

# IRISH CHICAGO

## Late Generation Ethnicity and the Future of Irish America

A Research Report Commissioned by The Irish Abroad Unit,  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.



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Family Green Music  
Home Friendliness

Survey Question: What does Ireland mean to you?

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# Key Findings

- ▶ The most frequently voiced concern by those interviewed and surveyed in this study is that the relations between Ireland and the US are growing weaker and the “next generation” of Irish America will be even more distant from its Irish heritage. At this critical juncture we need fuller knowledge of the changes underway, so as to meet the challenges and opportunities for designing and securing future relationships.
- ▶ The research confirms that Irish America is at a stage of late generation ethnicity, no longer refuelled by new emigrants, and this conditions the worldview of Irish America. A notable feature of this is that Irish ethnic identity in the US is increasingly symbolic, a matter of choice rather than need or circumstance. It is an identity that is no longer associated with immigrant trauma or oppression but with pride and distinction.
- ▶ The Irish American community is a mature, settled diaspora community, and markedly successful as measured by its representation in the upper reaches of government, law, labour and business organizations. It is also a diverse, fragmented populace, no longer bound by neighbourhood and church. The different varieties of Irishness represented in the city need to be recognised and nurtured to deliver sustainable engagement.
- ▶ There are very few new Irish emigrants to Chicago in recent years. They are mostly young professionals who view themselves as sojourners and tend not to engage with the more settled Irish communities. They have a different sense of Irish identity to that of the settled Irish community and retain strong links to the home country via media and regular return.
- ▶ There are pockets of vulnerability among the Irish in Chicago, most clearly with the undocumented and the elderly, but also less visibly in areas of mental health and addiction. The work of Chicago Irish Immigrant Support demonstrates that the role of dedicated Irish immigration centres in the US remains a crucial agency for front-line advice, counselling and support services.
- ▶ It is important for Ireland to continue to engage and support vulnerable Irish in the American diaspora. The needs are real and while the return can seem nebulous it is deep and meaningful, not only to those directly aided but to many in the Irish communities for whom it signals a positive and caring investment by the home country.
- ▶ The undocumented Irish are increasingly fearful about their status and futures, reluctant to trust and engage service providers, and uncertain about support within the Irish community.

- ▶ Immigration reform was viewed by a majority of survey respondents as the greatest challenge facing the Irish in Chicago. The issue was unquestionably heightened in the context of the Trump administration’s initiatives on immigration. At the same time, there was evidence that the settled Irish community have limited empathy for the undocumented or for immigration reform in their favour.
- ▶ The elderly Irish have a strong support system provided by several organisations and institutions. The challenge exists in the potential to expand or review coordination of services to make the best use of resources.
- ▶ Mental health and addiction issues registered highly in the survey but appear to be off the radar of service providers. This is an area that requires focused research to ascertain the scale and depth of the problems and suitable responses.
- ▶ The numbers of Irish students on J1 visas visiting Chicago are stable and employers value having Irish students, but there was some discontent among volunteers about the way in which the programme is currently being managed. There were suggestions for improvement, the most compelling being that the eligibility age for the J1 programme be raised to 35.
- ▶ There is a generally strong though fragmented civil society of organisations, institutions and networks supporting the Irish in Chicago. They serve different sections and needs among the diaspora Irish, only occasionally intersecting. The Consulate may helpfully facilitate such interactions though the primary responsibility remains with the diaspora actors.
- ▶ Culture remains crucial to the making and maintenance of ethnic Irish identity in Chicago. There is a strong sense of cultural loss and diminishment among older generations but also pride and energy in maintaining identity through particular institutions and activities.
- ▶ Given the challenges posed by late generation ethnicity, education must be at the centre of any strategic effort to engage the next generation of the Irish diaspora in the US. There was enthusiasm for the creation of an “Irish school” in Chicago (modelled on the established Polish Saturday School) and for increased promotion of Irish educational opportunities among diaspora youth.

# Introduction

The primary aim of this research is to investigate and document the profiles and needs of “vulnerable” Irish emigrants in the United States, using the city of Chicago as a case study. The study is framed in relation to distinctive communities about which surprisingly little is known given the paucity of scholarship and policy documentation, in order to provide fresh knowledge that will be useful both to scholars and policymakers, and that may inform the Government’s strategic objectives in engaging the diaspora—particularly through the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP).

