

Policy Submission

Submission on the Family Support Agency's Strategic Plan

September 2003

FAMILY SUPPORT AGENCY STRATEGIC PLAN

***SUBMISSION BY
COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY***

September 2003

1. Introduction

The Combat Poverty Agency is pleased to make a submission to the Family Support Agency's first Strategic Plan. We welcome the establishment of the Family Support Agency and would hope that we could share information and collaborate on issues of common interest. The key issues we would like to see addressed in the Strategic Plan are as follows.

2. Inclusivity of Family

The first point we would make is that **a broad definition of the family should be used to include all types of families**. For example, the UN focuses on a broad definition of the family as the basic unit of society in all its forms whether traditional, biological, common law, extended or one parent¹. In many ways this reflects the changing patterns in modern society and diversity of relationships which make up family units.

Evidence would suggest that a general redefinition of family is taking place, which involves a move to a focus on the obligations of parenthood rather than marital ties². "Family solidarity is being reinterpreted and redefined to refer to parental responsibility rather than spouses' or partners' solidarity towards each other"³. Across European countries there is a weakening of marital ties and a diversification of forms of private life. This has implications for family policy and supports, with an increasing focus on parental obligations and relations. This has a clear connection with a focus on children and the rights of children.

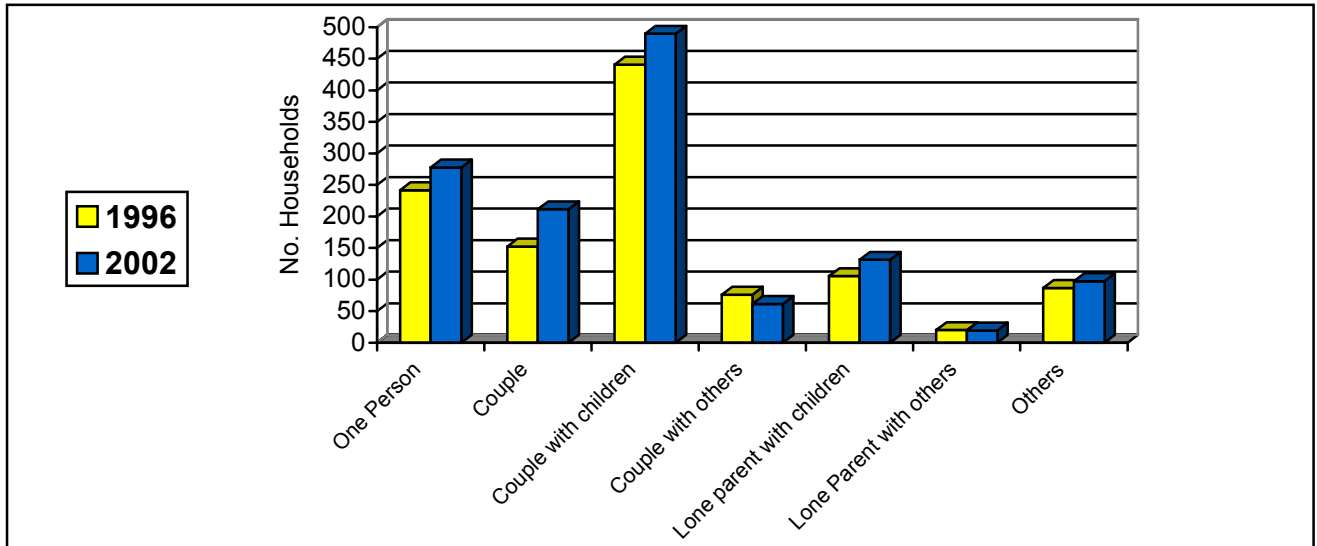
Families in Ireland have an increasingly wide diversity of forms, with family size in general declining. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the diversity of household types existing in Ireland. In 2002 there were 1,287,958 private households in Ireland.

¹ The definition used by the United Nations is: "Any combination of two or more persons who are bound together by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibility for, inter alia, the care and maintenance of group members through procreation or adoption, the socialisation of children and the social control of members". Commission on the Family (1998) *Strengthening Families for Life*. Dublin: Commission on the Family.

