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Title	4 questions to ask your election candidate about poverty
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Publication date	2020-01-29
Original Citation	Whelan, J. (2020) '4 questions to ask your election candidate about poverty', RTÉ Brainstorm, 29 January. Available at: https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0128/1111467-4-questions-to-ask-your-election-candidate-about-poverty/ (Accessed: 28 September 2020)
Type of publication	Contribution to newspaper/magazine
Link to publisher's version	https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0128/1111467-4-questions-to-ask-your-election-candidate-about-poverty/
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Download date	2026-11-03 13:59:50
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10594



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4 questions to ask your election candidate about poverty

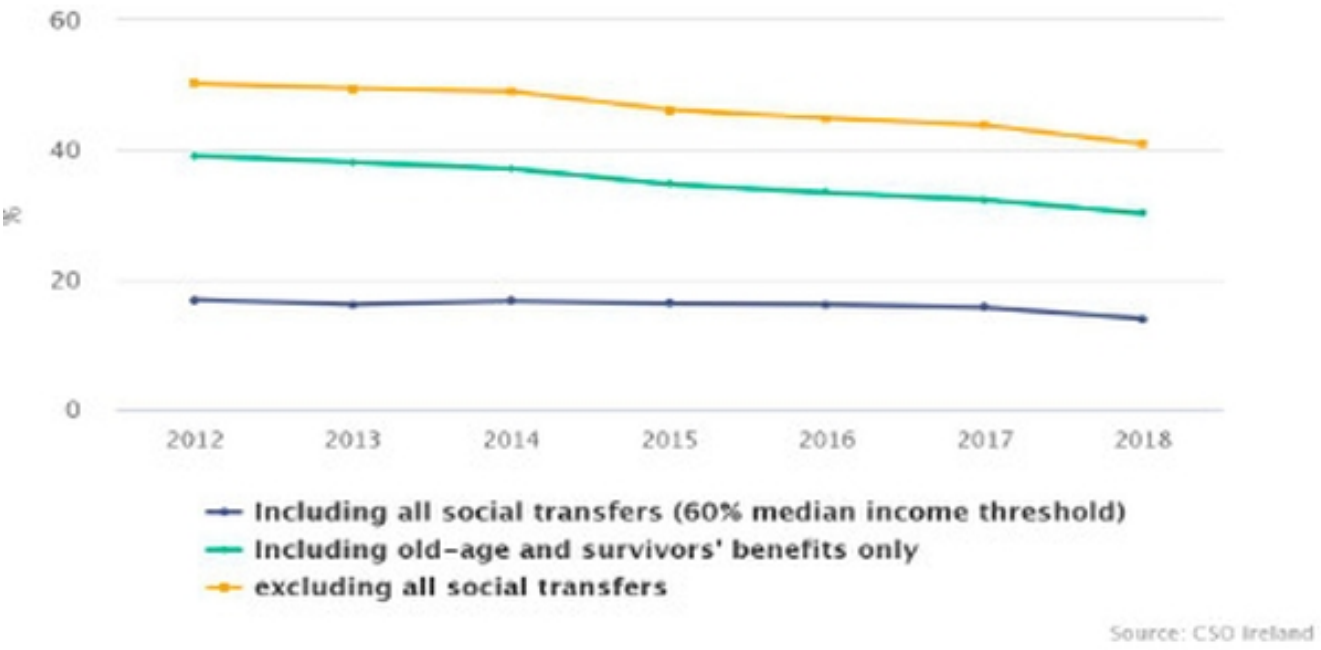
Updated / Wednesday, 29 Jan 2020 12:33



"110,000 people experiencing poverty are in employment". Photo: Getty Images

Opinion: how serious and informed is the man or woman looking for your vote about issues to reduce poverty?

