

ENOUGH ALREADY

*Empirical Data on Irish Public Attitudes
to Immigrants, Minorities, Refugees and Asylum Seekers*

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BREEN, DEVEREUX AND HAYNES HAVE BEEN ENGAGED for several years in an ongoing analysis of media representation of asylum seekers and refugees in Irish and UK newspapers. The phenomenon has been of particular interest given a significant increase in the numbers of persons seeking asylum in Ireland since the mid 1990s. This paper explores the empirical data from the European Values Study (EVS) and various Eurbarometer Studies (EB) which document public opinion toward migrant workers, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers on a pan-European basis.

Table 1 indicates the trend of asylum seeking in Ireland through the 1990s to the present. From a low of 39 in 1992, the number reached a high of 11,634 in 2002 before dropping back in 2003 to 7,431.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>
1992	39
1993	91
1994	362
1995	424
1996	1,179
1997	3,883
1998	4,626
1999	7,724
2000	10,938
2001	10,325
2002	11,634
2003	7,431
2004	4,766

Table 1 Number of persons seeking asylum in Ireland, 1992–2003

In reality, very few asylum seekers were granted refugee status. In 2001, only 6% were awarded refugee status at first stage. Fourteen per cent of those appealing a negative decision were granted refugee status. In total only approximately 10% were given refugee status.

The numbers of persons applying for refugee status needs to be put in context. Table 2 shows the average number of asylum seekers applications for a variety of developed countries. Over these same ten years Ireland, with a national population of less than four million, has an annual asylum seeker to population ratio of about 1:1000. In Germany, the equivalent ratio is about 1:500

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number</i>
Ireland	3,974
Belgium	21,951
Sweden	22,859
Netherlands	35,862
UK	57,289
USA	125,859
Germany	159,747

Table 2 Average Annual Asylum Applications (UNHCR data 1992–2001)

In 2002 there was a marked shift in the Irish pattern of inward migration. The numbers of indigenous Irish returning home increased dramatically while the number of new asylum seekers decreased significantly from 11,634 the previous year to 7,431 in 2002. In a wider context, Europe hosted only 21% of all those who fall under the remit of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), less than Africa (22%) and half the number hosted by Asia (46%). In fact, in these years, Ireland was dealing with a tiny proportion of those worldwide who were deemed to be ‘of concern’ to the UNHCR.

There are empirical data on the attitudes that exist in Ireland toward various groups including refugees drawn from European surveys. The European Values Study (EVS) is a pan-European project, conducted at roughly ten-yearly intervals, which utilises an omnibus survey focusing especially on values associated with work, religion, lifestyles and other issues. Its most recent data gathering exercise was in 1999, the third of its kind and the first EVS to include former Soviet-bloc countries. The 1999 EVS in Ireland had 1012 completed interviews. It was based on a national random sample population, excluding those under eighteen years of age. Post fieldwork weighting of data by sex, age and educational level was done against the 1997 Labour Force Survey population data.

Among other questions, respondents were asked to mention all those groups from a list which the respondent would regard as ‘unwanted neighbours’. One such group on the list was ‘immigrants and foreign workers’. Table 3 shows the number of mentions for this group.

		mentioned 1981	mentioned 1990	mentioned 1999–2000			
Age (categorised)	18 to 24 years	4.0%	14	3	8.9%	14	
	25 to 34 years	1.3%	3	5	2.8%	8.6%	18
	35 to 44 years	6.4%	11	6	3.0%	11.3%	24
	45 to 64 years	7.6%	21	24	8.0%	14.7%	41
	65 years or more	9.3%	17	13	7.7%	16.8%	25
Total		5.4%	66	51	5.1%	12.1%	122

Table 3 EVS Unwanted Neighbour Mentions¹

The question was replicated in each of the EVS’s three waves. In the Irish data, 5% of respondents in 1981 and 1990 indicated that they would regard immigrants/foreign workers as unwanted neighbours but this number had risen 10 years later to 12% of respondents. This increase was most noticeable amongst the 25–35 years old. In comparison with the data from other countries in the 1999 wave of the EVS, the situation in Ireland is significantly better than elsewhere; the percentages of Slovenian, Bulgarian and Latvian respondents naming immigrants/foreign workers as unwanted neighbours, for example, were much higher at 40.6%, 34.4% and 30.8% respectively. These, however, are countries with high unemployment rates that suffer from a variety of economic woes. Comparisons with more prosperous, developed countries are less favourable: Portugal, Sweden and Finland, for example, have corresponding rates of 2.5%, 2.8% and 4.6% respectively.

