

The Other Division in Northern Ireland: public attitudes to poverty, economic hardship and social security

Launch of NILT Survey 26 May 2022

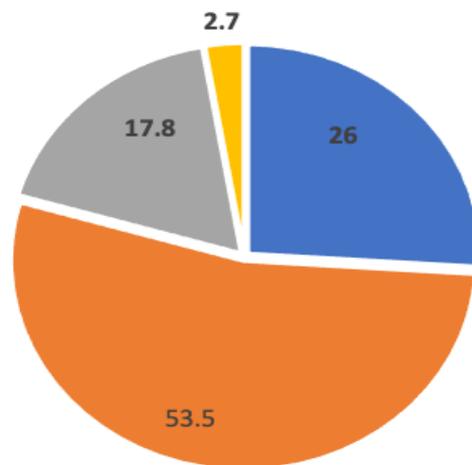
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- First time since 2000 that the NILT has asked people about their views on some of these issues – and in that period there have been substantive changes with regard to social security, labour markets and experience of devolved government.
- Plus - the experience of the pandemic – a financial as well as public health crisis.

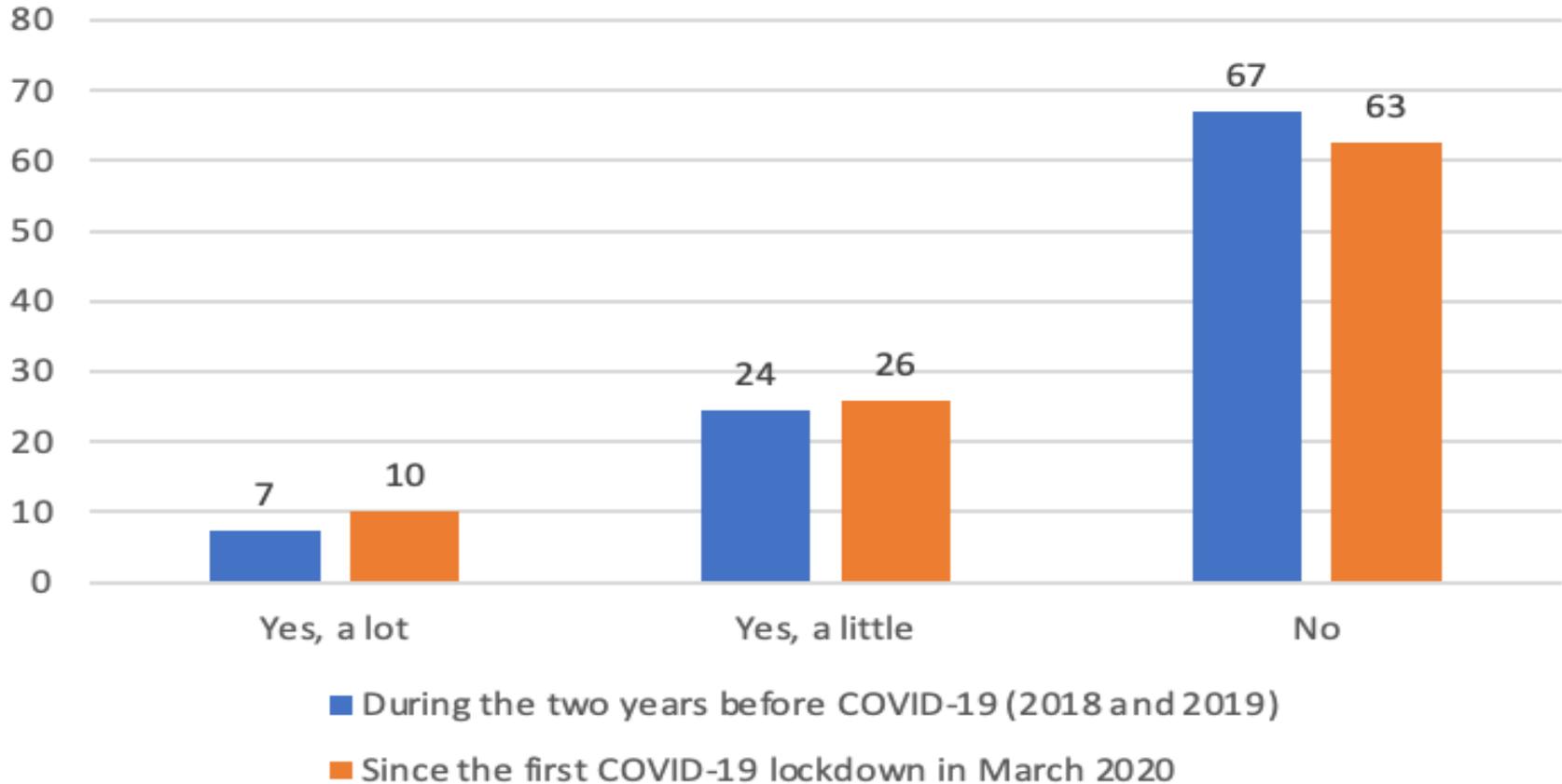
- Financial hardship before/during Covid 19 pandemic
- Perception of the fairness/unfairness regarding the income distribution and taxation
- Responsibility of government to address poverty
- Attitudes to social security including: whether the pandemic changed attitudes; what the social security system should aim to do; parity in social security with other jurisdictions