The secondary aim of this research is to begin analysis of the identity formations of Irish America today and of the roles of networks and organisations in maintaining identity and connecting Ireland and Irish America. In its broader parameters, the research reflects an understanding of the dynamics and contexts that shape the contemporary nature of the Irish diaspora and the shifting indices of identity within it. It is hoped this aspect of the research will be of interest to those seeking knowledge of the demographics, cultures and perspectives of the Irish in the US and of the networks linking Ireland with Irish America.

The research includes primary data gathering via a survey and interviews among Irish communities in Chicago. The fieldwork provides information on the Irish presence in the city that facilitates analysis of how Irishness is experienced and lived in everyday life. At the same time, there is analysis of the key networks, organisations and forms of social capital that link Irish individuals and communities in the city and with Ireland, to better understand the ways in which Irishness is maintained and circulated within the diaspora.

This research follows on from the report *Supporting the Next Generation of the Irish Diaspora*, a research project undertaken by the UCD Clinton Institute for the Irish Abroad Unit in 2014.<sup>1</sup> That report focused on the work of the ESP in supporting Irish communities across the world. It opened a fresh if partial window on the vulnerabilities of Irish emigrants in the US and the current study builds on this to provide a more detailed, fieldwork-based analysis. It pays fresh attention to the undocumented Irish who face particular vulnerabilities compounded by their status and display likelihoods of further difficulties in areas such as health and job security.

The research is also contextualised by and draws on the networks and knowledge transfer that followed from the Global Irish Civic Forums in Dublin in June 2015 and May 2017. These events made us cognizant of the need to learn more about the role of civil society actors in providing support for the Irish diaspora and the role of social capital in the maintenance and mobilisation of the diaspora. More

1. <https://www.dfa.ie/media/globalirish/Supporting-the-Next-Generation-of-the-Irish-Diaspora.pdf>.

particularly, the first Forum was a springboard for the current research project, which involves collaboration with civil society organisations in the United States, including front-line advice, counselling and support services.

It should be noted that this research took place during a period of seismic political and social change in the US and Europe, witnessing a growth in ethno-nationalism, populist politics and a pushback against globalization, all of which has brought great uncertainty to normative political, economic and social intercourse. While these widespread discontents were not always immediately apparent in Chicago, they coloured much of this research, perhaps most especially in the heightened anxieties and uncertainties surrounding the undocumented Irish in the city and in the activities around immigration reform, which has a prominent Irish leadership in the city.

*Because of Trump in America and Brexit in Europe...I feel stronger now about core American values than I did two years ago...I just took them for granted.*

*Citizenship and green card applications are rising recently, there is worry about the election [of President Trump].<sup>2</sup>*

Another important element of context is the widely perceived “waning” of Irish America in the twenty-first century, partly due to the declining numbers of new emigrants but also signifying that Irish America is at a stage of “late ethnicity” or “late generation ethnicity,” terms used by sociologists to indicate an ethnic formation that reaches back many generations in the US and is not being replenished from the country of origin.<sup>3</sup>

The last national census, the 2010 US Census, showed 34.7 million Americans registering Irish ancestry, down from 40.2 million in the 1980 census (the first to record ancestry or ethnic origin). The Census Bureau’s 2015 American Community Survey records 32.7 million Irish Americans.<sup>4</sup> The numbers of Irish-born American citizens is startlingly low compared to those claiming Irish heritage and it is declining. In 2010 the Census registered 153,480 Irish-born in the US, down from 250,000 in 1980. The numbers of Irish immigrating to the US has reduced to a relative trickle. In 2013, just 1,626 Irish-born people obtained legal permanent residency.<sup>5</sup>

2. All quotations drawn from field interviews in Chicago are presented in quotations in this report.

3. Herbert Gans, “The End of Late Generation European Ethnicity in America?” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38.3 (2015), 418-29.

4. See: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>.

5. See: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/17/the-fading-of-the-green>. In 2015, the Pew



Irish Americans are older than the U.S. population as a whole. In 2015, the American Community Survey shows the median age of those claiming Irish ancestry is 40.5 years old, versus a median age of 37.7 for the whole population. The survey also shows that 78.8% of the Irish American population are over 18 years old.<sup>6</sup>

This research project has been undertaken at a time when there is significant and growing uncertainty about the future of Irish America and its linkages with Ireland. The most frequently voiced concern by those interviewed and surveyed in this study is that the relations between Ireland and the US are growing weaker and the “next generation” of Irish America will be even more distant from its Irish heritage. At this critical juncture we need fuller knowledge of the changes underway, so as to meet the challenges and opportunities for redesigning and securing future relationships.