¹ Q 7 (V 52) On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbours? I – Immigrants/Foreign Workers

Data were also sought about Irish attitudes to immigration. Respondents were asked which of four options they would prefer regarding people from less developed countries immigrating here and the details are given in Table 4.² The overall numbers favouring a more liberal approach are low, less than 10% overall. Interestingly, this is most pronounced amongst the 25–35 years old, the same group which is least in favour of a total prohibition on inward migration. There is something of a disparity between the notional idea of immigration permissiveness and the more tangible reality of the presence of immigrants or foreign workers on the ground.

		Anyone come who wants to	Come when jobs available	Strict limits on the number of foreigners	Prohibit people coming here from other countries	Total
Age (categorised)	18 to 24 years	11	73	67	3	154
		6.9%	47.8%	43.3%	1.9%	100.0%
	25 to 34 years	20	90	94	1	205
		9.8%	43.8%	45.7%	.6%	100.0%
	35 to 44 years	13	103	83	10	209
		6.1%	49.4%	39.5%	5.0%	100.0%
	45 to 64 years	27	133	111	10	280
		9.5%	47.5%	39.5%	3.5%	100.0%
	65 years or more	12	64	67	4	147
		8.3%	43.5%	45.4%	2.8%	100.0%
Total		82	463	420	28	995
		8.3%	46.6%	42.3%	2.9%	100.0%

Table 4 EVS Openness to immigration

- 2 How about people from less developed countries coming here to work. Which one of the following do you think the government should do?
- Let anyone come who wants to
 - Let people come as long as there are jobs available
 - Put strict limits on the number of foreigners who can come here
 - Prohibit people coming here from other countries

The issue of practical attitudes towards immigrants is best expressed by way of comparison. Respondents were asked ‘to what extent do you feel concerned about the living conditions of’ (inter alia) elderly people, humankind, and immigrants. The summary data for the responses are given in Tables 5 through 7. In relation to concern for family, the average across all age groups who stated that they were ‘very much concerned’ or ‘much concerned’ was in excess of 80%.

		18 to 24 years	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 to 64 years	65 years or more	Total
Concerned with immediate family	very much	95 60.9%	138 66.7%	148 70.5%	203 71.9%	104 69.9%	689 68.5%
	much	26 16.7%	26 12.8%	26 12.5%	26 9.3%	18 11.7%	123 12.2%
	to a certain extent	9 5.6%	11 5.1%	11 5.1%	17 5.9%	6 4.2%	53 5.3%
	not so much	13 8.2%	16 7.5%	12 5.6%	21 7.6%	11 7.4%	73 7.2%
	not at all	13 8.5%	16 7.9%	13 6.2%	15 5.4%	10 6.8%	68 6.8%
Total		157 100.0%	207 100.0%	210 100.0%	282 100.0%	149 100.0%	1005 100.0%

Table 5 EVS Concern for family

As can be seen in Table 6, when the same question was asked regarding humankind, the numbers expressing ‘very much’ or ‘much’ concern dropped to 34% with 14% choosing to state ‘not so much’ concern or ‘none at all’.

		18 to 24 years	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 to 64 years	65 years or more	Total
Concerned with human kind	very much	11 7.3%	29 14.3%	34 16.3%	52 18.9%	25 17.1%	152 15.3%
	much	26 16.9%	41 19.9%	43 20.7%	42 15.3%	33 22.6%	186 18.7%
	to a certain extent	80 51.2%	95 46.1%	75 36.0%	107 38.7%	53 36.1%	409 41.3%
	not so much	31 19.9%	29 14.2%	45 21.6%	58 21.0%	28 18.9%	191 19.2%
	not at all	7 4.8%	11 5.5%	11 5.4%	17 6.0%	8 5.4%	54 5.5%
Total	157 100.0%	206 100.0%	207 100.0%	276 100.0%	146 100.0%	992 100.0%	

Table 6 EVs Concern for Humankind

When asked the identical question regarding immigrants (see Table 7), the numbers expressing ‘very much’ or ‘much’ concern dropped to 27.5% while the numbers state ‘not so much’ concern or ‘none at all’ doubled from the previous response to 29.4%.

		18 to 24 Years	25 to 34 years	35 to 44 years	45 to 64 Years	65 years or more	Total
Concerned with immigrants	very much	5 3.3%	19 9.4%	26 12.6%	35 12.5%	19 13.3%	105 10.6%
	much	17 11.0%	43 20.8%	40 18.8%	42 15.1%	27 18.3%	168 16.9%
	to a certain extent	84 53.5%	94 46.0%	77 36.6%	117 42.0%	58 39.5%	429 43.1%
	not so much	44 27.9%	41 19.9%	50 23.9%	71 25.3%	35 23.7%	240 24.1%
	not at all	7 4.3%	8 3.9%	17 8.1%	14 5.0%	8 5.2%	53 5.3%
Total	157 100.0%	205 100.0%	210 100.0%	279 100.0%	146 100.0%	996 100.0%	

Table 7 EVs Concern for Immigrants

It is astonishing to see that the levels of concern for humankind in general are higher than the concern for immigrants, reflecting a lived reality. Human-kind, at one level, is somewhat abstract. Immigrants, on the other hand, are very visible, especially immigrants whose skin colour is different, and, as such, represent a very tangible reality.

