

Twenty five years of TASC addressing inequality



The State We Are In: **Inequality in Ireland 2026**

September 2026

Author: Oisín Gilmore



TASC is an independent think-tank whose mission is to address inequality and sustain democracy by translating analysis into action. TASC's Constitution presents its main objectives as: Promoting education for the public benefit; Encouraging a more participative and inclusive society; Promoting and publishing research for public benefit.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



TASC receives support under the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) which is funded by the Government of Ireland through the Department of Rural and Community Development.

TASC
28 Merrion Square North
Dublin 2
Ireland
Tel: +353 1 616 9050
E-mail: contact@tasc.ie
Website: www.tasc.ie
Linkedin: [@tascblogireland](#)
Instagram: [@tasc_ireland](#)

The present report does not represent the collective views of TASC, but only of the respective authors. The responsibility of TASC is limited to approving its publication as worthy of consideration of the global progressive movement.

Copyright © 2026 TASC

ISBN: 978-1-7395318-4-3

Twenty five years of TASC addressing inequality



Twenty five years of TASC addressing inequality

For 25 years, inequality has been at the centre of TASC's work. Since its establishment in 2001, TASC has sought to document the extent and character of inequality in Ireland, explain the structures that produce it, and develop policies capable of creating a more equal society.

This chapter reviews how TASC's analysis of inequality has developed over that period. It begins with the organisation's early research and publications before examining the annual *Cherishing All Equally* and *The State We Are In* reports. It concludes by drawing together the principal lessons arising from this work and considering what 25 years of research can tell us about the persistent nature of inequality in Ireland.

1. The early years of TASC

In the late 1990s, a number of people began exploring the possibility of establishing Ireland's first independent think tank. This was achieved in June 2001 with the establishment of TASC. Initially named the Foundation for Policy Alternatives, its name was changed in 2002 to TASC – Think Tank for Action on Social Change. Paula Clancy took on the role of Executive Director, accountable to a board of three non-executive directors chaired by Des Geraghty and including Professor John Horgan and John Curran. For the first five or six years of TASC's existence, the organisation was steered and overseen by a Steering Committee comprising the three board directors; TASC's three co-founders, Paula Clancy, Proinsias De Rossa and Jim O'Donnell; and Fintan O'Toole, who chaired an Advisory Council of around 20 people drawn from politics, trade unions, NGOs and academia.¹

It is worth remembering the context in which TASC was founded. After several decades of poor economic performance and high levels of emigration, Ireland experienced an economic turnaround and unprecedented growth during the 1990s. This came after the rise of Thatcher and Reagan, the fall of the Soviet Union, major defeats for the trade union movement internationally, and the retreat of transformative social democratic politics. The 1990s were therefore a period in which right-wing economic thought and neoliberal orthodoxies were triumphant globally. This triumph was particularly visible in Ireland, where a political consensus developed around the closure of political and social possibilities. TASC emerged to challenge this and present a critical perspective on the dominant neoliberal narrative. At the time of its foundation, there were essentially no think tanks in Ireland, and none aligned with values “traditionally associated with the political left”.² TASC was therefore entering new waters when it was founded.

At its inaugural meeting, held on 12 October 2001, TASC's Advisory Council defined a programme of work around two themes: economic inequality and democratic accountability. Over the last 25 years, these two themes have remained at the core of TASC's work. The rest of this chapter provides an overview of how TASC has approached economic inequality over that period.

In its early years, TASC's work was largely based on the research of the network of academics, intellectuals and experts it brought together. This occurred through the TASC Economists Network and through the frequent seminars and conferences organised by TASC. Its work was also communicated to the public through regular engagement with the press, the publication of short research briefings and a book-publishing partnership established with New Island Press.

1 This section draws on Clancy, P. (2019) 'History of TASC', TASC, September. Available at: <https://www.tasc.ie/about/history-of-tasc.html>

2 Ibid

In 2003, TASC released its first publication, *After the Ball*, a searing analysis of Irish society by Fintan O'Toole. This was followed by a substantial number of books published over the next five years as part of the TASC at New Island series, alongside a number of TASC research pamphlets. These covered issues including, but not limited to, privatisation³, community arts⁴, foreign policy,⁵ housing,⁶ pensions,⁷ transport,⁸ local democracy,⁹ feminism¹⁰ and regeneration¹¹. Throughout, however, they maintained TASC's underlying focus on inequality and democracy. This concern with inequality was particularly apparent in examinations of Ireland's pension and housing systems.

TASC's research briefings also maintained a focus on inequality. One early example was Roger Fox's *Income Inequalities: Trends and Issues in Ireland*,¹² which compared the incomes of the top and bottom 10 per cent. It suggested that inequality had worsened during the early years of the Celtic Tiger but improved in the late 1990s, as demand for labour drove up wages at the lower end of the earnings distribution.

In 2009, TASC published *The H.E.A.P. Chart: Hierarchy of Earnings, Attributes and Privilege* with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Prepared by Terrence McDonough and Jason Loughrey, the report used 2006 data to map Irish households according to income, occupation and household type. It argued that inequality remained entrenched during the economic boom. Women, people with lower levels of education and welfare-dependent households were concentrated towards the bottom, while managerial and professional households dominated the top. Social transfers substantially reduced poverty, but Ireland's comparatively low social spending limited their effect. The report called for stronger social protection, more progressive taxation, narrower earnings gaps and greater investment in education, particularly early childhood education.¹³

TASC's focus on inequality continued through a series of *The Solidarity Factor* reports published between 2008 and 2014, which examined public perceptions of wealth distribution and economic inequality.¹⁴ These found that, between 2008 and 2010, the proportion of people who believed that wealth was distributed unfairly in Ireland increased from 70 per cent in 2008 to 85 per cent in 2009 and 87 per cent in 2010. In 2010, 91 per cent agreed that the government should take active steps to reduce the gap between high and low earners, up from 85 per cent in 2009. Only 4 per cent disagreed with government action in this area. When presented with a range of possible measures, 16 per cent favoured increasing the minimum wage, 29 per cent supported a maximum wage and 49 per cent favoured combining the two. Only 6 per cent supported neither measure or said that they did not know.