Fig. 1: St Patrick’s Season in Chicago, March 2017



## Sources and Methodology

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Research Center commented on this trend of declining Irish American numbers: “The ranks of Irish Americans who trace their ancestry back to Ireland—long one of the most prominent subgroups in American society—are slowly declining.” They consider that the decline is due to the ageing of the Irish American population and the reduction in numbers emigrating from Ireland.

6. See: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/cb17-ff05.html>.



The shifting nature of the Irish diaspora is a key conceptual and experiential point of focus as we design the research to not only review current profiles and needs of the Irish diaspora in the United States but also scope emergent patterns and project future profiles and needs.

The research includes primary data gathering in the field—among selected Irish communities in Chicago—via a survey and interviews, as well as reviews of existing scholarship and policy documentation both in Ireland and the United States pertaining to these communities. It employs a mixed methods approach combining quantitative data, including census tracking data and demographic surveys, with qualitative individual or group interview data and analysis. The research utilises conventional categories of emigrant mobility and identity: age/generation, gender, socio-economic factors, religion, and geography. It also draws on current research that is redefining categories of diaspora identity to better understand changing dynamics and contexts, in areas such as late generation ethnicity, the roles of networks and of social capital.

The key primary sources are data and reports commissioned by government and non-government agencies and information gleaned from fieldwork. The fieldwork was crucial due to the scarcity of formal data and reports and the unreliability of census data as a measurement of ethnic population. Crunching the numbers on Irish America can seem relatively straightforward but they also can be misleading: census data can provide useful demographic information on population size, gender, age, education levels, income and employment, but is also skewed by a range of factors, including the rather subjective indexing of those who self-identify as Irish.

We conducted interviews with individuals and organisations supporting the Irish community in Chicago, including civil society organisations, service providers, politicians, and other stake-holders. We also conducted interviews and field research with individuals and focus groups of selected immigrants, including undocumented and seniors. We conducted 83 in-depth interviews within the Irish community in Chicago between February and June 2107. Each participant was provided with a consent form and contact details for the research team should they wish to follow up on any issues raised. Interviews were audio recorded and uploaded to a password-protected file. Interviewees were advised to adopt pseudonyms to ensure their identity was protected.<sup>1</sup>

1. As professional researchers we are obliged to obtain full ethical approval from the UCD Ethical Review Board before conducting fieldwork. This ensures valid, rigorous and consistent ethical compliance at all times thereby protecting the reputation of our partner organisations within the community. In the case of Chicago, measures were taken to ensure informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

In addition to the interviews, we designed and distributed an online survey in collaboration with Chicago Irish Immigrant Support and Dominican University. The survey received 326 responses. It is designed to capture identity, political views, health and wellbeing of the community and has been analysed using statistical software once data collection was completed in June 2017. The results are used here in combination with our in-depth qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive and contemporary understanding of the Irish community in Chicago.

It is important to note that this survey is skewed in terms of the demographics of respondents, most likely due to the use of Irish organisations and service providers in disseminating it. Notably, 41% of respondents are Irish-born (much higher than the ratio of Irish born in the city), and as we shall see this has an impact on their views of Ireland and Irish America. It is also evident that many of the cohort are already self-identifying as Irish and engaged with Irish community matters.

The survey nonetheless provides invaluable information about the basic demographics and perspectives of Irish Chicago, while the interviews tell us more about how Irishness is experienced and lived, and how Irish articulate their identities. The interviews were necessary not simply to provide local colour but to begin to answer one of the most important questions abridging the research: How do the Irish in the US think of and talk about themselves?

