



THE IRISH IN ENGLAND

Mad but not Bad?

Few of the Irish who come to England find 'pavements of gold' and indeed many of them find work and housing hard to come by; as is the case with many other immigrant groups they are likely to experience hardship, poverty and poor health. They do not however, contrary to popular belief, seem to attempt to improve their situation by getting involved in serious crime.

The Irish in England, however they are defined, constitute a large minority group although the numbers of Irish people coming to England appear to be dropping. The latest Labour Force Survey (1993) estimates that there are now only 440,000 Irish people living in England but if the numbers of second generation Irish, are included, the Irish population living in England rises to two and a quarter million people. The young Irish leaving Ireland now appear to be going to mainland Europe and America in search of work as well as England. The Labour Force Survey shows that whereas in 1989 there were 290,000 Irish people in jobs in England, by 1993 that number had reduced to 220,000.

When we look for more detailed figures of how the Irish fare in England the statistics are not easy to find, for many of the social accounting procedures do not appear to recognise them as being an ethnic minority with a cultural identity which is separate from that of the English (O'Meachair 1992). What evidence there is however, does not paint too bright a picture of what life may be like for many of the Irish in England, many of whom are still manual workers (Economist 1991). The most striking thing about Irish immigrants to England is the poor state of their health.

Ill health and disadvantage

A particular aspect of the health status figures is the incidence of mental illness among Irish people living in England. Cochrane (1983) has shown that both men and women have a very high rate of admission to hospital for mental illness, higher than any other group, with men more likely to be admitted with a diagnosis of alcoholism and women with one of schizophrenia.

A recent and thorough study of alcohol and disadvantage amongst the Irish in England (Harrison & Carr-Hill 1992: 22) confirms the view that

"When adjusted for age and gender

the rates of heavy and high-risk drinking for people born in the Republic of Ireland are considerably higher than for any other group except the Northern-Irish British."

The study suggests that

"...most of these people developed drinking problems after leaving Ireland and... their problems appear to be related to material and structural circumstances associated with their status as a migrant group." (1992:1)

It appears from the limited and incomplete evidence which is available that although it may be true that we are all living in a risk society, Irish people who live in England are at greater risk than the English. They are more likely to have housing problems, and employment problems; there is a greater likelihood that they will seek company and solace in pubs and alcohol and there is the risk that they run of being classified as mentally ill. They are also more likely to die as a result of violence or accidents. This close involvement that many may have with insecurity and poverty makes it surprising that they are not highly visible in crime statistics.

A prison minority

The ethnicity data which is routinely collected about the prison population appears to be concerned mainly with distinguishing between black, Asian and white offenders. It shows for example that 10% males in the prison population are of West Indian, Guyanese or African background, that 3% of the prison population are males from the Indian sub-continent and that 2% are of Chinese, Arab or mixed background (Home Office Bulletin 1993). Some Home Office statistics are available however which suggest that the prison population in England has relatively few Irish born people in it. Only 588 men in this population declared themselves to be Irish; this can be seen to be approximately 1.3% of the total held in custody. The number may be an under-statement of the real number however as it may be that some people do not identify themselves as being Irish, either because they have lived so long in England that they no longer think of themselves as Irish or because they do not wish to advertise the fact that they are Irish.

Alternatively one could accept the figures as valid and speculate as to why so few Irish people find themselves in English prisons. One possible explanation is that they do not generally

involve themselves in crimes against other people, the offences which they may commit being related to behaviour which hurts only themselves, and which is perhaps more likely to see them classified as 'mad' rather than 'bad', hence the high rates of hospitalisation as mental patients.

Keeping a low profile

Another possible explanation is that they are seen as, or rather heard as, foreigners who are not welcome in England and so they see it as advisable to keep out of trouble as much as possible. An article in the *Economist* (1991:28) suggests that "many Irish people regard themselves as aliens, disliked by the natives and harassed by the police."

It goes on to suggest that after any IRA bombing in England many Irish people living there feel that they are all under suspicion. Some of them will know people who have been questioned but not charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In 1992, for example, 270 people were questioned for more than an hour but not charged (Home Office Bulletin 1993).

It could be that Irish culture is still powerful in teaching people right from wrong. Certainly many writers have associated having strong guilt feelings with having had an Irish Catholic upbringing.

The answers to such questions might become clearer if Irish people in England were recognised in official statistics as being an ethnic minority with a different culture and life-chances from the English.

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