

Causes and Consequences of School Absenteeism in Ireland

Dr. Merike Darmody
ESRI/TCD



ESRI – what do we do?

- contribute to understanding economic and social change
- inform public policymaking
- EMN



We are also involved in...

Children's Longitudinal Survey Growing Up in Ireland (ESRI&TCD)

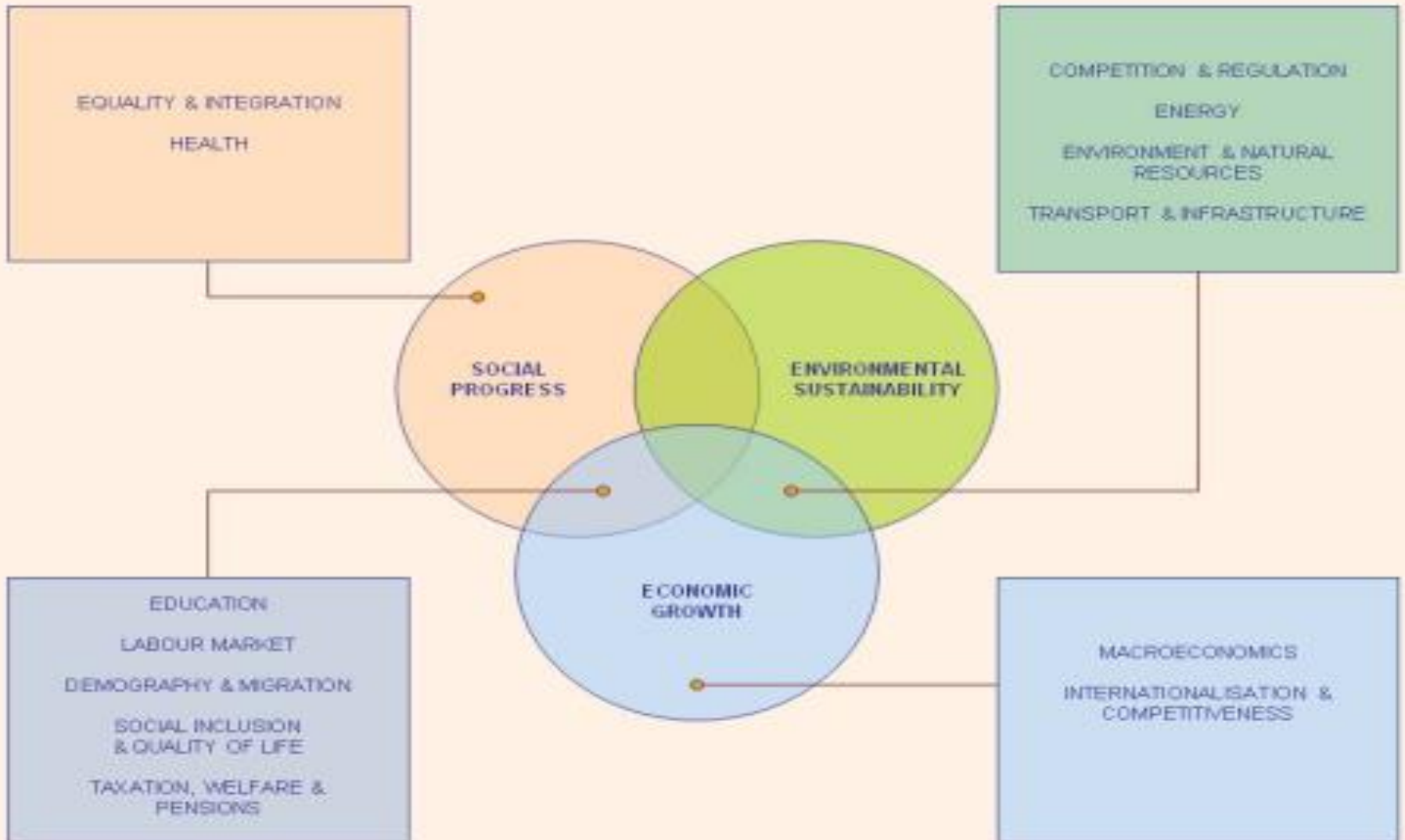
The study takes place over seven years and will follow the progress of two groups of children: 8,500 9-year-olds and 11,000 9-month-olds. The second visit to 9-year-olds took place when they were 13 years old, and the infants when they were 3-years-old. This study is the first of its kind on this scale in Ireland.