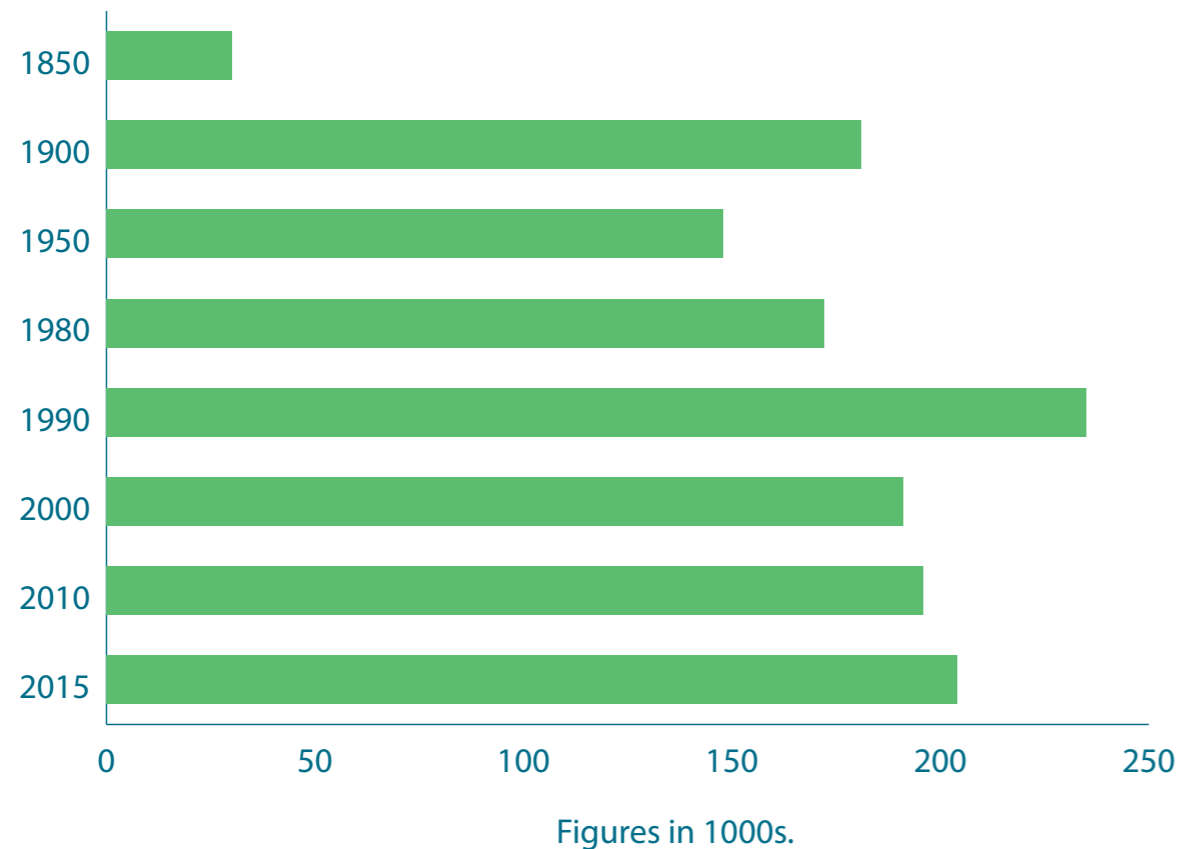
This can be a conceptual and discursive minefield. The diaspora is an imagined community and as such is notoriously difficult to pin down for analysis or measurement. It is not a homogenous entity and is segmented and fragmented in ways that can challenge state/diaspora engagements as well as tools of academic analysis. A striking example is the restricted currency of the term “diaspora”—while it has become the term of favour among policy makers when seeking to describe and engage the Irish abroad, it is not a term used by the Irish abroad. One Chicago interviewee observed *“the word diaspora falls short...to me it means mass emigration...doom and gloom.”* Another opined *“Diaspora means scattering...the government is ultimately responsible for scattering.”* Such comments are salient reminders of the importance of listening and learning in the field and not forcing a theoretical or policy framework on a subject.

## Chapter 1

# Irish Chicago

*We're not immigrants any more, we're mainstream...we have had an Irish mayor 60 out of the last 75 years...we run the place in many instances...We've built things...you've got the Irish Heritage Centre, you've got Gaelic Park, and for a long time when I was a kid those were just dreams.*

Fig. 1: Irish population of Chicago, 1850-2015



## History

The Irish population of Chicago grew rapidly in the nineteenth century. In 1840 there were less than 1,000 Irish, mostly gathered close to the Chicago River. By 1850, with numbers bolstered in part by the famine exodus to the US, just under 30,000 Irish made up approximately 20% of the city's population. By 1900 there were 181,002 Irish in the city (73,912 of them Irish born), making it the fourth largest Irish urban centre in the US at that time. The numbers of new immigrants decreased across the twentieth century, and with the Irish move to the suburbs from the 1950s onwards and the Immigration Act of 1965 restricting Irish immigrant entry, the numbers of new Irish in Chicago slowed to a trickle by the end of the century, bar a small increase in the late 1980s.

Irish influence in Chicago has long been out of proportion to their numbers. That influence began on the lowest rungs of labour with the construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1836, which drew Irish labourers and their families to the young city. It advanced with Irish building and populating the stockyards, steel mills and railroads, making a major contribution in building the new metropolis by the end of the nineteenth century. Their influence would continue with their leadership in city politics and unions through much of the twentieth century. In many significant ways Chicago was shaped by Irish immigrants and their descendants.

