and equitable manner. In this respect, information on poverty and social exclusion is particularly relevant to the ongoing development, monitoring and evaluation of the Government's National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). If this is to be effectively achieved, relevant and up-to-date information is necessary.

Progress on the overall poverty reduction targets set in the NAPS will be monitored using data from the Living in Ireland Survey<sup>3</sup>. However, the inclusion of more poverty relevant questions in the Census, and particularly the inclusion of an income question, could serve to complement the information from this survey. Additions to or improvements in the poverty relevant data available from the Census could prove to be very valuable in light of the Government's decision in 1998 to poverty proof all significant policy proposals. In addition, recent developments and forthcoming plans in local government will mean an increasing responsibility on local government bodies to address issues relating to poverty and social exclusion. In this context, the potential of the Census as a source of local information on these issues needs to be developed.

This submission addresses three areas. First, it looks at the possibility of including an income question on Census 2001. Second, it argues for the availability of data on an Enumeration Area or geo coded basis as a means of improving the mapping of disadvantage and therefore the targeting of resources and anti-poverty measures. Finally, it argues that, in the context of peace and the emerging important role of

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<sup>1</sup> CSO, 1998. *Central Statistics Office Statement of Strategy 1998 – 2000*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

<sup>2</sup> National Statistics Board, 1998. *Strategy for Statistics 1998 – 2002*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

<sup>3</sup> The Living in Ireland Survey, conducted by the ESRI, is part of the European Community Household Panel.

cross-border institutions, greater comparability with the Northern Irish census should be sought.

## **2. An Income Question**

At present, information on social exclusion is primarily gleaned from the Census through the composition of deprivation indicators. Various forms of these are comprised from responses to a number of Census questions including those relating to relating to housing tenure, number of rooms occupied, participation in education, employment status, duration of unemployment and access to a car. While the Agency is not arguing here that information relating to income would replace such indices, income is one of the strongest single indicators of poverty. The availability of such information could serve to further strengthen the indices currently in use and also provide additional information of direct relevance to poverty research and anti-poverty policy.

The Agency is aware that the issue of an income question on the Census is not a new one. We are also aware that few countries (USA, New Zealand and Canada) include such a question on their Census of Population. In seeking advice from experts in the area, the potential risks associated with the inclusion of such a question have also been highlighted, including increased and possibly unacceptable margins of error due to non-response rates. In addition, as questions regarding income are frequently perceived as particularly sensitive and intrusive, there is concern that data from sections of the Census may be rendered invalid due to a negative change in attitude to the accurate completion of the Census as a whole.

However, it is also the case that those countries that include income questions on their Census of Population have done so over a number of years. In the absence of readily available analysis of the validity and accuracy of the income data collected, it can only be assumed that the data collected has some validity and usefulness. In addition, given that such questions have been included over a number of periods, one is also lead to conclude that the damage such a question has caused to other areas of the Census has been insignificant.

Of particular relevance here is the possibility of the inclusion of an income question on the forthcoming UK Census. The UK Office of National Statistics included an income question on their pilot survey in 1998 and is now proposing that such a question is included in their 'dress rehearsal'. Although it is not yet certain that such a question will in fact be included in the 'dress rehearsal' or the eventual Census, it is encouraging that the income question has survived the pilot stage and is still very much a live issue.

In the light of these ongoing debates in the UK and the potential value of Census based income information for national and local anti-poverty research and policy, the Agency recommends that an income question be included on the pilot Census survey in Ireland. In considering the form and wording of such a question, the Agency considers that the prime consideration is one of simplicity, that is, the question should not be onerous on the respondent. In addition, it should yield information that is easily analysed so as not to place an undue burden on CSO staff or to delay the availability of other information from the Census.

In line with this, the following question, based on that included in the UK pilot survey, is suggested.

What is your **gross** income? This is your income before taxation, social insurance payments, health insurance, or any other deductions have been made. Please include income from all sources including earnings from employment or self-employment, social welfare payments, rent from property, interest on savings and investments, maintenance and grants and any other sources of income.

<i>Per Week</i>	<i>or</i>	<i>Per Month</i>	<i>or</i>	<i>Per Annum</i>
<b>Under £100</b>		<b>Under £400</b>		<b>Under £5,000</b>
<i>£100 - £199</i>		<i>£400 - £799</i>		<i>£5,000 - £9,499</i>
<i>£200 - £299</i>		<i>£800 - £1,199</i>		<i>£9,500 - £14,499</i>
<i>£300 - £399</i>		<i>£1,200 - £1,599</i>		<i>£14,500 - £18,999</i>
<i>£400 - £499</i>		<i>£1,600 - £1,999</i>		<i>£19,000 - £23,999</i>
<i>£500 - £599</i>		<i>£2,000 - £2,299</i>		<i>£24,000 - £29,999</i>
<i>£600 or more</i>		<i>£2,500 or more</i>		<i>£30,000 or more</i>

Although asking for information on income is always difficult and sensitive, the use of income bands may encourage people to respond to this question. Clear notes would obviously have to be provided with such a question in relation to different sources of income, and a restatement of the confidential nature of the information provided.

If information on income becomes available from the Census, it is important that this is made routinely available in conjunction with information on other indicators of deprivation. These include education level, occupation, unemployment status, housing tenure etc. This information should also be available by household type and composition. Such information would complement the data available from the Living in Ireland Survey and contribute to the development, monitoring and evaluation of the NAPS and other relevant public policies.

### **3. The Availability of Data at Local Level**<sup>4</sup>

In analysing deprivation, it is known that the scale size used influences the distribution pattern. In general, the smaller the scale the more extreme cases appear. When one moves to larger scales, extreme cases are lost and all values move towards an average. In relation to a concept such as deprivation, it is the extreme cases that are sought as these highlight the presence of deprivation concentrations.

