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POVERTY
in Northern Ireland:
From the Local to the Global

Canan Ozkaya, Qurat Ul Ain & Allen Thurston

School of Social Sciences, Education & Social Work
Queen's University Belfast & Centre for Global Education

Supported by Halifax Foundation for Northern Ireland

This report has been funded by the Halifax Foundation

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Foreword

The Centre for Global Education (CGE) is an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) based in Belfast concerned with the practice of development education. It defines development education as those processes of thought and action that contribute to a mutual understanding of social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental conditions in both a local and global context. Our mission is to practice education that challenges the root causes of poverty, inequality and injustice, enabling action at all levels and in all sectors of society. With that mission in mind, CGE commissioned Queen's University Belfast's School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work to carry out a systematic literature review of poverty reports in Northern Ireland between 2020 and 2024 that discerned the main drivers of poverty and persistent trends, and to make informed recommendations that could support effective anti-poverty policy interventions.

This report carries the results of the review and an impressive depth of data that focuses on the drivers of poverty across eight thematic areas: child poverty; health poverty; food poverty; energy poverty; educational outcomes; housing and homelessness; employment poverty; and the cost of living. The corrosive nature of poverty is evident from the findings given the intersectionality of the eight dominant themes. For example, the report finds that food insecurity significantly impacts on mental and physical health with people facing hunger becoming 24.3 percent more likely to need the use of an ambulance, 24.3 percent more likely to have attendance at Accident and Emergency, 11.5 percent more likely to need a GP appointment and 10.1 percent more likely to need a hospital admission. While readers of the report will be surprised by a very low unemployment rate in Northern Ireland of 1.6 percent, this serves to emphasise the degree of employment poverty with the foodbank network, the Trussell Trust, finding that one in four people referred to their food banks are in working households (Trussell Trust, 2023: 16). This points to wages not keeping pace with the rising cost of daily essentials, such as food, energy and childcare. The most vulnerable members of our society to the inequalities created by poverty identified by the report are children, lone parents, large families, black and minority ethnic communities, and people suffering from disabilities.

Perhaps the most alarming statistic in the report is that 18 percent of children live in relative poverty in Northern Ireland with eight percent of these living in persistent poverty. The report uncovers the impacts of poverty on the physical and mental development of young people with poor children being more likely to experience psychological distress and poor physical health. They are also more likely to experience educational inequalities as grammar schools in Northern Ireland are predominantly attended by children from more advantaged backgrounds. While 44 percent of children attend selective post-primary schools, only 14 percent of these pupils are eligible for free school meals. Inherent with such systemic inequalities in our education system is a lack of social mobility and the report argues that breaking this cycle requires the setting of quotas for free school meal entry for grammar schools that ensures they are representative of the geographic areas in which they are situated.

A key aim of CGE in commissioning this report was to locate local poverty in a comparative international context. To achieve this aim, the researchers selected a group of 12 countries, consisting of some of the world's leading economies, including the UK and south of Ireland, to provide "a solid benchmark for evaluating social and economic indicators". The indicators considered in the comparative section of the report include average income, unemployment, life expectancy, child poverty and educational outcomes. Perhaps, the most telling finding in this section is the average annual income comparison in which Northern Ireland has the lowest income of the 17 economies considered. There is also a striking divergence in the annual average income of the north of Ireland ($36,900) compared to that in the south of Ireland ($78,970). There are similar findings in educational attainment with the north of Ireland having a Pisa score for literacy at 485 and numeracy 475 compared to the south of Ireland scores for literacy 516 and numeracy 492. It suggests significant social and economic inequalities within the island of Ireland with the report providing a useful benchmark upon which to monitor future poverty trends in the north and south.

The researchers' analysis, conclusions and recommendations commendably aim to probe the root causes of the poverty data revealed by the report. They point to neoliberalism having been a "driving force in welfare reform in the UK, while failing to take account of the systemic barriers that exist for people living in poverty". As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has argued: "poverty in the UK is a political choice. Poverty is an outcome of policies that have been deliberately designed" (Tyler and Campbell, 2024: 2). With this in mind, the Queen's University research team argue "It is imperative that political parties move away from neoliberalism and a framing of inequality that recasts it as a virtuous outcome of people getting what they deserve". In recalling the failures by the Northern Ireland Assembly to deal with the systemic causes of poverty, they highlight the "urgent need to develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland with measurable targets". The publication of this report coincides with the launch of a consultation process on a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy by the Northern Ireland Executive. However, the Initial analysis of the draft strategy (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025) by the research team indicates serious flaws in the document. They find 'that the present draft lacks clear and measurable targets, milestones and will struggle to address issues of poverty in Northern Ireland in the current form'. This is a concerning initial assessment of the proposal that the Northern Ireland Executive should closely consider together with the findings of this report.

As an organisation situated in the international development and development education sectors in the island of Ireland, CGE calls upon colleagues to get behind the campaign for an effective anti-poverty strategy and to address the question of neoliberalism as part of their advocacy, public engagement and global education activities. A research study commissioned by CGE and Financial Justice Ireland in 2022 found that:

> "neither the international development nor the development education sector give anywhere near adequate attention to explorations with the public of the economic causes of poverty, inequality and injustice and of responses, through education, to the global neoliberal system" (Fricke, 2022: 7).

As sectors committed to tackling the root causes of poverty and inequality, omitting neoliberalism from their practice is not a tenable position given the worrying trends toward local and global inequality highlighted by this report. If poverty is a political choice then eradicating poverty requires concerted political action to ensure policy outcomes that will reverse the slide toward inequality.

Acknowledgments

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Stephen McCloskey,
Director,
Centre for Global Education

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List of Abbreviations

BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CV	Curriculum Vitae
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
EPPI	Evidence of Policy and Practice Centre
EU	European Union
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GP	General Practitioner
G12	Group of Twelve
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
MDM	Multiple Deprivation Measures
MIS	Minimum Income Standard
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHS	National Health Service
NICCY	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
NICVA	Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
NI	Northern Ireland
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NRPF	No Recourse to Public Funds
RaISe	Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Executive Summary

The terms of reference for this report centred around undertaking an evidence synthesis/systematic review of literature published in the period 1st January 2020 to 31st December 2024, on the topic of poverty in Northern Ireland. In addition, the terms of reference wanted an analysis of levels of poverty in Northern Ireland, compared to the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and some international comparators from Europe and the rest of the world. The G12 countries, plus the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, were determined to make a suitable group to make comparisons with. The report that follows synthesises published research literature and reports and then sets poverty in Northern Ireland within a broader national and international context. This evidence is then used to make informed recommendations that could support effective anti-poverty policy interventions in Northern Ireland.

This review provides an evidence synthesis of the literature on poverty in Northern Ireland since 2020. A systematic search across five major databases was undertaken: Scopus, Web of Science, Social Policy and Practice, PsycINFO, and Medline. A total of 622 studies were retrieved from academic, government, policy, and non-statutory sources. These studies were exported to Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre (EPPI) Reviewer (Version: 6.16.0.0) for screening and data extraction. After identifying and removing 350 duplicates, two reviewers conducted an initial screening of titles and abstracts, excluding 219 records based on inclusion criteria. Subsequently, 82 records underwent full-text screening, with 53 meeting the inclusion criteria and being incorporated into the evidence synthesis. The findings from these 53 studies are organised into eight key thematic areas: child poverty, health poverty, food poverty, energy poverty, educational outcomes, housing and homelessness, employment poverty, and the cost of living.

International Comparisons

Poverty in Northern Ireland is contextualised by comparing it with the G12 countries and Republic of Ireland. Comparative analysis revealed that, in terms of income, Northern Ireland ranked 16th out of 17 countries. However, it ranks first in terms of low unemployment, demonstrating a strong labour market presence. Northern Ireland holds the 14th out of 17 countries for life expectancy, while for child poverty, it is ranked 7th out of 17. In educational outcomes, Northern Ireland's reading scores place it 9th among the 17 comparator countries. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of poverty in Northern Ireland and offer insights into its relative position on the global stage.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland with measurable targets. Department for Communities (2024) report that 349,000 people live in poverty in Northern Ireland. These strategies need to be resilient and robust in the face of a changing and sometimes unstable political climate in Northern Ireland. This means a cross-community, cross-party approach to poverty developed and approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly that develops long-term solutions to poverty by:

- Developing a clear plan to eradicate poverty by the provision of financial aid packages to ensure all households have monthly income of greater than £373 per week (the figure set by the Government as being the threshold for living in poverty or not living in poverty).
- Reform of welfare policies and a movement away from neoliberalism ideology underpinning these policies.
- Addressing health inequalities with significant financial investment into life-changing interventions in the poorest areas of Northern Ireland, where health inequalities are greatest.

- Addressing food poverty and ensuring that all families in Northern Ireland can live without food insecurity.
- Undertaking historical and planned future high-quality analysis of Northern Ireland longitudinal data sets (e.g., health data, benefits data, school attainment data, population census data) to examine patterns of poverty and inequality, looking at how public policy and Government decisions have influenced outcomes, and make similar comparisons to England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland and suitable international countries.
- Investment in, and support for, affordable childcare to ensure parents (especially those who may be primary care givers) can take their place in the workforce and by being economically active increased their household income. This ultimately would lift many families out of poverty.
- Improving the quality and availability of housing, ensuring affordable rental property was well insulated, energy efficient, and free from damp and mould. This would reduce poverty, improve health of the renting population and their children, and help Government meet targets on carbon emissions.
- Improving access to all forms of education, especially for disadvantaged groups, where publicly funded schools should educate a representative section of the communities they serve. In essence, the Northern Ireland Assembly should set quotas for free school meal entry for grammar schools that are representative of the geographic areas in which they are situated.
- Address transport and digital poverty, particularly in rural areas.

Key words: Poverty; Inequality; Employment income; Evidence synthesis; Northern Ireland, International comparison of poverty; G12.

1 Introduction

Poverty is a critical social issue with profound negative impacts. Despite extensive research on economic growth and development, economists have yet to find a definitive way to make poor countries prosperous, leaving poverty as the reality for billions (Stachurski & Azariadis, 2005). In 1995, the United Nations (UN) adopted two distinct definitions of poverty. One of these, absolute poverty, is characterised as a condition marked by severe deprivation of fundamental human needs, including access to adequate food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, healthcare, shelter, education, and information. This definition emphasises that absolute poverty is not solely determined by income but also by the availability and accessibility of essential services (UN, 1995: 75). According to the UN another form of poverty is overall poverty, which involves a lack of income, resources, and access to basic services, leading to hunger, poor health, inadequate housing, and social exclusion. It occurs globally, from widespread deprivation in developing countries to isolated poverty amid wealth in developed nations, and can result from economic downturns, disasters, or social marginalisation (Ibid., 1995:75).

For many years, approaches to poverty in the realm of international development and policymaking were humanistically limited, focusing solely on economic growth as the primary goal of development and measuring quality of life only through per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Nussbaum, 2006). Poverty occurs when individuals, families, or groups lack the resources necessary to access typical diets, participate in common activities, and enjoy standard living conditions and amenities, resulting in a level of deprivation so severe that they are effectively excluded from normal societal patterns and activities (Townsend, 1979). According to Sen (1973), one reason poverty persists is its intrinsic link to inequality: even when average income levels rise, disparities within a society can still result in significant levels of poverty. Furthermore, the socially accepted minimum standard of living, which helps define the 'poverty line', is often influenced by the average income, meaning poverty measures may also capture elements of relative inequality (Sen, 1973; Piketty, 2014). On Piketty's analysis (2014), inequality is not an accident but the result of capitalism which, without state intervention and high progressive income tax, threatens democracy and extreme inequality.

The United Nations acknowledges that income alone does not constitute the ultimate goal but serves as a means to achieve the broader objective of human development. To this end, non-economic factors such as healthy life, women's status, and standard of living also play a vital role. To promote this holistic approach, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) annually publishes the Human Development Report, ranking over 100 countries based on the Human Development Index (HDI). This index not only considers GDP performance but also evaluates progress in education, child welfare, and health outcomes, including life expectancy (UN, 2024. A country's or region's level of achievement in a specific area (such as income, literacy, or life expectancy) is typically assessed using the average value of that outcome. However, this approach overlooks the potential inequality in how that outcome is distributed among different population groups or geographical areas within the country.

This disparity is evident in Northern Ireland, which, despite being part of the United Kingdom, has long been recognised as one of its most deprived regions (Monteith and McLaughlin, 2020). Despite this, it has not been prominently featured in discussions on poverty measurement or the development of poverty alleviation policies (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Poverty in Northern Ireland leads to young people growing up in segregated communities characterised by high rates of disability, chronic physical and mental health issues, and persistent unemployment, perpetuating intergenerational poverty (Horgan, 2011). This review aims to provide a systematic and focused analysis of the existing literature on poverty in Northern Ireland since 2020. The evidence will be examined to identify the main drivers and indicators of poverty, as well as the recommendations or interventions proposed to address the issue. Additionally, the review will explore the connection between poverty and broader economic and social structures between Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, UK, European, and global levels to enhance the understanding of the causes of poverty and inequality. The objective is to systematically review literature, reports, and data on poverty in Northern Ireland from 2020-2024, identify key drivers of poverty, compare them with patterns in Ireland, and G12 countries (Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan,

Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and provide evidence-based recommendations to community organisations and policymakers to strengthen interventions aimed at poverty reduction.

2 Methodology

A systematic literature review is a rigorous and structured approach to synthesise the existing literature followed by a predefined protocol to ensure reproducibility, transparency, and minimisation of bias in the selection and inclusion of relevant literature (Guillaume, 2019). It involves the identification of relevant databases, selection of studies according to a predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter irrelevant literature. Relevant data is extracted and summarised, while the quality and reliability of the included studies are critically appraised. The findings are then systematically synthesised to provide a structured overview of the evidence. Finally, the results are presented, highlighting key trends, insights, and research gaps for future research.

2.1 Research Questions

The systematic evidence synthesis was carried out to explore the following questions:

1. What does the published literature indicate are the main drivers of poverty and long-term trends and indicators in Northern Ireland?
2. How does poverty at a local (Northern Ireland) level connect with macro and international poverty trends in the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Europe, and globally?

2.2 Research Databases

For this systematic literature review, we selected five prominent academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed scholarly work. In addition to these, we incorporated government and policy databases, as well as reports from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international bodies, to provide a broader contextual understanding and enable cross-sectoral comparison. This multi-source approach allows us to triangulate findings, identify gaps between academic research and policy or practice, and enhance the robustness and relevance of our review outcomes. The following databases were explored to gather relevant studies:

1. Academic databases
2. Scopus
3. Web of Science
4. Social policy and practice
5. PsycINFO
6. Medline

Government and policy databases

1. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)
2. Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe)
3. UK Data Service
4. Gov.uk Publications (for UK government reports)
5. NGO and International Reports
6. OECD library
7. World Bank Open Knowledge Repository
8. European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)
9. Joseph Rowntree Foundation
10. NICVA (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action)
11. World Inequality Lab
12. European Commission Data (for EU poverty and deprivation statistics)
13. Just Economics

14. Statista
15. World Data
16. Eurostat
17. Worldometer
18. World Bank
19. UNICEF
20. PISA

2.3 Search Criteria

The search criteria were confined to papers:

1. Published studies, reports, and articles published from 2020 to 2024 in English.
2. Geographically focused on Northern Ireland, with secondary comparisons to UK, Republic of Ireland, EU, and global data.
3. Addressed poverty, its drivers, trends, or policies in Northern Ireland.
4. Sourced from Governmental reports, peer-reviewed journals, NGO reports, and reputable policy analysis.

For government, statutory, and non-statutory databases we conducted a comprehensive search to identify documents related to poverty. Unlike academic databases, these repositories do not feature search engines that allow for structured query strings. Therefore, we manually examined archives containing relevant documents and reports to ensure a thorough and exhaustive search. Search strategies used for searching records from databases can be found in Table Appendix 1, in Appendix 1.