3 Sweeney, P. (2004) *Selling Out? Privatisation in Ireland*. Dublin: TASC at New Island.

4 Fitzgerald, S. (ed.) (2004) *An Outburst of Frankness: Community Arts in Ireland – A Reader*. Dublin: TASC at New Island.

5 O'Toole, F. (2005) *Post Washington: Why America Can't Rule the World*. Dublin: TASC at New Island.

6 Drudy, P.J. and Punch, M. (2005) *Out of Reach: Inequalities in the Irish Housing System*. Dublin: TASC at New Island.

7 Stewart, J. (2005) *For Richer, for Poorer: An Investigation of the Irish Pension System*. Dublin: TASC at New Island; Stewart, J. (2007) *Choosing Your Future: How to Reform Ireland's Pension System*. Dublin: TASC.

8 Wickham, J. (2006) *Gridlock: Dublin's Transport Crisis and the Future of the City*. Dublin: TASC at New Island.

9 Ó Broin, D. and Waters, E. (2007) *Governing Below the Centre: Local Government in Ireland*. Dublin: TASC.

10 Barry, U. (ed.) (2008) *Where Are We Now? New Feminist Perspectives on Women in Contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: TASC, National Women's Council of Ireland and New Island.

11 Bissett, J. (2009) *Regeneration: Public Good or Private Profit?* Dublin: TASC and New Island.

12 Fox, R. (n.d.) *Income Inequalities: Trends and Issues in Ireland*. Dublin: TASC. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20071118182940/http://www.tascnet.ie/upload/rfox.pdf> Although, this report is undated, the original PDF's embedded metadata records its creation as 27 June 2003.

13 McDonough, T. and Loughrey, J. (2008) *The H.E.A.P. Chart: Hierarchy of Earnings, Attributes and Privilege Analysis*. Dublin: TASC and Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/heap_report.pdf.

14 TASC (2010) *The Solidarity Factor: Public Perceptions of Unequal Ireland*. Dublin: TASC. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/solidarity_factor_august2010.pdf

A follow-up survey conducted in 2014 found that 83 per cent believed income was unfairly distributed. This increased to 88 per cent after respondents were told that the incomes of the richest 10 per cent were 7.5 times those of people on the lowest incomes. It should be noted that the earlier surveys asked about wealth inequality rather than income inequality. Once again, 90 per cent believed that the government should actively reduce the gap between high and low earners. Some 84 per cent supported increasing the minimum wage and 55 per cent supported establishing a maximum wage, while 46 per cent supported introducing both measures.¹⁵

A later TASC research briefing, *Income Inequality in Ireland*, published in 2014, applied to Ireland the analysis popularised by Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. It argued that Ireland had experienced the same broad historical movement identified by Piketty elsewhere: inequality declined during the middle decades of the twentieth century but subsequently began to rise again. Although the increase in inequality in Ireland had not been as extreme as in the United States, it was nevertheless concerning that the prosperity experienced during the economic boom had not significantly reduced inequality.¹⁶ In 2014 Piketty gave the keynote address at a TASC–FEPS conference, “The Challenge of Economic Inequality to Recovery and Wellbeing,” held at the Croke Park Conference Centre.

2. TASC's annual inequality reports: *Cherishing All Equally*

In 2015, TASC launched its “inaugural annual report on economic inequality”, *Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland*. The title referenced the unfulfilled commitment contained in the 1916 Proclamation of Independence, which declared the resolve of the Republic to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all its parts, “cherishing all the children of the nation equally”. The report was supported financially by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. TASC went on to produce five editions of *Cherishing All Equally* between 2015 and 2020.

2.1 Cherishing All Equally 2015

Written by Nat O'Connor and Cormac Staunton, this substantial 144-page report argued for a multidimensional approach to understanding inequality in Ireland. It identified seven distinct but interrelated factors affecting inequality: income, wealth, public services, taxation, family composition, personal capacities, and the cost of goods and services.¹⁷

The report devoted a chapter to each of these dimensions and described in detail the available data relating to each topic.

It highlighted that Ireland combines highly unequal market incomes with a tax and transfer system that substantially reduces the resulting inequality. As a result, disposable-income inequality in Ireland was around the European average.

However, the report argued that this model is both socially damaging and economically fragile. It leaves the state heavily dependent on taxes and transfers to address structural inequalities, while low employment, low pay, inadequate public services and a comparatively low tax base constrain its ability to do so.

15 These results are not directly comparable with those from 2010: in the earlier survey, respondents were asked to choose their preferred measure from a range of options, whereas in 2014 they were asked whether they supported each measure individually.

16 TASC (2014) The Solidarity Factor: Opinion Poll, November 2014. Dublin: TASC. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_solidarity_factor_tasc.pdf

17 O'Connor, N, and C. Staunton. (2015). “Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland.” Dublin: TASC. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_cherishing_all_equally_web.pdf.

Published at the tail end of the recession, the report argued that the return of economic growth would not by itself solve this problem, as it had deeper structural roots. It highlighted how, although the Celtic Tiger had raised general living standards, it had distributed the gains unevenly, increased essential costs such as housing, and left many people financially exposed when the property economy collapsed. The report presciently warned that a future recovery could reproduce these same problems.

