



Research Office
Legislative Council Secretariat



Information Note

Poverty reduction targets in Ireland and Canada

IN06/2022

1. Introduction

1.1 In September 2013 and for the first time in Hong Kong, the Government set the official poverty line at 50% of the median monthly household income. Over the past decade or so, around one-fifth of the local population has thus been identified as “poor population” before policy intervention (i.e. taxation, welfare transfers and public housing) under the poverty line framework, though this would be slashed to less than one-tenth after intervention.¹ While this relative poverty line enables the Census and Statistics Department (“C&SD”) to conduct annual macro-analyses of the local poverty situation, the Government has not complemented the regularly updated data with quantifiable policy targets in tackling poverty. Without such targets, there are doubts in society over the long-term commitment of the Government in poverty alleviation on the one hand, and the cost-effectiveness of the 142% upsurge in recurrent expenditure on social welfare over the past decade on the other.² Consequently, there is increased advocacy for specifying poverty reduction targets, in conjunction with a review of the poverty line framework to include poverty indicators in absolute terms (e.g. basic living cost and material deprivation) for progress monitoring.³ In the Legislative Council (“LegCo”), the subject of setting poverty reduction targets has been discussed on at least four occasions over the past three years. Most recently, a motion on “reviewing the methods for measuring poverty” and “setting specific targets for reducing the poor population” was passed in LegCo on 6 April 2022.⁴

¹ Local poverty rate before policy intervention increased from 19.9% in 2013 to 23.6% in 2020. However, the post-intervention rate edged down slightly from 8.4% to 7.9%.

² While there is general applause for the increased devotion of resources to poverty alleviation over the past decade, some are concerned whether the resources are used in the most effective manner to assist the poor.

³ Legislative Council Secretariat (2021), Office of the Government Economist and Census and Statistics Department (2021), 香港社區組織協會 (2021) and 香港01 (2022).

⁴ Legislative Council (2022), Legislative Council Secretariat (2021) and Subcommittee on Reforming the Poverty Alleviation Policies and Strategies (2022).

1.2 At the request of Hon TANG Ka-piu, the Research Office has studied the poverty reduction targets in Ireland and Canada.⁵ These two places are well-known globally not only for their multi-faceted framework in poverty measurement (with both absolute and relative poverty indicators), but also for their poverty reduction targets embedded in the poverty line framework. More importantly, both governments have devoted substantial resources to meet such targets in combating poverty. This *Information Note* begins with an overview of the global trend of poverty reduction targets, followed by a review of recent discussions over the existing poverty alleviation framework in Hong Kong. It will then switch to the respective poverty reduction frameworks and targets in Ireland and Canada, along with a concise table for easy reference (**Appendix 1**).

2. Recent global developments

2.1 In the Millennium Development Goals released in 2000, the United Nations (“UN”) asked its member states to formulate national policies to reduce global population living under extreme poverty (i.e. daily per capita income under US\$1.9 (HK\$14.9)) by half during the period from 1990 to 2015. These targets, however, were primarily more applicable to developing countries rather than affluent places.⁶ In September 2015, **UN went further to announce a wider set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”), including a universal target of halving the population living below the poverty lines as defined by individual states in the period from 2015 to 2030. SDGs are thus applicable to affluent places as well.** On top of relative poverty, UN urges member states to include poverty-related indicators (e.g. food security, employment and social inclusion) into their poverty alleviation framework.⁷ Some affluent countries (e.g. Norway, Czech Republic and New Zealand) have thus formulated their own anti-poverty strategies with quantifiable targets accordingly, along with adoption of a transparent and evidence-based mechanism to assess the policy impact.⁸

⁵ Despite the close relationship between poverty reduction targets and framework of poverty line, this short piece focuses on the former. The latter is a wide-ranging topic meriting another dedicated study. See also Legislative Council Secretariat (1998, 2005, 2013).

⁶ It was estimated that some 736 million people in the world still lived below extreme poverty in 2015. See United Nations (2015).

⁷ SDGs were adopted by 193 countries under the UN 2030 Development Agenda comprising 169 targets and 231 indicators spanning across poverty, health, education, economy, environment, innovation, social inclusion and governance. See United Nations (2017, 2022).

⁸ International Labour Office (2016), Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation (2021) and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022).

2.2 Conceivably, a policy target is vital because it is “a clear expression of a policy priority, setting out exactly what the government wants to have done and by when.”⁹ More specifically on time-bound poverty reduction targets, they help the responsible government agencies to (a) set a course towards the committed targets and overcome the hurdles; (b) identify and assist the vulnerable groups; and (c) build a measurable framework for public monitoring.¹⁰ Below is a brief summary of poverty reduction targets generally seen in affluent places, notwithstanding wide variations in implementation details:

- (a) **Targets embedded in the official poverty line:** As briefly discussed above, poverty reduction targets are set within the framework of the official poverty line. At present, there are three different approaches in setting poverty lines. *First* on relative poverty, the line is typically based on 50%-60% of the median household income (e.g. South Korea and Finland). *Secondly* on absolute poverty, the line is based on a minimum amount of expenditure for basic living or subsistence costs of a person/household (e.g. the United States and the Netherlands). *Thirdly* on hybrid approach, both relative income and absolute expenditure discussed above are used to determine the poor population in need of assistance (e.g. Italy, Estonia and Ireland);
- (b) **Headline targets for reduction:** The timeframe to achieve specified targets is usually set at 5-10 years, but headline targets (i.e. primary indicators) differ across places. While certain places aim at reducing relative poverty (e.g. South Korea), some are also keen on reducing the population facing non-monetary hardships (e.g. Ireland). Some places (e.g. Germany) adopt other targets (e.g. employment rate and welfare dependency) instead of poverty rates, whereas others (e.g. Japan and Portugal) focus more on reducing poverty amongst specific demographic groups such as children and/or the working population.¹¹ These reduction targets are regularly reviewed, keeping in view the latest socioeconomic developments;¹²
- (c) **Sub-targets for policy monitoring:** Given that poverty is multidimensional, some advanced places (e.g. Canada) have gone further than headline targets. They monitor a basket of indicators

⁹ UK Parliament (2010).

¹⁰ Atkinson et al. (2005), European Commission (2012) and United Nations (2017).

¹¹ Atkinson et al. (2005) and United Nations (2017).