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only

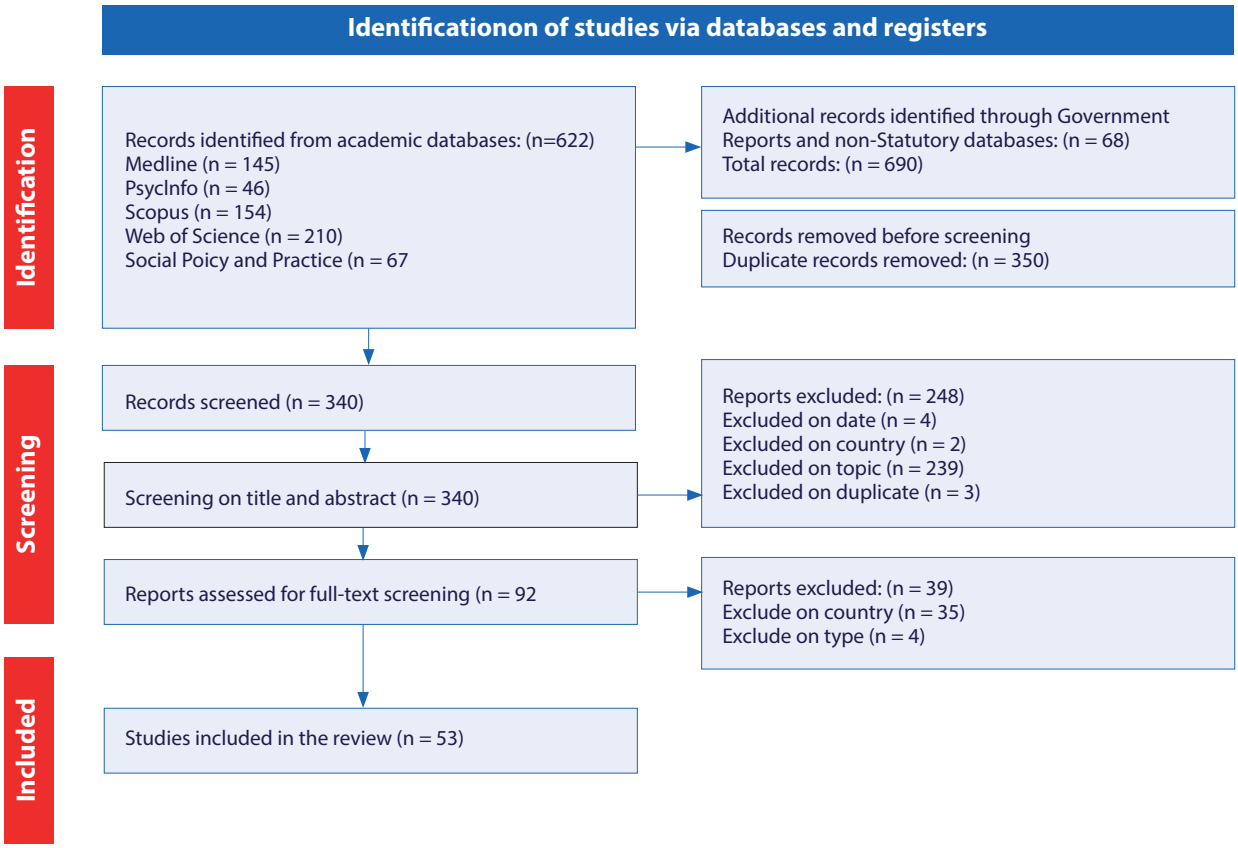

Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram

2.4 Selection of Studies

This review examined all available evidence on poverty in Northern Ireland, including its prevalence, severity, and lived experiences. It also assessed various interventions and services aimed at reducing poverty, including government initiatives that provide support to those affected and targeted interventions for individuals experiencing poverty. To manage the anticipated large volume of studies and maintain a focus on Northern Ireland, the search was limited to English-language peer-reviewed publications, government reports, and non-statutory literature. The review included all studies on poverty in Northern Ireland, regardless of methodology.

In total 622 studies were recorded from academic, Government and policy databases and non-statutory databases. Studies were exported to the Evidence of Policy and Practice Centre (EPPI) Reviewer Version: 6.16.0.0 for screening and data extraction. Three hundred and fifty duplicates were found and removed. Initial screening of titles and abstracts was conducted by two reviewers, and 219 records were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Eighty-two records were reviewed for full-text screening, and fifty-three records met the inclusion criteria and were included in the evidence synthesis. Inter-rater reliability was undertaken on 50 manuscripts to check for agreement on inclusion. Kappa was =1.0, indicating complete agreement between the reviewers. Codes were developed to extract relevant information from the included studies (Appendix 1).

3 Findings

According to the NISRA (2023/2024) report, relative poverty remains higher than absolute poverty in Northern Ireland. In 2023/24, 17 percent of individuals, approximately 331,000 people, were living in relative poverty, while 15 percent, around 291,000 individuals, were experiencing absolute poverty. Although relative poverty decreased slightly from 18 percent in 2022/23 to 17 percent in 2023/24, absolute poverty increased from 14 percent to 15 percent. These headline figures, however, only tell part of the story. Poverty in Northern Ireland is a complex, multifaceted issue that affects individuals and communities in varied and intersecting ways.

To explore this in more depth, we conducted a thematic analysis of relevant reports and literature. Themes were generated inductively, with the team closely reading and becoming familiar with selected articles. Initial themes were identified, discussed, and refined through collaboration. These were then grouped into cognate areas, with some organised as sub-themes under broader thematic headings.

3.1. Key Factors Driving Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

Poverty in Northern Ireland is persistent and often begins in childhood, driven by early life disadvantages and socio-economic factors (Graham and Nawarol, Department for Communities, 2021; Reimagine Children's Collective, 2023). According to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024), 18 percent of children in Northern Ireland were living in relative poverty (before housing costs), while 8 percent experienced persistent poverty, defined as living in poverty for three of the past four years. Research indicates that childhood poverty, poor educational outcomes (NICCY, 2021), and low parental qualifications (Reimagine Children's Collective, 2023) significantly impact life chances and future earnings (Bywaters et al., 2020; JRF, 2025). Family structure also plays a crucial role, as lone parents, larger families, and those experiencing family breakdown are at greater risk of poverty, partly due to the financial strain of single incomes, the high cost of living, and unaffordable childcare (Bunting et al., 2023; NI Audit Office, 2024; JRF, 2024; JRF, 2025).

High Cost of Living

The rising cost of living is a central driver of child poverty in Northern Ireland, directly affecting families' ability to meet children's basic needs (Centre for Progressive Policy, 2023). When essential costs - such as food, fuel, housing, and childcare - consume a large portion of household income, particularly in low-income or single-income households, the result is often a shortfall in meeting children's nutritional, educational, and developmental needs (Shinwell et al., 2021; Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024; JRF, 2024). According to Bunting et al. (2023), in Northern Ireland, economic inactivity (26 percent) and low-paid work have deepened poverty for children, especially when families are subject to benefit caps or reduced hours due to the cost-of-living crisis. The two-child limit policy, applied to over 43 percent of children from families with more than three children, disproportionately harms those in low-income households. The pattern reflects how rising costs intensify deprivation in already disadvantaged communities, trapping more children in poverty.

Rising heating and food costs are also pushing families who are already on the margins - especially in rural Northern Ireland - deeper into poverty, with children bearing the brunt (Centre for Progressive Policy, 2023). According to Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2021), 82 percent of rural households rely on home heating oil, which lacks a price cap and affordable alternatives. Families face stark choices between heating and eating, directly impacting children's health. Childcare costs are another major factor. The NI Audit Office (2024) reports average weekly childcare costs at £193 per child, over a third of household income, placing huge pressure on families, especially lone parents. This forces many out of work, lowering income and raising child poverty risks. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024–2025), inflation and stagnant wages have worsened the situation in the UK. While Northern Ireland has lower average housing costs, 43 percent of social renters and 35 percent of private renters still live in poverty. These conditions contribute to overcrowding, housing instability, and rising child homelessness affecting education, mental health, and overall development.

Children in Northern Ireland are disproportionately affected by the rising cost of living, as support systems fail to keep up. According to the Centre for Progressive Policy (2023), parents often skip meals, delay heating, or leave work due to unaffordable childcare choices that harm children's health and development and deepen intergenerational poverty in Northern Ireland. Employment is no longer a safeguard. Northen Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2021) and the NI Audit Office (2024) report that around two-thirds of children in poverty come from working families. With one in four jobs paying below the Real Living Wage and many relying on insecure work, families struggle to cover basics like food, heating, and housing - leaving children vulnerable and dependent on food banks or state aid. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (Birt, Drake, Cebula, et al., 2022; JRF, 2024; JRF, 2025) highlights that in-work poverty remains one of the most persistent and damaging forms of poverty across the UK, including Northern Ireland. Although overall poverty rates in Northern Ireland appear lower than in other countries in the UK, the intensity of hardship among low-income working families especially those with children is deeply concerning. When wages fall short and living costs rise, children are more likely to experience nutritional deprivation, unstable or overcrowded housing, missed educational opportunities, and increased mental health strain due to ongoing parental stress and financial insecurity (Birt et al., 2022; JRF, 2024; JRF, 2025).

Gaps in Family Support Systems: Welfare System Policies and Childcare

The design and delivery of social security play a pivotal role in determining whether families can stay out of poverty, and for many in Northern Ireland, current welfare policy is failing to provide a sufficient safety net, especially for families with children (Bunting et al., 2023; Bywaters et al., 2020). Despite welfare powers being devolved in principle, Northern Ireland is bound by the parity principle, meaning it must match welfare policy in Great Britain unless it funds any differences itself (JRF, 2025). This has limited local flexibility to protect vulnerable children from harmful UK-wide reforms. For example, the two-child limit, the benefit cap, and Universal Credit rollout have all had substantial negative impacts on child poverty rates in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024).

The NICCY (2021) report and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024) both emphasise that these policies have disproportionately harmed larger families, lone parents, and families with disabled children. In Northern Ireland, 21 percent of families have three or more children, higher than any other UK nation, making the two-child limit especially punitive (O'Hara and Orr, 2021). Many families in poverty are simply ineligible for the support they need, not because they don't qualify based on income, but because of rigid entitlement rules. While Northern Ireland has implemented some welfare mitigation measures, such as payments to offset the bedroom tax and benefit cap, these have been limited in scope and duration (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) found that although Northern Ireland has lower poverty rates than other UK regions, many families still fall into deep or persistent poverty due to inadequate or delayed benefit support. For instance, 43 percent of children in families with three or more children are living in poverty, and despite receiving Universal Credit, many families still fall below the poverty line, particularly when housing costs are accounted for, revealing the inadequacy of the current social security system to protect families from poverty in the face of rising living expenses. At a number of points between 2017 and 2020, and again in 2022, many anti-poverty strategies and policy reforms in Northern Ireland were delayed or stalled due to the absence of a functioning government.

Devolved government in Northern Ireland is delivered by the Executive in the Northern Ireland Assembly. In the wake of issues on the Renewable Heat Incentive in 2017, the Assembly lost cross-community support and was suspended until 2020. During this period of political deadlock, the Child Poverty Strategy 2016-2022 suffered from a lack of clear implementation and accountability, as the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024) and Bywaters et al. (2020) report. The political gridlock that persisted between 2017-2020 (as well as in 2022) prevented the enactment of new policies and reforms aimed at addressing the rising levels of poverty, particularly child poverty. This delay in governance had a significant impact on vulnerable families, as poverty alleviation efforts were either incomplete or insufficient. The lack of a fully functioning Executive has also delayed the development of a new anti-poverty strategy and prevented further mitigation efforts, leaving many vulnerable families without protection. The Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy draft proposal has now been published and is

subject to a consultation period (Department for Communities, 2025). Reports show that food bank usage, rent arrears, and destitution have all increased as a direct consequence of inadequate welfare support (Bywaters et al., 2020; O'Hara and Orr, 2021; JRF, 2024).

Bunting (2023) notes that child protection interventions and the number of children taken into care have increased over time, and in 2020, children from the 10 percent most deprived areas were nine times more likely to be taken into care than those from the 10 percent least deprived areas. Similarly, Bywaters et al. (2020) highlight significant inequalities in the effectiveness of social service interventions related to poverty, particularly in child placement into care, as well as the effectiveness of social assistance. These inequalities vary based on regional poverty levels, with Northern Ireland showing a shallower social gradient in poverty-related interventions compared to other regions. This suggests that the effects of poverty increase less sharply in Northern Ireland than in other regions. Moreover, Mason, Morris, Featherstone et al. (2021) examine the reasons behind the low rates of children placed into care in Northern Ireland through in-depth case studies and qualitative analysis of child welfare inequalities. The study emphasises that intervention rates are notably high for large families and families with disabled children, with poverty rates largely driven by gaps in social security policies.

The Impact of Familial Structures

Lone Parenting

Lone parenting may correlate with higher poverty rates of child poverty in Northern Ireland, contributing to the disproportionate impact of poverty on children (Birt et al., 2022; NICCY, 2021). According to Birt et al. (2022) and NICCY (2021), child poverty has been consistently highlighted as a challenge faced by single-parent families, which have the highest poverty rates compared to other family structures. According to the NICCY (2021) report, 43 percent of children living in lone-parent families in Northern Ireland are in poverty. This high poverty rate is largely due to the single income structure of these households, which makes it difficult to meet basic needs, especially when combined with the high cost of living. Childcare costs, in particular, exacerbate this issue, as single parents often face the added challenge of finding and affording quality care for their children while working.

The lack of affordable childcare has been identified as a barrier for single parents seeking full-time employment or increasing their working hours. As highlighted by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) report, the cost of childcare in Northern Ireland is among the highest in the UK, averaging £193 per week. The lack of a universal childcare strategy in Northern Ireland, compared to other regions in the UK, exacerbates this issue, making it more difficult for parents to access affordable care (Centre for Progressive Policy, 2023). It also points to the absence of government support for childcare compared to other UK regions like England, Scotland, and Wales, which provide 30 free hours of childcare for three- and four-year-olds (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). This represents over a third of the average household income, a significant portion that many lone-parent families simply cannot afford (NICCY, 2021). In many cases, the absence of childcare subsidies or flexible work arrangements means that single parents are often unable to secure stable, well-paying jobs, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Lone-parent families, particularly those living in deprivation, also face chronic stress from financial insecurity. This stress can affect children's health and development, with poorer mental health outcomes and lower educational attainment often reported among children from single-parent households (NICCY, 2021). NICCY (2021) findings show that children in lone-parent families are twice as likely to leave school without five good GCSEs, a critical factor in their future opportunities. Additionally, the lack of parental support, due to financial strain, long working hours, or lack of flexible childcare, can contribute to social isolation. Children from lone-parent families are more likely to face housing instability and food insecurity, both of which negatively impact their overall well-being and educational outcomes (NICCY, 2021).

Larger Families

Larger families, particularly those with three or more children, face significant challenges that disproportionately increase the risk of child poverty in Northern Ireland. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025), 43 percent of children in families with three or more children are living in poverty, which is nearly double the rate of poverty in families with fewer children. This issue is further compounded by the UK government's two-child limit policy, which restricts child-related benefits, such as Universal Credit and Child Tax Credits, to only the first two children in a family. As a result, families with more than two children receive less financial support, adding greater financial strain. This is especially problematic in Northern Ireland, where 21 percent of families have three or more children, a significantly higher proportion than in the rest of the UK, where only around 15 percent of families have larger households (Bywaters et al., 2020).

Moreover, larger families face increased living costs, and the financial burden becomes even more pronounced when considering the high cost of childcare. As stated above, in Northern Ireland, childcare costs average £193 per week, which accounts for more than a third of the average household income before housing costs (NICCY, 2021). For families with many children needing care, this cost becomes a significant barrier to economic stability, especially when they have a single income or a parent working part-time. Many parents in larger families find themselves unable to work full-time due to the high childcare costs, and this, combined with low wages, limits their ability to increase household income. The lack of employment opportunities and reliance on lower-wage work creates a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape (Bywaters et al., 2020).

The impact of poverty in larger families is long-lasting, affecting children's health and education (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024; JRF, 2025). Larger families in Northern Ireland face, therefore, a combination of financial insecurity, limited access to better-paid jobs, and an inability to escape the poverty trap, which have profound and long-term consequences for children's well-being and future prospects (NICCY, 2021).

