

CONTENTS

List of Tables	8	PART 1 - SIMPLE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDY FACTORS AND HEALTH	
List of Figures	9		
Foreword	12		
Outline of the Report	13		
SUMMARY	16	Chapter 5	
		Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics and Health	52
Background	16	5.1 General Health	52
Aims	16	5.2 Limiting Long-term Illness	54
Methods	16	5.3 General Mental Health	56
Key Themes	17	5.4 Satisfaction with Health	58
Summary Table	22	5.5 Quality of Life	60
Supporting Results for Key Themes	24	5.6 Summary Tables	62
		5.7 Comments	65
INTRODUCTION		Chapter 6	
Chapter 1		Social Capital Indicators and Health	66
What is Health?	30	6.1 General Health	66
1.1 Definition of Health	30	6.2 Limiting Long-term Illness	66
1.2 Factors influencing Health	30	6.3 General Mental Health	67
Chapter 2		6.4 Satisfaction with Health	67
Specific Determinants of Health	32	6.5 Quality of Life	68
2.1 Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics	32	6.6 Summary Tables	69
2.2 Social Capital Indicators	32	6.7 Comments	73
2.3 Lifestyle Behaviours	33	Chapter 7	
Chapter 3		Lifestyle Behaviours and Health	74
Policy Context	34	7.1 General Health	74
3.1 Policy Context	34	7.2 Limiting Long-term Illness	74
3.2 Social Capital in Irish Public Policy	34	7.3 General Mental Health	74
3.3 General Comments	34	7.4 Satisfaction with Health	74
Chapter 4		7.5 Quality of Life	75
The All-Ireland Social Capital and Health Survey	36	7.6 Summary Table	76
4.1 Survey Fieldwork	36	7.7 Comments	77
4.2 Definitions	36	PART 2 - COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDY FACTORS AND HEALTH	
4.3 Statistical Methods	43		
4.4 Some Cautionary Notes	47	Chapter 8	
4.5 Profiles of Respondents	47	Logistic Regression Models	80
		8.1 General Health	80
		8.2 Limiting Long-term Illness	84
		8.3 General Mental Health	88
		8.4 Satisfaction with Health	92
		8.5 Quality of Life	96

PART 3 - DEMOGRAPHIC AND
SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL
CAPITAL INDICATORS AND LIFESTYLE
BEHAVIOURS

Chapter 9

Views about the Local Area	102
9.1 Local Problems	102
9.2 Local Services	104
9.3 Personal Safety in the Local Area	106
9.4 Summary Tables	108
9.5 Comments	110

Chapter 10

Social networks	112
10.1 Number of Neighbours Known	112
10.2 Social Contact with Neighbours, Relatives and Friends	114
10.3 Practical, Financial and Emotional Support Networks	116
10.4 Summary Tables	118
10.5 Comments	124

Chapter 11

Perceived Neighbourhood Social Norms	126
11.1 Neighbourhood Trust	126
11.2 Neighbourhood Reciprocity	128
11.3 Neighbourhood Efficacy	130
11.4 Summary Tables	132
11.5 Comments	135

Chapter 12

Civic Engagement	136
12.1 Involvement in Local Organisations	136
12.2 Comments	136

Chapter 13

Lifestyle behaviours	138
13.1 Smoking Status	138
13.2 Drinking Level	140
13.3 Exercise Level	142
13.4 Body Mass Index	144
13.5 Summary Tables	146
13.6 Comments	149

REFERENCES	152
------------	-----

APPENDICES	158
------------	-----

Appendix 1

Definitions of Social Capital	158
-------------------------------	-----

Appendix 2

What is Logistic Regression?	159
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LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.2.1
Measures of perceived health

Table 4.2.2
Study factors

Table 4.5.1
Demographic and socio-economic
profiles of respondents, by jurisdiction

Table 5.6.1
Good health, by jurisdiction

Table 5.6.2
Good health, by demographic and
socio-economic characteristics

Table 6.6.1
Good health, by views about the local area

Table 6.6.2
Good health, by social contacts

Table 6.6.3
Good health, by social support networks

Table 6.6.4
Good health, by perceived neighbourhood
social norms and civic engagement

Table 7.6.1
Good health, by lifestyle behaviours

Table 8.1.1
Logistic regression model -
excellent/very good general health

Table 8.2.1
Logistic regression model -
free of limiting long-term illness

Table 8.3.1
Logistic regression model -
high general mental health score

Table 8.4.1
Logistic regression model -
very satisfied with their health

Table 8.5.1
Logistic regression model -
very good quality of life

Table 9.4.1
Views about the local area, by jurisdiction

Table 9.4.2
Views about the local area, by demographic
and socio-economic characteristics

Table 10.4.1
Social contacts, by jurisdiction

Table 10.4.2
Social contacts, by demographic and
socio-economic characteristics

Table 10.4.3
Social support networks, by jurisdiction

Table 10.4.4
Social support networks, by demographic and
socio-economic characteristics

Table 11.4.1
Perceived neighbourhood social norms and
civic engagement, by jurisdiction

Table 11.4.2
Perceived neighbourhood social norms and
civic engagement, by demographic and
socio-economic characteristics

Table 13.5.1
Lifestyle behaviours, by jurisdiction

Table 13.5.2
Lifestyle behaviours, by demographic and
socio-economic characteristics