Since Coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown in March 2020 has your household income changed?

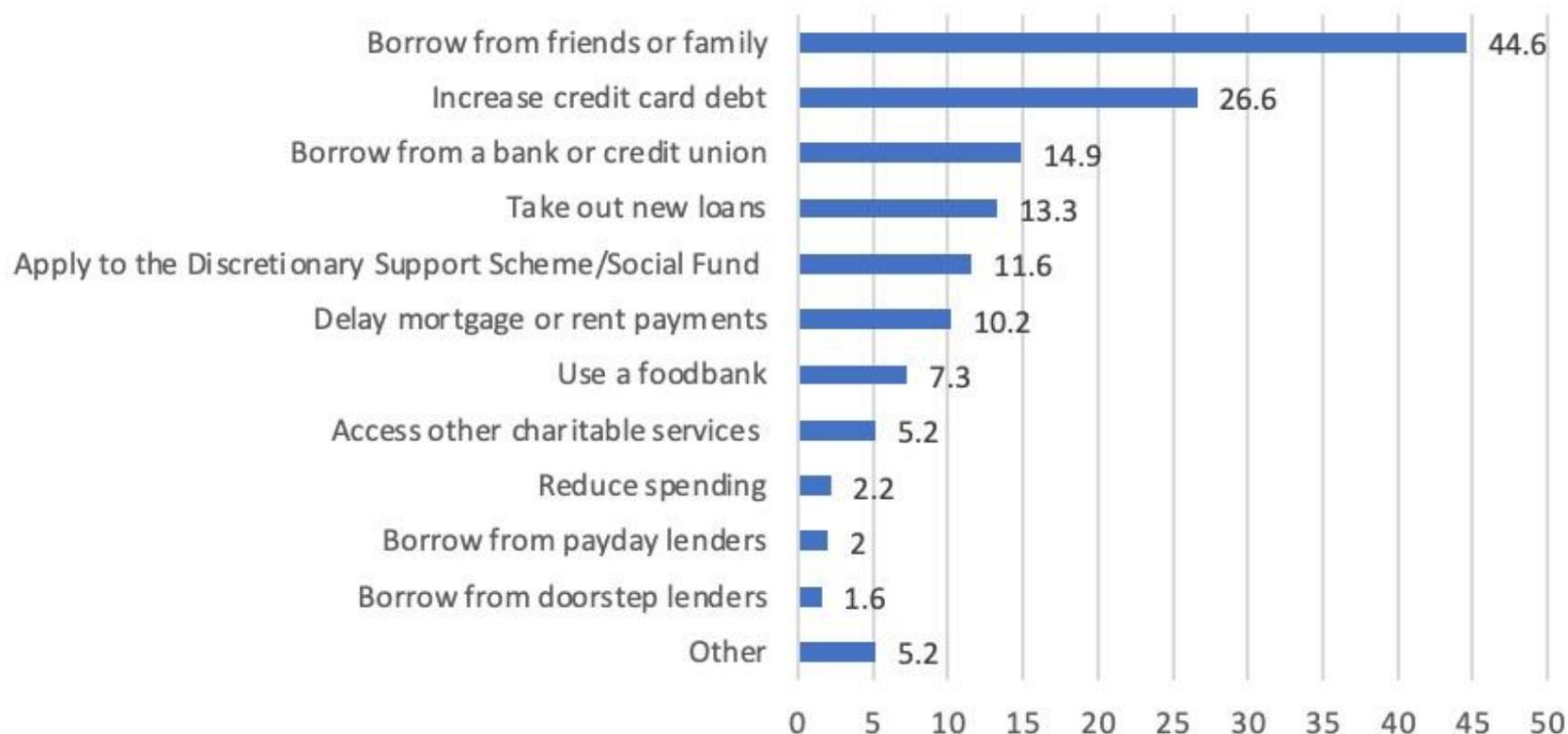


■ Gone down ■ Stayed the same ■ Gone up ■ Don't know

Have you experienced any financial hardship (during the 2 years pre Covid and since lockdown March 2020)?



How do respondents cope with financial hardship? (%)



Could your household afford to pay an unexpected, but necessary, expense of £500?

- Almost 25% of respondents said they **could not** – (one in ten of over 65s; 40% of 18-24 yr olds; 36% of 25-34 yr olds and 33% of 35-44 yr olds)
- Less than two percentage points of a difference between the ability of those in paid employment (24.9%) and those not (26.4%) to afford an expense of £500

Did your household turn heating down or off because you could not afford the costs last winter, even though it was too cold in the house/flat?

- Just over 24 per cent of households reported having to turn the heating down or off **due to costs**.
- Over half of respondents who described themselves as low income had turned the heating down or off because they could not afford it.

- The proportion of respondents unable to afford a £500 expense should not surprise us - the Family Resources Survey (2019-20) found that 36% of households have no savings.
- Nor is it surprising that there is less than two percentage points of a difference between the ability of those in paid employment (24.9%) and those not (26.4%) - since official statistics show that so many of those in paid employment are living, objectively, in poverty.

Social security-related questions in the survey cover two broad categories:

- Adequacy – what level of income benefits should guarantee
- Questions about fairness, reciprocity and the deservingness of social security claimants.

- Data shows that people in NI value a safety net that ensures an acceptable standard of living.
- But, at the same time, a significant minority (37.5%) agreed that benefit incomes should be capped regardless of factors like family size or housing costs.
- 51.7 % think that income distribution in NI is unfair.
- Almost half (49.3%) of respondents agreed that it was '*the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between people with high and low incomes*'