The Impact of Disability on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland: Challenges and Inequalities

Disability is a major driver of child poverty in Northern Ireland. Children in households affected by disability are more likely to experience poverty and financial strain. According to the NICCY report by O'Hara and Kerr (2021), 44 percent of children in poverty live in households where someone is disabled, which highlights the additional costs and barriers that families with disabled members face. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024) also report that 31.5 percent of disabled people live in poverty, and that many of these individuals are either children themselves or parents of children with disabilities. This adds an additional layer of financial vulnerability to already disadvantaged households, as families with disabled children often have higher living costs because they require specialist equipment, therapies, and extra care needs, that are not fully covered by state support.

Despite the disability benefits available to families, the current welfare system does not adequately meet the full needs of families with disabled children. As the Bywaters et al. (2020) study found, welfare reforms, like the two-child limit and benefit cap, have disproportionately affected families with disabled children, pushing them further into poverty. These families often have to manage care responsibilities alongside trying to meet the high costs associated with disability. Further, access to services and support remains inconsistent, especially in more rural areas of Northern Ireland, where families have limited access to specialist services and financial aid (Mason et al., 2021).

Additionally, the impact of disability extends beyond financial strain. Families with disabled children often face higher levels of stress and mental health challenges, which can affect both the parents' ability to work and the children's well-being. The O'Hara and Kerr (2021) report highlights that families with disabled children are more likely to experience mental health issues and social exclusion. These compounded effects mean that children in these households not only face greater financial hardship but also have reduced opportunities in education, healthcare, and social integration, further entrenching the cycle of poverty.

Overall, disability significantly exacerbates child poverty in Northern Ireland, contributing to the complex intersection of factors that perpetuate poverty for families with disabled children. Inadequate welfare support, high additional costs, and limited access to essential services mean that disability-related poverty remains one of the most persistent forms of economic disadvantage in Northern Ireland.

Policy Failure Contributing to Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

The issue of child poverty in Northern Ireland is heavily influenced by policy failures, particularly around social security, welfare support, and the lack of a cohesive, long-term child poverty strategy (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024; Bywaters et al., 2020; NICCY, 2021; Reimagine Children's Collective, 2023). According to Child Poverty Action Group Report (2024), since 2016, the Northern Ireland Executive has implemented a mitigation package aimed at reducing the effects of certain Westminster policies, such as the benefit cap and bedroom tax, through the provision of welfare supplementary payments. The Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024) emphasises that welfare policies like the benefit cap and bedroom tax have compounded the difficulties faced by larger families, making it increasingly difficult for them to access adequate support. Supplementary welfare payments were introduced to offset these effects, but they have failed to alleviate the financial burden on low-income families. However, despite these efforts, the Northern Ireland Executive has faced challenges, particularly since May 2022, when the absence of a devolved government halted the development and implementation of a new child poverty strategy (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024). According to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Executive is required to adopt a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion, and patterns of deprivation based on objective need, but political instability has prevented this from being fully realised (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024). Stormont's Executive Committee was found by a court ruling to be in breach of its legal obligation to adopt the strategy (Mitchell, 2025). The adoption of this policy is reported to have been agreed in May 2025, but the contents have not been made public, and it has not been implemented at the time of writing (McCormack, 2025).

According to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024), despite the widespread impact of child poverty in Northern Ireland, there is currently no dedicated agreed anti-poverty strategy in place. Plans are in progress to include child poverty within a broader anti-poverty strategy. Although considerable work has been done on an initial draft, the development had been delayed due to the ongoing absence of a functioning Executive. The absence of clear targets and accountability mechanisms meant that despite various programmes such as SureStart and Free School Meals, there was little measurable progress in reducing child poverty. These programmes were not sufficiently linked to specific poverty reduction outcomes, and in some cases, they did not target the most vulnerable children. Additionally, the 2016-2022 strategy lacked a strong focus on early intervention and prevention, which stakeholders, including, for example, non-governmental organisations, policymakers, experts in child welfare, identified as crucial for long-term success in combating child poverty (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). The strategy also failed to embed child poverty within core government planning, leaving departmental accountability unclear and interventions fragmented. Experts recommend a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that includes measurable targets and focuses on children to tackle the root causes of poverty effectively.

The lack of a universal childcare strategy in Northern Ireland has also worsened child poverty (NICCY, 2021). The high cost of childcare, averaging £193 per week, is a significant burden for low-income families, particularly large families (those with four or more children). This has led to a situation where many single parents and large families are forced to choose between working fewer hours or not working at all, deepening their poverty. The NICCY (2021) report states that without affordable childcare, working parents, especially in lone-parent families, are unable to maximise their employment potential, thereby contributing to in-work poverty.

Child Poverty and the Education Gap: A Cycle of Disadvantage

Child poverty and educational outcomes are deeply interconnected, with poverty often contributing to worse educational performance and long-term disadvantage. According to the Northern Ireland Executive's 2021-2022

report, social disadvantage is the greatest single impact on educational attainment, with children from low-income families facing a substantial attainment gap (Department for Communities, 2023; O'Hara & Kerr, 2021; NICCY, 2021). Additionally, the NICCY (2021) report welcomes the ongoing review of Free School Meals (FSM) and school uniform grant eligibility, including the possibility of universal FSM for certain students. It also notes a 20 percent increase in the uniform grant announced by the education minister in June 2022, raising the grant for pupils under 15 from £51 to £61.20. However, NICCY (2021) criticises the grant as insufficient, as school uniform costs can reach up to £600 in some schools and disagrees with the policy of placing responsibility for managing these requirements on Boards of Governors.

Further, Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024) stresses that the attainment gap begins early in a child's life, as children from low-income families start school already up to a year behind their middle-income peers in terms of cognitive skills. It also reports that by the age of three, children from low-income families have typically heard 30 million fewer words and possess only half the vocabulary of their peers from higher-income families. By the time children reach primary school, the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest children can be as large as 19 months, with the most disadvantaged children consistently lagging behind in academic skills. The report has also linked persistent poverty to cognitive development issues (Save the Children, 2017; Child Poverty Action Group, 2024, both cited in Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). Their findings suggest that children who experience persistent poverty during their first seven years have cognitive development scores that are on average 20 percent lower than those who have never lived in poverty. This early gap in cognitive development leads to long-term disadvantages, with children from poorer households facing reduced opportunities for higher education and future employment, as educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of adult poverty.

Moreover, the Northern Ireland Executive's Child Poverty Strategy (2020/21) has acknowledged that poverty affects children's mental health, with poor children being more likely to experience psychological distress and poor physical health (Department for Communities, 2023). This is compounded by poor housing conditions, which are more common in low-income households. For instance, children living in cold homes are more than twice as likely to suffer from respiratory problems compared to those living in better conditions.

3.2. Factors Driving Health Poverty in Northern Ireland

Health poverty in Northern Ireland is influenced by a range of intersecting social, economic, and systemic factors. The following thematic discussion explores the most critical drivers contributing to health poverty and widening health inequalities across Northern Ireland.

Spatial Factors

The Health Inequalities Annual Report (Carson, Blakley, and Laverty, 2021) highlights the key drivers of health poverty in Northern Ireland. Male life expectancy in the most deprived areas is 7.0 years lower than in the least deprived areas, while the gap for females is 4.8 years. Premature mortality rates, particularly respiratory mortality among under 75s, are three and a half times higher in the most deprived areas. Drug-related mortality is five times higher, and alcohol-specific mortality is four times higher in the most deprived areas compared to the least deprived. Additionally, the proportion of mothers smoking during pregnancy is four and a half times higher in the most deprived areas.

In a report on poverty in Northern Ireland, Birt et al. (2022) reported that men born in Northern Ireland can generally expect to live in good health for 60 years, while women can expect 62 years. However, for children born in the most deprived 20 percent of neighbourhoods, this expectation drops to 54 years for men and 52.5 years for women. Women in these poorest neighbourhoods can anticipate living in good health for 66 percent of their lives, and men for 73 percent. In contrast, those born in the wealthiest neighbourhoods not only have a longer overall life expectancy but can also expect to live 79 percent of these longer lives in good health, for both males and females. Nearly 19 percent of 16- to 34-year-olds living in poverty reported poor health, compared to 11 percent of

their non-poverty counterparts. Among 50- to 64-year-olds, 48 percent of those in poverty reported poor health, significantly higher than the 30 percent of those not in poverty.

Around 27.5 percent of the population in Northern Ireland lives outside 2.5 km of an NHS dental practice. This lack of proximity to dental services can lead to poorer oral health outcomes, which are a component of overall health poverty (Jo et al., 2020; 2021). In Northern Ireland, there is a noticeable social gradient in tooth decay among children, correlated with levels of deprivation. In the most deprived areas, 1.74 percent of children experience decay in their primary (baby) teeth, whereas in the least deprived areas, the rate is 1.25 percent. Similarly, decay in permanent (adult) teeth is more common in the most deprived areas, affecting 1.30 percent of children, compared to 0.93 percent in the least deprived areas (Sofi-Mahmudi et al., 2020). These differences highlight the significant impact of socioeconomic deprivation on children's oral health and overall health outcomes.

McElroy et al. (2023) in a longitudinal study found that adolescents from poorer families were more likely to experience health and disability issues over a 10-year period. Specifically, children from households with employment deprivation were 1.93 times more likely to have poor health and 1.52 times more likely to have a disability. Education deprivation increased the risk of disability by 1.15 times, while living in social housing raised the disability risk by 1.34 times. Additionally, children from single-parent households were 1.66 times more likely to have poor health and 1.28 times more likely to have a disability. Boys were also found to be 1.49 times more likely to have a disability (McElroy et al, 2023).

Food Related Factors

Garratt and Armstrong (2024) emphasise that food insecurity not only signals existing deprivation, but also actively contributes to the development of chronic health issues over time. Based on data collected form 18,557 adults across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, 25 percent of respondents from Northern Ireland experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months, and 4 percent had used food banks during the same period. Severe food insecurity was particularly concentrated among respondents with long-term health conditions and food hypersensitivities.

Mental and Physical Health Related Factors

The Scaffolding Project, launched in 2017 by East Belfast community groups under EastSide Partnership, provides holistic support to help individuals and families move out of poverty. EastSide Partnership (2021) highlights several key drivers of health poverty in East Belfast. Poor mental health is both a cause and consequence of poverty, affecting individuals' ability to respond to their circumstances. In East Belfast, 49 percent of children in the Inner East Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal area are living in poverty, contributing to poor health outcomes (EastSide Partnership, 2021).

In their scoping review, Graham and Naworol (2021) presented factors contributing to health poverty in Northern Ireland. These are disability, particularly parental disability, mental health conditions, and special educational needs. Graham and Naworol (2021) found that these issues are often compounded by personal and parental substance misuse, including drugs and alcohol addiction, which can create intergenerational cycles of mental ill health and disadvantage and placing additional strain on an already overstretched health and social care system.

Infrastructure Factors

The Reimagine Children's Collective (2023), a collaborative effort led by major charities, advocates for the effective implementation of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland has reported there are currently 22,875 children identified as being in need, highlighting a significant demand for support services. Additionally, 4,000 families are waiting for the allocation of their cases, indicating delays in accessing

necessary assistance. Furthermore, 2,251 children and young people are waiting for an initial Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) assessment, underscoring the urgent need for mental health support. These figures reflect the pressing need for resources and interventions to address the needs of vulnerable children and families in Northern Ireland.

According to the Census data for 2021 and 2022, there are approximately 4,100 people in Northern Ireland who identified as either Irish Traveller or Roma, representing about 0.2 percent of the population, who encounter substantial obstacles in accessing essential services, particularly healthcare. Their living conditions, economic difficulties, and social exclusion limit their access to medical care and support services, exacerbating their health outcomes. This situation highlights the inadequate service capacity available to this community (Sovacool and Del Rio, 2022).

Immigration and No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Related Barriers

Immigration status significantly influences a family's vulnerability to health poverty. Those affected by NRPF face systemic exclusion from public welfare, including healthcare, housing, and income support. This policy environment creates extreme financial hardship, forcing families into precarious living situations that directly harm health and wellbeing (O'Hara and Orr, 2021). Housing4All conducted a human rights survey in 2016 of 36 destitute asylum seekers in Belfast. The survey revealed that 63 percent of respondents had experienced homelessness more than once, and 87 percent reported negative impacts on their mental and physical health (O'Hara and Orr, 2021). Restricted access to healthcare services, particularly reproductive and sexual health, along with insufficient financial support for migrant women and those with NRPF, exacerbated health inequities and heightened health poverty (Women's Budget Group, 2020).

3.3. Food Poverty

Food poverty refers to the inability to afford or access sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life. It is a growing concern globally, affecting millions of individuals and families. Research by Garratt and Armstrong (2024) to identify who is most at risk of severe food insecurity and who uses food banks shows that the prevalence of food insecurity rose from 17.6 percent in October 2021–January 2022 to 24.6 percent in October 2022–January 2023 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This trend highlights the growing number of households struggling to afford adequate food. Food bank use has also increased, with 3.6 percent of respondents using food banks in the past 12 months, rising to 17.9 percent among those experiencing food insecurity. Garratt and Armstrong (2024) explained that the primary causes of food poverty include low income, unemployment, and health-related issues. Households with lower incomes are significantly more likely to experience food insecurity, with higher incomes providing a protective effect. Although individual figures for Northern Ireland were not provided in this report, this study highlighted the clear link between low income and food insecurity in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Further investigations were undertaken to attempt to find actual figures of food bank usage in Northern Ireland. These figures were found in the Trussell Trust (2025a) report (note that this report was published after the systematic search was completed and did not appear as a record). It was reported that food parcels were provided to 55,771 families with children and 21,286 families without children (of these there were 3,074 families without a member over 65, and 68,462 families with someone over aged 65). These figures were reported to have significantly increased from a similar survey undertaken in 2019/20 with rises of +68 percent for families with children, +79 percent for families without children (of these the rise was +69 percent for families without a member over 65, and +59 percent for families with someone over aged 65). The trends in foodbank usage vary significantly across Northern Ireland. The greatest increase in food parcels since 2019/20 was reported to be in Fermanagh and South Tyrone (+363 percent), North Down (+211 percent), Belfast East (+143 percent), South Antrim (+122 percent) and Belfast North (+94 percent). Given that data reported later in Table 1 will demonstrate that income in Northern Ireland is lower than 15 of the 17 comparator countries, then it may be inferred that low income is likely to lead to higher levels of food insecurity in Northern Ireland.

Beacom et al. (2021) aimed to understand the factors contributing to food poverty in Northern Ireland and its broader implications. They interviewed nineteen stakeholders, including consumer representatives, community practitioners, policymakers, political representatives, local council representatives, academics, and a public health representative. They found that food poverty is driven by household demographics, poor health, addiction, limited physical access to food and external threats such as Brexit and welfare reforms further increased food prices and reduced disposable income. The research highlights the complexity of food poverty, emphasising that it is influenced by a combination of individual, structural, and political factors, and suggests that addressing food poverty requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy changes and targeted interventions (Beacom et al., 2021b).

Carers NI (2022) have identified that food poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland is a severe issue due to the increased cost-of-living crisis. Rising grocery prices have forced many carers to cut back on essentials, with 85 percent reporting increased spending on food and over 40 percent worried about needing to use food banks. This situation is worsened by insufficient social security support, which does not offer enough financial aid to meet basic living needs.

Many families in East Belfast are increasingly relying on food banks to meet their nutritional needs. The Scaffolding Project by the EastSide Partnership published a briefing report in 2021 on the experience of poverty and explained that the causes of food poverty include rising utility costs, which place additional financial burdens on low-income households, and the overall lack of sufficient income to cover basic living expenses. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these difficulties, as many people faced loss of employment and income, leading to increased reliance on welfare benefits and community support services. Families are struggling to purchase daily essentials, with some choosing between heating their homes or feeding their families (EastSide Partnership, 2021).

The report, *Cost-of-Living Crisis Across the Devolved Nations* by Mudie (2023) published by Centre for Progressive Policy, found that areas like Derry City and Strabane are experiencing the highest food insecurity rate at 13.19 percent, followed by Mid Ulster at 11.57 percent. This increase is driven by persistently high food prices, which rose by 18.4 percent year-on-year, exacerbating the struggle for households already facing economic challenges. During summer holidays when children are not attending school and they lose access to free school meals, food poverty has become a serious issue. According to Shinwell et al. (2021) nearly 30 percent of children are at risk of going hungry during this period, highlighting the prevalence of food insecurity in disadvantaged communities. The causes of food poverty include long-standing economic and political marginalisation, inadequate support systems, and the increased financial pressures families face during holidays.