A comparison with other European countries for the same question shows that Ireland is, in fact, one of the four best countries in Europe in this regard. If we look at the proportion of respondents who state that they are not at all concerned with immigrants, only Sweden, Spain and Italy have lower percentages at 1.59%, 2.12% and 3.89% respectively. Hungary and Latvia are the worst in this regard, at 41.64% and 41.43% respectively.

Another significant source of empirical data regarding public opinion in Europe is found within the Eurobarometer (EB) survey data. Eurobarometer surveys, addressing major topics concerning European citizenship are conducted on behalf of the European Commission at least twice a year in all member states of the European Union. Each survey consists of approximately 1000 face-to-face interviews per Member State with some exceptions. In 2003, EB 59.2 was carried out and focused, in part, on attitudes to immigration and asylum seekers. It is to that survey that we now turn.

At first glance, the Irish data from the survey seem to be more positive about immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Respondents were asked about immigrants from Muslim countries, from non-EU countries and refugees. Summary data are given in Table 8. The majority, between 50% and 60%, are in favour of immigration but with certain restrictions. Looking at those wanting to impose a complete ban (not be accepted), the strongest attitude is toward immigrants from Muslim countries (10%). Similarly, the most liberal attitude (accept without restriction) is weakest toward immigrants from Muslim countries (16.2%) and strongest for those outside of the EU (35.6%), presumably non-refugees.

	Muslim countries (%)	Refugees (%)	Non-EU countries (%)
Be accepted, without restrictions	16.2	25.8	35.6
Be accepted, but with restrictions	60.3	59.5	51.2
Not be accepted	10.6	5.6	3.8
Don't know	12.9	9.1	9.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 8 EB Willingness to accept immigrants (N=1004)

A deeper examination of the data indicates cause for concern. When asked about their opinions regarding asylum as a fundamental human right, less than two thirds of respondents replied in the affirmative. The summary data are given in table 9.

	%
Tend to agree	65.7
Tend to disagree	17.9
Don't know	16.4
Total	100.0

Table 9 EB The right of asylum is a fundamental human right (N=1000)

Among other questions ascertaining views on immigrants, respondents were asked if they thought that there are too many immigrants in Ireland, whether immigrants are responsible for a lot of petty crime, whether immigrants who continue to follow customs which are against national values should be expelled, even if they are legally settled, and whether asylum seekers should be made to go back to their country, once it is safe for them to do so. The summary data for these questions are given in Table 10. The very strong sense that exists regarding too many immigrants already in Ireland is in stark contrast to the more liberal picture in Table 8. More than 7 on 10 respondents completely agree or tend to agree that there are too many immigrants. Equally startling is the apparent attitude that asylum should be a temporary event, with more than 6 on 10 respondents completely agreeing or tending to agree that asylum seekers should be returned to their country of origin if safe.

	Too many immigrants (%)	Responsible for crime (%)	Expel if against values (%)	Send back if safe (%)
Completely agree	38.5	18.8	28.7	26.6
Tend to agree	36.2	34.0	27.6	35.6
Tend to disagree	13.8	28.0	20.9	18.0
Completely disagree	2.2	5.1	9.0	3.6
Don't know	9.3	14.1	13.8	16.2

Table 10 EB Views on immigrants, various aspects (N=1000)

A further series of questions elaborated on the theme of ‘sending back’ immigrants. Respondents were asked whether legally established immigrants from outside the European Union should be sent back to their country of origin if they are unemployed or convicted of serious offences; whether legally established immigrants from outside the European Union should all be sent back to their country of origin; whether all illegal immigrants should be sent back to their country of origin without exception; and whether all immigrants, whether legal or illegal, and their children, even those who were born in Ireland, should be sent back to their country of origin. The summary data are given in Table 11.

	If convicted of serious offenses	If unemployed	All legal	All illegal	All inc. children born in Ireland
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Tend to agree	76.4	36.3	27.4	45.3	28.3
Tend to disagree	10.4	44.3	52.9	39.0	53.1
Don't know	13.2	19.4	19.7	15.7	18.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 11 EB Attitudes to sending back immigrants under various conditions (N=1000)

Various other questions were asked about immigrants and minorities in this particular survey. These are too numerous to cover in their entirety but four particular questions in regard of minorities are worth to mention. Respondents were asked whether they agree that it is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different races, religions or cultures; that in order to be fully accepted members of Irish society, people belonging to these minority groups must give up their own culture; people belonging to these minority groups must give up their own culture if in conflict with the Irish law; that there is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept; and that Ireland has reached its limits such that if there were to be more people belonging to these minority groups we would have problems. The summary data are given in Table 12.

