



An exploration of Hygiene Poverty in Ireland

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Executive Summary

This research represents the first comprehensive study of hygiene poverty in Ireland. Hygiene Poverty is understood as the inability to afford or access essential hygiene items such as shampoo, soap, laundry detergent, etc. The research comprised a literature and policy review, an expert workshop and submissions, a survey, focus groups and in-depth case study interviews. In this respect, the research has sought to

- Understand the factors that lead to hygiene poverty.
- Explore the impact of hygiene poverty.
- Share research findings with key stakeholders to influence the wider conversation on poverty and raise awareness.

Hygiene poverty occurs when people are forced to go without or cut back on essential hygiene and personal care products. Notably, this issue transcends income levels, emphasising the broad-reaching implications of the ongoing cost of living crisis.

65.1% of those surveyed had experienced difficulty affording essential hygiene items in the previous 12 months. This was defined as ‘having gone without basic toiletries or hygiene items because you could not afford to buy them.

Research Key Findings

- **Prevalence Across Income Groups:** The research indicates that consistent access to personal and household hygiene items is a fundamental aspect of human flourishing, cutting across income levels.
- **Fundamental Human Rights:** The study asserts that consistent access to personal and household hygiene items is crucial to basic human rights and should be recognised as such.
- **Adequate income:** The linkage between income inadequacy and hygiene poverty emerged prominently. Participants emphasised the strong association of income inadequacy with insufficient welfare or benefit rates, as well as inadequate wages for paid employment.
- **Hierarchy of Needs:** The research reveals a hierarchy of needs within households, where hygiene needs often sit at the bottom of priorities. This prioritisation, reflected in both survey results and qualitative reporting, showcases the hidden nature of hygiene-related deprivation within households, making it difficult to address through mainstream social policies.
 - Respondents noted significant hurdles, with 70.5% attributing difficulties to rising household expenses, 58.6% citing reduced disposable income as a significant barrier, and 52.9% highlighting increased spending on food.

Physical and Mental Health Impacts:

- **Physical Impacts:** A high level of respondents reported a negative impact on physical health due to the unaffordability of hygiene items. The most frequently reported impact was trouble sleeping (63.5%), followed by lack of exercise (45.9%) and poor oral health (41.4%)
- **Mental Health Impacts:** Our survey revealed that 69% of those surveyed reported feeling embarrassed, ashamed or depressed, while increased stress was reported by 61.2% of individuals as a result of not being able to afford basic hygiene items

Demographic Trends

- Among those facing challenges affording hygiene essentials, specific groups exhibited a higher likelihood of being affected. Notably, 79.5% of respondents dealing with a health condition or disability experienced difficulties compared to 54.9% without such conditions.
- Our study indicates a higher proportion of people from ethnic minority backgrounds experiencing hygiene poverty compared to those from a white Irish background (73.7% vs. 62.8%).
- Adults who indicated having responsibility for children were also more likely to experience hygiene poverty than those who did not. Households with children aged under 17 were more likely to report having experienced hygiene poverty than households with no children aged under 17 (72.2% vs. 66.7%).

Recommendations

Conclusion 1: *There is a need to address Inadequate Income.*

Recommendation: This recommendation echoes calls from various civic society groups for core personal social welfare rates to be raised by a minimum of €25, which is needed to keep pace with inflation and to begin to address income inadequacy among the poorest families, and in the context of reduced purchasing power overall.

Conclusion 2: *Hygiene needs are an aspect of deprivation for households who are both at risk and not at risk of poverty.*

Recommendation: The research team for this study recommends that access to personal hygiene and household cleaning items be included as a deprivation indicator in order to best capture the breadth and depth of hygiene-related deprivation across income groups in order to steer policy responses. The following wording is proposed: **Consistent access to personal hygiene and household cleaning products.**

Conclusion 3: *Hygiene related needs are not yet fully or even partially recognised politically or in policymaking circles.*

Recommendation: Just as food poverty, period poverty and fuel/energy poverty have been taken up and given a formal basis in policy that includes specific responses, hygiene poverty and/or hygiene-related deprivation need to be recognised to allow for a specific, focused response.

Conclusion 4: *A lack of general awareness of Hygiene Poverty.*

Recommendation: Continued and enhanced efforts to raise awareness of hygiene poverty and/or hygiene-related deprivation are needed. This goes beyond the need to raise awareness of Hygiene Hub as an existing entity and towards a need to raise awareness of the relevant issues generally.

Conclusion 5: *Hygiene rights are a fundamental aspect of human rights.*

Recommendation: While not located in a specific policy recommendation, this research strongly suggests that work needs to be done to highlight hygiene rights as a core aspect of human rights and consistent access to hygiene items as key to underpinning human flourishing. By strengthening and enhancing their rights and advocacy-based activities, groups like Hygiene Hub, in tandem with other civic society groups who work in the same broad space, may be able to move beyond charitable provision only and go some way towards achieving this recognition.

rent food shoes petrol bills toys
school uniform christmas birthdays
hygiene items school trip personal care products
cleaning items school books clothes
laundry detergent



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