**Growing Up
in Ireland**
National Longitudinal
Study of Children



Research in the ESRI is currently focusing on 13 interrelated areas



Outline of presentation

- Introduction & Background
- Methods and Data Sources
- Results: School absenteeism in Irish schools
- Concluding comments

Introduction and background to the study (1)



- Educational qualifications are a crucial determinant of later life-chances (Burgess, Gardiner and Popper, 2001; Hobcraft, 2000);
- Low attendance levels can reflect more general disaffection with school;
- ... can be associated with early school leaving, academic underperformance and more restricted opportunities in terms of further education, training and the labour market (Malcolm *et al.*, 1993);
- ...can also miss out on social interaction with peers

Introduction and background to the study (2)



- Absenteeism encompasses:
 - family socio-economic background
 - ethnic background
 - school characteristics
 - school climate
 - factors related to the child him/herself
- Patterns of non-attendance often get established early in a student's educational career (Reid, 2002)

Previous Research on School Absenteeism



- School characteristics (Brookmeyer, Fanti, and Henrich, 2006; McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum, 2002; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, and Montague, 2006)
- Parent/family characteristics (Reid, 2008; Dalziel and Henthorne 2005)
- Child characteristics (McCoy et al. 2007; Corville-Smith, et al. 1998; Wagner et al., 2004)

School attendance: Ireland

- Ireland - the Education Welfare Act (2000)
- the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB)
- Considerable differences between schools
- 20-day absences are most closely linked to DEIS categories
- Figures for 20-day absence have remained fairly stable
- About 12% of primary school students and 18% of post-primary students were absent for 20 days or more during the school year

Aims of the paper

- What factors are likely to predict poor attendance among Irish primary school [age 4-11] children?
- What factors impact on attendance among second-level school [age 12-18] children and what are the consequences?

Methodology (1) School absenteeism among primary school children



- Primary school children: GUI- first study of its kind ever to be carried out in Ireland
- The first phase of the nine year old cohort, selected through the primary school network throughout Ireland
- A random sample of schools
- 8568 interviews
- Answer categories were: '0 days', '1 to 3 days', '4 to 6 days', '7 to 10 days', '11 to 20 days', and 'more than 20 days'.

Findings (1)

- At the family level:
 - children of mothers whose native language was other than English or Irish were more likely to have a poor attendance record.
 - Parental engagement with the child's schooling
 - Unemployed parent
 - Maternal depression
 - Witnessing parental conflict

Findings (2)

- Child's own characteristics:
 - having Special Educational Needs
 - having chronic illness
 - victims of bullying (as reported by the primary caregiver)
 - emotional and behavioural difficulties
 - those who reported liking school were less likely to be absent

Findings (3)

- School related factors:
 - accounted for a much smaller proportion of the variation in attendance
 - children attending single sex boys' schools
 - the number of teachers inadequate

Methodology (2) Older students

- A pooled dataset (5344 cases) comprising School Leavers' Survey data of two time points
- The survey is based on a random sample, stratified by educational level and programme, with an average response rate for the two surveys: 50%.
- “truancy” is defined as skipping “a day here and there”, “several days at a time” and “weeks at a time”.
- Just over a fifth (21%) of the sample

Findings (1)

- student background characteristics, school characteristics and student attitudes
 - male students
 - highest rates: unskilled manual groups, those from non-employed households and those who did not provide information on parental social class
 - Traveller community
 - attending disadvantaged schools

Findings (2)

- Students attending very small schools (<200 students) were less likely to be absent;
- Students attending urban schools (in one of the five main cities in Ireland) have higher absenteeism levels
- Worked while at school more likely to be absent
- School climate as supportive - significantly less likely to be absent

Findings (3)

- Consequences:
 - Less likely to complete upper secondary education
 - Within the labour market, those who were absent are less likely to have obtained employment one year after leaving school than other students

Concluding comments: Causes and consequences



- Absenteeism is influenced by many and varied factors: family, child-level, school-level
- Patterns of non-attendance often get established early in a student's educational career and can be a habit-forming behaviour with a likelihood of continuing into second-level education
- Possible cumulative disadvantage and reduced life-chances
- Persistent absenteeism as a multi-dimensional issue ; devise interventions appropriate to each individual case.

Thank you!

- Merike.Darmody@esri.ie
- Darmody, M., Smyth, E. and McCoy, S. (2008), Acting up or Opting out? Truancy in Irish Secondary Schools, *Educational Review*, 60, 4, pp. 359-373. Special issue.
- Thornton, M., McCoy, S., Darmody, M. (2012), Persistent Absenteeism among Irish Primary School Pupils, *Educational Review*. DOI:10.1080/00131911.2013.768599.