2.2 Cherishing All Equally 2016

The subsequent 2016 report was written by Rory Hearne and Cian McMahon.¹⁸ Its scope was substantially narrower than that of the inaugural report. Moving away from the seven-factor framework, it did two things. First, it presented an analysis of why economic inequality matters and where Ireland stood in 2016. Second, beginning what would become a feature of many of TASC's subsequent reports on economic inequality, it identified specific themes on which to focus. In 2016, these were gender and children.

In analysing why economic inequality matters and where Ireland stood in 2016, the report reiterated many of the findings of the 2015 report. In particular, it highlighted the difference between market-income and disposable-income inequality. It also examined problems in the labour market, noting that 23 per cent of Irish workers were low-paid, among the highest proportions in the OECD. While recognising the redistributive achievements of the Irish state, the report emphasised the need for "predistribution": reducing inequality before taxes and transfers through wages, working hours, employment rights and collective bargaining.

In its analysis of gender, the report highlighted persistent income gaps between men and women. It drew attention to the substantially higher proportion of women working part-time, the gender pay gap, the underreported gender pension gap, and the highly unequal distribution of care, with women performing 70 per cent of this work. It also examined the position of one-parent families. Approximately 90 per cent of lone parents were women, while the deprivation rate among lone-parent families was 58.7 per cent, far higher than that of the general population.

In its analysis of how economic inequality affects children, the report highlighted that poverty during early childhood not only affects children at the time but can have consequences that compound throughout their subsequent lives. It showed how consistent poverty among children had increased substantially over the course of the recession and how highly unequal educational outcomes were closely associated with income inequality.

2.3 Cherishing All Equally 2017

The third *Cherishing All Equally* report was produced in 2017.¹⁹ It was edited and principally written by James Wickham. As with the 2016 report, it had two particular thematic focuses. Alongside an update on TASC's inequality indicators, the report presented a comparative analysis of inequality in Ireland and other countries. It also contained an extended analysis of housing written by Rory Hearne.

¹⁸ Hearne, R. and C. McMahon. (2016). "Cherishing All Equally 2016 Economic Inequality in Ireland." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_inequalityreport_2016_web.pdf.

¹⁹ Wickham, J. (2017). "Cherishing All Equally 2017 Economic Inequality in Ireland." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/cherishing_all_equally_2017.pdf.

In its international comparative analysis, the report argued that inequality is a political choice. It described how countries across Europe and North America, although exposed to similar economic pressures, had produced very different outcomes in relation to inequality. The report attributed this to differences in their political institutions, welfare systems and labour-market arrangements.

Despite these differences, the report highlighted how, across the West in recent decades, there had been a shift from a “diamond-shaped” social structure, with a large middle, towards an “hourglass”, with wealth and income accumulating at the top, insecurity expanding at the bottom and the middle being hollowed out.

Again, the report highlighted the success of Ireland's system of redistribution but called for a shift in public policy away from addressing inequality post hoc and towards a system of “predistribution”, in which market income would be distributed more equally and the state would need to do less to correct inequalities after they arose. In particular, the report called for a general increase in wages, arguing that “Europe needs a pay rise”, and for universal, publicly supported childcare.

Following the collapse of the property market in the late 2000s, by 2016 Ireland was already experiencing another highly problematic increase in rents and house prices. In his specialist chapter, Rory Hearne described how Dublin rents had increased by almost 65 per cent between 2010 and 2016 and were already above their previous boom-time peak. He argued that Ireland's persistent and recurrent property crises were rooted in a housing policy that treated housing primarily as an asset and source of investment returns rather than as a home. The crisis was not inevitable, accidental or simply the result of insufficient construction. Rather, it was the product of policy.

The housing crisis, the report argued, had developed over a period of decades as the state withdrew from directly providing housing and moved towards subsidising private landlords, facilitating institutional investors and relying on rising property values as a source of economic recovery. The alternative was not simply more supply, although increased supply was important. The report argued that a fundamentally different housing system, organised around the provision of secure and affordable homes, was required.

2.4 Cherishing All Equally 2019

The fourth *Cherishing All Equally* report was published in February 2019 and reported on data from 2018.²⁰ It was produced jointly with the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and was notably different from the preceding reports. Rather than concentrating mainly on Ireland, it placed Irish inequality within a European and international framework. Moreover, while previous reports had generally been written by one or two core authors associated with TASC, this report was edited by Robert Sweeney and Robin Wilson and contained chapters by a number of international authors.

A chapter by José Gabriel Palma of Cambridge University asked how European countries had achieved relatively similar levels of disposable-income inequality despite substantial differences in their economic development, political histories and welfare institutions. Building on his previous work, Palma argued for comparing the income share of the top 10 per cent with that of the bottom

20 Sweeney, R. and R. Wilson. (2019). “Cherishing All Equally 2019: Inequality in Europe and Ireland.” Dublin: TASC. <https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/20190220114456.pdf>.

40 per cent.²¹ He observed that the middle 50 per cent fairly consistently received around half of all income and argued that attention should therefore focus on the ratio between the top 10 per cent and the bottom 40 per cent.

Using this "Palma ratio", he described how market-income inequality had increased across Europe since the 1960s, while disposable-income inequality had risen at a much slower rate because of the redistributive efforts of the state. This connected with the findings of earlier reports in the *Cherishing All Equally* series in relation to Ireland, but Palma explored the pattern across Europe more broadly. Again echoing the previous findings of the series, he argued for a greater focus on predistributive policies. These could include stronger collective bargaining, higher wages at the bottom, less extreme remuneration at the top, greater employment security, more equal ownership of productive assets, and institutions that give workers greater economic power.

A chapter by Hanna Szymborska of the Open University explored wealth inequality in the European Union. It found that, in 2010, the wealthiest 10 per cent of households in the EU owned 50 per cent of the total net wealth included in the sample. By 2014, the share owned by the top 10 per cent had increased to 51.2 per cent. It also found that wealth inequality was far greater than income inequality, with net-wealth Gini coefficients of more than 0.7 in Latvia, Germany, Ireland, Austria, Cyprus and the Netherlands. The chapter highlighted how the composition of assets differed considerably across the wealth distribution. Lower- and middle-wealth households held much of their wealth in their principal residence, while wealthier households held more financial assets, other property and business wealth.