² Daly, M. and S. Clavero (2002) *Contemporary Family Policy: A Comparative Review of Ireland, France, Germany, Sweden and the UK*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration for the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

³ Letablier, M.T. & G. Rueucau (2000) "The Policy Logics of Action about Caring for Children", Paper presented at the 4th Seminar of the TESR Network Working and Mothering: Social Practices and Social Policies, Paris, March 23-25.

Figure 1: Living Arrangements⁴: 1996 and 2002



Key trends include:

- The number of families in the state increased by over 30% from 1981 to 2002, with the majority of the increase taking place in the 1996 to 2002 period.
- The fastest growing category was families (whether married or not) without children – their number increased by nearly 80% since 1981.
- Over three quarters of families of all families in 2002 had two children or less, compared to 62% in 1981.
- The number of families with four or more children almost halved over the 21 year period, standing now at 78,900.
- The average number of children per family fell from 2.2 to 1.6 over this period.
- In total, there were 1,470,800 children in family units in Ireland in 2002.
- In 2002 there were 77,600 cohabiting couples, up 31,300 from 1996. These comprised 8.4% of family units in 2002, compared to 3.9% in 1996.
- Almost two thirds of cohabiting couples had no children.
- The number of same sex cohabiting couples recorded increased from 150 in 1996 to 1,300 in 2002.
- There were nearly 154,000 lone parent families in 2002, 85% of these being headed by women.
- 40% of lone parent families were headed by a widowed person, a further 32% by a separated or divorced person and 24% by a single person.
- Persons aged 65 years and over living alone accounted for 41% of all persons living alone in 2002.

⁴ Source: Central Statistics Office (2003) *Census 2002: Principal Demographic Results*. Dublin: Stationery Office. Notes: 1. Couples include both married and cohabiting couples. 2. Couples with others includes couples with children and other persons. 3. Lone parents with others includes lone parents with children and other persons. 4. Others include two or more family units and non-family households.

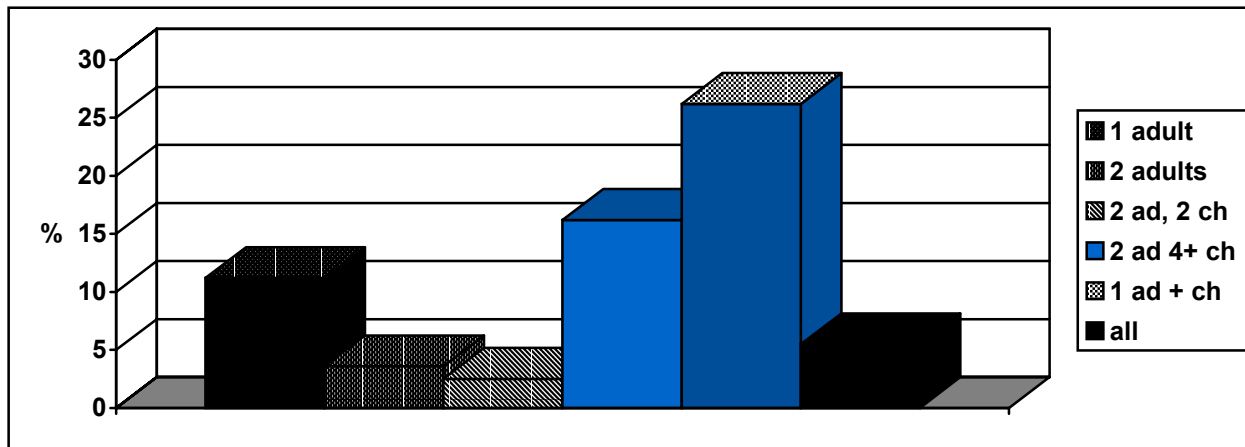
3. Addressing the Needs of Families in Poverty

There is a need to focus attention on addressing the needs of families in poverty. Families with greatest needs identified by Combat Poverty are:

- ***Families with 4 or more children***
- ***Lone parent families***
- ***Single adult families, especially women***
- ***Vulnerable families.***

Families with four or more children and lone parent families have the highest risk of being poor, see Figure 2. While the number of large families in the population as a whole is declining, the level of child poverty in Ireland is relatively high: 8 per cent of children have a risk of consistent poverty; with a quarter of all under 18 year olds living in low income households⁵. Child poverty damages children's well-being as well as their future well-being as adults.