¹² United Nations Children’s Fund (2017).

and conduct annual assessment of the effectiveness of their poverty reduction plans. These sub-targets or metrics could be monetary (e.g. income inequality and low income entry and exit rates) and non-monetary (e.g. food insecurity, housing quality and youth engagement);¹³

- (d) **Poverty line thresholds not equivalent to eligibility criteria for means-tested welfare schemes:** There is no direct linkage between poverty thresholds and eligibility for means-tested assistance schemes in most of these affluent economies, as in the case of Hong Kong. Poor households thus identified need to apply for welfare assistance through other channels; and
- (e) **Transfer payments to the poor:** Setting targets itself cannot eradicate poverty. Transfer payments are the most common policy instruments used to assist vulnerable groups (e.g. children, elderly or lone parents/single parents) to get out their financial plight. Indicative of increased devotion of resources, the ratio of public social welfare spending to Gross Domestic Products (“GDP”) of the 38 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (“OECD”) had increased from 12.6% in 2007 to 14.3% in 2017.¹⁴

2.3 Reflecting in part the general achievements of poverty reduction strategies, the overall poverty rate in OECD member states declined by 0.3 percentage point to 11.2% during the period from 2007 to 2019, but there is no study available to highlight the specific role played by poverty reduction targets.¹⁵ As regards the concerns on poverty alleviation targets, some governments are allegedly cherry-picking easy targets and resorting to “window dressing” to present their achievements. While some critics are concerned that it is rather common to see the governments missing the poverty reduction targets even after years of implementation, others put the blame on unforeseeable factors (e.g. economic downturn or constraints due to fiscal deficit) outside the control of policymakers.¹⁶

¹³ Gao and He (2022).

¹⁴ Public social welfare expenditure in this study refers to welfare payments only (i.e. excluding health expenditure). See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020).

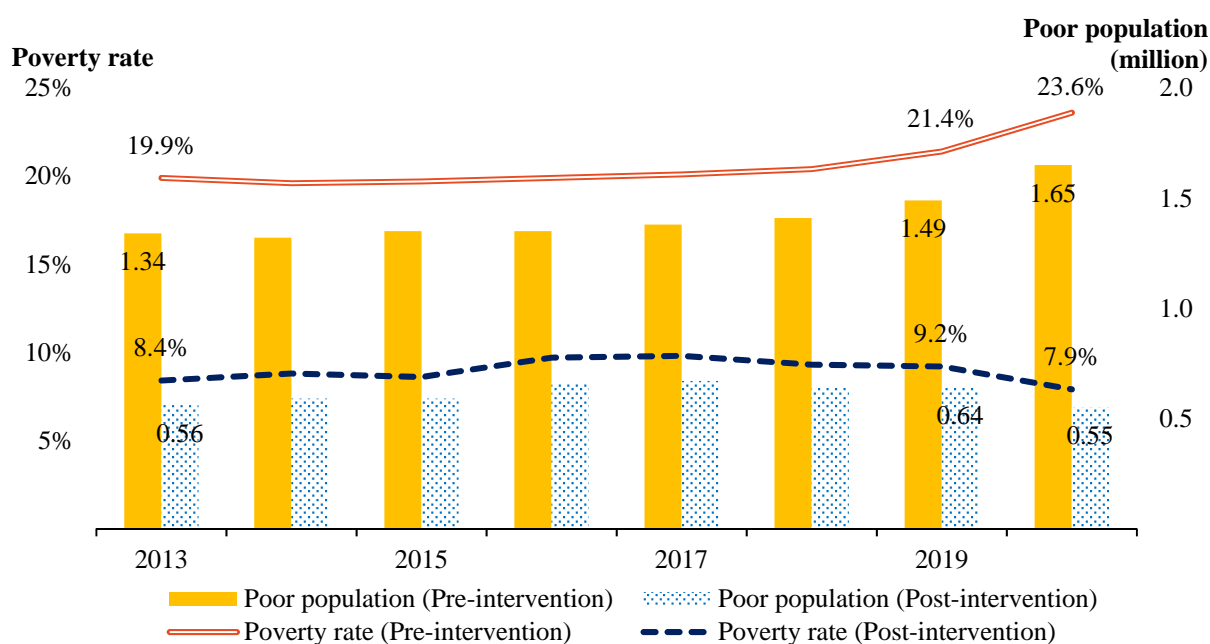
¹⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022).

¹⁶ Atkinson et al. (2005), European Commission (2012), Elkins et al. (2015) and Plante (2019).

3. Poverty alleviation policy in Hong Kong

3.1 Before policy intervention, the size of local poor population had increased by 24% from 2013 to a historic high of 1.65 million in 2020, along with a rise in poverty rate from 19.9% to 23.6% (**Figure 1**). To a certain extent, the economic setback caused by COVID-19 had intensified the poverty situation in 2020. **After policy intervention, the number of poor people declined slightly by 2% to 0.55 million over the same period, so did the poverty rate from 8.4% to 7.9%.** More specifically, over 1 million people were lifted out of poverty in 2020 because of recurrent welfare measures on the one hand, and one-off relief measures (e.g. cash payout of HK\$10,000 and the Anti-epidemic Fund (“AEF”)) on the other.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, the post-intervention poverty rate could have risen to a high of 12.8% (or increased by 341 900 people) in 2020, had it not been the one-off relief measures.¹⁸

Figure 1 – Overall poverty rates and population in Hong Kong



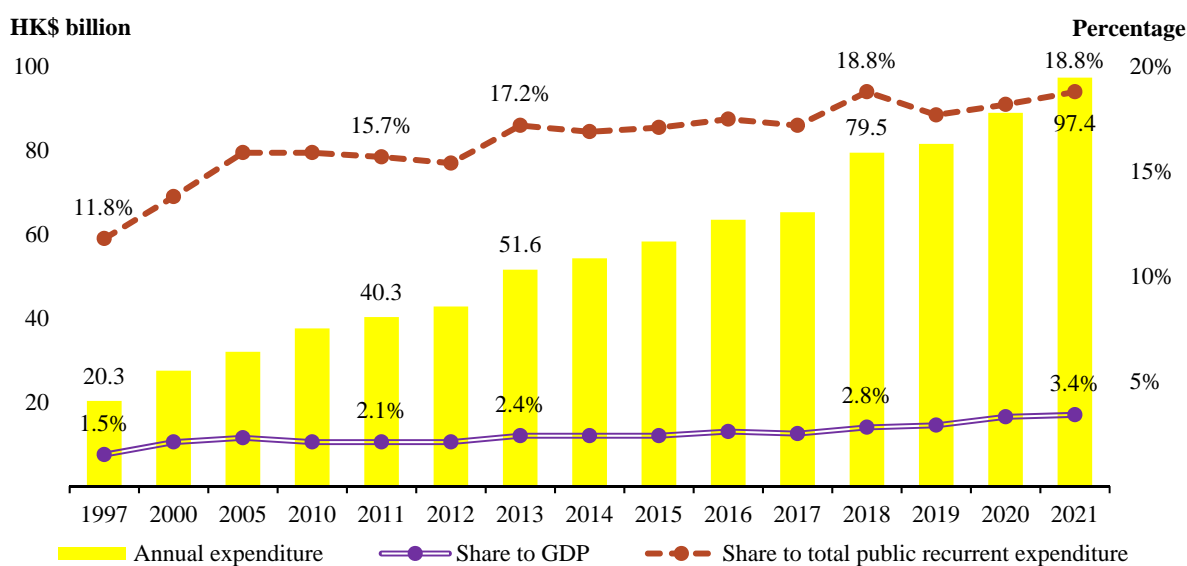
Source: Census and Statistics Department.