There was a significant link between food and employment poverty among low-income families in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 lockdown. Spyreli et al. (2021) found that financial constraints were intensified by job losses and reduced income, with 18 percent of households experiencing a decrease of 24 percent or more in income. Consequently, the proportion of people facing food poverty increased to 20 percent, up from 8 percent before the pandemic. Parents, especially single parents, relied on school meal payment schemes, community food donations, and discounted food offers to manage food insecurity. These economic hardships led to changes in food-related decisions: families cooked more at home, often using cheaper or reduced-to-clear items, but also consumed more unhealthy snacks due to stress and boredom. Reduced access to fresh food during infrequent shopping trips impacted dietary quality, particularly for children. The study highlights how employment instability directly affected food security, revealing a cycle of economic and nutritional vulnerability intensified by the pandemic (Spyreli et al., 2021).

3.4. Energy Poverty in Northern Ireland

Energy poverty, which impacts all facets of livelihood, can be attributed to factors such as unreliable and insufficient electricity supply, elevated costs, and defective energy infrastructure (Bhattacharyya, 2012). In Northern Ireland,

a household is considered fuel poor if it needs to spend more than 10 percent of its household income on all fuel use to maintain a satisfactory level of heating (21°C in the main living room and 18°C in other occupied rooms). According to Hinson and Bolton (2024), in 2016, 160,000 households (22 percent) in Northern Ireland were in fuel poverty, which increased to 24 percent (179,000 households) by 2019. Historically, fuel poverty rates peaked at 44 percent in 2009 before decreasing to 42 percent in 2011, with the latest rates being around half of the peak levels. Key factors contributing to fuel poverty include household income, fuel costs, and energy consumption, which is influenced by the energy efficiency of the dwelling.

The Northern Ireland government published a fuel poverty strategy in 2011, acknowledging that the 2004 target to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016 would not be met but emphasised their determination to eradicate fuel poverty. According to Birt et al. (2022), between 2017-2020, Northern Ireland had the lowest average weekly household spend in the UK at £486, which is £100 less than the UK average of £585. Northern Ireland households notably spend less on housing and energy, and on recreation and culture. However, they spend more on essential items like food and clothing, averaging £95 per week, which constitutes 36 percent of their total spending, similar to other UK regions. Average weekly spending on housing and energy in Northern Ireland is significantly lower than in other regions of the UK. Households in Northern Ireland spend around £80 per week, whereas in England, the average is £135. The lower average weekly household spending in Northern Ireland can be attributed to historically lower housing and energy costs, reduced expenditure on recreation and culture, and generally lower income levels compared to other regions in the UK (McClelland, 2022). In Wales and Scotland, the weekly spending averages £100 and £105 respectively, underscoring a notable regional disparity in housing and energy costs.

However, costs may be lower in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK but rising fuel costs disproportionately affect low-income households. In February 2022, 96 percent of carers who participated in a survey reported that their energy bills had risen over the past six months. Nearly 60 percent of these carers were reducing their heating to manage monthly expenses. Alarmingly, almost half (44 percent) expressed concerns about being unable to heat their homes to a safe level due to increasing costs (Carers NI, 2022).

Affordability is the primary concern for meeting electricity and energy needs in Northern Ireland. A survey conducted by Del Rio et al. (2023) explored the effects of energy and mobility poverty among 538 respondents. The survey revealed that 37.65 percent believe lowering energy costs, including heating, cooling, and electricity, would make the most significant difference. Additionally, 41.20 percent think that having more disposable income would better help them manage their energy needs. While efficient energy technologies are considered beneficial, only 21.15 percent prioritise them over affordability measures.

The region's cool climate significantly increases the demand for heating, and the widespread reliance on costly fuel oil as a primary energy source contributes to the prevalence of energy poverty among households. Rural areas often lack access to the gas grid, making heating more costly. The volatility of gas prices further exacerbates the issue, and many homes lack adequate energy efficiency measures, leading to higher energy consumption and costs. These combined factors make it difficult for households to afford the energy needed to maintain a comfortable temperature in their homes (Del Rio et al., 2023). In Northern Ireland, energy poverty is more common in certain groups. For example, 25 percent of people living in detached houses or bungalows are in energy poverty. This is higher compared to other types of homes. Among vulnerable groups, up to 3.5 percent of elderly people and those on benefits face significant financial stress from energy costs. The main reasons for energy poverty include high fuel costs, inefficient heating systems, and poor building insulation. Rural areas, where detached houses are more common, tend to have higher retrofit costs, making it harder for residents to improve their homes' energy efficiency (Lowans et al., 2023).

According to a report by the Centre for Progressive Policy (Mudie, 2023), energy poverty in Northern Ireland has significantly worsened, with the percentage of households in fuel poverty more than doubling from 22 percent in 2016 to 45 percent in 2022. This increase is particularly severe in rural areas, where 51 percent of households in the

west are affected. In Belfast, 35 percent of households are in fuel poverty. The main reasons for this trend include the high dependency on home heating oil, which is unregulated and subject to significant price fluctuations, and the lack of a gas grid in many areas. Additionally, the absence of a functioning government has hindered effective policy responses to mitigate these issues.

Ogunrin et al. (2022) highlight that energy poverty in Northern Ireland remains a significant challenge. The main reasons behind this trend include outdated building thermal standards, high dependency on oil for heating, and a substantial number of homes that are off the gas grid. The retrofit cost for fuel-poor homes to achieve a SAP (Standard Assessment Procedure for assessing the energy performance of domestic properties) rating of C is estimated at £440 million. Improved energy efficiency through fabric retrofitting can significantly reduce heating demand and carbon emissions, providing socioeconomic and environmental benefits.

Sovacool and Del Rio (2022) explored the extreme energy and transport poverty faced by Gypsies and Travellers in Northern Ireland. According to their study, energy poverty among Gypsies and Travellers in Northern Ireland is characterised by high expenditures on electricity and heating, inadequate housing conditions, and significant health impacts. Many Gypsies and Travellers are forced to spend a substantial portion of their income on energy services, with some paying up to £400 per month for electricity and £100 per week for heating during colder months. This financial burden is exacerbated by poor insulation and outdated caravans, leading to higher energy consumption and costs.

3.5. Lower Educational Outcomes

Education poverty refers to lack of access to quality education due to factors like limited school availability, poor educational resources, economic barriers, and social discrimination. Butler et al. (2023) conducted a study on General Practitioner (GP) training opportunities in Northern Ireland and uncovered a significant disparity between affluent and deprived areas. Among the 319 GP practices, 195 (61 percent) are designated as postgraduate training practices. These practices have a lower average deprivation score (3.02) compared to non-training practices (3.2), indicating that they serve less deprived populations. Notably, only 12 percent of training practices are in areas where over half of the patients reside in the most deprived quintile. This underrepresentation suggests that future GPs are less likely to train in and subsequently serve high-need communities. Factors such as fewer GPs, higher patient loads, and increased case complexity in deprived areas hinder the establishment of training practices, potentially exacerbating health inequalities as regions with the greatest healthcare needs are less likely to benefit from adequately trained GPs.

The UK Poverty Report (JRF, 2024) sheds light on significant educational inequalities and poverty trends in Northern Ireland. During the 2021/22 academic year, a notable gender gap in GCSE attainment was observed, with 82.5 percent of girls achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A* - C, including English and Maths, compared to 73.1 percent of boys, reflecting a 9.4 percentage point difference. Additionally, students entitled to free school meals (FSM) faced substantial educational disadvantages, with only 59 percent meeting the same GCSE benchmark, compared to 84 percent of their non-FSM peers, resulting in a 25- percentage point gap.

Lloyd (2022), in a comprehensive analysis of neighbourhood change, deprivation, and unemployment in Belfast, Northern Ireland, underscores persistent educational deprivation in certain areas. Factors such as high unemployment rates, weakened community infrastructure, long-standing social and economic inequalities, and the exacerbating effects of economic downturns and the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to this issue. The Education, Skills, and Training Deprivation Domain, a critical component of the Multiple Deprivation Measures (MDMs) in Northern Ireland, accounts for 15 percent of the overall deprivation score. This domain assesses educational deprivation through indicators such as the proportion of people with no qualifications and the percentage of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

McElroy et al. (2023) examine the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and educational poverty among adolescents in Northern Ireland. In 2001, 36.11 percent of households in Northern Ireland were deprived in the education domain, meaning that no person aged 19 to pensionable age had level 2 education, and no person aged 16-18 was in full-time education or had level 2 education. In 2019/20, nearly 97,000 pupils (approximately 30 percent of all pupils) were entitled to free school meals in Northern Ireland, indicating economic deprivation. This educational deprivation was linked to higher rates of disability in 2011 (OR = 1.15; 95 percent CI = 1.06-1.25). Contributing factors include economic disadvantages, lack of early assessment and support for special educational needs, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing inequalities by limiting access to educational resources and support services. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions to improve educational outcomes and reduce socio-economic disparities (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2020).

A scoping review by Corr and Holland (2022) highlighted the challenges faced by asylum-seeking and migrant families during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in engaging with remote learning due to lack of access to digital devices, internet provision, and translation services. This disruption negatively impacted the integration of migrant children and their language development. The temporary extension of free school meal eligibility to certain children from families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) in England highlights the pressing need for equivalent policy measures in Northern Ireland. The primary causes of educational poverty for these children include restrictive NRPF policies that prevent access to essential services and financial support, leading to extreme poverty and destitution. These barriers hinder their ability to participate fully in education, exacerbating existing inequalities and limiting their opportunities for academic success and social integration.

The Social Mobility Commission (2021) report aimed to assess progress in improving social mobility across the UK. According to the report, grammar schools in Northern Ireland are predominantly attended by children from more advantaged backgrounds. While 44 percent of children attend selective post-primary schools, only 14 percent of these pupils are eligible for free school meals (FSM), compared to 37 percent in non-selective schools, indicating a significant disparity in access to selective education based on socio-economic status. Additionally, almost one-quarter (24 percent) of children in Northern Ireland live in households that struggle to afford basic necessities such as heat, food, and clothing, which can impact their educational opportunities. There are also notable gaps in school attainment between FSM and non-FSM students at Level 2, with boys experiencing a larger gap (30.6 percentage points) than girls (27.7 percentage points). Furthermore, disadvantaged Protestant pupils face a larger attainment gap (33.1 percentage points) compared to disadvantaged Catholic pupils (27.1 percentage points). The attainment gap can be due to historical socio-economic deprivation, the selective grammar school system favouring advantaged backgrounds, and higher levels of community segregation and paramilitary activity (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). These disparities highlight the challenges in achieving educational equity and the need for targeted interventions to support disadvantaged students.

3.6. Lower Quality Housing and Homelessness

Families in the lowest income quintile are at greater risk of issues such as cold homes, lack of space, and absence of basic furnishings, all of which can adversely affect health, education, and well-being (Department for Communities, 2023). Overcrowding is particularly prevalent in social housing and is associated with higher rates of respiratory illness and mental distress (Ibid). Poverty in Northern Ireland remains intricately linked to housing conditions, affordability, and tenure. According to Birt et al. (2022), although Northern Ireland has consistently recorded lower overall poverty rates compared to other UK nations - standing at 18 percent in 2017–2020 - it is the relatively low housing costs that have played a central role in cushioning households from deeper poverty. Median housing costs in both the social and private rented sectors remain the lowest across the UK, which has helped prevent a greater number of households from being pushed into poverty as a result of housing expenses. Despite this advantage, renters, especially in the social and private sectors, are disproportionately affected by poverty. Over one-third (37 percent) of social renters and nearly 30 percent of private renters live in poverty, compared to about 10 percent

of homeowners. Notably, around 9 percent of people in both sectors are specifically pulled into poverty due to housing costs, significantly lower than the 14–18 percent seen in other UK regions, but which is still concerning given the shifting tenure landscape.

Data from the Family Resources Survey (2020/21) by the Department for Communities (2021) reveals that 14 percent of households were in the social rented sector and 13 percent in the private sector, while 43 percent owned their homes outright. Despite a decade-long trend of growth in the private rental market, 2020/21 marked the first year in which social renting once again overtook private renting in prevalence. Nonetheless, private rents remain higher than social rents by a factor of 1.4, and affordability concerns persist for low-income tenants, many of whom lack financial resilience, 45 percent of benefit units had less than £3,000 in savings. Local-level evidence from East Belfast (EastSide Partnership, 2021) further highlights the lived experience of housing-linked poverty. Community groups report that fuel poverty is widespread due to aging, poorly insulated housing and rising energy costs. Residents often face stark choices between heating and food, especially during colder months. The cumulative effect of inadequate housing, poor energy efficiency, and low incomes exacerbates both physical hardship and emotional stress.

According to the Joseph Rowntree reports on UK Poverty (2024) in 2021/22, 43 percent of social renters and 35 percent of private renters were in poverty after housing costs, with 36 percent and 51 percent of each group respectively pushed into poverty solely due to those costs. By contrast, only 9 percent of mortgaged homeowners and 15 percent of outright owners were in poverty, with housing expenses having minimal impact on their poverty status. Notably, private renters in poverty spent on average, 60 percent more on rent than social renters. The private rented sector's expansion has contributed to a shift in poverty by tenure: in 2000, 15 percent of people in poverty were private renters; by 2021/22, this figure had more than doubled to 31 percent. Fuel poverty in Northern Ireland is strongly associated with poor energy efficiency in older housing stock, low household income, and rural fuel dependency. The region continues to rely on a 10 percent income threshold definition, which is sensitive to fluctuating energy prices (Hinson, Bolton, & Kennedy, 2024). Rising rents, mortgage interest rates, and a freeze on housing support are forecasted to deepen housing-related poverty, particularly among low-income renters and new homeowners (UK Poverty, 2024). Moreover, the report highlights that the number of families living in temporary accommodation is at record highs, framing this condition as one of the "visceral signs of hardship" (p.4) caused by deepening poverty. It links the situation to social failure, noting that increased demand for temporary accommodation is placing growing pressure on local councils and public services (UK Poverty, 2024). Homelessness is not always directly attributed to poverty, even though it is identified as the most extreme form of housing deprivation, because housing benefits play a mitigating role. Deprivation is not always directly attributed to poverty due to the mitigating role of housing benefits. Nonetheless, poverty, particularly when combined with events such as relationship breakdown or debt, can still lead to homelessness, highlighting the fragility of housing security for those at the margins (Department for Communities, 2024).

Between March 2022 and March 2023, Northern Ireland experienced the sharpest rental price increases of any UK nation, with average private rents rising by 9.9 percent, compared to just 4.6 percent in England and 5.1 percent in Scotland (Centre for Progressive Policy, 2023). This spike in housing costs was particularly pronounced in areas such as Newry, Mourne and Down, where rents grew by 12.7 percent in a single year. As rental inflation continues to outpace income growth, affordability has deteriorated rapidly and median apartment rents now consume up to 45 percent of take-home pay in Belfast, the highest rate in the region. Concurrently, the number of households receiving housing cost support has tripled since 2019, now including roughly one in six households overall, and one in four in the private rented sector. These trends signal an escalating housing crisis, deepening housing insecurity, and increasing risk of homelessness, especially in the absence of updated local housing strategies or effective regulation (Centre for Progressive Policy, 2023). Such patterns are often driven by a shortage in rental properties due to landlords leaving the market, linked to increased demand as mortgage rates increased (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2022).

Insecure housing, particularly in the private rented sector, increases the risk of homelessness and frequent relocations, which are linked to worse health, education, and mental wellbeing. More than half of state schoolteachers reported having pupils who were homeless or had recently become homeless (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). In the past 20 years, the size of the private rental sector has doubled, now accommodating more than 1.5 million families with children - many of whom face unstable tenancies, overcrowding, and high rental costs. These conditions often force children to change schools frequently, adversely affecting educational outcomes. Between 2022 and 2023, housing insecurity remained acute for families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) in Northern Ireland. Excluded from housing benefits and mainstream welfare, many faced destitution and homelessness. The Hostile Environment report highlights that families, particularly those with children, were often left to rely on overstretched NGOs and charitable organisations for emergency shelter, food, and essential needs. Some children experienced sofa surfing and long-term homelessness, with statutory bodies slow or unable to intervene effectively due to unclear referral pathways and a lack of systematic data. While Article 18 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 provides a legal duty to safeguard children, the practical application remains inconsistent. These conditions not only violate basic socio-economic rights but also directly contravene children's rights to housing, protection, and an adequate standard of living as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (O'Hara and Orr, 2021).