In two subsequent chapters, Robert Sweeney placed Ireland within this wider European context. These chapters highlighted how, despite Ireland having relatively high market-income inequality, its tax and transfer system substantially reduced inequality, leaving disposable-income inequality close to European norms. They also highlighted how Ireland relied heavily on cash transfers to compensate for inequality, rather than on institutions that compressed market incomes or supplied universal public services.

The report's introduction and conclusion, written by Robert Sweeney and Robin Wilson, examined the effect of inequality on democracy in Europe and warned that it posed a number of challenges. First, concentrated wealth produces concentrated political influence. Second, stagnant living standards, social insecurity and growing inequality undermine trust in democratic and European institutions. Legitimate anger can then be redirected towards migrants, minorities or European integration rather than towards unequal economic structures. However, the report also highlighted polling evidence suggesting that there was substantial support for solidaristic policies across Europe.

2.5 Cherishing All Equally 2020

The fifth and final *Cherishing All Equally* report was published in 2020. Written principally by Robert Sweeney, it was again produced in partnership with FEPS. Unlike the preceding reports, it did not provide an update on general inequality indicators for Ireland but focused exclusively on its principal theme: the care economy.²²

21 Palma, J.G. (2011) 'Homogeneous middles versus heterogeneous tails, and the end of the "inverted-U": The share of the rich is what it's all about', *Cambridge Working Papers in Economics*, No. 1111. Cambridge: University of Cambridge. Available at: <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/241870>

22 Sweeney, R. (2020). "Cherishing All Equally 2020: Inequality and the care economy." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/cae_2020-report-final.pdf.

The report contained two core chapters: one by Robert Sweeney on care, employment and gender inequality across the EU, and another by Robert Sweeney and Danielle Oliveira Santanna on unpaid and paid care in Ireland.

It argued that care is indispensable to economic and social life, but its value is systematically underestimated. Much of it is performed without pay within households, it is disproportionately undertaken by women and, when conducted through the labour market, it is often supplied by low-paid and frequently migrant workers. Additionally, care is often understood as the responsibility of individual families rather than as a collective social responsibility.

The care economy has a number of implications for inequality. The fact that women undertake more unpaid work plays a major role in explaining their lower levels of income, wealth and political participation. The concentration of low-paid and precarious work in the care sector also matters for wider patterns of inequality. Publicly funded childcare and adult care can allow more women to enter employment and may therefore promote greater gender equality. However, the report noted that although countries with extensive care systems generally have smaller gender gaps in total earnings, they do not necessarily have smaller hourly gender pay gaps. This appears to be because public provision brings more women into paid employment but frequently concentrates them in low-paid, female-dominated occupations.

Examining Ireland in particular, the report found that Irish people did more unpaid care work than people in any other EU country.²³ Women undertook an average of 21 hours of unpaid care work each week, compared with 12 hours among men. Women also performed approximately 40 hours of total unpaid work each week, compared with 21 hours among men. However, when paid and unpaid work were combined, the difference in total workload was much smaller, with women working an average of 54 hours each week compared with 51 hours among men. The principal inequality therefore related to the type of work performed and whether it generated income, security and economic independence.

The report noted that the amount of unpaid care work performed declined as income rose, as higher-income households were better able to pay for care services. In line with previous reports in the series, it also noted that Ireland devoted substantial resources to supporting families and unpaid carers through payments such as Child Benefit, Maternity Benefit, the Working Family Payment, the One-Parent Family Payment, Carer's Allowance and related supports. While recognising the value of these payments, the report argued that they supported households financially while preserving reliance on unpaid care rather than developing a comprehensive care infrastructure.

The result was expensive childcare; low employment among lone parents and some groups of women; reliance on informal childminders and au pairs; unpaid care continuing to fall disproportionately on women; and weak public support for the pay and conditions of professional carers. The report argued that existing benefits should generally be preserved, but that future expansion should concentrate more heavily on services.

The report also examined Ireland's formal care system, arguing that its childcare system was underdeveloped and highly marketised. It found that approximately 74 per cent of childcare services were operated for profit, while 26 per cent were community-based, not-for-profit services. It also found that 58 per cent of the sector's income came from the state, with the remaining 42 per cent coming from parental fees.²⁴ Wages and working conditions within the sector were poor.

²³ Ibid., p.62.

²⁴ Ibid., p.74.

3. TASC's annual inequality reports: *The State We Are In*

In 2019, to coincide with the centenary of the First Dáil, TASC began another annual inequality report series, *The State We Are In*.²⁵ The initial report was produced jointly by TASC and the Foundation for European Progressive Studies. Reports in this new series were intended to be shorter and more tightly focused on Ireland, building on "the more comprehensive *Cherishing All Equally* reports".²⁶

3.1 The State We Are In 2019

The first *The State We Are In* report was structured around three core chapters, which examined the labour market, the development of inequality over time, and the contribution of different economic sectors to inequality.

The report identified the labour market as the principal arena through which income before taxes and benefits is distributed for much of the population. However, Ireland had a relatively employer-friendly labour market, with weak trade unions, low levels of union density and collective bargaining coverage, and relatively weak employment protections. According to an OECD index cited in the report, Ireland ranked 22nd out of 23 EU countries for labour-market protections and 20th for the regulation of temporary contracts.²⁷ Ireland also had one of the highest proportions of low-paid workers in the EU, although it had one of the lowest levels of in-work poverty.