¹⁷ Including one-off anti-epidemic relief measures amounting to over HK\$300 billion in 2020. See Office of the Government Economist and Census and Statistics Department (2021).

¹⁸ According to the Government, the cash payout of HK\$10,000 and relief measures of AEF helped reduce poverty rate by some 4.9 percentage points in 2020.

3.2 To a considerable extent, the reduction in post-intervention poverty rate is attributable to substantial resources devoted to “alleviate poverty and support the disadvantaged” over the past decade. These include launching Normal Old Age Living Allowance in 2013, Higher Old Age Living Allowance and Working Family Allowance in 2018, non-means-tested Student Grant and Public Transport Fare Subsidy Scheme in 2019, and enhancing the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (“CSSA”) Scheme in 2020. Reflecting these, the recurrent expenditure on social welfare (including both transfer payments and social services) had registered a noticeable growth of 142% from 2011-2012 to a record high of HK\$97.4 billion in 2021-2022 (Figure 2).¹⁹ The ratio of such welfare spending to GDP thus climbed up significantly from 2.1% to 3.4%. That said, some critics point out that Hong Kong is only catching up from a low base, in view of its weak poverty support beforehand when benchmarked against other advanced places.

Figure 2 – Recurrent public expenditure on social welfare



Note: Financial year figures. Revised estimated figure for 2021.

Source: Budget (various years).

3.3 In spite of the aforementioned catch-up in social welfare spending in recent years, there are continued concerns over the inadequacies of the existing poverty line alleged to have undermined the effectiveness of poverty alleviation policies. *First*, the annual report on poverty situation published by

¹⁹ There are at least 20 recurrent cash benefits and another 20 plus non-recurrent cash transfer schemes. These schemes are funded either by the Social Welfare Department or other bureaux/departments. See Table A.3 of Office of the Government Economist and Census and Statistics Department (2021).

C&SD is largely an update of analytical summary of the profile of poor population based on the poverty line, rather than a grand strategy and official policy pledges to mitigate the poverty situation.²⁰ **Secondly**, there are no policy targets nor a holistic poverty alleviation strategy, resulting in criticisms of existing policies as “short-term, fragmented and remedially responsive”.²¹ Without committed policy targets, the policy framework at present is allegedly unable to command cost-effective resource allocation. **Thirdly**, the existing poverty line is unidimensional on relative income only. It cannot capture other facets of poverty (e.g. health, housing and education) as discussed above. Hence, there are suggestions to add more indicators into the framework of poverty demarcation and some of them could become policy targets. For instance, there are calls to compile a set of non-monetary deprivation indicators (e.g. food security and usage of health services). Those people failing to meet the minimum consumption thresholds would then be classified as poor and deprived in need of public assistance, even though their income could be above the poverty line.²²

3.4 On 6 April 2022, LegCo Members passed a motion urging the Government to make its poverty alleviation policies more “targeted”, highlighting the need, amongst others, to (a) lay down poverty reduction targets; and (b) enrich the poverty demarcation framework by adding more indicators (e.g. subsistence living protection).²³ However, the Government reiterated that setting poverty reduction targets was technically infeasible because it would be difficult to forecast the movement of certain socioeconomic indicators (e.g. wages) for target setting in the medium to longer term. It may also cause policy and resources to “tilt towards households living under the poverty line”, but may risk neglecting those living on the edge of the poverty line but still belonging to vulnerable groups.²⁴

²⁰ The Government nonetheless argued that the existing poverty line analysis helped identify needy groups and formulate certain welfare measures (e.g. Working Family Allowance in 2018 for low-income working families not receiving CSSA). See Panel on Welfare Services (2019), Legislative Council Secretariat (2021), South China Morning Post (2021) and 晴報 (2021).

²¹ 黃洪 (2013), 香港社區組織協會 (2021) and 香港01 (2022).

²² 香港01 (2017) and 香港社會服務聯會 (2019).

²³ Legislative Council (2022) and Legislative Council Secretariat (2021).

²⁴ Labour and Welfare Bureau (2019) and Legislative Council Secretariat (2019, 2021).

4. Poverty reduction targets in Ireland

4.1 The Irish economy witnessed a notable transformation from a backwater to a powerhouse over the past three decades, on the back of substantial inflow of foreign direct investment induced by a very competitive corporate tax regime (e.g. a tax rate of just 12.5% at present) and its membership of the euro zone since 1999. As an acclaimed “Celtic Tiger”, Ireland saw its GDP grow at a robust pace of 8.2% annually on average between 1995 and 2021, amongst the fastest in affluent economies.²⁵ With additional resources available in the coffers, the Irish government is committed to sharing the fruit of economic prosperity with the poor and the deprived, as manifested in its frequent review of the anti-poverty strategy and targets since the late 1990s.

4.2 Before discussing its anti-poverty strategy, **it merits an introduction to the Irish poverty measurement under a hybrid approach which offers a high degree of sophistication for reflecting “the multidimensional nature of poverty”**. In a nutshell, the poor must meet the following two conditions at the same time. *First*, persons with an annual disposable household income below 60% of the median figure are classified as “at risk of poverty”, akin to relative poverty.²⁶ *Secondly*, persons who cannot afford at least 2 out of 11 basic living items (e.g. home heating) are regarded as experiencing “enforced deprivation”.²⁷ Those with overlapped conditions are demarcated as being in “consistent poverty” or poor people in Ireland. One consideration for the Irish government to adopt such an approach is that relative poverty could be somewhat “arbitrary” when some persons with low income (e.g. wealthy elderly in retirement) may have substantial savings and their living standard may not be the worst.²⁸ Between 2013 and 2021, the consistent poverty rate fell from 9% to 4%, below the previous low of 4.2% recorded in 2008 (**Figure 3**).²⁹

²⁵ Financial Post (2016).