Furthermore, Gypsies and Travellers in Northern Ireland face some of the most extreme forms of housing insecurity in the UK. Nearly 68 percent of Travellers lack appropriate accommodation with basic amenities such as water, sanitation, and electricity, and are eight times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions compared to the general population (Sovacool and Del Rio, 2022). Many reside in unauthorised encampments, ageing caravans, or poorly maintained sites without insulation or heating, contributing to significant health risks. In some parts of England, Traveller homelessness reaches up to 50 percent, illustrating the broader scale of exclusion. The lack of culturally appropriate and safe accommodation, combined with systemic discrimination in planning systems, where over 90 percent of Traveller site applications are rejected - contributes to a continuous cycle of marginalisation, poverty, and homelessness.

3.7. Employment Poverty

Employment poverty occurs when individuals are employed but still live in poverty due to low wages, insecure jobs, and lack of benefits. Employment poverty is a significant challenge for unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, with only 43 percent in full-time or part-time work, nearly 20 percentage points lower than the general population. The demands of caring roles, lack of flexible working options, and insufficient childcare support force many carers to leave the labour market or reduce their working hours, resulting in financial strain and lower employment rates (Carers NI, 2022). This issue is further intensified by the ongoing cost of living crisis, making it increasingly difficult for carers to juggle work and caregiving duties. Tackling employment poverty requires robust, inclusive policies that promote flexible working options and ensure accessible childcare, empowering carers to sustain meaningful employment and achieve financial stability.

EastSide Partnership (2021) highlights that employment poverty is a significant issue in East Belfast, with 30 percent of the working-age population being employment deprived. This high rate of worklessness contributes to the overall poverty levels in the area. The primary causes include a lack of sustainable and well-paying jobs, low employment rates, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to job losses and financial insecurity.

According to Social Mobility Commission (2021), Northern Ireland has a lower proportion of professional jobs (42 percent) compared to the UK average (49 percent), highlighting significant socio-economic challenges. Working-class individuals are 80 percent less likely to access professional roles than those from professional backgrounds, indicating barriers to upward mobility. Additionally, 25 percent of jobs pay below the real Living Wage (£9.30), exacerbating financial instability. The economy's reliance on agri-food, retail, and hospitality sectors, heavily impacted by COVID-19, further contributed to these issues. The pandemic led to an 8.7 percent drop in employment

among young working-class men (aged 16–24), with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds facing higher risks of job loss and long-term unemployment. White working-class communities in "cold spot" regions (post-industrial, under-resourced towns) face severe educational and employment barriers due to lack of regional investment and centralised policymaking. Addressing these disparities requires targeted policy interventions to improve access to professional roles and enhance regional economic resilience.

Disabled individuals often face significant socio-economic challenges that can lead to higher rates of poverty. These challenges include limited access to employment opportunities, additional costs associated with managing disabilities, and insufficient support through disability benefits. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024) highlighted, disabled people in Northern Ireland are twice as likely to be in poverty compared to non-disabled individuals. Approximately 30 percent of working-age disabled adults live in poverty, a rate that has remained stubbornly high over time. This persistent disparity is compounded by the aforementioned factors, highlighting the need for comprehensive policy interventions to address the socio-economic barriers faced by disabled individuals in the region.

Minority ethnic communities often experience higher poverty rates due to discrimination, insecure housing, and precarious work. Trigger events like gaining employment, increasing working hours, or receiving promotions can help individuals achieve financial stability. The Department for Communities (2023) highlights the difficulties that ethnic minorities face with respect to insecure work, low pay, and underemployment, all of which are major drivers of poverty. Even full-time employment does not always provide a path out of hardship, especially in sectors with low wage progression. Widespread poverty has been reported to stem from long-standing economic and political marginalisation, particularly in conflict-affected areas such as Derry and the border areas of Northern Ireland (Yavuz & Byrne, 2023). Young people and former members of paramilitary groups both republican and loyalist often face disenfranchisement and limited employment opportunities, making them susceptible to recruitment by dissident paramilitary groups (small armed groups that split from larger ones because they disagreed with peace or political deals). The situation worsens when external funding ceases, leading to the collapse of community projects that temporarily provide engagement and support. The lack of sustained investment and the bureaucratic nature of international aid programmes further exacerbate the problem, as these structures often fail to address the immediate needs of local communities. Consequently, employment poverty drives instability, undermining efforts toward peacebuilding and reconciliation (Yavuz and Byrne, 2023).

Lloyd (2021) identified that areas in the west and north of Belfast continue to experience high levels of employment deprivation, with the proportion of working-age adults in relative poverty rising from 14 percent in 2021/22 to 17 percent in 2022/23. In Belfast, the number of claimants rose from 7,373 in March 2020 to 14,000 in April (an 89.9 percent increase), and to 14,711 in May representing a 99.5 percent rise from March. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the claimant counts for unemployment benefits nearly doubled between March and April 2020, the highest levels of long-term unemployment being found in parts of the northwest of the city, including parts of the Falls, Shankill, Ardoyne, and New Lodge. Key causes include historical job losses with 9.84 percent of unemployment rate in 2011 and mental health conditions, highlighting the role of socio-economic factors in perpetuating employment poverty (Lloyd, 2021).

Mudie (2023) highlighted that employment poverty in Northern Ireland is marked by high rates of economic inactivity and low pay, significantly impacting regions like Derry City and Strabane, which have an economic inactivity rate of 32.0 percent, and a claimant count of 5.0 percent. Mid Ulster also faces substantial employment poverty, with 16.1 percent of jobs classified as low pay. The lack of job opportunities and the prevalence of low-paying jobs contribute to the economic strain on households, making it difficult for individuals to meet their basic needs and exacerbating overall poverty levels.

Young people often face difficulty and deprivation in employment. Pivotal (2023) found challenges such as low wages, a shortage of apprenticeship placements, and discrimination based on age, community background,

religion, class, or area of residence were the first-hand contributing factors to employment poverty in young adults. Financial support like the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is crucial but has administrative issues such as missing a single day could result in losing a week's payment. This discouraged many who relied on the payment from continuing with their study or training. Additionally, the ongoing cost of living crisis, particularly for food and transport, adds to these difficulties, making it hard for young people to cover costs, especially those in low-paying apprenticeships. According to 62.1 percent of young people, there were limited job opportunities, and this inexperience affected their ability to search for jobs, complete application forms, create CVs, and perform well in interviews. Many felt trapped in a vicious cycle, unable to gain work experience without a job, and while volunteering was an option, not all could afford to work for free for extended periods (Pivotal, 2023).

3.8. Living on Less

The cost-of-living crisis in Northern Ireland has dramatically reshaped the landscape of poverty and inequality. The convergence of post-pandemic inflation, rising energy prices, stagnant wages, and regressive social welfare changes has left many households struggling to meet even their most basic needs was highlighted in the Runnymede Trust Briefing (Edmiston, Begum & Kataria, 2022). While poverty in Northern Ireland has long-standing structural roots, the current crisis is pushing previously stable households closer to a standard of living crisis and deepening the hardship faced by those already in poverty. Importantly, certain groups, including unpaid carers, ethnic minorities, and disabled individuals, experience the worst effects of these pressures.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation in collaboration with Loughborough University (Birt et al., 2022) confirms that households in Northern Ireland require incomes similar to those elsewhere in the UK to meet the Minimum Income Standard (MIS), but that regional differences in earnings, public services, and infrastructure make achieving that standard more difficult. One of the standout findings is that many households in Northern Ireland fall well short of the MIS, even when in full-time work. This is due to a mix of low pay, underemployment, and the rising cost of essentials. For example, in 2021, a single working-age adult without children in Northern Ireland needed to earn around £20,400 a year (after tax) to reach the MIS, while a couple with two children needed approximately £38,000. However, many families in Northern Ireland were earning far less than this, with benefits and Universal Credit levels falling substantially below the MIS threshold. Even small increases in the cost of fuel, rent, or childcare can push a household under the MIS (Birt et al., 2022).

Further, the rising cost of living, particularly in relation to energy, food, transport, and housing, has impacted people across the UK, but has hit Northern Ireland disproportionately hard (Birt et al., 2022). Inflation peaked above 9 percent in 2022, while benefit increases were limited to 3.1 percent, creating a significant real-terms income drop for benefit recipients. For Northern Ireland households, this shortfall is critical: a larger share of the population relies on benefits, and many have fewer financial buffers, such as savings or home ownership, to cushion economic shocks. The result is that a growing number of households, especially those on Universal Credit, cannot afford to cover even the most essential costs. Another report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024) states that the cost-of-living crisis has intensified poverty in Northern Ireland in several ways. Although household spending in Northern Ireland is lower than the UK average (£486 per week compared to £585), this is not because goods are cheaper, it is because people have less to spend. In fact, 36 percent of all household spending in Northern Ireland is on essentials like food and clothing, a similar or even higher proportion than in the rest of the UK. Households in Northern Ireland are not cushioned from inflation — they are more exposed, especially those on lower incomes. Moreover, one of the most important takeaways is that benefits are not keeping up with inflation, leaving many people in Northern Ireland with significant income shortfalls. As the cost of living continues to rise, the real value of benefits is falling, particularly affecting people who are disabled, unemployed, or unable to work. The report notes that an estimated 10,000 additional families in Northern Ireland could fall into poverty due to benefit uprating not matching inflation (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024). According to Del Rio et al. (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these vulnerabilities. With people spending more time at home, energy consumption increased and with reduced use of public transport and increased remote work or schooling, the gap between those with private

mobility and those without widened. Low-income households bore the brunt of these changes, while government responses often lacked the nuance or flexibility to address these compounded forms of poverty.

Transport Poverty

Transport poverty, meanwhile, is an equally pressing but often overlooked issue. Del Rio et al. (2023) highlight that 27 percent of the poorest households in Northern Ireland do not own a car, and that public transport in rural and semi-rural areas is limited or unreliable. This severely restricts residents' ability to access essential services, including employment, education, and health care. Long travel times, lack of safe walking or cycling routes, and poor transport infrastructure contribute to social and economic isolation, particularly for elderly residents, disabled individuals, and carers. Transport poverty also results in reduced work opportunities, missed health appointments, and restricted social participation. These deprivations are linked to higher levels of stress, lower well-being, and wider inequalities in education and employment outcomes. Transport challenges, especially in rural areas with poor public transport, add to the cost and complexity of daily life, especially for those on low incomes (Birt et al., 2022).

Unequal Impacts on Marginalised Groups

In terms of economic justice, the Equality Coalition (2023) points out that 25 percent of the Northern Ireland workforce earns below the real Living Wage, and child poverty remains significantly high, especially in rural and post-conflict areas. It stresses that economic growth in Northern Ireland over the past decade has not translated into social progress for everyone, largely due to regional imbalances, underinvestment, and structural inequality. The Runnymede Trust Briefing Report by Edmiston, Begum and Kataria (2022) provides a comprehensive examination of how the cost-of-living crisis has disproportionately impacted Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups in the UK, including Northern Ireland. Geographically, these disparities are even more pronounced in certain regions. In Northern Ireland, BME individuals are 2.9 times more likely to live in poverty than white individuals. Over the past decade, reforms to the tax and social security systems have been not only highly regressive but also racialised, resulting in ethnic minorities being more likely to experience poverty and to experience it more severely. This is because welfare reforms have disproportionately reduced incomes among minority groups over the same period. The report finds that white families have lost an average of £454 per year in benefits (in real terms), while BME families have lost £806, and Black families have lost £1,635. These figures highlight the racialised nature of austerity, especially when compounded by other identity factors. BME women, for example, have lost £1,040 per year, showing that gendered disparities are layered onto ethnic ones. This is the result of structural bias. BME women are more likely to be working in insecure employment and are more at risk of complications of infection from the Covid-19 virus (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2023).

Del Rio et al. (2023) draw on a nationally representative survey conducted across the island of Ireland (respondents from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) with 1,860 respondents. The data reveals that low-income, disabled, and elderly individuals, particularly those living in rural areas, are most vulnerable to forms of poverty. Other high-risk groups include ethnic minorities, women (especially carers and single mothers), and those in rental housing. These individuals are more likely to face high energy costs, rely on prepayment meters, live in poorly insulated homes, and lack affordable, accessible transport options (Del Rio et al., 2023). Many individuals from minority backgrounds were already living close to the edge before inflation surged. Now, even a minor increase in rent, a fuel bill, or a food shop pushes them into crisis mode. According to the Advice NI Report (2022), energy debt in particular has become a major concern. Advice Northern Ireland reported clients with arrears of £500–£1,500, often with little realistic prospect of repayment. Some clients had disconnected their own energy supply for extended periods to avoid further debt. In terms of inequality, the report draws attention to widening gaps across demographic groups. Disabled people are more likely to be out of work and face extra costs associated with their health, leading to a poverty rate of over 31.5 percent in this group. Ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland also experience disproportionately high levels of poverty; the poverty rate among minority ethnic households is

32 percent, compared to 18 percent for white households. They are also more likely to experience in-work poverty and housing insecurity.

Unpaid Carers

Carers NI (2022) highlight a stark reality: tens of thousands of unpaid carers in Northern Ireland are struggling to afford a basic standard of living. Even before the cost-of-living crisis escalated, 40 percent of carers were already finding it difficult to make ends meet, often relying on credit cards, personal savings, and food banks to get by. Carers typically face additional expenses related to the care they provide, such as higher electricity usage (for medical equipment), increased heating needs, special dietary requirements, and transport costs to and from hospitals and appointments. These costs have only grown under the current inflationary pressures, yet state support has not kept pace.

As of February 2022, over 48,500 people in Northern Ireland were receiving Carer's Allowance, the main welfare benefit intended for full-time unpaid carers. However, the value of this allowance is among the lowest of its kind in the UK - less than £2 per hour for 35+ hours of care per week. While some recipients saw a minor increase in April 2022, it amounted to just 4 pence more per hour, which failed to offset inflation or energy cost increases. Further, Carer's Allowance is not available to older carers who receive State Pensions due to overlapping benefit rules, leaving many retired carers completely unsupported financially despite their ongoing care responsibilities. The report also emphasises the structural unfairness within Carer's Allowance eligibility rules. For instance, if a carer earns just £1 above the earnings threshold (then £132/week), they lose their entire entitlement - a "cliff edge" policy that disincentivises work and traps many in poverty (Carers NI, 2022: 07). Additionally, carers in education are excluded from receiving the benefit, further limiting financial independence. The result is that 46 percent of Carer's Allowance recipients in Northern Ireland report struggling to make ends meet, and 27 percent report being in debt. Many informal carers provide care for more than 35 hours per week. Carers face higher poverty risks due to low benefit levels, limited access to employment, and increased household costs related to care (UK Poverty, 2024).

The findings presented in the preceding section highlight the deeply embedded and multidimensional nature of poverty in Northern Ireland. Evidence across a range of domains, including child poverty, education, housing, health, employment, and access to essential services, demonstrates how poverty is both persistent and structurally reinforced in Northern Ireland. The analysis underscores the disproportionate impact on specific population groups such as children, women, lone parents, larger families, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, it points to the cumulative effects of policy failures, rising living costs, and gaps in welfare and childcare provision, all of which contribute to a cycle of disadvantage.

While this analysis is grounded in the specific context of Northern Ireland, it is important to situate these findings within a broader international framework. The following section presents a comparative analysis of poverty in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and selected Group of Twelve (G12) countries. This comparative lens enables a critical examination of differences in average incomes, unemployment rates, life expectancies, child poverty rates, and educational outcomes.