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1	Factors that influence health
Figure 4.3.1	Conceptual framework that views social capital indicators as mediators
Figure 4.3.2	Conceptual framework used in this report
Figure 5.1.1	Percentage of respondents who have excellent/very good general health, by age
Figure 5.1.2	Percentage of respondents who have excellent/very good general health, by education and income
Figure 5.2.1	Percentage of respondents who are free of limiting long-term illness, by age
Figure 5.2.2	Percentage of respondents who are free of limiting long-term illness, by education and income
Figure 5.3.1	Percentage of respondents who have a high general mental health score, by age
Figure 5.3.2	Percentage of respondents who have a high general mental health score, by education and income
Figure 5.4.1	Percentage of respondents who are very satisfied with their health, by age
Figure 5.4.2	Percentage of respondents who are very satisfied with their health, by education and income
Figure 5.5.1	Percentage of respondents who have a very good quality of life, by age
Figure 5.5.2	Percentage of respondents who have a very good quality of life, by education and income
Figure 9.1.1	Percentage of respondents who have a high local problems score, by employment status and housing tenure
Figure 9.1.2	Percentage of respondents who have a high local problems score, by education and income
Figure 9.2.1	Percentage of respondents who have a low local services score, by centre size and employment status
Figure 9.2.2	Percentage of respondents who have a low local services score, by education and income
Figure 9.3.1	Percentage of respondents who feel very unsafe in their local area, by gender and employment status
Figure 9.3.2	Percentage of respondents who feel very unsafe in their local area, by education and income
Figure 10.1.1	Percentage of respondents who do not know most of their neighbours, by employment status and housing tenure
Figure 10.1.2	Percentage of respondents who do not know most of their neighbours, by education and income
Figure 10.2.1	Percentage of respondents who have infrequent contact with their friends, by marital status and employment status

Figure 10.2.2

Percentage of respondents who have infrequent contact with their friends, by education and income

Figure 10.3.1

Percentage of respondents who have limited practical support networks (a lift), by centre size and employment status

Figure 10.3.2

Percentage of respondents who have limited practical support networks (a lift), by education and income

Figure 11.1.1

Percentage of respondents who do not trust most of their neighbours, by centre size and employment status

Figure 11.1.2

Percentage of respondents who do not trust most of their neighbours, by education and income

Figure 11.2.1

Percentage of respondents who feel their neighbours do not look out for one another, by marital status and employment status

Figure 11.2.2

Percentage of respondents who feel their neighbours do not look out for one another, by education and income

Figure 11.3.1

Percentage of respondents who feel they do not live in an efficacious neighbourhood, by jurisdiction and employment status

Figure 11.3.2

Percentage of respondents who feel they do not live in an efficacious neighbourhood, by education and income

Figure 12.1.1

Percentage of respondents who have not been actively involved in any local organisations in the last three years, by employment status and housing tenure

Figure 12.1.2

Percentage of respondents who have not been actively involved in any local organisations in the last three years, by education and income

Figure 13.1.1

Percentage of respondents who currently smoke cigarettes regularly or occasionally, by jurisdiction and employment status

Figure 13.1.2

Percentage of respondents who currently smoke cigarettes regularly or occasionally, by education and income

Figure 13.2.1

Percentage of respondents who drink excessively, by jurisdiction and employment status

Figure 13.2.2

Percentage of respondents who drink excessively, by education and income

Figure 13.3.1

Percentage of respondents who do no adequate exercise, by gender and employment status

Figure 13.3.2

Percentage of respondents who do no adequate exercise, by education and income

Figure 13.4.1

Percentage of respondents who are obese/overweight, by gender and employment status

Figure 13.4.2

Percentage of respondents who are obese/overweight, by education and income

“We require therefore in the study of epidemic diseases,
as of geology, a wide field, in order that we may found
theories on a sufficiently broad basis to avoid the risk of
coming to partial and erroneous conclusions”.

Benjamin Guy Babington

Introductory Address to the Epidemiological Society. Lancet 1850;2:639-42

FOREWORD

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland was set up to promote co-operation for public health between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Its aim is to tackle inequalities in health. It is committed to increasing understanding of the wider determinants of health on the island.

This report has been produced to add to understanding and promote dialogue about what can be done to protect and promote health. At a time of great change in Ireland, North and South, the study has important policy implications and will be useful for a range of constituencies and organisations.

This is the first report in Ireland, North or South, which measures and identifies systematically the connections between perceived health and an extensive range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics and lifestyle behaviours. The report also examines the role of the widely debated concept of social capital and explores its influence on health.

The report highlights wide demographic and socio-economic inequalities in health, social capital indicators and lifestyle behaviours. By quantifying the independent effects on health of each study factor after the effects of all the other factors have been taken into account, the report shows that the circumstances in which people live and how they feel about them are independent and significant influences on perceived health.

It increases understanding of the ways in which the social environment affects people's health and shows its extensive reach in creating widespread inequalities in health and well-being. The report emphasises the need for all public health and health promotion programmes to consider the important and independent effects of the social environment. It points to the need for all government departments to seriously consider and take account of the effect of their policies on health, and to work more closely together to maximise the opportunities for good health and minimise the potential for harm.

The study emphasises the many ways in which health can be viewed, the broad range of potential influences on health and the significant and independent role of social factors. Too often these are ignored or seen merely as mediating factors when planning public health or lifestyle interventions.

OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The report is set out in four sections.

After the Summary, the Introduction looks at health and its determinants and describes the All-Ireland Social Capital and Health Survey.

Part 1 looks at the study factors one at a time and describes their simple relationships with perceived health.

Part 2 looks at all the study factors simultaneously and describes their complex relationships with perceived health.

Part 3 describes demographic and socio-economic differences in social capital indicators and lifestyle behaviours.