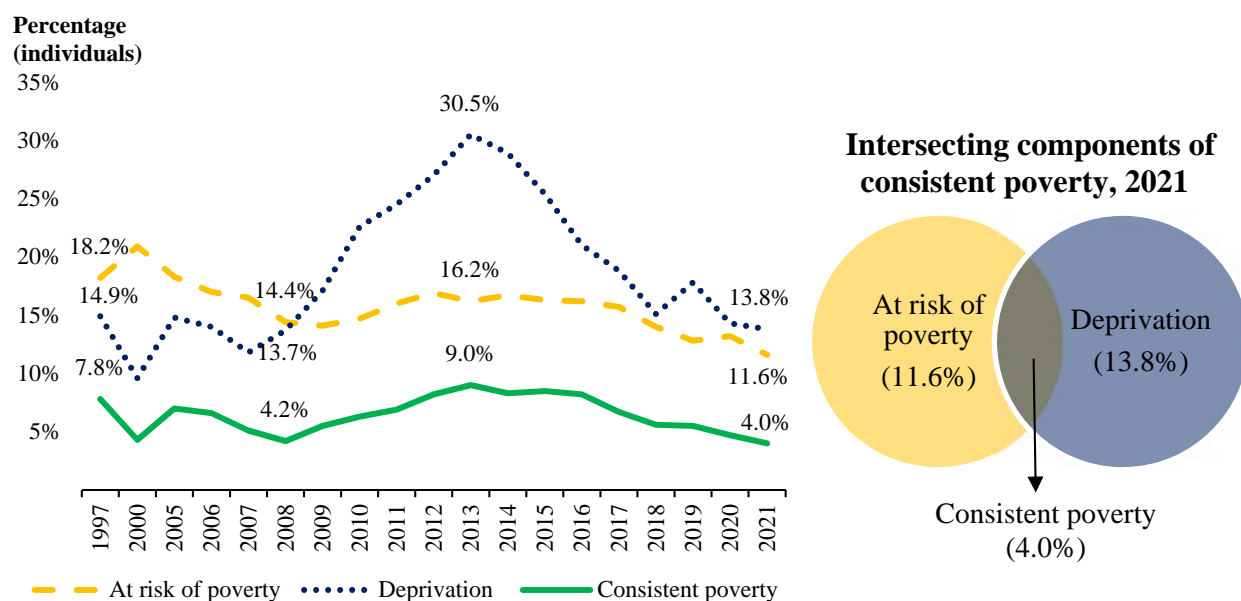
²⁶ For instance, the annual income for a person demarcated as “at risk of poverty” should be lower than €15,158 (HK\$120,355) in 2021. See Government of Ireland (1997).

²⁷ The 11 items are (a) two pairs of strong shoes; (b) a warm waterproof overcoat; (c) buying new clothes; (d) having meals with meat, chicken, fish every second day; (e) having a roast joint once a week; (f) ability to use heating last year; (g) keeping the home adequately warm; (h) buying presents for family or friends at least once a year; (i) replacing worn out furniture; (j) having family or friends for a drink or meal once a month; and (k) going out in the last fortnight for entertainment. In 2021, item (i), (c) and (j) were the three most commonly experienced deprivations in Ireland.

²⁸ Department of Social Protection (2021).

²⁹ Walker (2011) and Department of Social Protection (2011).

Figure 3 – Trends of key poverty indicators in Ireland



Note: Figures of consistent poverty and deprivation between 1997 and 2000 are not strictly comparable with the time series afterwards due to a change in methodology in compilation of deprivation index.

Source: Central Statistics Office.

4.3 The Irish government launched its first National Anti-Poverty Strategy (“NAPS”) in April 1997, laying down both the poverty alleviation framework and committed poverty reduction targets. Subsequently, NAPS was reviewed four times, namely in 2002, 2007, 2012 and 2020, in response to socioeconomic developments. The headline target (i.e. consistent poverty rate) had been progressively reduced from the actual figure of 15% in 1994 to 5%-10% by 2007 under the first NAPS, and further to 0% or 0%-2% in the succeeding NAPS documents (**Figure 4**).³⁰ For the latest NAPS named as Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (“Roadmap”) launched in 2020, the Department of Social Protection (“DSP”) is the responsible agency in Ireland, with statistical support from the Central Statistics Office (“CSO”) and poverty analytical support from the Economic and Social Research Institute (“ESRI”).³¹

³⁰ Government of Ireland (1997, 2002), Department of Social Protection (2012) and Walker (2011).

³¹ CSO carries out the Survey on Income and Living Conditions annually with a representative sample of about 5 000 households or 12 000 individuals in Ireland for derivation of indicators on poverty, deprivation and social exclusion. See Government of Ireland (2020).

Figure 4 – Headline targets of consistent poverty rate in Ireland

| Name of the Strategy/Review | Period | Consistent poverty rate | | | |
|---|-----------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| | | Actual figure at the inception | Target | Actual figure at the end-year | Target achieved |
| National Anti-Poverty Strategy | 1997-2007 | 15% (1994) | 5%-10% (2007) | 5.1% (2007) | ✓ |
| Building an Inclusive Society | 2002-2007 | 6.2% (2000) | 0%-2% (2007) | 5.1% (2007) | ✗ |
| National Action Plan for Social Inclusion | 2007-2016 | 7% (2005) | 0% ⁽¹⁾ (2016) | 8.2% (2016) | ✗ |
| National Social Target for Poverty Reduction (Review) | 2012-2020 | 6.2% (2010) | 0%-2% ⁽²⁾ (2020) | 4.7% (2020) | ✗ |
| Roadmap for Social Inclusion | 2020-2025 | 5.6% (2018) | 0%-2% (2025) | - | - |

Notes: (1) Interim targets were set at 2%-4% by 2012.

(2) Interim target was set at 4% by 2016

(-) Not available.

Sources: Government of Ireland and Central Statistics Office.

4.4 On poverty reduction targets, not only headline targets on consistent poverty rates are set out in NAPS for the following 5-10 years, but four national sub-targets on key socioeconomic indicators (e.g. employment rate) have also been established most recently.³² Below are the key features of such targets:

- (a) **Progressive upgrading of poverty reduction targets:** As discussed above, the consistent poverty rate has been adopted as the headline target of NAPS for 25 years since 1997. Compared with the actual consistent poverty rate of 15% in 1994, the headline rate was initially targeted at 5%-10% by 2007, and was aggressively lowered to just 0%-2% by 2025 under the Roadmap;³³

³² Under the Roadmap, there are one national headline target, four national sub-targets and 66 departmental commitments across seven policy areas. See Government of Ireland (1997, 2007, 2020) and Department of Social Protection (2012).

³³ Government of Ireland (1997), Walker (2011) and Department of Social Protection (2011).