4 International Comparisons

In this research, we selected the Group of Twelve (G12) countries comprising Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (for which we identified data from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the Republic of Ireland as a comparative framework for examining poverty in Northern Ireland due to their economic prominence and global impact. The G12, consisting of some of the world's leading economies, provides a solid benchmark for evaluating social and economic indicators. These nations not only encompass a variety of economic systems and welfare models but also offer a comprehensive view on how developed countries tackle socio-economic issues. By comparing Northern Ireland's poverty metrics with those of the G12 and the Republic of Ireland, we aim to place the region's social inequalities within a wider international context, providing detailed insights into the effectiveness of current policies.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of these policies, we carried out a comparative analysis focusing on several key indicators of poverty and socio-economic well-being. These indicators include average income, which reflects the overall economic status of households; child poverty, given its long-term effects on social mobility and well-being; education levels, as they are directly linked to employment opportunities and income stability; life expectancy, serving as a measure of health and living standards; and unemployment rates, which greatly influence income stability and social inclusion. By analysing these variables, we sought to uncover patterns and disparities between Northern Ireland, Ireland the G12 countries, and the Republic of Ireland, thereby providing evidence-based recommendations for addressing poverty in Northern Ireland.

4.1. Average Income Comparison of Northern Ireland with Republic of Ireland and G12 Countries

Within the United Kingdom

According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2025), the median annual earnings for full-time employees in 2024 were £30,000, which is lower than the median incomes in most of the parts of UK. Specifically, England has a median annual income of £31,840, Scotland £31,891, and Wales £29,614 (Office for National Statistics, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). The disparity may be due to differences in industrial composition, public sector employment levels, and economic investment across regions.

Comparison with the Republic of Ireland

In contrast, the Republic of Ireland, as reported by Statista (2023) exhibits a markedly higher average annual income of $78,970 USD per capita, equivalent to approximately £63,000 based on exchange rates in 2024. This stark income differential between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland underscores the economic divergence despite geographical proximity and historical links. The Republic of Ireland's robust economic performance has been attributed to a strong technology sector, favourable corporate tax policies, and high foreign direct investment inflows (Statista, 2023).

European Context

When compared to other European countries, Northern Ireland's income levels are relatively low. Countries like Germany ($54,800), Belgium ($54,580), the Netherlands ($62,540), and France ($45,180) all have significantly higher average annual incomes than Northern Ireland (World Data, 2024). Even Italy, with an average income of $37,920, surpasses Northern Ireland. Spain, with an income level of $32,830, is one of the few Western European countries with a figure closer to Northern Ireland's, though it still maintains a slight lead (Our World in Data, 2024).

Switzerland stands out as the highest-income country in Europe, with an average annual income of $95,070,

followed by the Republic of Ireland and the Netherlands (World Data, 2024). Sweden also reports high income levels at $54,809 (World Data, 2024). These figures reflect the influence of high-skilled labour markets, comprehensive welfare systems, and high productivity per capita in these nations. Northern Ireland's comparative disadvantage within Europe highlights the need for structural investments in education, innovation, and labour market development.

Global Context

In the global context, Northern Ireland's income levels are relatively modest. When compared to high-income economies like the United States ($80,450) and Australia ($63,150) (World Data Info, 2023a; 2023b), Northern Ireland's average income is significantly lower. Countries such as Canada ($54,040) and Japan ($39,350) also report higher earnings (World Data Info, 2023c; 2023d). Only Spain and, in certain contexts, Italy, have income levels that are comparable to or slightly higher than Northern Ireland

This global comparison places Northern Ireland in the lower range (Table 1) of high-income economies, highlighting persistent regional economic challenges despite being part of the larger UK economy. It underscores the need for targeted economic interventions, including investments in high-growth sectors and improved access to vocational and higher education opportunities, to help bridge these earnings gaps.

Table 1: Average Income comparison of Northern Ireland with Republic of Ireland and G12 countries

Rank	Country/Region	Average Annual Income (USD)	Period
1	Switzerland	$95,070	2024
2	United States	$80,450	2023
3	Republic of Ireland	$78,970	2023
4	Netherlands	$62,540	2024
5	Australia	$63,150	2023
6	Germany	$54,800	2024
7	Sweden	$54,809	2024
8	Belgium	$54,580	2024
9	Canada	$54,040	2024
10	France	$45,180	2024
11	Japan	$39,350	2023
12	Scotland (UK)	£31,891 ($39,200)	2024
13	England (UK)	£31,840 ($39,140)	2024
14	Italy	$37,920	2024
15	Wales (UK)	£29,614 ($37,678)	2024
16	**Northern Ireland (UK)**	**£29,005 ($36,900)**	**2024**
17	Spain	$32,830	2024

In conclusion, although Northern Ireland is part of a high-income country (the UK), its income levels are notably lower than those of its national counterparts and European neighbours. This disparity becomes even more pronounced in a global context, highlighting the necessity for targeted socio-economic strategies to boost regional prosperity.

4.2. Unemployment Rate Comparison of Northern Ireland with The Republic of Ireland and G12 countries

Within the United Kingdom

Northern Ireland's unemployment rate according to data published by Clark (2025a) on Statista was 1.6 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024 and is the lowest among the four countries of the UK. This rate is significantly lower than Wales, which reported an unemployment rate of 3.5 percent in August 2024 (Welsh Government, 2024), reflecting a slight increase of 0.2 percentage points from the previous year. Scotland's unemployment rate was 3.8 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024, up from 3.4 percent in the previous quarter, indicating a rising trend (Clark, 2025b). England recorded an unemployment rate of 4.5 percent in the same period, the highest among the UK countries (Clark, 2025c). The stark contrast between Northern Ireland's unemployment rate and those of Wales, Scotland, and England underscores Northern Ireland's robust labour market and effective employment strategies, positioning it as a leader in employment within the UK.

Comparison with the Republic of Ireland

In comparison to the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland's unemployment rate is notably lower. The Republic of Ireland had an unemployment rate of 4 percent in March 2025, slightly up from the previous month (3.9 percent) (Clark, 2025d). This comparison highlights Northern Ireland's stronger labour market performance relative to its neighbouring country.

European Context

In the context of the latest unemployment data, Northern Ireland stands out with a remarkably low unemployment rate of 1.6 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024. This figure is significantly lower than the overall unemployment rate in the European Union, which was 5.8 percent in March 2025, and the euro area, which recorded a rate of 6.2 percent (Eurostat, 2025). Among individual European countries, Northern Ireland's unemployment rate is notably lower than Belgium (5.9 percent), Italy (6.0 percent), France (7.3 percent), Spain (10.9 percent), Sweden (8.8 percent), and the Netherlands (3.9 percent) (Eurostat, 2025). Even Germany, with one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe at 3.5 percent, has a higher rate compared to Northern Ireland. Switzerland, with an unemployment rate of 4.7 percent as of December 2024, also exceeds Northern Ireland's rate. This comparison highlights Northern Ireland's strong labour market performance relative to its European counterparts, underscoring its resilience and effective employment policies.

Global Context

In a global context, Northern Ireland's unemployment rate of 1.6 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024 is exceptionally low. When compared to other countries, Northern Ireland's rate is significantly lower than Australia's 4.1 percent in March 2025 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Canada's unemployment rate climbed to 6.9 percent in April 2025, reflecting a substantial year-over-year increase (Statistics Canada, 2025). According to O'Neill (2025), Japan, which is known for its low unemployment rates, reported a rate of 2.6 percent in 2023, which is still higher than Northern Ireland's. The Republic of Ireland had an unemployment rate of 4 percent in March 2025. In the United States, the unemployment rate increased to 4 percent in 2024, up from 3.6 percent in the previous year (Tierney, 2025). This comparison highlights Northern Ireland's strong labour market performance on a global scale, showcasing its resilience and effective employment policies amidst varying economic conditions worldwide.

The table shows Northern Ireland's leading position in terms of low unemployment rates compared to the other countries listed (see Table 2).

Table 2. Unemployment rates in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and G12 countries

Rank	Country	Unemployment Rate (percent)	Period
1	**Northern Ireland (UK)**	**1.6**	**Q4 2024**
2	Japan	2.6	2024
3	Germany	3.5	March 2025
4	Wales (UK)	3.5	August 2024
5	Scotland (UK)	3.8	Q4 2024
6	Netherlands	3.9	March 2025
7	Republic of Ireland	4.0	March 2025
8	United States	4.0	2024
9	Australia	4.1	March 2025
10	England (UK)	4.5	Q4 2024
11	Switzerland	4.7	December 2024
12	Belgium	5.9	March 2025
13	Italy	6.0	March 2025
14	Canada	6.9	April 2025
15	France	7.3	March 2025
16	Sweden	8.8	March 2025
17	Spain	10.9	March 2025

4.3. Life Expectancy Comparison of Northern Ireland with Republic of Ireland and G12 Countries

Within the United Kingdom

Life expectancy exhibits notable regional variations, reflecting diverse socioeconomic and health conditions. According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) (2024), life expectancy in Northern Ireland for the period 2021 to 2023 was 78.75 years for males and 82.48 years for females, presenting a combined average similar to that observed in other UK regions. In England, life expectancy during the same period was slightly higher, with males living an average of 79.09 years and females 83.04 years. In Wales, life expectancy at birth was recorded at 78.04 years for males and 82.01 years for females, marginally lower than in England but closely aligning with the UK average (ONS, 2024). Scotland, however, shows a more significant disparity, with a life expectancy of 76.8 years for males and 80.8 years for females, the lowest regional figures within the UK (National Records of Scotland, 2024).

Comparison with the Republic of Ireland

Turning to the Republic of Ireland, life expectancy data from 1995 to 2025 indicates a combined average of 82.7 years, with females living approximately 84.7 years and males 80.8 years (Worldometer, 2025a). These figures demonstrate that the Republic of Ireland's life expectancy, while comparable to England's, is marginally higher than that of Scotland and Wales, indicating a more consistent longevity rate between genders compared to the UK.

European Context

Examining life expectancy across European countries, a general pattern emerges, whereby most nations exhibit higher averages compared to the UK. For instance, France, as of 2024, reports an average life expectancy of 83.5 years, with women living up to 86 years and men around 80 years (World Bank, 2025). Germany shows a slightly lower average, with women living 83 years and men 78 years (ibid). Italy, Spain, and Sweden all report similar patterns, with women living approximately 85 to 86 years and men around 80 to 81 years, leading to average life expectancies of around 83 years (ibid). Notably, Switzerland exhibits one of the highest life expectancies in Europe, with an average of 84 years, attributed to women living around 86 years and men 82 years (ibid). The Netherlands also demonstrates relatively high longevity, with women living 84 years and men 80 years, leading to an average of 82 years (ibid). Belgium's figures are comparable, with women at 84.6 years and men at 80.3 years, resulting in an overall average of 82.4 years (ibid).

Global Context

On a global scale, life expectancy figures from non-European countries highlight a diverse range of outcomes. In Australia, from 1955 to 2025, life expectancy reached 86 years for females and 82.4 years for males, averaging 84.2 years overall (Worldometer, 2025b). Similarly, Canada recorded a life expectancy of 85 years for females and 80.7 years for males, with a combined average of 82.9 years from 1995 to 2025 (Worldometer, 2025c). In contrast, the United States presents a lower average, with women living 82.1 years and men 77.2 years, resulting in a combined average of 79.6 years (Worldometer, 2025d). Among the highest globally, Japan reports a combined average of 85 years, with females living up to 88 years and males 82 years, underscoring the country's renowned longevity (Worldometer, 2025e).

In conclusion, while the UK exhibits moderate life expectancy figures compared to other developed countries, Northern Ireland's data closely aligns with the overall UK average. Ireland's figures demonstrate slightly higher longevity, while many European countries, particularly in Southern and Northern Europe, exhibit greater life expectancy. Globally, countries like Japan and Switzerland stand out with significantly high averages, emphasising the varying demographic and health conditions that influence life expectancy across different regions. Table 3 shows the position of Northern Ireland in life expectancy rate compared to G12 countries and the Republic of Ireland.

Table 3. Life Expectancy rates in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and G12 countries

Rank	Country	Average Life Expectancy	Female Life Expectancy	Male Life Expectancy	Period
1	Japan	85 years	88 years	82 years	1995 to 2025
2	Australia	84.2 years	86 years	82.4 years	1995 to 2025
3	Switzerland	84 years	86 years	82 years	2023
4	France	83.5 years	86 years	80 years	2023

5	Spain	83 years	86 years	80 years	2023
6	Italy	83 years	85 years	81 years	2023
7	Sweden	83 years	85 years	81 years	2023
8	Canada	82.9 years	85 years	80.7 years	1995 to 2025
9	Republic of Ireland	82.7 years	84.7 years	80.8 years	1995 to 2025
10	Belgium	82.4 years	84.6 years	80.3 years	2023
11	Netherland	82 years	82 years	80 years	2023
12	Germany	81 years	83 years	78 years	2023
13	England	80.8 years	83.04 years	79.09 years	2023
14	**Northern Ireland**	**80.35 years**	**82.48 years**	**78.75 years**	**2023**
15	Wales	79.85 years	82.01 years	78.04 years	2023
16	United States	79.6 years	82.1 years	77.2 years	1995 to 2025
17	Scotland	78.6 years	80.8 years	76.8 years	2024

4.4. Child Poverty Comparison: Northern Ireland

Within the United Kingdom

According to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024), 18 percent of children in Northern Ireland were living in relative poverty (before housing costs), and 8 percent in persistent poverty defined as experiencing poverty in three of the last four years. Northern Ireland's child poverty rate remains lower than in England where it is 30 percent (Brown, 2024), Wales, where it is also 30 percent (Senedd Research, 2023), and Scotland, where it is 23 percent (Scottish Government,2025). This suggests that although Northern Ireland fares better than England, Wales and Scotland, its rates are troubling and above several EU averages.

Comparison with the Republic of Ireland

In comparison, the Republic of Ireland recorded a 15.2 percent child poverty rate in 2022, based on the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (Social Justice Ireland, 2023). The Republic of Ireland's rate is notably lower than Northern Ireland's, suggesting relatively better outcomes for children despite geographical and cultural proximity.

European Context

Across the European Union, 24.8 percent of children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). Northern Ireland's 18 percent lies below this EU average, although not among the lowest. Countries such as Spain (28.9 percent), France (25 percent), and Italy (24.8 percent) report considerably higher rates. However, countries like the Netherlands (3.6 percent), and Belgium (19 percent) show more favourable outcomes. Interestingly, despite overall economic strength, Sweden (19.8 percent) and Switzerland (18.1 percent) still report high child poverty rates slightly above or similar to Northern Ireland. This suggests that national income levels do not always directly correlate with lower child poverty.

Global Context

Among other high-income countries, Canada (17.8 percent) (UNICEF Canada, 2023), Japan (14.8 percent) in 2021 data (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023), and the USA (12.4 percent) (Shrider & Creamer, 2023) present varied levels of child poverty. Australia had 823,000 children living in poverty in 2022, around 14.5 percent (Duncan and Twomey, 2024). However, it's notable that Japan and the USA have lower child poverty rates than Northern Ireland, despite having greater populations and economic pressures. The Netherlands, with only 3.6 percent of children in poverty, stands out as a strong performer globally. These comparisons highlight that Northern Ireland's child poverty level is above many similarly classified high-income nations, despite being part of a wealthier UK economy. The comparison of Northern Ireland with the G12 countries in terms of child poverty is ranked at seventh place (see Table 4).

Table 4. Child poverty rates in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and G12 countries

Rank	Country	Child Poverty Rate (percent)	Period
1	Netherlands	3.6	2023
2	USA	12.4	2023
3	Australia	14.5	2022
4	Japan	14.8	2021
5	Republic of Ireland	15.2	2022
6	Canada	17.8	2021
7	**Northern Ireland**	**18**	**2022**
8	Switzerland	18.1	2023
9	Belgium	19	2023
10	Sweden	19.8	2023
11	Scotland	23	2023
12	Germany	23.5	2021
13	EU Average	24.8	2023
14	Italy	24.8	2023
15	France	25	2023
16	Spain	28.9	2023
17	England	30	2023
18	Wales	30	2022

4.5. Educational Outcomes

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), run by the OECD, evaluates 15-year-olds' skills in maths, reading, and science. Usually held every three years, the 2022 cycle was delayed due to COVID-19. Participation has grown from 43 systems in the first cycle to 81 in 2022, with around 690,000 students involved. The average scores for OECD countries in 2022 were 472 in maths and 476 in reading. In this report, we will compare the PISA scores of Northern Ireland with those of G12 countries (OECD, 2023a).