	Good for society (%)	Give up culture (%)	Give up part of culture if legal conflict (%)	There is a limit to how many from minorities (%)	The limit has been reached (%)
Tend to agree	73.5	31.2	61.1	79.1	65.7
Tend to disagree	17.4	54.5	26.1	14.0	18.4
Don't know	9.1	14.3	12.8	6.9	15.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 12 EB Attitudes to minorities under various headings (N=1000)

It is heartening to see the positive expression toward minorities with almost three quarters of the population considering the presence of minorities as beneficial for society. Even so, some 30% of respondents would like to see minorities give up their own cultural practices entirely and more than 60% partially, in relation to legal conflicts. This is clearly a vexed question: most people, for example, consider female circumcision as barbaric and illegal, but male circumcision is perfectly acceptable.

The final questions cited above, as to whether there is a limit to the number of people from minorities that should be accepted and whether such a limit has been reached, raise fundamental questions about tolerance in Irish society. The first question, regarding the existence of a theoretical limit to minorities, is rather crude. In all likelihood, no nation would indicate that it is absolutely willing to take in minorities to such an extent that its very identity is displaced and the previous majority becomes the new minority. But I do not think that is what is being probed here. The question is really about the existence of a theoretical limit. The Irish response to this question is unambiguous in that almost 8 respondents on 10 tended to agree that such a limit exists.

It is the second of these questions, as to whether that theoretical limit has been reached, that gives far greater cause for concern. Almost 2 out of every 3 respondents tend to believe that the limit has been reached. In fact, excluding the 'don't know' respondents, 78% tended to agree that the limits have been reached. Given the relatively low numbers of immigrants in this country, compared to the scale of the problem worldwide as reported by UNHCR, these latter data seem to represent strong feelings of both intolerance and ignorance.

Table 13 shows the corresponding summary data for Europe from the EB survey of 1999. It is obvious that Finland and Sweden are the countries most open to immigration, and Greece and Ireland the most resistant. The suggestion that

the limit for minorities has been reached can be read as a measure of tolerance for immigrants; in this regard, Greece, Great Britain, West Germany and Belgium are the most intolerant and Finland, Sweden and Northern Ireland the most tolerant. The European average for this question is 58.7% tending to agree; Ireland is above the average with 65.5%.

	<i>Tend to agree</i> There is a limit to how many from minorities (%)	<i>Tend to agree</i> The limit has been reached (%)
Belgium	72.2%	66.3%
Denmark	69.3%	51.7%
West Germany	75.4%	69.4%
Greece	80.0%	80.6%
Italy	50.9%	48.6%
Spain	50.3%	46.1%
France	69.4%	62.4%
Ireland	79.1%	65.5%
Northern Ireland	67.3%	43.9%
Luxembourg	70.2%	58.0%
Netherlands	74.7%	66.1%
Portugal	60.8%	60.9%
Great Britain	69.8%	69.7%
East Germany	76.1%	65.7%
Finland	28.1%	27.0%
Sweden	48.6%	42.5%
Austria	66.8%	62.6%

Table 13 EB Percentages of respondents tending to agree on limits existing and limits being reached by country

There is little cause for comfort in these data. There are strong elements of very significant proportions of intolerance toward minorities and immigrants expressed in these data. Inter-nation comparisons are useful but limited; the reality is that, at the very least, about 3 out of every 10 respondents in each country believes in the existence of a theoretical limit and also that that limit has been reached. The fact that one nation is more inclined to that view than another is not really critical in the light of the baseline measures across all the nations in the study.

The situation in Ireland, on some comparative measures, may seem better than elsewhere in Europe but there is little to be happy about. The fact is that attitudes to immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland are quite negative. The results of a crime victimisation survey carried out by the Central Statistics Office in Ireland in 2003 revealed that non-nationals were six times more likely than nationals to experience crime generally. Some 6.9% of non-EU nationals are victims of personal crimes in 2003 compared to 5.8% in 1998. This compares to a figure of 5.2% for the general population. It is worth noting that incoming asylum seekers do not create racism of themselves but rather encounter it as an all too manifest reality in Irish society. It is all the more remarkable, in the light of the experience of Irish emigrants to England, the US and further afield, who often experienced racism at various levels. Racism, once experienced by the Irish abroad, is now the experience of those who come here seeking asylum.

It is one thing to document the reality of attitudes, often negative, towards immigrants, minorities, refugees and asylum seekers. The core questions that follow from this are manifold: Why is this so? What are the factors that influence the general public so that they hold these views? What can be done to address them? Given the centrality of the media in the life of contemporary society, it is to this question that my colleagues now turn in the remaining papers in this volume.

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