- (b) **More sub-targets in various aspects of well-being:** The first NAPS in 1997 also specified a number of sub-targets, like unemployment rate of 6% and 98% completion rate of secondary schools by 2007. These sub-targets were adjusted or substituted with other metrics in subsequent NAPS to reflect evolving policy objectives in combating poverty upon socioeconomic changes. The most recent NAPS released in 2020 specified at least 20 sub-targets.³⁴ Moreover, the headline targets are broken down into a few new sub-targets for certain vulnerable groups (e.g. persons with disabilities and working poor) (**Appendix 2**). For example, the second NAPS aimed to reduce child poverty rate to 2% or less by 2007.

On an ad-hoc basis, the Irish government could also formulate strategies for specific vulnerable groups at higher poverty risks (e.g. tackling child poverty in 2014 and employment challenges faced by persons with disabilities in 2015), also with quantified targets;³⁵

- (c) **All relevant departments jointly responsible for meeting targets:** Not only is DSP responsible for meeting the poverty reduction targets, but so are other government departments (e.g. Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment for employment targets and Department of Health for health targets). A duty list with commitments and delivery details of responsible departments to meet the stated targets is clearly stipulated in NAPS for resource allocation in the annual budget. As from 2009, all Irish departments are required to conduct Poverty Impact Assessment on poverty situation and targets before their launch of new initiatives or major policy changes;³⁶ and
- (d) **Monitoring mechanism for poverty reduction:** The mechanisms for tracking the progress of NAPS include publication of an annual progress report against each of the headline/sub-targets, commitments and key metrics in NAPS and its submission to the

³⁴ For instance, employment rate of 33% for persons with disabilities by 2026; retention rate of 91.6% at secondary schools serving disadvantaged groups by 2025; unmet healthcare ratio of 0.1% by 2025; and annual completion of 12 000 social housing units after 2021. See Government of Ireland (1997, 2020).

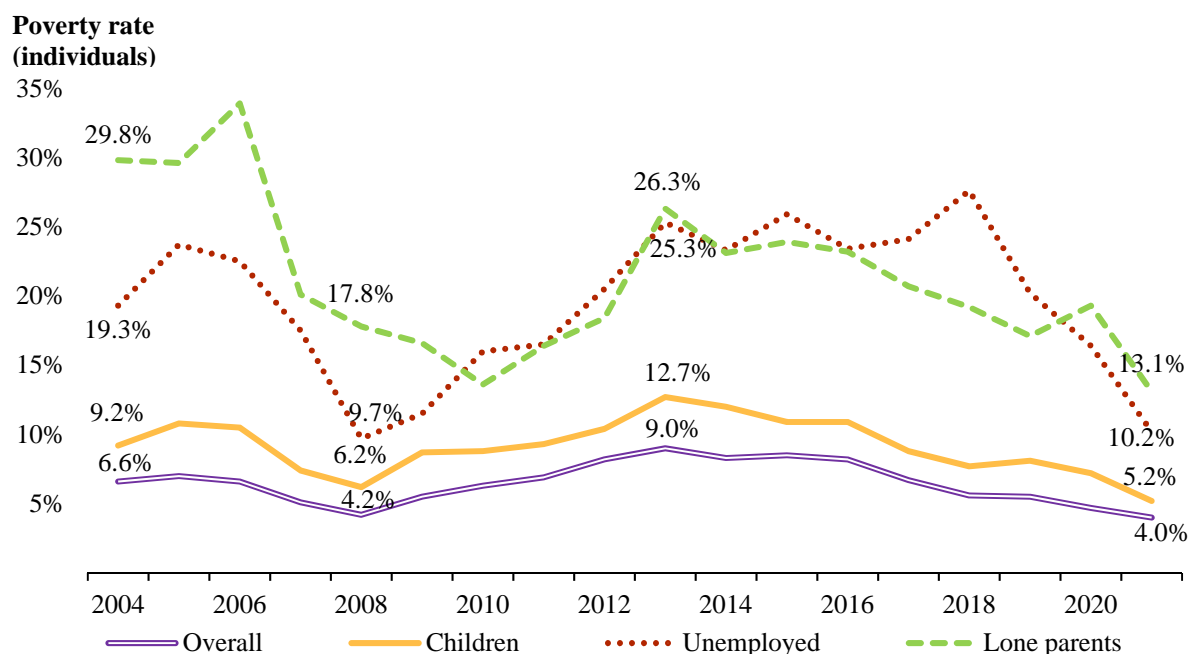
³⁵ For instance, public service employment rate for persons with disabilities was targeted to increase from 3% to 6% during 2014 to 2024 and 70 000 children were to be lifted out of poverty during 2011 to 2020.

³⁶ Department of Social Protection (2022b).

Irish Parliament on the one hand, and an interim review conducted from time to time to refine measures and targets on the other.³⁷ Also, both CSO and ESRI are given additional resources to improve data collection and to provide dedicated poverty analyses especially on the most vulnerable groups.³⁸

4.5 **The anti-poverty strategy in Ireland appears to be quite effective, as evidenced by the decline in consistent poverty rate from 15% in 1994 to 4.2% in 2008, and the reaching of a new low of 4% in 2021 after a period of rebound following the Global Financial Crisis and European Debt Crisis (Figure 5).** To a certain extent, this was attributable to (a) a generally robust economic growth; (b) higher employment rate; (c) a 124% rise in the minimum welfare payment rates from 1997 to 2007 as compared with the concurrent inflation rate of just 41%;³⁹ (d) a 63% upsurge in welfare spending to €8.2 billion (HK\$462 billion) between 2007 and 2020; and (e) significantly widened welfare access for certain vulnerable groups (e.g. low-wage families) since 2014 upon the economic recovery. As regards the headline targets laid down in various NAPS, the Irish government managed to achieve them only once in 2007 because public finances were tighter at other times after a few economic crises originated elsewhere.

Figure 5 – Consistent poverty by selected demographic groups in Ireland



Source: Central Statistics Office.

³⁷ Goodbody Economic Consultants (2001).

³⁸ Houses of the Oireachtas (2002) and Economic and Social Research Institute (2022).

³⁹ Government of Ireland (2007).