- *Over 67% think that people with higher incomes should pay larger taxes*

Statement	%	%	%	%
	Agree/strongly agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree/strongly disagree	Don't know
<i>Social security benefits should:</i>				
<i>Enable an individual or family to meet their basic living needs</i>	90.3	5.1	2.4	2.2
<i>Enable an individual or family to have a normal standard of living</i>	60.8	22.1	13.5	3.7
<i>Enable an individual or family to live a life in dignity</i>	80.9	12.5	3.8	2.8
<i>Be capped and not exceed a maximum amount irrespective of factors such as family size, housing costs etc.</i>	37.5	19.3	36.4	6.7

- Consensus that social security benefits should enable people to meet a *basic standard of living* - regardless of whether self-assessed income was high, middle, or low, between men and women and across the political spectrum
- The principle that social security should enable a '*normal standard of living*' was most strongly supported by the low-income group with weakest support from the high-income group; nationalist party supporters were most likely to agree that social security should enable a *normal* standard of living,
- Strong support across groups for the notion that benefits should enable a life *lived in dignity*

‘The Northern Ireland Executive is doing all that it can to reduce poverty’

Party	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Can't choose (%)
Alliance	0.4	2.3	18.6	26.6	47.9	4.2
DUP	0	13.6	27.8	20.7	29.6	8.3
SDLP	0	7.8	17.2	26.1	42.8	6.1
SF	0.6	7.3	17.5	20.9	43.5	10.2
UUP	2.7	11.9	29.7	18.4	31.4	5.9

- In the latter part of the last Assembly mandate, the Minister for Communities commissioned independent reviews of welfare mitigations and the discretionary support scheme which provides emergency assistance to those in the greatest hardship.
- In 2020 work commenced on the development of an anti-poverty strategy (APS) though this has yet to be concluded. The report of the Expert Panel notes that on *'The Panel's key assumption is that the purpose of an APS is to raise living standards and reduce living costs for those below an agreed, objectively-defined poverty line.'*
- The current Fuel Poverty Strategy dates back to 2011 and much has changed since then. NI urgently needs an up-to-date Fuel Poverty Strategy.