The comparative performance of Northern Ireland and participating countries from the G12 in the PISA 2022 assessment across mathematics and reading is summarised in Table 5 and Table 6 respectively. In comparing the PISA scores of Northern Ireland with the G12 countries, it is evident that Northern Ireland's performance is slightly below the G12 average. Specifically, Northern Ireland scored 475 in maths and 485 in reading, which are 14 points and 5.42 points lower, respectively, than the G12 averages. This indicates that while Northern Ireland is relatively close to the G12 average in reading, there is a more noticeable gap in maths, suggesting areas for potential improvement in mathematical education.

Comparison with the UK and the Republic of Ireland

In the 2022 PISA results, Northern Ireland scored 475 in maths and 485 in reading (Department for Education, 2023a), placing it above the OECD average (472 maths, 476 reading), but behind several of its closest counterparts. England outperformed Northern Ireland in both subjects, with scores of 492 in maths and 496 in reading (Department for Education, 2023b). Scotland had slightly lower maths scores (471) but performed better in reading (493) (Scottish Government, 2023). Wales, meanwhile, lagged all other UK nations with 466 in both maths and reading (Welsh Government, 2023). Notably, the Republic of Ireland significantly outperformed Northern Ireland, achieving 492 in maths and a strong 516 in reading, indicating a particularly high level of literacy performance relative to its neighbour (OECD, 2023b).

European Context

Compared to other European education systems, Northern Ireland's performance was mixed. Countries like Switzerland (508 maths, 483 reading) (OECD, 2023c) and Belgium (489 maths, 479 reading) (OECD, 2023d) surpassed Northern Ireland in maths, though their reading scores were slightly lower or comparable. Germany (475 maths, 480 reading) (OECD, 2023e) and France (474 maths, 474 reading) (OECD, 2023f) had maths scores nearly identical to Northern Ireland's, with slightly lower reading outcomes. Italy (471 maths, 482 reading) (OECD, 2023g) and Spain (473 maths, 474 reading) (OECD, 2023h) scored similarly or slightly below Northern Ireland in both domains. Interestingly, the Netherlands outperformed Northern Ireland in maths (493) but had a lower reading score (459), suggesting a disparity between domains (OECD, 2023i). Sweden's performance, with 482 in maths and 487 in reading, was very similar to Northern Ireland overall (OECD, 2023j).

Global Context

Globally, several countries far outpaced Northern Ireland's PISA scores. Japan stood out as the top performer with 536 in maths and 516 in reading, far exceeding all other countries listed. Canada (497 maths, 507 reading) and Australia (487 maths, 498 reading) also demonstrated significantly stronger results in both areas. The United States scored lower than Northern Ireland in maths (465) but performed better in reading (504), continuing a pattern where literacy tends to be stronger than numeracy in English-speaking systems.

Table 5: PISA scores 2022 for Maths for Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and G12 countries

Rank	Country	Mathematics Score
1	Japan	536
2	Switzerland	508
3	Canada	497
4	Republic of Ireland	492
4	England	492

6	Netherlands	493
7	Belgium	489
8	Australia	487
9	Sweden	482
10	**Northern Ireland**	**475**
10	Germany	475
12	France	474
12	Spain	473
14	Scotland	471
14	Italy	471
16	Wales	466
17	USA	465

Table 6: PISA scores 2022 for Reading for Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and G12 countries

Rank	Country	Mathematics Score
1	Republic of Ireland	516
1	Japan	516
3	Canada	507
4	USA	504
5	Australia	498
6	England	496
7	Scotland	493
8	Sweden	487
9	**Northern Ireland**	**485**
10	Switzerland	483
11	Italy	482
12	Germany	480
13	Belgium	479
14	France	474
14	Spain	474
16	Wales	466
17	Netherlands	459

5 Conclusion, Summary and Recommendations

This report synthesised 53 studies from academic, government, and NGO sources. Data on poverty in Northern Ireland reported in these publications was focussed across eight thematic areas:

1. Child poverty
2. Health poverty
3. Food poverty
4. Energy poverty
5. Educational outcomes
6. Housing and homelessness
7. Employment poverty
8. Cost of living

As this research revealed, 18 percent of children live in relative poverty in Northern Ireland with 8 percent of these living in persistent poverty (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). A large scale study using data from 11,114 children from Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland reported that after controlling for age of children, number of children in household, number of adults in household, presence of a disabled person, qualifications of adults and whether adults were in work, children in Northern Ireland were significantly more likely to live in poverty than those in the Republic of Ireland. The magnitude of this difference was expressed as 7 percent. This major study was significant due to the excellent scientific statistical analysis and the sample size, indicating that results could be generalised to the whole populations of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Russell, Maitre, Alamir et al., 2025). Child poverty is driven by the high cost of living (food, fuel, childcare), inadequate welfare policies (e.g., two-child benefit limit), lone parenting and large families, disability in households, policy failures and lack of a cohesive anti-poverty strategy, and educational disadvantage and poor mental health. The (former) United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has been particularly critical of the UK Government's policy on welfare reform (Alston, 2018). In this report, Alston reported that the Universal Credit policy had an impact on claimants' mental health, finances and work prospects. Alston (2018: 3) reports that:

> *The government has made no secret of its determination to change the value system to focus more on individual responsibility, to place major limits on government support, and to pursue a single-minded, and some have claimed simple-minded, focus on getting people into employment at all costs. Many aspects of this program are legitimate matters for political contestation, but it is the mentality that has informed many of the reforms that has brought the most misery and wrought the most harm to the fabric of British society. British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach apparently designed to instil discipline where it is least useful, to impose a rigid order on the lives of those least capable of coping with today's world, and elevating the goal of enforcing blind compliance over a genuine concern to improve the well-being of those at the lowest levels of British society.*

Such criticism highlights the role of neoliberal framing of poverty in government. Neoliberalism has been described as a political-economic regime (Hayek, 1944) in which human relations are defined by competition, citizens are consumers, and the poor can make market decisions to change their lives. However, neoliberalism also suggests that the poor are deficient individuals who do not take responsibility for their fate or for the conditions in which they live (Feldman, 2019: 341). Neoliberalism has been a driving force in welfare reform in the UK (Ibid.: 344), while failing to take account of the systemic barriers that exist for people living in poverty. While it may promote economic growth, neoliberalism also increases inequality, increasingly to dangerous levels, and concentrates capital accumulation in the hands of the few (Piketty, 2014). These have been reported to be pervasive and to prevent 'free-choice' in lifestyles (Card & Hepburn, 2023) and economic mobility (Beni, 2025). There are reports that neoliberalism is responsible for increasing inequality between those living in poverty and the rest of society so that members of society living in poverty are 'left behind' and their plight is 'ignored by people in power' (Stiglitz,

2024). It is imperative that political parties move away from neoliberalism and a framing of inequality that recasts it as a virtuous outcome of people getting what they deserve (Monbiot, 2016). Of course, poverty existed before neoliberalism became a mainstay of Government economic and social policy. Intergenerational poverty was recognised by Lewis (1959) as being a significant barrier to mobility out of poverty long before Thatcher and Reagan adopted neoliberalism (Monbiot, 2016). As adopting neoliberal policy has failed to address the issue of poverty effectively, the logical conclusion must be that there should be a focus on changing socio-economic and political structures and providing financial intervention to remove poverty. Only then can behaviours change (Moore, 2001).

Life expectancy is lower in deprived areas. Poor health outcomes linked to food insecurity, provision for mental health issues, poor access to wider health services (e.g., CAMHS, dental care) and poverty of those with intermediate immigration status (e.g., NRPF families). Those in poverty experience higher prevalence of ill health, difficulty and delays in accessing treatment and poorer health outcomes (Mallorie, 2024). Health shows intersectionality with other effects of poverty, such as food insecurity. The highest comorbidity between food and diet-related health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, is strongly linked to areas of high poverty in England (House of Commons Library, 2025). Similar patterns exist in Northern Ireland where many poor health outcomes are situated in the north, west and east of Belfast and Foyle areas, such as highest alcohol related mortality (Belfast, west and Foyle) and chronic heart disease (Belfast east) (Russell, 2012). These figures represent systemic failures by the Northern Ireland Assembly to deal with the systemic causes of poverty and implement successful public policy that allows health change behaviours to manifest.

Low household income is driving rising food insecurity, especially post-COVID and during school holidays. Other contributory factors are health issues, poor access to affordable food, and welfare reforms, which reduce the income of the poorest in society. The very large increases in use of foodbank and food parcel use by families in Northern Ireland's highest poverty areas reflects this food insecurity (Trussell Trust, 2025a). Trussell Trust (2025b: 30) estimate that the cost of food poverty in terms of cost to NHS, losses to the economy and fiscal costs equate to £2 billion per annum. The report states that food insecurity significantly impacts on mental and physical health with people facing hunger 24.3 percent more likely to need the use of an ambulance, 24.3 percent more likely to have attendance at Accident and Emergency, 11.5 percent more likely to need a GP appointment and 10.1 percent more likely to need a hospital admission (Ibid.: 35). Food insecurity and fuel poverty go hand in hand (Ibid.: 23). Often families find themselves tied into both forms of poverty simultaneously. Forty-five per cent of households in Northern Ireland are fuel poor. There is a high reliance on unregulated home heating oil, poor insulation and energy efficiency in many homes, and rural areas are disproportionately affected by this factor.

There are significant educational attainment gaps between those living in poverty and those who are not. Comparing Free School Meal student attainment with non-Free School Meal, shows a 25-percentage point gap in school attainment in favour of non-Free School Meal students. The underlying causes of this gap may include poverty-related cognitive delays, lack of digital access (especially for migrants), and the continued use of attainment selection in the Grammar school system, favouring wealthier families who can pay for tuition and preparation for the transfer test. This results in the underrepresentation of students on free school meals in selective grammar schools (Borooah & Knox, 2015). At the last school meals survey, 31.6 percent of students in secondary school were in receipt of free school meals, whereas 11.6 percent of students in grammar schools were in receipt of free school meals (Northern Ireland Statistical Records Agency, 2020). If opportunities for social mobility through education are to be realised, then grammar schools must do more to ensure that they take a representative sample of free school meals students.

Poverty is exacerbated for those who rent a home with 43 percent of social renters and 35 percent of private renters living in poverty. Issues within the rental market include overcrowding, poor housing quality, rising rents and housing insecurity and homelessness among NRPF families and travellers.
Employment does not guarantee that families will escape from poverty. The mean wage in Northern Ireland is low compared to that of other comparable countries. Groups particularly affected by this include unpaid carers,

disabled individuals, ethnic minorities and young people. The high levels of poverty reported in Northern Ireland are set against a backdrop of high inflation, stagnant wages, and inadequate benefits. All these factors deepen poverty.

It is important to understand that poverty in Northern Ireland is situated within a post-conflict society. The troubles brought additional challenges to those living in poverty in Northern Ireland that did not occur in the rest of the UK or the Republic of Ireland, such as, the loss of economic capital through death, with 45 percent of people experiencing the death or injury of someone they knew personally (Tomlinson, 2013), or the collapse of the industrial heart base happening as violence increased in Northern Ireland (Smyth, 2020). Patterns of highest deprivation, and highest death rate being linked to areas of highest segregation during the troubles (Smyth, 2020), persist even today (Department for Communities, 2024).

In terms of comparative analysis with G12 plus the UK and the Republic of Ireland:

- Northern Ireland ranks 16th lowest out of 17 countries when looking at the mean income of workers.
- Northern Ireland has the lowest unemployment rate of these countries (1.6 percent).
- Northern Ireland ranks 14th of 17, having one of the lowest life expectancies in years.
- Northern Ireland ranks 7th lowest out of the 17 countries in the percentage of children living in poverty.
- In education Northern Ireland 10th highest in mathematics and 9th highest in reading attainment scores on PISA 2022 measures.

5.1. Recommendations

There is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland with measurable targets. The Department for Communities (2024) report that 349,000 people live in poverty in Northern Ireland. These strategies need to be resilient and robust in the face of a changing and sometimes unstable political climate in Northern Ireland. This means a cross-community, cross-party approach to poverty developed and approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly that develops long-term solutions to poverty by:

- Developing a clear plan to eradicate poverty by the provision of financial aid packages to ensure all households have monthly income of greater than £373 per week (the figure set by the Government as being the threshold for living in poverty or not living in poverty).
- Reform of welfare policies and a movement away from neoliberalism ideology underpinning these policies.
- Addressing health inequalities with significant financial investment into life-changing interventions in the poorest areas of Northern Ireland, where health inequalities are greatest.
- Addressing food poverty and ensuring that all families in Northern Ireland can live without food insecurity.
- Undertaking historical and planned future high-quality analysis of Northern Ireland longitudinal data sets (e.g., health data, benefits data, school attainment data, population census data) to examine patterns of poverty and inequality, looking at how public policy and Government decisions have influenced outcomes, and make similar comparisons to England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland and suitable international countries.
- Investment in, and support for, affordable childcare to ensure parents (especially those who may be primary care givers) can take their place in the workforce and by being economically active increased their household income. This ultimately would lift many families out of poverty.

- Improving the quality and availability of housing, ensuring affordable rental property was well insulated, energy efficient, and free from damp and mould. This would reduce poverty, improve health of the renting population and their children, and help Government meet targets on carbon emissions.
- Improving access to all forms of education, especially for disadvantaged groups, where publicly funded schools should educate a representative section of the communities they serve. In essence, the Northern Ireland Assembly should set quotas for free school meal entry for grammar schools that are representative of the geographic areas in which they are situated.
- Address transport and digital poverty, particularly in rural areas.

The Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy draft proposal has now been published and is subject to a consultation period (Department for Communities, 2025). However, the draft Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy has already been heavily criticised by Peter Bryson, the Head of Save the Children Northern Ireland who was quoted as commenting, 'It (the draft Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy) has no clear priorities, budget, action plan, milestones, or accountability for its delivery. It recycles existing commitments, with no real clear link drawn to a deeply flawed description of the current drivers of poverty. There's no evidence that lessons have been learnt from past initiatives, no serious assessment of the drivers of poverty, and no engagement with the lived experience of children, families and communities' (McCarthy, 2025). Initial analysis of the draft strategy (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025) indicates that the present draft lacks targets, milestones and will struggle to address issues of poverty in Northern Ireland in the current form.

Poverty has always been present in society. However, the neoliberal political policies implemented by successive UK governments, and indeed the Northern Ireland Assembly, have correlated with increased poverty levels for children and working adults (Department for Communities, 2023). Further work is required to look at poverty and inequality and examine the causes of this. While low wages have been cited as being the major contributory cause (Doorley, Gubello, & Tuda, 2024), it is clear that welfare reform has coincided with increased poverty, increased inequality and reduced social mobility (Department for Communities, 2023). There may be a need for additional tax to be levied on those most affluent in society. This has led to calls for increased taxation on extreme wealth to increase funding for public services that can help to tackle persistent poverty (Oxfam, 2025). However, Westminster would need to devolve additional powers to Stormont (Devlin, 2022). Only when there is coordinated, sustained cross-community, cross-sectoral and cross-party support for an effective anti-poverty strategy will these persistent deprivations be addressed.