4.6 **The setting of multi-faceted sub-targets was particularly “effective in capturing perceived economic stress and risk factors of poverty,” and thereby conducive to tackling poverty issues.**⁴⁰ Taking employment-related sub-targets for selected vulnerable groups (e.g. women, elderly and persons with disabilities) as an illustration, the active labour market policies helped the most disadvantaged to secure job positions, even throughout the difficult period after the outbreak of Global Financial Crisis and European Debt Crisis.⁴¹ A number of related sub-targets were achieved, though not by the envisaged timelines due partly to the challenging economic conditions in the late 2000s and early 2010s. For example, one of the sub-targets of the third NAPS was to increase overall employment rate to 70% by 2010 and it was eventually realized in 2019 instead. Completion/retention rates of secondary schools serving disadvantaged groups, which help monitor the progress of reducing intergenerational poverty, are other examples of sub-targets. For certain vulnerable groups, it is noted that coverage of childcare services and social housing was expanded as well.⁴² Yet there are studies suggesting that fiscal sustainability of the Irish government will be jeopardized in the next three decades upon surging public expenditure on health and pensions amidst an ageing population. This could limit the room for increased social welfare spending in the longer term.⁴³

5. Poverty reduction targets in Canada

5.1 Canada did not have an official poverty line before 2019. While Canada has a publicly funded “Medicare” system which is well-known in the world, its non-health social welfare spending as a ratio to GDP stood at a low level of just 8% in 2015, compared with the average figure of 15% in OECD. Between 1996 and 2015, the proportion of Canadian population with household income lower than 50% of the median level after government intervention (i.e. definition of relative poverty in OECD) increased from 12.4% to a peak of 14.2%. To address poverty concerns, Justin Trudeau of the Liberal Party made an election pledge in 2015 to formulate a national anti-poverty strategy.⁴⁴ After winning the election, **Prime Minister Trudeau delivered his promise and**

⁴⁰ Houses of the Oireachtas (2019) and Central Statistics Office (various years).

⁴¹ Department of Social Protection (2011) and Government of Ireland (2012, 2013).

⁴² Economic and Research Institute (2020, 2022), National Economic and Social Council (2020), Department of Social Protection (2022a) and Houses of the Oireachtas (2022b).

⁴³ National Economic and Social Council (2020), Irish Fiscal Advisory Council (2020), National Advisory Council for Children and Young People (2021) and Houses of the Oireachtas (2022a).

⁴⁴ Before 2015, the federal government reiterated that addressing poverty is “a provincial responsibility” under the constitution. See House of Commons (2017) and Murphy (2017).

released the National Poverty Reduction Strategy (“PRS”) for the first time in Canadian history in August 2018, ushering in an official poverty line and maiden poverty reduction targets.

5.2 The Canadian poverty line follows an absolute budget approach, in contrast to the relative one in Hong Kong and the hybrid one in Ireland. **The Market Basket Measure (“MBM”), which is “the combined costs of a basket of goods and services that individuals and families require to meet their basic needs and achieve a modest standard of living”, came into effect as Canada’s official poverty line in June 2019.**⁴⁵ Technically, a few unique features of MBM are noteworthy. *First*, the basket coverage is comprehensive, with altogether five components of costs: (a) 61 kinds of healthy food; (b) 32 items of clothing and footwear; (c) appropriate shelter; (d) public and private transportation; and (e) other necessities facilitating social engagement (e.g. mobile phones). *Secondly*, MBM thresholds differ across 53 regions in Canada, taking into account unique local situations in terms of necessities to maintain a basic standard of living. *Thirdly*, MBM thresholds increased with the size of household subject to an equivalized standard formula. *Fourthly*, the MBM costs are anchored to 2018, adjusted for annual inflation, and subject to major review once every five years. In short, all those families with household disposable income below their regional MBM thresholds are considered poor.⁴⁶

5.3 **Since the enactment of the Poverty Reduction Act in June 2019, both PRS and the poverty reduction targets have become statutory in Canada,** legally requiring the federal government to (a) reduce the poverty rate by one-fifth in five years to 9.7% by 2020; and (b) halve the poverty rate to 6.1% by 2030 versus 2015 (**Figure 6**).⁴⁷ While Employment and Social Development Canada is the agency responsible for PRS implementation, the National Advisory Council on Poverty is mandated to report the progress of poverty reduction to the Parliament annually.⁴⁸ **On top of MBM, a dashboard of 12 multidimensional poverty indicators has been created in Canada for monitoring poverty trends under PRS.** In short, these indicators cover other facets of poverty, such as (i) unmet health and housing needs; (ii) food insecurity; (iii) ratio of persons

⁴⁵ MBM was initially designed between 1997 and 1999 to complement relative poverty in evaluating the effectiveness of the new Child Benefit. Since the 2000s, some provinces adopted MBM to track progress of their anti-poverty measures. See House of Commons (2010), Employment and Social Development Canada (2018a) and Sarlo (2020).

⁴⁶ Disposable income for MBM is total income (including government transfers) after deducting income tax and several non-discretionary expenses like contributions to pension and insurance schemes and expenses on medical and childcare services. See Statistics Canada (2020) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021).

⁴⁷ Employment and Social Development Canada (2018b).

⁴⁸ The National Advisory Council on Poverty comprises nine members who are persons with lived experience, experts, academics and practitioners of poverty reduction.

with inadequate savings as a buffer against adversities; and (iv) youth aged 15-24 not in education, employment and training (**Appendix 3**). Though these indicators are not taken as policy targets as in the case with Ireland, their numerical trends are updated online annually for public monitoring.⁴⁹

Figure 6 – Poverty Reduction targets in Canada for 2020 and 2030

| | Poverty rate | | | | |
|------|--------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| | Actual figure in 2015 ⁽¹⁾ | % of reduction | Target rate | Result | Target achieved |
| 2020 | 12.1% | ↓ 20% | 9.7% | 6.4% | ✓ |
| 2030 | | ↓ 50% | 6.1% | - | - |

Notes: (1) When PRS was announced in 2018, the poverty rate in 2015 indicated was derived from MBM anchored to 2008.

(-) Not available.

Sources: Employment and Social Development Canada and Statistics Canada.

5.4 While the anti-poverty strategy in Canada had a short implementation period of just three years, the poverty rate nearly halved from 11.2% in 2018 to 6.4% in 2020, already far exceeding the policy target of 9.7% (Figure 7). To a considerable extent, this remarkable achievement could be attributable to (a) doubling of social welfare spending to C\$325 billion (HK\$1.98 trillion) between 2015 and 2020, or equivalent to about 15% of GDP in 2020 upon expanded benefits;⁵⁰ (b) delivery of the emergency and recovery benefits amounting to C\$82 billion (HK\$499 billion) to combat COVID-19 in 2020; and (c) the improving employment situation under a steady economy before 2019. Some studies also attributed the positive development to the guiding role of poverty reduction targets and dashboard indicators in formulation of specific and timely measures (e.g. expanding the Workers Benefit, easing the eligibility of Disability Tax Credit and enhancing Child Benefit and childcare services) to assist certain marginalized groups.⁵¹ For example, the poverty rate for children in lone-parent families plunged by 22.3 percentage points in five years to 16.9% in 2020, so did the poverty rates for persons with disabilities,