Figure 2: Families in Consistent Poverty⁶



In total, it is estimated that 5.5% of households (approximately 71,000 households) experience consistent poverty (ie. are living on an income of less than €172 per adult per week and do not have basic necessities such as food, clothes and heating).

Households headed by someone who is ill or has a disability have a relatively high risk of consistent poverty at 11%. However, when we look at households living below the income poverty line of €147 per week, that poverty risk increases to 54%. This risk is accentuated by the costs associated with having a disability as well as barriers to full participation in society.

Households headed by someone who is unemployed continue to have a high risk – with just over 50% living below the income poverty line and 22% in consistent poverty. In fact, people in workless households make up 70% of the consistently

⁵ Low income households are households with an income below 60% of the median, which was approximately €147 per week for a single adult in 2000.

⁶ Percentage of persons below 70% of median income and experiencing basic deprivation by household type, in 2000. Nolan, B., Gannon, B., Layte, R., Watson, D., Whelan, C.T. and Williams, J. (2002) *Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland: Results from the 2000 Living in Ireland Survey*. Dublin: ESRI Policy Research series, No. 45

poor population, comprising people working in the home, unemployed people, retired people and disabled people. Low paid employees account for a quarter of the consistently poor.

Many families find themselves in vulnerable situations for a variety of reasons that can increase their risk of poverty. Vulnerable families include homeless families, particularly women and children. The number of homeless households remains high at 3,773 in 2002, as compared to 3,743 in 1999⁷.

Ireland is becoming a more intercultural society which has many positive benefits for Irish life. The recent census results show that non-Irish nationals now make up nearly 6% of the population. However, the economic, social and cultural position of many ethnic minority families, including Travellers place them at risk of poverty in Ireland.

Other families who may find themselves at risk of poverty include older women living alone. An increasing trend in Ireland in recent years has been the increase in poverty risk for single adult households, which mainly comprise single adults living alone, the majority of whom are older women.

Families may also find themselves in vulnerable situations because of the effect of violence inside or outside the home. Domestic violence can have a serious detrimental impact on families and lead to an increased risk of poverty. External violence has also impacted on family life in Ireland. For example, in the Border Region in particular, but also through-out Ireland, the Northern Ireland conflict has impacted on family life. Research has found that children in poor families are most at risk from violence associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland.⁸

The **reality of family poverty** is illustrated in a recent Combat Poverty study based on the experiences of 30 families⁹. The families were chosen to reflect the broad spectrum of circumstances facing Irish families in poverty: rural and urban, one and two parents, small and large families and working and non-working.

These families were very poor, living on €124 per week on average¹⁰. Almost all of their money went on food, household bills and their children's basic needs so that these households were very vulnerable to shortages for regular and irregular expenses. As a result, borrowing and indebtedness were widespread.

The Celtic Tiger bypassed these families. In fact, many felt relatively deprived during the economic boom. They could see and hear about others doing well, but their situation either remained static, disimproved or only marginally improved.

One striking finding was the extent of poor health among these families. One in three households highlighted health problems in relation to children. Reference was

⁷ Department of Environment and Local Government (2003) *Housing Statistics Bulletin: December Quarter 2002*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

⁸ Fay, M.T., Morrissey, M., Smyth, M. and T. Wong (1999) *The Cost of the Troubles Study*. Pluto Press

⁹ Daly, M. and M. Leonard (2002) *Against All Odds: Family Life on a Low Income in Ireland*. Institute of Public Administration in association with the Combat Poverty Agency.

¹⁰ The study was undertaken in the year 2000. Figures and amounts refer to the year 2000.

made to the content and nutritional balance of the children's diets – providing a nutritional diet costs money. In a minority of households children were sometimes kept out of school because of a lack of food.

