

INTRODUCTION

Good nutrition is important for growth and development, health and wellbeing. A healthy balanced diet can help reduce both immediate and long term health complications. However, having access to a balanced diet is a prerequisite to the promotion of healthy eating habits.

Food poverty can be defined as the inability to access a nutritionally adequate diet and the related impact on health, culture and social participation⁽¹⁾. Among school children in Ireland food poverty was associated with a substantial risk to both physical and mental health and wellbeing ⁽²⁾. Since then further data on food poverty have been collected from school children in Ireland providing the impetus to explore the extent of food poverty today.

OBJECTIVES

The current study aimed to investigate the prevalence of food poverty among school children in Ireland using data from two surveys collected 4 years apart; to investigate whether economic circumstances help explain reported food poverty among children; and to compare the data cross-nationally.

METHODS

Data for this paper is based on the 2002 and 2006 Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) surveys. The HBSC survey is a large WHO collaborative study (www.hbsc.org). Nationally representative samples of children aged 10-17 years were recruited through schools and questionnaires were completed anonymously in class during both survey rounds. The student response rate was 83% (n= 8424, 176 schools) in 2002 and in 2006 (n=10,335, 215 schools). Consent from schools, parents and children was obtained.

Children were identified as experiencing food poverty if they answered always, often or sometimes to the following question:

- Some young people go to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food in the house. How often does this happen to you?

Children reported parental occupation during both survey rounds and a three-category social class scale was created (social classes 1–2; 3–4; 5–6).

RESULTS

Overall, 16% and 17% of children reported going to school or bed hungry in 2002 and 2006, respectively. Reports of food poverty were higher among younger children, and among boys and no clear social class gradient was observed (figure 1). An improvement in economic circumstances in Ireland between these years was observed, with higher proportions of people participating in the labour market, slightly lower inflation and significantly higher Gross Domestic Product per capita and Gross National Product per capita (www.data.worldbank.org/indicator).

Internationally, Ireland ranks in the top one third of children reporting food poverty (figure 2). Overall, there was a rise in the prevalence of reported food poverty from 2002 to 2006 cross-nationally,

RESULTS

Figure 1: Reported prevalence (%) of food poverty among school children in Ireland, by age and social class.