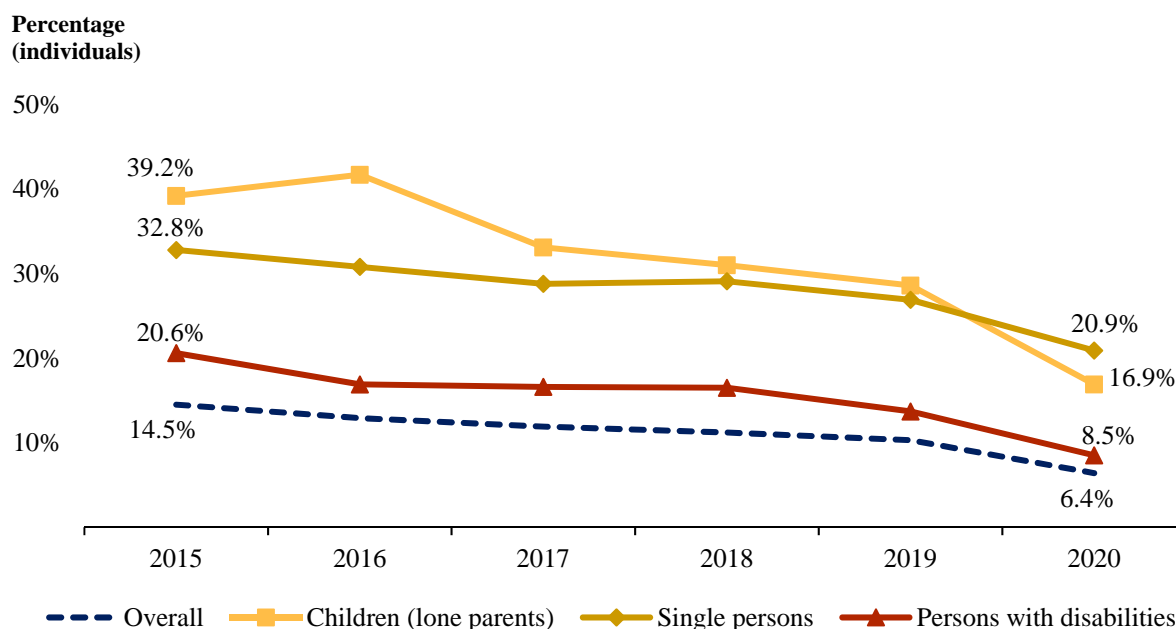
⁴⁹ In view of statistical importance in poverty tracking, Statistics Canada are granted additional resources to review MBM costs more frequently and conduct additional surveys on specific vulnerable groups (e.g. persons with disabilities, lone parents and racialized communities). See Statistics Canada (2021a).

⁵⁰ Right before the delivery of emergency and recovery benefits, social welfare spending accounted for just 8% of GDP in Canada in 2019.

⁵¹ Statistics Canada (2022b) and National Advisory Council on Poverty (2021a, 2021b).

by 12.1 percentage points to 8.5%, and for single persons (usually associated with the working poor) by 11.9 percentage points to 20.9%.⁵²

Figure 7 – Poverty rate by selected demographic groups in Canada



Source: Statistics Canada.

5.5 Notwithstanding recent improvements in headline poverty rates, a number of non-monetary dashboard indicators tracking the progress of the C\$127 billion (HK\$772 billion) poverty alleviation initiatives under PRS have been worsening.⁵³ This is conceivable, given many of these indicators would be less impacted by one-off transfers but would depend more on targeted, sustained and effective policies over a longer period. For instance, the proportion of those living with food insecurity surged from 8.3% in 2011 to 11.2% in 2020. Hence, the Canadian government will spend C\$303 million (HK\$1.8 billion) on food security programmes for the period from 2021 to 2024. Moreover, C\$3.6 billion (HK\$21.9 billion) will be invested on the construction of affordable housing and increasing Housing Benefit till 2028, whereas a total of C\$1.2 billion (HK\$7.3 billion) was earmarked in 2021 to provide jobs, upskill training and study grants for youth until 2023.⁵⁴ However, there are concerns in

⁵² Employment and Social Development Canada (2019), Hillel (2020) and Statistics Canada (2022b).

⁵³ The dashboard indicators were established to track progress of PRS over the next decade. See Employment and Social Development Canada (2018a) and Statistics Canada (2022a).

⁵⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) and National Advisory Council on Poverty (2021b).

the Canadian community that significant increases in social benefits in recent years are not fiscally sustainable in some provinces in the longer term.⁵⁵

6. Observations

6.1 In **Hong Kong**, there is increased advocacy in the community to quantify poverty reduction targets in the anti-poverty policies, in conjunction with a review of the relative poverty line framework to include other poverty indicators in absolute terms for monitoring the progress. The two-pronged (i.e. a headline target and an array of sub-targets/indicators) approach and multi-faceted poverty reduction targets in Ireland and Canada may shed light on their potential benefits and challenges. Amongst the concerns, it is noted that whether having a suite of sub-targets can help generate more cost-efficient and effective poverty alleviation policies has attracted interest from stakeholders in these places.

6.2 In **Ireland**, poverty reduction targets have been part and parcel of its anti-poverty strategy over the past 25 years or so. Not only can its poverty definition under a hybrid approach reflect “the multidimensional nature of poverty”, but also the Irish government is committed to both reducing consistent poverty rate (i.e. headline target) and achieving many sub-targets. On the back of the 63% upsurge in social welfare expenditure in Ireland during 2007 to 2020, its consistent poverty rate had almost halved from a recent high of 9% in 2013 to only 4.7% in 2020, and further to a record low of 4% in 2021. Moreover, certain multi-faceted sub-targets (e.g. employment rates) were ultimately achieved upon a combination of an improved economy and targeted policies to support vulnerable groups. This may suggest the overall effectiveness of the Irish anti-poverty strategy and the merit of policy guidance. Yet there are concerns on the fiscal sustainability of increased social welfare spending over the next three decades amidst an ageing population in Ireland.

6.3 In **Canada**, the government committed itself to reducing the poverty rate by 20% by 2020 and by half by 2030 relative to 2015 levels in its statutory anti-poverty strategy enacted in 2019. While the Canadian poverty definition follows an absolute budget approach, there is a dashboard of 12 multidimensional poverty indicators for monitoring. Thanks in part to the 77% upsurge in social welfare spending (including measures and benefits under COVID-19) from 2018 to 2020, the poverty rate almost halved from 11.2% to 6.4% concurrently, already far exceeding the policy target of 9.7%. Nevertheless, in view of the worsening trend in a number of non-monetary dashboard indicators (e.g. food insecurity), the Canadian government allocated extra resources to relevant policy aspects for

⁵⁵ Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (2021).

precise poverty alleviation most recently. Similar to Ireland, while staunch efforts in poverty alleviation have received applause from many quarters of society, there are also doubts over the fiscal sustainability of welfare expansion in some Canadian provinces over the next three decades.