In examining the development of inequality, the report drew on the World Top Incomes Database. It found that, between 1975 and 2009, the top 1 per cent increased its share of total income from 6 to 11 per cent. It also observed that poverty and deprivation particularly affected people outside the labour market, including children, unemployed people and those unable to work because of illness or disability.

The report also observed that Ireland had an unusually polarised employment structure, with relatively large numbers of people working in both highly paid and poorly paid sectors. Highly paid sectors included finance, information and communications, energy, and professional and scientific services. Poorly paid sectors included hospitality, administration and support, agriculture, and wholesale and retail.

Despite this polarisation, and contrary to claims sometimes made, only a minority of total labour-income inequality could be explained by differences in pay between sectors. Most inequality arose within sectors. The report found unusually high levels of market-income inequality across the Irish economy. It therefore rejected an explanation of Ireland's high market-income inequality based solely on the country having the wrong mixture of industries. Instead, it identified a broader structural problem with how income was distributed within workplaces and sectors. Possible explanations included weak bargaining power, low wage floors, and high levels of executive and professional pay.

The report repeated a frequent finding of TASC's inequality reports: despite Ireland's high level of market-income inequality, its tax and benefit system reduced disposable-income inequality to around average levels. However, these cash transfers did not address the underlying structural inequalities within the economy.

25 Sweeney, R. (2019). "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland today." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/18457_inequality_in_irelandinnerfinalweb.pdf.

26 Ibid., p.4.

27 Ibid., p.8.

3.2 The State We Are In 2020

The second *The State We Are In* report, published in 2020, was again written by TASC and produced jointly with the Foundation for European Progressive Studies. Building on the now familiar finding that middling disposable-income inequality concealed high market-income inequality, the report asked what caused Ireland's unusually high level of market-income inequality. It examined two principal issues: earnings inequality and joblessness. It found that both factors mattered, but in different ways, with joblessness playing a particularly large role when inequality was examined at the household level.²⁸

In relation to earnings, the report built on the previous report's finding that only a minority of Ireland's market-income inequality could be explained by the industrial structure of the labour market. It argued that Ireland's high level of earnings inequality arose principally because individual industries paid low wages, rather than because the country had an unusually large number of inherently low-paying industries.

The report also found that Ireland had an unusually high proportion of working-age people living in households with no income from employment, self-employment or capital. Low levels of education were closely associated with having no market income. However, it argued that increasing employment would not necessarily resolve the associated distributional problems, as people from jobless households were likely to enter relatively poorly paid employment.

Despite this, the report recommended policies aimed at increasing employment. These included measures to reduce practical barriers to employment, such as affordable childcare and care services, transport, education and training, the tapered withdrawal of benefits, and targeted support for people with disabilities. It also advocated policies to increase wages, including stronger collective bargaining, sector-by-sector wage-setting, higher wage floors, better protection for low-paid workers, and measures to strengthen labour's bargaining position.

3.3 The State We Are In 2022

There was no *The State We Are In* report in 2021, with the third report in the series published in 2022. Written by Robert Sweeney and Donald Storrie, it focused on the distributional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's income supports, as well as the emerging cost-of-living and energy crisis following the reopening of the economy and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.²⁹

A central finding was that disposable-income inequality fell during the pandemic. This apparently counterintuitive result arose because, despite widespread job losses, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, wage subsidies and the existing welfare system protected household disposable incomes. The decline in disposable-income inequality was not driven by any comparable decline in market-income inequality. Instead, it resulted from the cash payments distributed by the government through the tax and benefit system. While the intervention worked, it reinforced Ireland's dependence on correcting inequality after it had arisen.

The cost-of-living crisis produced by the surge in inflation following the reopening of the economy and Russia's invasion of Ukraine presented a different challenge. The report described how the effect of inflation on real incomes was greater for people on lower incomes because of the composition of their consumption. Lower-income households spent a greater proportion of their

28 Sweeney, R. (2020). "The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2020." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/the_state_we_are_in_tasc_final_030320.pdf.

29 Sweeney, R. and D. Storrie. (2022). "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2022." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/2205-4_tasc_inequality_in_ire_2022.pdf.

incomes on essentials, including energy and food, for which prices were rising rapidly. The report argued that the government's responses to the crisis were insufficiently targeted at lower-income households and disproportionately benefited middle- and higher-income groups.

3.4 The State We Are In 2023

The fourth *The State We Are In* report was published in 2023 and written by Robert Sweeney. It developed the analysis contained in the 2022 report, examining long-term and more recent changes in Irish income inequality and the distributional consequences of the cost-of-living crisis.³⁰

It found some evidence of declining disposable-income inequality over the long term, but no evidence of a comparable decline in market-income inequality. This suggested that the decline in disposable-income inequality had been driven by increased redistribution rather than a more equal distribution of income within the market economy.

The report reiterated the findings of previous reports concerning Ireland's high number of jobless and low-work-intensity households, high earnings inequality, and deficient public services.

It also examined how housing costs affected household incomes, as the continuing housing crisis became an increasingly important dimension of inequality. Housing costs were not adequately reflected in conventional measures of disposable income, but could substantially reduce the actual living standards of renters and other households facing high accommodation costs.

3.5 The State We Are In 2024

The fifth *The State We Are In* report was written by the current author, Oisín Gilmore. Alongside the annual analysis of inequality indicators, the report contained a special-focus chapter on educational inequality, co-authored by Sara Singleton and Oisín Gilmore.³¹

In its examination of annual developments in inequality, the report considered Ireland's persistent dependence on taxes and social transfers to counteract exceptionally unequal market incomes. It suggested that apparently favourable poverty and inequality statistics concealed underlying experiences of economic insecurity.

The report examined changes in market-income and disposable-income inequality, together with indicators of poverty and deprivation. In line with previous reports, it found that non-employment was closely associated with lower incomes and an increased risk of poverty and deprivation.