In the Republic of Ireland, DEDs are used for small area statistics and analysis. In the main, this system works well. However, difficulties occur when DEDs comprise very different levels of population. In rural districts, the population contained within DEDs is small enough to allow for pockets of disadvantage to be identified. Cities

<sup>4</sup> The Agency would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dennis Pringle, NUI Maynooth in relation to the detail of this section.

and most very large urban settlements are further broken down into wards, and this allow sfor the same.

However, it is also the case that a number of large towns are comprised of only one DED of population size significantly greater than either large rural DEDs or urban wards. Examples of these include Dundalk and Drogheda, both of which have populations of over 25,000. Within these single DED towns 'pockets' of disadvantage may include several thousand people but these are effectively hidden in the overall population.

One possible solution to this is to make data available at the level of the Enumeration Area (EAs). Although this would result in certain rural EAs having very small numbers of households, these could be aggregated up for the purpose of spatial analysis, while allowing for the breakdown of urban populations into units more equal in size to the remainder of the country. This will provide a means of identifying areas of disadvantage that have been hidden in Census data to date and allow for the more effective targeting of anti-poverty policies.

Another possibility here is to geo code each household in the Census. This involves assigning and recording the grid reference for each household. A national system of geo codes is currently being developed by the Ordnance Survey office and An Post. It is intended that geo codes will be available for the Dublin postal regions in spring 1999, with all urban areas being covered by the summer. Geo coding would allow for the extraction of aggregate data for any area irrespective of size or shape using a Geographic Information System<sup>5</sup>.

The availability of data at this very local level has the capacity to greatly enhance the understanding of the spatial distribution of poverty. In the current policy context, it is also has particular relevance to local government reform and the development of local anti-poverty strategies by local authorities. In addition to allowing for the analysis of the spatial distribution of deprivation at a very local level, this system would also allow for the comparison of data for areas over time even if the boundaries of the standard area divisions change. It is not envisaged that data based on geo codes be made routinely available, but that it is available for special runs from the Census.

#### 4. Compatibility with the Northern Ireland Census<sup>6</sup>

One of the strategic objectives of the Agency is to support the peace process and to advance the opportunities offered by peace to build a more inclusive and participative democracy on this island. In order to achieve this, the Agency will seek to influence policy makers and others on issues related to poverty and social exclusion, and to ensure that there is a clear anti-poverty dimension to the new cross border institutions. In this regard, and in the context of the general the trend towards increasing cross-border co-operation, the availability of quality data on an all Ireland basis is becoming increasingly important<sup>7</sup>. It is recommended that the Central Statistics Office liaise closely with their Northern Irish counterparts in order to

<sup>5</sup> The greater use of GIS systems in the Census is recommended by the National Statistics Board in its *Strategy for Statistics 1998 – 2002* (see footnote 2 above).

<sup>6</sup> The Agency would like to thank Sally Cook, University of Ulster, for her help in relation to this section.

<sup>7</sup> A detailed discussion of the difficulties of analysing the spatial distribution of deprivation on an all Ireland basis using Census data is contained in Cook et al., *Comparative Spatial Deprivation in Ireland*, Geography Society of Ireland Report to the Combat Poverty Agency.

standardise, as far as is possible, the content of the Censuses, the wording of questions and the manner in which data is released.

**Areas in which improvements could be made in the compatibility of data relevant to the analysis of deprivation include:**

- social class, which is released on the basis of households in Northern Ireland and individuals in the south;
- educational attainment, which is collected and released on very different bases north and south<sup>8</sup>
- overcrowded households, which is reported as the average number of persons per room in the south and the proportion of households with less than one room per person in Northern Ireland.

The availability of all Ireland data also has relevance in relation to the spatial analysis of deprivation. In the 1991 Census in Northern Ireland, information was released for all areas at the level of Enumeration District (ED), which allows for a more accurate identification and analysis of the spatial distribution of deprivation. If information were available at the level of EAs in the south, or if geo coding were employed, this would make data from the two censuses more compatible.

## **5. Recommendations**

***The Combat Poverty Agency makes the following recommendations in relation to the 2001 Census.***

1. That an income question, similar to that recently piloted in the UK, be included in the 2001 Census pilot survey. The Agency also recommends here that developments in the UK in relation to their income question be closely monitored.
2. That data from the Census be routinely made available at the level of Enumeration Areas and that consideration be given to the use of the system of geo codes being developed by the Ordnance Survey office and An Post.
3. That the Central Statistics Office closely liaise with their counterparts in Northern Ireland to pursue issues of comparability of data from the two Censuses.

## **6. Conclusion**

The concern of the Agency in making a submission to the Central Statistics Office in relation the 2001 Census is in improving the Census as a source of information on poverty and deprivation to inform the development of more effective public policy to tackle poverty. Three principal areas are addressed in the submission: the inclusion of an income question, the availability of data on a small area basis to allow for more effective identification of pockets of deprivation, and greater compatibility with the Northern Irish census. The Agency believes that if these issues were addressed then the Census would provide a stronger base for the analysis of poverty and deprivation on which policy can be developed. This is particularly important given the need to monitor the implementation of the NAPS, which seeks to substantially reduce levels of poverty in Ireland.

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<sup>8</sup> In Northern Ireland, information is collected and released for persons aged over 18 years who have obtained third level and / or professional qualifications. In the Republic of Ireland, information is collected for each person aged over 15 years in relation to their highest level of educational attainment. This is routinely released however only for those active in the labour force.