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Poverty reduction targets in selected places

| | | Hong Kong | Ireland | Canada |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Population in mid-2022 | | 7.3 million | 5.1 million | 38.7 million |
| 2. Per-capita GDP in 2021 | | HK\$387,110 | €85,062 (HK\$675,392) | C\$55,278 (HK\$336,090) |
| 3. Year of the first anti-poverty strategy | | × | 1997 | 2019 |
| 4. Poverty rate based on OECD definition (50% of post-intervention median household income) | | 7.9% (2020) | 5.3% (2021) | 9.3% (2020) |
| 5. Ratio of public welfare expenditure to GDP | | 3.4% (2021) | 15.6% (2020) | 14.1% (2020) |
| 6. Cumulative growth in social welfare spending | | 142% (2011-2021) | 41% (2013-2020) | 106% (2015-2020) |
| 7. Official poverty line | | Relative poverty | Consistent poverty | MBM |
| (a) Components | Relative/Absolute poverty | 50% of median household income | 60% of median household income | Basic living cost |
| | Deprived conditions | × | 2 out of 11 deprivation items | × |
| (b) Post-intervention poverty rate in 2020 | | 7.9% | 4.7% | 6.4% |
| (c) Frequency of review | | × | Need-based | Every 5 years |
| 8. Poverty reduction headline targets | | | | |
| (a) Nature | | × | Administrative | Statutory |
| (b) Latest target for the poverty rate | | | 2% by 2025 | 6.1% by 2030 |
| 9. Multidimensional indicators for monitoring | | | | |
| (a) Benchmarks | | × | Sub-targets | Dashboard indicators |
| (b) Purpose | | | Tracking & achieving | Tracking only |
| (c) Dedicated timelines | | | ✓ | × |
| (d) Checklist of government commitments | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| (e) Targets for specific vulnerable groups | | | ✓ | × |

Sub-targets of the “Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025” in Ireland

| National sub-targets | | 2018 (actual) | 2025 (target) |
|--|--|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Child poverty reduction target (Reducing the number of children under consistent poverty to some 35 300 persons by 2020 as from 2011 level) | | 92 000 | 37 000 (2020 actual) |
| 2. Employment target for people with a disability (Increasing the employment level of people with a disability) | | 22.3% (2016) | 33.0% (2026) |
| 3. Education (Improving retention rates at secondary schools serving disadvantaged groups) | | 85.0% | 91.6% (no specified year) |
| 4. Social housing (Annual units of social housing completed) | | - | 50 000 (2021); 12 000 thereafter |
| Sub-targets for implementing EU anti-poverty strategy ⁽¹⁾ | | 2018 | 2025 |
| 1. Income distribution (Ratio of total income received by the 20% population with the highest income to those 20% with the lowest income) | | 4.2:1 | 3.8:1 |
| 2. Income poverty (At risk of poverty rate) | Pre-social transfers | 41.0% | 37.9% |
| | Post-social transfers | 14.9% | 12.8% |
| | Indexing 2017 as a baseline year | 15.6% | 13.3% |
| | In-work persons | 4.8% | 3.5% |
| | Children | 23.9% | 16.0% |
| | Persons with disabilities | 36.9% | 28.7% |
| 3. Housing quality | Housing cost overburden rate | 3.4% | 2.0% |
| | Overcrowding rate | 2.7% | 2.5% |
| 4. Socio-economic aspects of living conditions (Share of population) | Reported with good/very good health | 84.2% | 84.2% |
| | Reported with health care needs unmet | 0.9% | 0.1% |
| | Living in underemployed households | 13.1% | 5.5% |
| | Receiving formal childcare (Children) | 69.2% | 69.4% |
| | Suffering severe material deprivation | 5.2% | 3.1% |
| 5. Social participation and integration (Share of population) | Active citizenship rate | 13.0% | 17.2% |
| | Participation in formal voluntary work | 29.0% | 34.1% |

Note: (1) As a member state of the European Union, Ireland is also required to stipulate its contributions to achieve the poverty reduction targets (e.g. lifting at least 15 million people out of poverty by 2030 in EU) updated by the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan in 2021 most recently.

Official poverty dashboard of indicators in Canada

| | | 2015 (actual) | 2020 (actual) |
|--|---|----------------------|----------------------|
| Canada's official poverty rate | | 14.5% | 6.4% |
| 1. Deep income poverty (Share of persons with income below 75% of the poverty line) | | 7.4% | 3.0% |
| 2. Unmet housing needs (Proportion of persons in housing that is unaffordable (i.e. shelter costs over 30% of before-tax household income) or substandard, and whose income is insufficient for a suitable home) | | 12.5% (2011) | 12.7% (2016) |
| 3. Unmet health needs (Share of persons aged 16+ not receiving health care when needed) | | 5.1% (2018) | 7.2% |
| 4. Food insecurity (Share of persons living in households suffering food insecurity) | | 8.3% (2011-2012) | 11.2% |
| 5. Relative low income (Ratio of persons having less than half the median after-tax income) | | 14.3% | 9.3% |
| 6. Bottom 40% income share (Percentage of total after-tax income held by population at the bottom 40% of the income distribution) | | 20.2% | 22.2% |
| 7. Youth engagement (Share of persons aged 15-24 not in employment, education or training) | | 10.6% | 11.4% |
| 8. Educational level of persons aged 15 | Low literacy rate | 10.7% | 13.8% |
| | Low numeracy rate | 14.4% | 16.3% |
| 9. Median hourly wage | All | C\$24.0 | C\$26.0 (2021) |
| | Women | C\$20.0 | C\$24.4 (2021) |
| | Men | C\$24.0 | C\$28.0 (2021) |
| 10. Average poverty gap (Average income shortfall below the poverty line for poor persons) | | 34% (2018) | 31.7% |
| 11. Asset resilience (Share of persons who had enough liquid assets to cover three months of unexpected expenses or reduced income) | | 66.6% (2016) | 67.1% (2019) |
| 12. Persistence of poverty | Low income entry rates (Share of whole population) | 4.1% (2014-2015) | 3.9% (2018-2019) |
| | Low income exit rates (Share of persons in poverty) | 27.5% (2014-2015) | 29.5% (2018-2019) |

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Note: ^ Internet resources listed in this section were accessed in September 2022.