It also examined the effect of the COVID-19 and cost-of-living supports and raised concerns about their temporary nature. The report highlighted how, in the absence of these supports, poverty rates would have increased significantly in the preceding years.

The special-focus chapter highlighted how Ireland performed remarkably well in terms of educational outcomes, despite not spending an unusually large amount on education. This was particularly true of primary and secondary education. Where Ireland performed less well was in early childhood education and care. Despite substantial increases in spending in this area, Ireland's childcare system remained expensive, fragmented and heavily reliant on private, for-profit providers. UNICEF ranked Ireland 36th out of 41 affluent countries for childcare provision.

30 Sweeney, R. (2023). "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2023." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/he_state_we_are_in_tasc_2023_final.pdf.

31 Gilmore, O. (2024). "The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2024." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_inequality_report_2024_final.pdf.

The report also highlighted examples of successful policies addressing educational inequality. In particular, it pointed to the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. Between 2007 and 2022, reading achievement in the most disadvantaged schools increased by approximately 13 per cent and mathematics achievement by 15 per cent. The gap in Junior Certificate retention between DEIS and non-DEIS schools fell from 16.8 percentage points in 2001 to 8.5 percentage points in 2014, with further progress thereafter. Progression from DEIS schools to higher education increased from 45 per cent in 2012 to 60 per cent in 2022.

The report also pointed to the contribution of programmes intended to promote access to higher education, such as SUSI grants and the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH).

Nevertheless, substantial inequalities remained within the Irish education system. Students in non-DEIS schools continued to perform significantly better than those attending DEIS schools, while parental education and social class remained strong predictors of a child's educational achievement.

3.6 The State We Are In 2025

The sixth *The State We Are In* report was published in 2025. It was again written by the current author, Oisín Gilmore. Its special-focus chapter, on inequality, isolation and loneliness, was written by Adeelia Goffe, Maria Pachowicz and Oisín Gilmore.³²

Drawing on the World Inequality Database, the report highlighted how the income shares of the top 10 per cent and top 1 per cent had increased over the preceding 40 to 50 years. However, harmonised estimates produced by the ESRI showed greater stability.

Once again, the report found that Ireland continued to have high market-income inequality but fairly average disposable-income inequality. This demonstrated both the unusually unequal distribution of income generated by the market and the unusually large redistributive effect of taxes and benefits in Ireland. Ireland's disposable-income Gini coefficient had remained remarkably close to 0.3 for approximately 35 years. The report characterised the welfare state's effect as stabilising rather than transformative: it repeatedly repaired market outcomes without substantially changing how those outcomes were initially produced.

The report also contained a chapter focusing on groups at a particularly high risk of poverty and deprivation. These included people not in employment, such as children, retired people, unemployed people and those unable to work because of illness or disability. Renters and families comprising one adult and children were also identified as being at particular risk. Poverty and deprivation were substantially higher among these groups than among people in employment.

The report once again raised concerns about the withdrawal of pandemic and cost-of-living income supports and the potential consequences for poverty and deprivation.

The special-focus chapter on inequality, isolation and loneliness explored how economic inequality can affect people's ability to participate in social life. Economic insecurity determines whether people can travel, meet friends, participate in community activities, host visitors or maintain stable relationships.

Analysis of the Survey on Income and Living Conditions showed that people at risk of poverty had less contact with friends and relatives than those above the poverty threshold. Meanwhile, a 2022

32 Gilmore, O. (2025). "The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2025." Dublin: TASC. https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_the_state_we_are_in_2025.pdf.

EU-wide survey found that more than 20 per cent of Irish respondents felt lonely most or all of the time, compared with an EU average of 13 per cent. Loneliness was particularly associated with limited social support, mental-health difficulties, being female, being aged between 15 and 29, disability, and being born outside Ireland.

The report highlighted how loneliness could constitute a serious public-health issue. International research cited in the report associated social isolation with a 29 per cent greater risk of premature mortality, loneliness with a 26 per cent greater risk, and living alone with a 32 per cent greater risk.

It also examined several groups particularly exposed to loneliness and isolation: people experiencing homelessness; people with disabilities or chronic illnesses; older people and carers; immigrants and ethnic minorities; and children and young people.

4. What have we learned from 25 years of studying inequality?

When TASC was founded in 2001, it identified the two core themes that would direct its work over the following 25 years: economic inequality and democratic accountability. Researchers at TASC have now been studying inequality for a quarter of a century. What have we learned from this extended body of research?

The findings can broadly be divided into two categories: the particular and the general. Since the second *Cherishing All Equally* report in 2016, TASC's annual inequality reports have extended beyond a general analysis of economic inequality to examine particular dimensions of inequality. At the same time, these reports have continued to provide a general analysis and regular update on inequality in Ireland. Even just from reading this chapter, the consistency of the findings arising from that general analysis has probably become apparent.

4.1. Particular findings

Before drawing out those general lessons, however, it is worth reviewing some of the more particular findings.

4.1.1 Wealth inequality

TASC's inequality reports have repeatedly highlighted that income inequality is not the only issue. Wealth inequality is also a major challenge. Indeed, the reports have consistently stressed that wealth is considerably more concentrated than disposable income, with the wealthiest 10 per cent of households owning more than half of all wealth.

Even these figures understate some aspects of the distribution, as the composition of wealth differs considerably across the wealth distribution. For most households, wealth consists mainly of an owner-occupied home and perhaps a pension. These assets are relatively illiquid and often do not generate a current income. At the top of the distribution, wealth is more likely to consist of financial and business assets capable of producing additional returns.

4.1.2 Housing inequality

Housing inequality was one of the first subjects analysed by TASC, including in the 2005 book *Out of Reach: Inequalities in the Irish Housing System* by P.J. Drudy and Michael Punch.³³ More recently, since the publication of Rory Hearn's special chapter on housing in the 2017 *Cherishing All Equally* report, it has been a consistent focus of TASC's research.