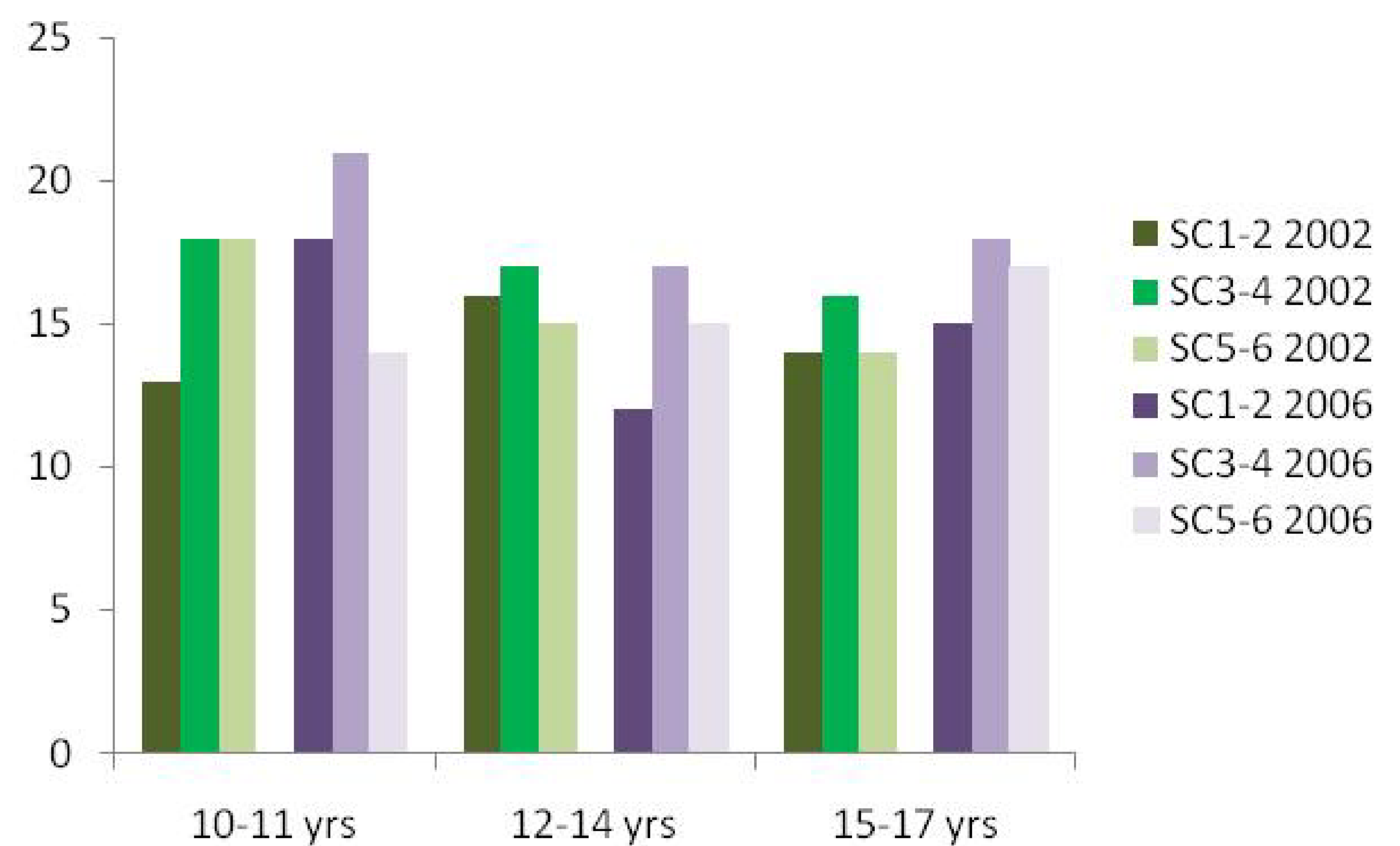
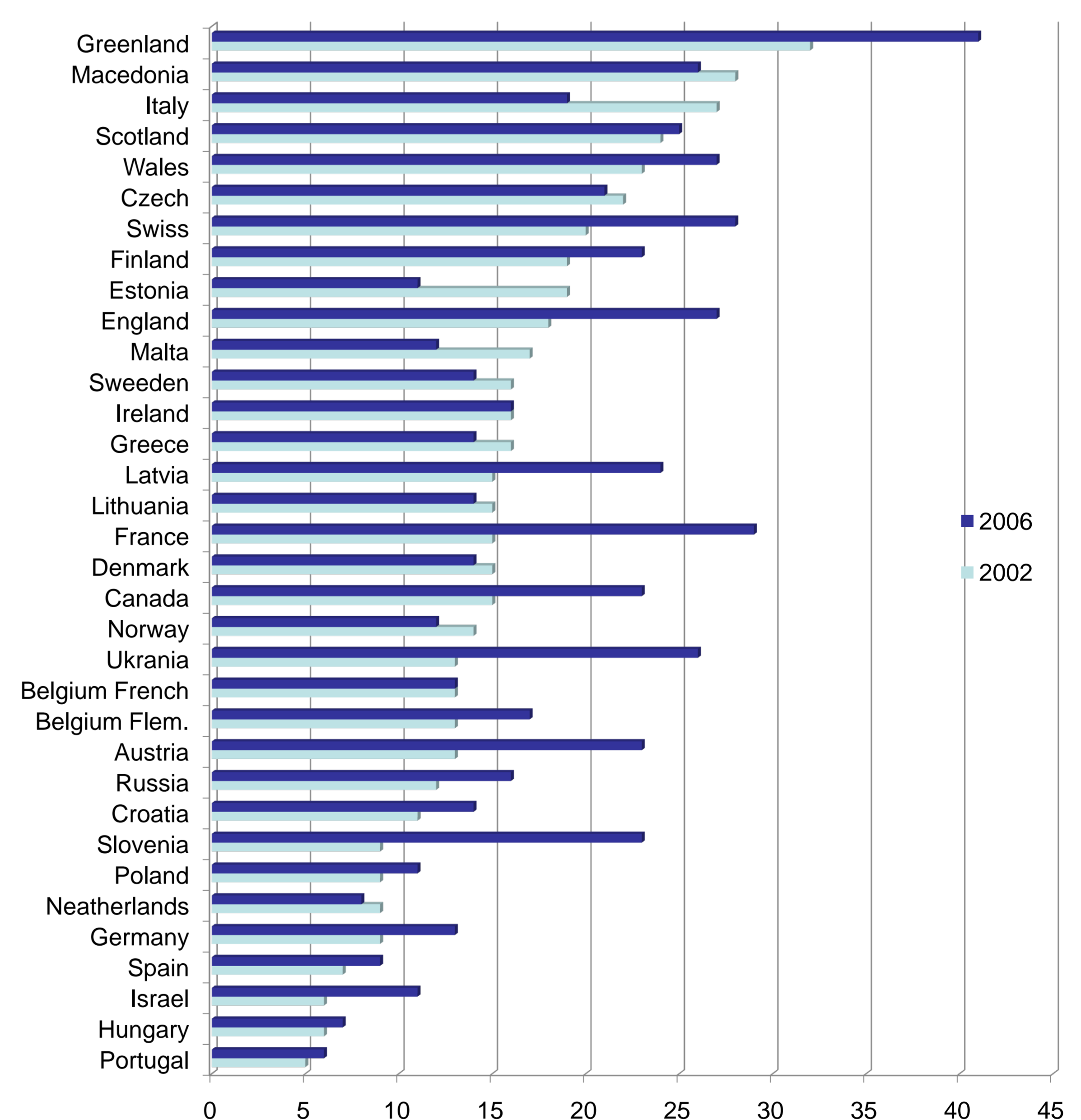


Figure 2: Reported prevalence (%) of food poverty among school children cross-nationally.



CONCLUSION

Despite no change in reported food poverty, there are still a high proportion of children experiencing food poverty in Ireland. A key strategic objective within a draft national nutrition policy (2007) was to help reduce food poverty. However, no such policy has been launched. With a new public health policy due for consultation, the issue of food poverty should be highlighted as a important consideration for action.

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