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Appendix 1

Table Appendix 1: Search strategy

ACADEMIC DATABASE	SEARCH STRING
Scopus	Poverty* OR poor OR "economic deprivation" OR "economic inequality" OR deprivation* OR "lack of access" OR "insufficient resources" OR "lack of income" OR "deprivation of basic needs" AND "Northern Ireland "OR "NI"
Web of Science	Poverty* OR poor OR "economic deprivation" OR "economic inequality" OR deprivation* OR "lack of access" OR "insufficient resources" OR "lack of income" OR "deprivation of basic needs" AND "Northern Ireland "OR "NI"
Social Policy and Practice	Poverty* OR poor OR "economic deprivation" OR "economic inequality" OR deprivation* OR "lack of access" OR "insufficient resources" OR "lack of income" OR "deprivation of basic needs" AND "Northern Ireland "OR "NI"
PsycINFO	Poverty* OR poor OR "economic deprivation" OR "economic inequality" OR deprivation* OR "lack of access" OR "insufficient resources" OR "lack of income" OR "deprivation of basic needs" AND "Northern Ireland "OR "NI"
Medline	Poverty* OR poor OR "economic deprivation" OR "economic inequality" OR deprivation* OR "lack of access" OR "insufficient resources" OR "lack of income" OR "deprivation of basic needs" AND "Northern Ireland "OR "NI"

Appendix 2

Data Extraction Codes

Ref ID

Author

Year

Funding
- Yes
- No
- Not reported

Type
- Report
- Peer Reviewed Article
- Non-peer Reviewed
- Other

Design
- Qualitative
- Quantitative
- Mixed-Method
- Policy Oriented
- Survey
- Other

Data type
- Primary Data
- Secondary Data
- Other

Data Collection
- Face to face
- Online
- Telephone
- Post
- Not applicable
- Not reported

Population

Sample Size
- N
- Not reported
- Not applicable

Setting for data collection
- Healthcare
- Education
- Workplace
- Domestic
- Community forums
- Social services
- Govt Databases
- Other

Key Drivers for Poverty
- Child Related
- Health
- Food
- Energy
- Education
- Housing
- Employment
- Women related
- Other
- Transport
- Digital Poverty
- Low Income
- Overall Poverty

Recommendations
- Policy response
- Monitoring response
- Business response
- Continued research
- Other

Trends

Appendix 3

Table Appendix 3: Table showing studies included in the evidence synthesis

Ref	Author (year)	Funding	Type	Design	Data type	Data Collection	Sample Size	Setting for data collection	Population	Poverty Drivers
01	Department of Health (2021)	Department of Health, NI	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Govt Databases	General population	Health
02	Beacom et al. (2021)	Open Access funding provided by the IReL Consortium for publication only	Peer Reviewed Article	Qualitative	Primary Data	Face to face Interviews Oct 2017 to May 2018	19	Stakeholders	Stakeholders	Food
03	Beacom (2021)	Not reported	Peer Reviewed Article	Mixed-Method	Primary Data	Face to face Interviews and Nominal group technique	55 (19+36) 19 in study 1 and 36 in study 2	Forum organised by researchers on food poverty	Stakeholders	Food
04	Birt et al. (2022)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Northern Ireland Public	1. Food 2. Energy 3. Housing 4. Transport 5. Low income 6. Health
05	Bunting et al. (2023)	Administrative Data Research UK and the European Social Research Council Grant	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Online	Referrals; (N = 228,779) Investigation: (N= 32091) Registrations: (15849) Looked after: (37216)	Social Services	Data on child protection from Social Care Services Data	Child related
06	Butler et al. (2023)	Northern Ireland Research and Development	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Primary Data	Online	319 practices	Healthcare	GP Practices	Education
07	Bywaters et al. (2020)	Nuffield Foundation	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Not reported	Local authorities in NI = 5 Children registered/plan to register and looked after = 1845 + 2878	Social Services	Children	Child related
08	Carers, NI (2022)	Not reported	Report White paper	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Healthcare	Carers	1. Carers 2. Child related 3. Energy 4. Employment 5. Income related 6. living cost

09	Carers, NI (2023)	Not reported	Report	Qualitative	Primary Data	Not applicable	11 carers interviewed	Healthcare	Young Carers	Carer Income related
10	Child Poverty Action Group (2024)	Oxfam GB	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Children	Child related Social support
11	Del Rio et al. (2023)	UK Research and Innovation through the Centre for Research and Khalifa University of Science and Technology	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative Survey	Primary Data	Online	Mexico (N = 1,205), United Arab Emirates (N = 1,141), Northern Ireland (N = 1,860)	Online distributed to public	Public	Energy Transport Income related
12	Department for Communities (2021)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Children	Child related
13	Department for Communities (2022)	Not reported	Report	Survey	Secondary Data	Face to face interviews	700 households	Domestic	Private households	1. Housing 2. Employment 3. Income 4. Overall poverty
14	EastSide Partnership (2021)	The Executive Office, NI	Briefing document	Policy Oriented	Primary Data	Face to face	5 Community forums from East Belfast	Community forums	Public from East Belfast	1. Health 2. Food 3. Housing 4. Employment 5. Digital Poverty 6. Income Related
15	Edmiston et al. (2022)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not applicable	Govt Databases 'Households Below Average Income' (HBAI)	Ethnic minorities	1. Income related 2. Overall poverty 3. Cost of living
16	Garratt and Armstrong (2024)	No reported	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative nationally representative household survey	Primary Data	Online	18,557 from all over England, Wales and North-ern Ireland	Social Services Food Standard Agency (FSA) an independent, non-ministerial department	Population of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.	1. Health 2. Food 3. Employment 4. Income related
17	Hinson and Bolton (2020)	Not applicable	Briefing paper from the House of Commons presented by MPs	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Households of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland	1. Energy 2. Housing

18	Jo, Kruger, and Tennant (2020)	Not reported	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Not applicable	1795 NHS dental practices in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland	Healthcare	Dental practices	Health
19	Jo, Kruger, and Tennant (2021)	Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Online	13,007 dental practices and 13,759 general practices from the UK 370 dental practices and 296 general practices from NI 314,724 older adults from NI	Healthcare	Older adults	Health
20	JRF (2025)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data this report come from data collected in the FRS in 2022/23 and the HBAI data that was generat-ed from this.	Unclear	Not applicable	Govt Databases	General public of UK	1. Child related 2. Health 3. Employment 4. Overall poverty
21	JRF (2022)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Govt Databases	General population	1. Child related 2. Overall poverty 3. Working age poverty 4. Pensioner poverty
22	JRF (2024)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Not applicable	Social Services Govt Databases	UK public	1. Child related 2. Education 3. Housing 4. Employment 5. Overall poverty
23	Liz and Kacper (2021)	Not reported	Non-peer Reviewed	Review	Secondary Data	Online	Not applicable 51 articles	Journal databases	Not applicable	1. Child related 2. Health 3. Housing 4. Employment 5. Income related 6. Family size 7. Lone parenting 8. Ethnicity

24	Lloyd (2022)	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Not applicable	Censuses of 1971, 1991, 2001, and 2011; the MDM for 2005, 2010, and 2017; and benefits claimant count data for 2020	Govt Databases	Population of Belfast	1. Health 2. Education 3. Employment
25	Lowans et al. (2023)	Department for the Economy (DfE)	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not reported	Govt Databases Belfast City Council Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Northern Ireland House Condition Survey (NIHCS)	Low-income households in NI	1. Energy 2. Transport
26	Mason et al. (2021)	The Nuffield Foundation	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative a quantitative work stream (Work Stream A) Mixed-Method [info] a series of mixed methods case studies (Work Stream B) practice observations; (ii) semi-structured interviews; (iii) focus groups, using a standardised vignette; (iv) mapping of decision-making processes; and (v) analysis of routinely collected child protection data.	Primary Data Secondary Data	Online	Semi-structured Interviews (X9) Focus Group (17)	Workplace Social Services	Social Workers Duty teams Assessment Team Child Protection and Children Looked After local decision-making processes with practitioners and managers	1. Child related 2. Benefits cut
27	McElroy et al. (2022)	Health and Social Care Research and Development Division of the Public Health Agency	Peer reviewed	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Not reported	46,535	Healthcare health and disability variables	Northern Irish adolescents	1. Child related 2. Health 3. Education 4. Employment 5. Household poverty

28	Montgome y et al. (2024)	Northern Ireland Department of Education	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Not reported	938 investigations and 1,984 Adult Safeguarding plans	Govt Databases Social Care Services Data	Adults in NI (Adult Safeguarding)	1. Adult safeguarding 2. Adult abuse
29	Moriarty et al. (2022)	Health and Social Care Research and Devel-opment Division of the Public Health Agency (HSC R&D Division) and NISRA	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary Data	Not reported	342,681	Healthcare	Data from 2001 and 2011 Censuses to house valuations for representative 28 percent of the population aged 10–64 years	1. Child related 2. Health
30	Morton et al. (2023)	Not reported	Report	Quantitative Policy Oriented	Primary Data	Not reported	1,323 responses (3.25 percent from NI)	Healthcare	Health visitors working in all four UK countries and every local authority region	1. Child related 2. Health 3. Food 4. Homelessness 5. Asylum seekers
31	Mudie (2023)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Unclear	Govt Databases	Populations in all four UK nations	1. Child related 2. Food 3. Energy 4. Housing 5. Employment
32	Muinzer (2020)	Not Reported	Peer Reviewed Article	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Populations in all four UK nations	Energy
33	Nichols and Donovan (2021)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not reported	Govt Databases	Populations in all four UK nations	Furniture poverty
34	NISRA (2021)	Not reported	Report	Not reported	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not reported	Social Services Govt Databases	Children in NI	Housing
35	NISRA (2022)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not reported	Key labour market	Children in NI	Employment
36	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2020)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Children and Young People in NI	Child related
37	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2020)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not applicable	Social Services Govt Databases	Children and Young People in NI	1. Child related 2. Education

38	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2021)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented Survey	Primary Data & Secondary Data	Not reported	4,385 young people	Education Social services Govt Databases	Children and families affected by immigration status	1. Child related 2. Health 3. Food 4. Education 5. Overall poverty
39	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2021)	Not reported	Report	Scoping review Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Online	Not applicable	Other databases	Children in NI	1. Child related 2. Health 3. Education 4. Housing 5. Funding policy 6. Asylum process
40	Northern Ireland Executive (2022)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Children in NI	Child related
41	Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not reported	Healthcare Social Services Govt Databases	Children in NI	Child related
42	Ogunrin et al. (2022)	The Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)	Peer Reviewed Article	Case study	Secondary Data	Online	Not applicable	Govt Databases	Houses in fuel poverty	Energy
43	Pivotal (2023)	Not reported	Report	Qualitative	Primary Data	Unclear	92	Community youth work organisations in seven areas from across Northern Ireland	Youth (14-25 years old)	1. Education 2. Employment
44	Reimagine Children's Collective (2023)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Not reported	Not reported	Social Services Govt Databases	Children in NI	1. Child related 2. Health 3. Employment
45	Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2020)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Online	Unclear	Social Services Govt Databases	Children in NI	Child related
46	Shinwell et al. (2021)	Children in Northern Ireland and Northumbria University	Peer Reviewed Article	Qualitative	Primary Data	Face to face	34; aged 4–11	Education	Primary and Secondary School Children	1. Child related 2. Food

47	Social Mobility Commission, Uk (2021)	Not reported	Report	Policy Oriented	Secondary Data	Unclear	Unclear	Education Domestic	Whole population in NI	1. Child related 2. Food 3. Energy 4. Education 5. Housing 6. Employment 7. Women related 8. Living costs
48	Sofi-Mahmudi et al. (2020)	Unclear	Peer Reviewed Article	Quantitative	Secondary analyses of cross-sectional data from the 2013 Child Dental Health Survey	Online	9,866 12- and 15-year-old children	Healthcare	Children	1. Child related 2. Health
49	Sovacool and Furszyfer Del Rio (2022)	No	Peer Reviewed Article	Mixed-Method (i) original expert research interviews, (ii) community and household interviews, (iii) site visits and naturalistic observation, and (iv) a targeted literature review.	Primary Data & Secondary Data	Face to face primary data	5 interviews with Gypsies and Travellers from a research and policy standpoint 41 household and community interviews	Domestic	Gypsies and travellers in NI	1. Health 2. Energy 3. Housing 4. Transport
50	Spyreli et al. (2021)	Queens University Belfast	Peer Reviewed Article	Qualitative	Primary Data	Online Telephone	12 parents	Domestic	Low-income families	Food
51	Vaughan et al. (2024)	Seafood	Peer Reviewed Article	Qualitative photovoice and creative mapping methods	Primary Data	Online	28 participants	Domestic	Parents or guardians of children between the ages of 2 and 18 who self-defined as 'living on a tight budget'	Food
52	Women's Budget Group (2020)	Unclear	Report	Discussion	Secondary Data	Unclear	Unclear	Healthcare	Women in NI	1. Health 2. Women related
53	Yavuz and Byrne (2023)	Not reported	Peer Reviewed Article	Qualitative	Primary Data	Online	120	Civil Society Organisation	Civil Society Organisation (CSO) peacebuilding and reconciliation workers that liaison with ex-combatants and youth in Derry and the Border area of Northern Ireland.	Employment

Appendix 4

Poverty drivers and corresponding studies

Poverty drivers	Studies	Total
Health Inequality	S01, S14, S16, S18, S19, S20, S23, S24, S27, S29, S30, S37, S38, S43, S47, S48, S51	N=17
Child Poverty	S05, S07, S10, S12, S20, S21, S22, S23, S26, S27, S29, S30, S31, S35, S36, S37, S38, S39, S40, S43, S44, S45, S46, S47	N=24
Food Insecurity	S02, S03, S04, S14, S16, S30, S31, S37, S45, S46, S49, S50	N=12
Energy Poverty	S04, S08, S11, S17, S25, S31, S32, S41, S46, S48	N=10
Lower Educational Outcomes	S06, S22, S24, S27, S36, S37, S38, S42, S46	N=9
Lower Quality Housing and Homeless-ness	S04, S13, S14, S17, S22, S23, S31, S38, S46, S48	N=10
Employment	S08, S13, S14, S16, S20, S22, S23, S24, S27, S31, S42, S43, S46, S52	N=14
Living on Less • Cost of Living • Low Income • Transport fares	S04, S08, S09, S11, S13, S14, S15, S16, S23, S25, S27, S33, S46, S48	N=14
Poverty in Ethnic Minorities and Asylum Seekers	S30, S38	N=2

About the Authors

Canan Ozkaya is a Ph.D. researcher at Queen's University Belfast, based in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work. Her doctoral research explores the experiences of high-attaining girls in STEM education through the dual lenses of gender theory and the Capabilities Approach. With a strong commitment to social justice, her work critically examines structural inequalities in educational achievement and opportunity. Canan's broader academic interests include gender equity, inclusive education, and educational policy. Her research contributes to ongoing debates on how education systems can support the full development of young women's capabilities in traditionally male-dominated disciplines.

Qurat ul Ain is a Ph.D. researcher in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast. Her research focuses on peer tutoring and its effects on students' academic performance and metacognitive development. She is particularly skilled in quantitative methodologies and data synthesis, with an interest in translating research findings into effective educational policies and practices. Her work contributes to understanding how collaborative learning strategies can enhance student achievement and engagement. Qurat's academic interests include educational psychology, intervention research, and evidence-informed policymaking in education systems.

Allen Thurston is employed as a Professor of Education at the School of Social Sciences, Education & Social Work at Queen's University Belfast (QUB). He has an established international research reputation. He regularly presents at high-status, peer-reviewed international conferences. He regularly publishes as lead author in journals defined as having a high impact factor on the JCR Social Science Citation Index. He has a long track record of obtaining research income from funding bodies. Allen has been involved in successful research funding applications in excess of £11 million. He has also had time spent as Head of the School of Education, and both Director of Research and Head of the School of Social Sciences, Education & Social Work (SSESW) at Queen's University Belfast. His current research projects are researching how to raise attainment for those students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. He predominantly uses randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and is currently running four large RCTs on improving literacy levels/health for students in schools spread across South Africa, Chile, Colombia, and the United Kingdom. He has published a significant body of work on cooperative learning in reading, having published 140+ manuscripts in this area. He has received the American Educational Research Association Special Interest Group Cooperative Learning Award for outstanding research in the field of cooperative learning. He was Chair of this SIG from 2021-2025. He was engaged by the Educational Endowment Foundation to review their evidence toolkit of peer tutoring in schools. He has run large-scale randomised controlled trials using peer tutoring (including some in mathematics, youth offending, and smoking prevention) funded by ESRC , Global Challenges Research Fund, Danish Academy for Sciences and The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. He has published four major teacher manuals for teachers who are implementing cooperative learning in their classrooms. He is currently running cooperative learning initiatives with the Queen's Widening Participation Unit aimed at helping students from high socioeconomic disadvantage areas gain their GCSE in mathematics. He sat on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) Education Unit of Assessment panel for REF2021, has worked extensively on Hong Kong's RAE2026 assessment, and been involved setting and writing the policy and regulations around REF2029 (the next cycle of assessment). He has been a mentor for Council for At Risk Academics for five years, undertaking three research projects with refugees, and refugee academics in Turkey/Syria. He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in October 2023.

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