33 Drudy, P.J. and Punch, M. (2005) *Out of Reach: Inequalities in the Irish Housing System*. Dublin: TASC at New Island.

As Rory Hearne argued, and as more recent reports have repeated, the housing crisis was not caused merely by insufficient supply. It resulted from treating housing primarily as an investment asset rather than as a social need. As the state stopped treating housing as a need, it withdrew from the direct construction of social housing and increasingly subsidised private landlords. Public money supported high rents without creating a permanent public asset.

The results of decades of failed housing policies are now extreme. Recent reports in *The State We Are In* series have highlighted the enormous increase in homelessness and the particularly precarious position of renters.

4.1.3 Groups at risk

TASC has repeatedly highlighted how inequality does not affect everyone equally. It is a particularly significant problem for people outside employment and those whose caring responsibilities place them at risk of exclusion from employment. This is visible in the substantially higher rates of poverty and deprivation among lone parents, children, people with disabilities or long-term illnesses, unemployed people, households containing nobody at work, carers and older people. The housing crisis has also made renters a particularly exposed group.

4.1.4 Gender and care

Gender inequality has been a recurring focus of TASC's research. It has been particularly visible in the annual inequality reports since the special-focus on gender and children in 2016. TASC's research has repeatedly found that gender inequality is inseparable from care work.

Women undertake most unpaid childcare, eldercare and care for people with disabilities. This affects their relationship with the labour market. Women tend to work fewer paid hours and spend less time in employment. When they are employed, caring responsibilities restrict their occupational choices, earnings and prospects for promotion. All of this reduces their ability to save for a pension and accumulate wealth over their lifetimes.

Ireland's reliance on unpaid family care and privately provided paid care generates a double inequality: unpaid carers sacrifice income and employment opportunities, while paid carers are concentrated in low-paid, insecure and undervalued occupations.

4.1.5 Education and children

The 2016 and 2024 reports both placed a particular focus on education and children. They highlighted how child poverty can have long-term consequences extending well beyond childhood. They also showed how Ireland continued to underperform in early-years education and childcare provision.

However, the 2024 report also demonstrated that well-designed policy can produce real successes. Ireland achieves comparatively strong educational outcomes despite relatively modest expenditure. Targeted interventions have produced tangible gains, particularly through the DEIS programme and programmes intended to widen access to third-level education.

Despite this, educational outcomes remain strongly associated with parental income, parental education and social class, and attendance at a fee-paying school. Education cannot fully compensate for inequalities in housing, health, family income and care. It can mitigate disadvantage, but educational policy cannot independently create an equal society.

4.1.6 Temporary income supports

Recent years have seen a series of major crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. In response, the government introduced a range of costly measures that largely took the form of cash transfers. These were effective in preventing substantial increases in disposable-income inequality, poverty and deprivation, but they were, by their nature, temporary.

These temporary measures were both effective and necessary. However, they did not permanently raise the income floor or reduce the cost of essential goods and services.

The measures demonstrated the state's capacity to alter distributional outcomes rapidly when it chose to do so. However, recent reports described a growing dependence on stop-start emergency intervention. Households could move above or below the poverty threshold depending on whether an electricity credit or lump-sum payment happened to be included in that year's income.

Furthermore, as these interventions have now largely come to an end, we have yet to see whether they concealed growing structural problems in the Irish economy.

4.1.7 Inequality and social participation

The reports have also pointed to the close connection between economic inequality and TASC's other principal focus: democracy.

They have highlighted not only how inequality can undermine trust in democratic institutions, but also how inequality, poverty and deprivation can reduce people's ability to participate fully in society. This was particularly visible in the 2025 *The State We Are In* report, which described the connections between inequality, loneliness and social isolation.

4.2 General findings

In addition to these particular findings, a number of general findings have repeatedly emerged from the reports. Indeed, from reading this chapter, the basic insight arising from 25 years of research may already have become somewhat familiar, because its central argument has been remarkably consistent:

Ireland has an exceptionally unequal distribution of market income, but a highly redistributive tax-and-transfer system prevents this from producing equally exceptional disposable-income inequality. The state is much better at compensating for inequality after it arises than at changing the structures that generate it.

Ireland repeatedly appears among the most unequal developed countries when income is measured before taxes and social transfers. Fluctuations in inequality before taxes and transfers appear to be driven largely by changes in employment and unemployment. The deeper inequalities built into the structure of the Irish economy remain. Despite this, once taxes and transfers are included, Ireland generally moves towards the EU or OECD average. Disposable-income inequality has remained surprisingly stable over several decades, despite recessions, recoveries, the pandemic and inflation.

The difference between inequality before and after taxes and transfers is unusually large in Ireland, demonstrating the scale of the redistribution performed by the state.

The reports consistently reject two frequently heard assessments of this situation.

First, it cannot be said that Ireland has an ineffective welfare state. The state has a very substantial effect on social outcomes. State pensions, unemployment payments, family supports and progressive direct taxation prevent much higher levels of poverty and inequality.

Second, it is sometimes suggested that the scale of the state's redistributive effort is itself sufficient. However, moving from an unusually bad problem to an averagely bad problem is not a solution. Redistribution mitigates inequality, but it does not resolve it. In particular, it does not address the underlying problem of high market-income inequality.

Ireland's tax-and-transfer system is an after-the-fact response to inequality. It stabilises social pressures by reducing some of the negative consequences of an unequal society. It is not, however, a transformative policy that addresses the underlying structural causes of inequality.

This reliance on redistribution allows employers to pay wages below what is required for an adequate standard of living while the state supplements household incomes through welfare payments and in-work benefits. Similarly, the state subsidises private rents instead of providing sufficient public housing, and supports families through cash transfers while leaving them to purchase childcare and other essential services privately. This produces a recurring pattern in which an underlying structural problem is met with a compensatory cash response.