The majority of early Irish immigrants to Chicago in the mid-nineteenth century were poor and uneducated, mostly heralding from the west of

Ireland. They were soon perceived as a social problem by an alarmed and often hostile native population, fed by bouts of nativism and anti-Catholicism throughout the century. As elsewhere in the US, ethnic nationalism and Catholicism provided powerful cohesive forces of collective and communal identity for the new Irish settling in urban centres. Parishes provided stability for the Irish immigrants as they created their own institutional structures—schools, hospitals and orphanages—and civil society of supportive organisations and networks. They built neighbourhood and parish-based enclaves of ethnic culture and institutions that helped empower them to secure mobility and status in the broader urban terrain.

The Irish excelled in urban politics, due in part to their organizational talents, their use of English and their knowledge of Anglo politics and governance. While their population of the city never was more than 20% in the early twentieth century the Irish took up political leadership, partly benefitting from the lack of a single majority ethnic block in the city and the prevalence of Catholic immigrant groups. They fine-tuned the Democratic political machine in Chicago via a system of brokerage and patronage that served both material and personal needs of constituents. There is little doubt that extralegal activities were a staple of machine politics, but it provided a valuable welfare support for Irish families and Irish Democrats were often progressive on social issues, reflecting both Catholic and mid-Western influences.

The machine reached its apex of power under Richard J. Daley, who served as mayor from 1955 to 1976. Daley was a highly effective urban leader who excelled in promoting city services and urban renewal projects and forging multi-ethnic coalitions that maintained his power. The machine had approximately 30,000 patronage positions under his tutelage and he kept it running well after similar political systems had died in other American cities.

He also reinstated a St Patrick's Day Parade in the city centre in 1956.

The Irish population of Chicago rapidly declined during Daley's tenure. As elsewhere in Irish America, social mobility and declining attachments to ethnic nationalism and the Catholic Church across the twentieth century saw the simultaneous suburbanization and assimilation of the Irish. In Chicago this process happened a little earlier and more quickly than elsewhere, due in large part to racial tensions. From the late 1950s into the 1970s the Irish were a large part of the "white flight" from the core city as African Americans moved into neighbourhoods; parishes were unable to resolve the challenges of racially changing neighbourhoods and many dissolved as the Irish moved to the suburbs. Many went to southern and western near suburbs, then to the outer suburbs, such as Tinley Park, Gaelic Park, Oak Park and Forest Park. By 1987, Lawrence McCaffrey could observe, "*most of the metropolitan-area Irish are now suburbanites with a middle-class life-style that makes it difficult to differentiate them from Anglo-Americans.*"

Several of our interviewees referenced this transition, often with a nostalgic sense of a community now lost:

*I grew up on the West Side, in St Angela's parish, a heavily populated Irish parish, a lot of families their parents were from Ireland. It was a great neighbourhood, everyone knew everybody, it was back in the time when every house you went by they knew who you were...A lot of people from that West Side area moved when the neighbourhood changed, the demographics changed, people moved out and came to the Northwest Side of the city.*

This was a transitional period in terms of Irish American ethnic identity as they became more fully assimilated into mainstream American culture

and society. Observing this process, the Chicago priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley observed in 1972: “the American Irish will disappear...into upper-middle-class suburbs. They have made it into American society, but at the price of repressing their past and denying their future.” Greeley was rueful about what he saw as the death of Irish ethnicity in the US; they had “made it” but at the price of their identity. However, this was not the first nor last time Irish America would be pronounced dead. Time and again it proves to have an afterlife, adapting to new conditions of urban settlement and immigrant arrival.

Even as the Irish settled comfortably into the suburbs, a new influx of Irish in the later 1980s and 1990s revitalised Irish Chicago. While many of the immigrants were fleeing the poor economic conditions in Ireland they differed from those who had come before them. Soon dubbed the New Irish, they were relatively well-educated, largely indifferent to nationalist politics and perspectives, and from all parts of the island. Many came with the intent not to settle but to sojourn until the Irish economy improved, but many did stay, including many who simply overstayed their visas and so became illegal aliens.

The New Irish, with many illegal aliens among them, helped spark an activist Irish immigration movement across the US and this had impact in Chicago where the Irish Immigration Reform Movement (1987) had a branch and contributed to the creation of Chicago Irish Immigrant Support in 1998 to meet the needs of a new influx of Irish immigrants to the city. These energies are also evident in the creation of Chicago Celts for Immigration Reform, founded in 2006 and led by New Irish immigrants.