Contrary to the view of a supportive community life, the local environment for the families in the study was often a negative aspect of their lives. Many adults felt bullied and picked upon. Lone mothers in particular were very vulnerable in this regard – they felt their homes were more likely to be targeted because there was no man living there. In the local areas there was a lack of local amenities and services. The threat of being burgled or attacked as well as the presence of joy-riding and drug misuse locally was also raised. Under these circumstances family relationships were cited as being crucial in helping people to keep going when times were tough.

The study also focused on the impact on children of living on a low income. Children valued their family - half of the children in the study viewed their family as the best thing in their lives. The concerns of children were mainly about the pressures of trying to fit in with their peers. For example, wearing the right clothes was seen as important in being accepted by peers. This meant that certain brand names often had to be bought even though this was an expensive option. Unfortunately, school was for some children a place of danger rather than learning. A quarter of the children admitted that they had been bullied at school – often because they did not have brand name clothes or runners.

3. Recognising the Importance of Community Supports

It is important to recognise that families do not exist in isolation, but are comprised of individuals and exist in communities. Family policy and supports thus need to recognise the rights and needs of individuals within the family unit and the community and environment within which the family exists. It has been argued that **a vibrant community life can support the family unit.**¹¹ **Community development approaches are very important in this regard.** Combat Poverty understands community development to be “a process whereby those who are marginalised and excluded are enabled to gain in self-confidence, to join with others and to participate in actions to change their situation and tackle the problems that face their community”. In supporting families community development can support change at three levels: personal – developing self-confidence and skills; community – regenerating and revitalising disadvantaged communities; and public policy – influencing wider policies and programmes in favour of disadvantaged people and communities.

Examples of supportive community initiatives include the Family Resource Centres and Springboard. Evaluations of these initiatives provide information on their impact and areas to be addressed. It is important that these initiatives are integrated and co-ordinated at local and national level. This, and other work, highlights the importance of links between home, school and community in tackling disadvantage. For example, the Combat Poverty Agency's Demonstration Programme on

¹¹ Commission on the Family (1996) *Strengthening Families for Life: Interim Report to the Minister for Social Welfare*. Dublin: Commission on the Family.

Educational Disadvantage¹² demonstrated the value of integrated responses, involving the home, school, adult education, community and relevant services, being at the core of any local response to address educational disadvantage. The evaluation of the Demonstration Programme illustrated the value and challenges of integrated responses.

A further important point in relation to community supports is the recognition of the important role Family Resource Centres play in promoting social inclusion in disadvantaged areas. The continuation and strengthening of this work will require adequate funding and the maintenance of supports.

4. Working within the Current Policy Context

It will be important to recognise existing policy initiatives to support the family and to build on these. The main national policy to address poverty is the **National Anti-Poverty Strategy**. The revised strategy *Building an Inclusive Society* contains targets to eliminate poverty generally by 2007, with child poverty being specifically mentioned. One of the key strategies to address this is to raise the basic social welfare rate to €150 per week and to fulfil the Government's commitment to raise child benefit to €34.50 per week (€149.90) per month. The Strategy also proposes greater equality of access to education, health and housing services for children. In addition, the Strategy addresses a number of policy concerns relating to the delivery of public services; the need for family support initiatives; the prevention of anti-social behaviour; teenage pregnancy and child suicide; the regeneration of poor communities and run down areas; and the needs of families in vulnerable situations, such as families with a disabled person, some minority ethnic groups, including Travellers and homeless families, which are relevant to combating family poverty.

In July of this year, the Government submitted its **National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005** to the European Commission. Following an extensive consultation process, this Plan reconfirms the NAPS targets and outlines various policies and programmes to tackle poverty.

Further relevant policies and programmes are the National Children's Strategy and the National Development Plan. The National Children's Strategy contains an important focus on tackling child poverty and supporting the rights of children. The National Development Plan has social inclusion as one of its four key priorities as well as having social inclusion as a horizontal principle across the Plan. The Family Resource Centres are included under the Social Inclusion and Childcare Priority of the National Development Plan. In this context they have an important role in promoting social inclusion. It will thus be important that robust social inclusion indicators are developed to enable measurement of the impact of the Family Resource Centres in promoting social inclusion.

¹² Cullen, B. (2002) *Evaluating Integrated Responses to Educational Disadvantage*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.