The reports produced by TASC do not oppose these compensatory measures. Rather, they argue that compensation has increasingly become a substitute for reforming the structures that make it necessary.

Underlying structural problem	Compensatory response
Low wages	In-work income supports
Joblessness	Unemployment payments
High private rents	Rent subsidies
Expensive childcare	Cash payments and subsidies
Inadequate healthcare	Subsidies for private provision
Energy-inefficient homes	Temporary energy payments

TASC has therefore repeatedly called not only for policies that redistribute income but also for measures that address the "predistribution" of income.

In addition to redistributing cash income towards those outside employment, this requires policies that alter the structure of the economy itself. Action can be taken in three principal areas: the labour market, the distribution of assets, and the provision of public goods and services.

4.2.1 *The labour market*

In relation to the labour market, one central issue is addressing joblessness and low labour-force participation. The collapse in employment during the recession and its subsequent recovery was the dominant economic issue in Ireland for much of the last 15 years, and its importance is difficult to overstate.

However, there are also significant inequalities among people in employment. Too many workers in Ireland are in low-paid jobs, work variable or insufficient hours, or experience precarious employment or bogus self-employment. Addressing these problems requires ensuring that people receive adequate wages, can obtain the hours they want, and have secure, good-quality jobs.

The principal mechanism for achieving this is stronger trade union rights and collective bargaining. Currently, few workers in Ireland's private sector are covered by collective agreements. Those who are covered often benefit from legacy agreements established decades ago. Trade union representation is increasingly becoming a benefit largely confined to workers in the public sector.

The EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages requires member states in which collective bargaining coverage is below 80 per cent to establish an enabling framework and an action plan to promote collective bargaining. This obligation remained intact following the Court of Justice of the European Union's November 2025 judgment, which annulled other parts of the Directive. However, the government does not appear to be treating the expansion of collective bargaining with the seriousness or urgency it requires.³⁴

4.2.2 The distribution of assets

A second area is the extremely unequal ownership of assets in Ireland. This is frequently discussed in relation to housing, but the ownership of business and financial assets is even more concentrated.

Exploring how the ownership and control of economic assets can be more widely distributed or democratised is something the left has long advocated but which largely disappeared from the policy agenda in recent decades. Relevant issues include wealth taxation, executive remuneration, worker representation in corporate governance, wider reforms to corporate governance and, more fundamentally, questions of ownership. It is important that this again becomes an area in which serious policy alternatives are developed.

4.2.3 Public goods and services

The third area is the provision of public goods and services. TASC's reports repeatedly describe public services as a form of "social income". Two households with the same cash income can have very different living standards depending on their access to secure housing, healthcare, childcare, education, disability supports, eldercare and public transport.

These are all goods and services that can be, often are, and should be provided publicly and universally. One area that particularly needs to be expanded is the public provision of care, including healthcare and mental-health services, childcare, disability supports and eldercare.

The possible expansion of universal public services should also be considered in light of recent discussion of universal basic services. We need to explore the public provision of utilities and essential services such as water, waste collection, public transport, telephone and internet access, electricity, heating and legal services. Before pursuing a more radical expansion of universal basic services, however, we must at least ensure adequate public provision of existing essential services.

³⁴ Gilmore, O. (2025a) *The EU Minimum Wage Directive and the Battle for Social Europe: Why Denmark's Case at the ECJ Matters for the Future of Ireland and the EU*. Dublin: TASC. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_eu_min_wage_report-final_2.pdf

Ireland's relatively weak provision of universal services means that households must purchase many essentials privately. This reduces the real value of disposable income and makes comparisons based on nominal cash incomes incomplete.

It also creates a feedback loop identified in TASC's early reports as the "low-tax triangle":

1. Low public revenue produces inadequate public services.
2. Households must purchase essential services privately.
3. High private expenses generate resistance to taxation, further constraining public provision.

Consequently, the reports' case for higher public expenditure is also a case for increasing the effective living standards of households.

5. Conclusion

Over the last 25 years, TASC's research has examined inequality from many different perspectives. However, its central finding has remained remarkably consistent. Ireland relies heavily on taxes and social transfers to compensate for an unusually unequal distribution of market income, while doing much less to change the structures that produce inequality in the first place.

This redistribution is essential and prevents far higher levels of poverty and deprivation. But it cannot substitute for secure and adequately paid employment, a more equal distribution of wealth, and the universal provision of housing, care and other public services. The challenge is therefore not simply to redistribute income after inequality has arisen, but to build an economy and society that produce more equal outcomes from the outset.

The following chapter examines how these long-standing patterns developed during 2025 and considers the current state of inequality in Ireland.



The year 2026 marks 25 years since TASC was established. Throughout that period, economic inequality and democratic accountability have remained at the centre of the organisation's work. This report looks back over 25 years of TASC research, examines the current state of inequality in Ireland and considers how artificial intelligence may affect existing economic and social inequalities.

TASC's research has consistently shown that Ireland has a very unequal distribution of market income, but that its tax-and-transfer system substantially reduces the resulting inequality. The state is much better at compensating for inequality after it arises than at changing the structures that produce it. Drawing on the latest evidence, the report examines the distribution of income, poverty and deprivation, the housing crisis and the central role played by social transfers in supporting household living standards.

A special-focus chapter by TASC Technology Researcher Molly Newell explores how the rapid development of artificial intelligence could reshape work and inequality in Ireland. It considers who is most exposed to displacement, who may benefit from productivity gains and how AI could affect workplace power, discrimination, public services and the distribution of wealth.



TASC (Think tank for Action on Social Change) is an independent progressive think-tank whose core focus is addressing inequality and sustaining democracy.