Elections, by their nature, are a time of promises, plans and perfunctory platitudes. However, despite so much being promised by so many, very little direct mention of poverty and of how to reduce and ultimately eliminate it has entered into the debate so far. Encouragingly, latest available statistics on poverty show that poverty rates have fallen. CSO figures for 2018 show that the "at risk of poverty" rate has fallen from 15.7% in 2017 to 14.0%. The deprivation rate over the same period has fallen from 18.8% to 15.1 % and the consistent poverty rate has fallen from 6.7% to 5.6%.



CSO Ireland's at risk poverty figures

Nevertheless, any comfort derived from these reductions must be short lived. In real terms, more than 689,000 people remain in poverty in Ireland and over 200,000 of these are children. Furthermore, despite wage growth, increases in employment and, high rates of economic growth, 111,000 people living in poverty are in employment. Suffice to say, an unacceptable number of the population is still living in unacceptable circumstances. Not surprisingly, the biggest barrier to poverty remains the safety net provided by social transfers: 40.9% of Ireland's population would be living in poverty, instead of 14%, without these.

Here, then, are three questions to ask prospective TDs, of all parties and none, who may knock on our doors in the coming days.

Do you know the current "at risk of poverty" rate and what do you or your party plan to do about reducing it?

A candidate who knows the answer to the first part of this question just might be someone who takes poverty seriously as a social issue and, if they didn't know it when they knocked, they'll know it when they leave. In answering the second part of the question, candidates would ideally espouse ambitious targets to reduce the national poverty rate over the next number of years.

00:46

From RTÉ Archives, 1987 RTÉ News report about Combat Poverty agency seeking a raise in the basic payment line from £34 per person to £48 per person per week.

History has shown us that approaching plans such as these through a dedicated agency can be effective and can put and keep pressure on governments. However, since Combat Poverty was dissolved via its integration with Office for Social Inclusion to form the 'Social Inclusion Division' within the then Department of Social and Family Affairs back in 2009, no such agency has existed. The dissolution of Combat Poverty was arguably dubious in the first place. Therefore, the politically sponsored re-emergence of such an entity is something candidates and parties should be asked to seriously consider as part of an overall commitment to reduce poverty.

Will you or your party pledge to protect and maintain adult social welfare rates?

This is essential. As pointed out earlier, were it not for social transfers, nearly 41% of the population would suffer the indignity of poverty on an ongoing basis. Therefore, social welfare as part of an overall social infrastructure is essential. On the basis that 14% of people here are still 'at risk of poverty' despite social welfare, protecting basic payment rates is essential so that this figure does not increase.

Will you or your party pledge to support the adoption of the living wage?

As shown earlier, 110,000 people experiencing poverty are in employment. Meaningful measures to insure persons in work are adequately compensated for the labour they provide are essential so that inequality can be reduced and low-paid workers receive an income sufficient to afford a socially acceptable standard of living.

02:06

From RTÉ 1's Six One News, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar tells the Dáil in July 2019 that the government will not legislate for a living wage

What is your view on the universal basic income?

Introducing a basic income to replace parts of the social welfare system is something that needs serious consideration. It's needed because of things like future job-displacement and the need for a move away from a constant growth model of economy that the present environmental catastrophe demands. It also offers a chance to rethink think our relationship with work, to value all work, not just paid employment, to remove stigma from the realm of human welfare and to banish poverty to antiquity as ought to have happened long before now. Progressive and forward-thinking politicians of all persuasions, young and old, seasoned and new, should have it on their agenda.

04:30

From RTÉ Radio 1's Morning Ireland, could a basic income be paid in Ireland?

A question for the voter - why bother asking these questions?

These four questions really only scratch the surface of what could be asked of incumbent and prospective candidates in respect to poverty. As a result, much has been left out. Nevertheless, asking these questions will make plain the seriousness with which candidates take poverty. The purpose of asking them is not to test or catch out those who make the offer of public service. Rather, it is to engage those who offer themselves to the electorate on matters fundamental to the social health of Ireland by placing poverty, and its eradication, front and centre of the agenda, where it ought to be.

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