The New Irish also contributed to a resurgence of Irish culture in the US in the later 1980s and 1990s, though this was more principally due to the increasing commercialisation of Irish identity in this period. This too was experienced in Chicago

where it helped spark a revival in Irish cultural and community interests and gave a boost to the Irish American Heritage Center and Gaelic Park. This “re-authenticating” of Irish cultural attributes suggests that a comfortable Irish American middle class were keen to celebrate their identity via cultural consumption.

By the turn of the twenty first century there were few neighbourhoods in Chicago with a strong Irish presence, yet the Irish maintained a strong cultural and political presence in the city.

### Today

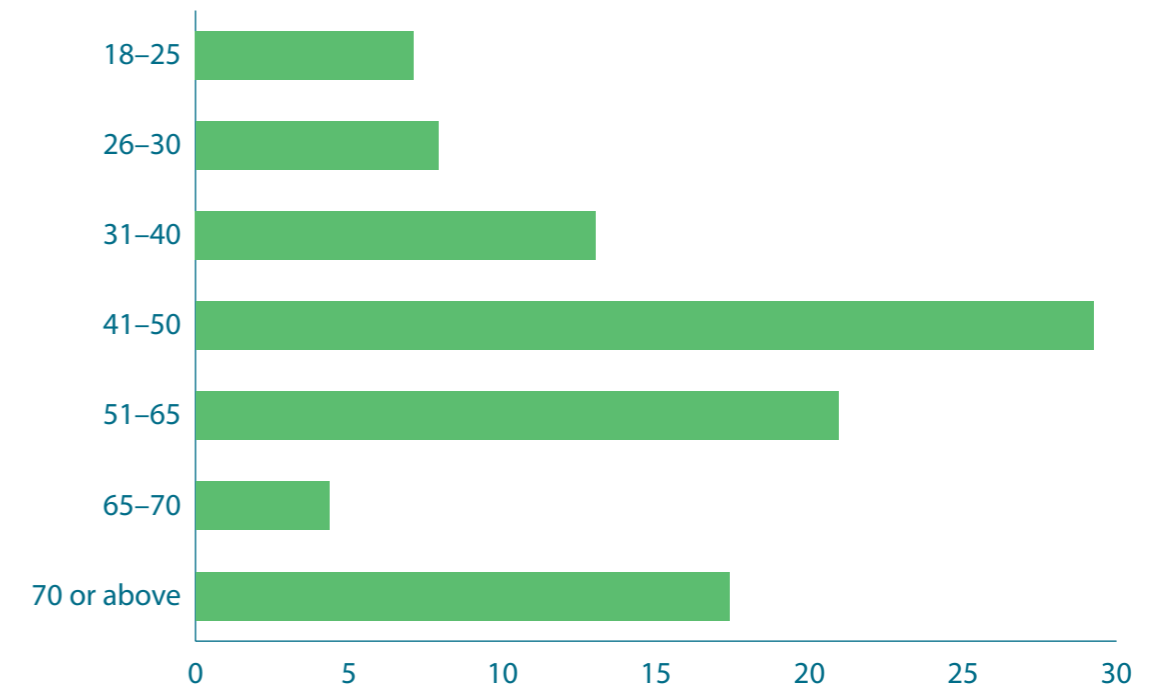
Since the 1990s the numbers of new Irish emigrants in Chicago have been much reduced. This is due in large part to the heightened immigration sensitivities and restrictions in the US, especially following 9/11, which make it more difficult to obtain work permits and adjust to legal status. It is also due to the improved economic opportunities in Ireland.

In the 2010 Census, 1,598,702 people in Illinois claimed Irish heritage. The Illinois counties with the biggest Irish populations were Hardin County with 26.98%, Gallatin County with 23.67% and Grundy County with 22.66%. The 2010 Census data shows that the city of Chicago has 196,568 Irish Americans (down from 235,568 in 1990), making up 7.5% of the city's population and making it the second largest after New York, while the Chicago metropolitan area has 1,078,354 people of Irish ancestry, making it third largest in the country. The 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) records 201,530 Irish in Chicago. The same survey shows the number of Irish-born immigrants in Cook County to be 6,000.<sup>1</sup>

Only a few city neighbourhoods registered substantial Irish populations in the 2010 Census.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county>

Fig. 2: How old are you?



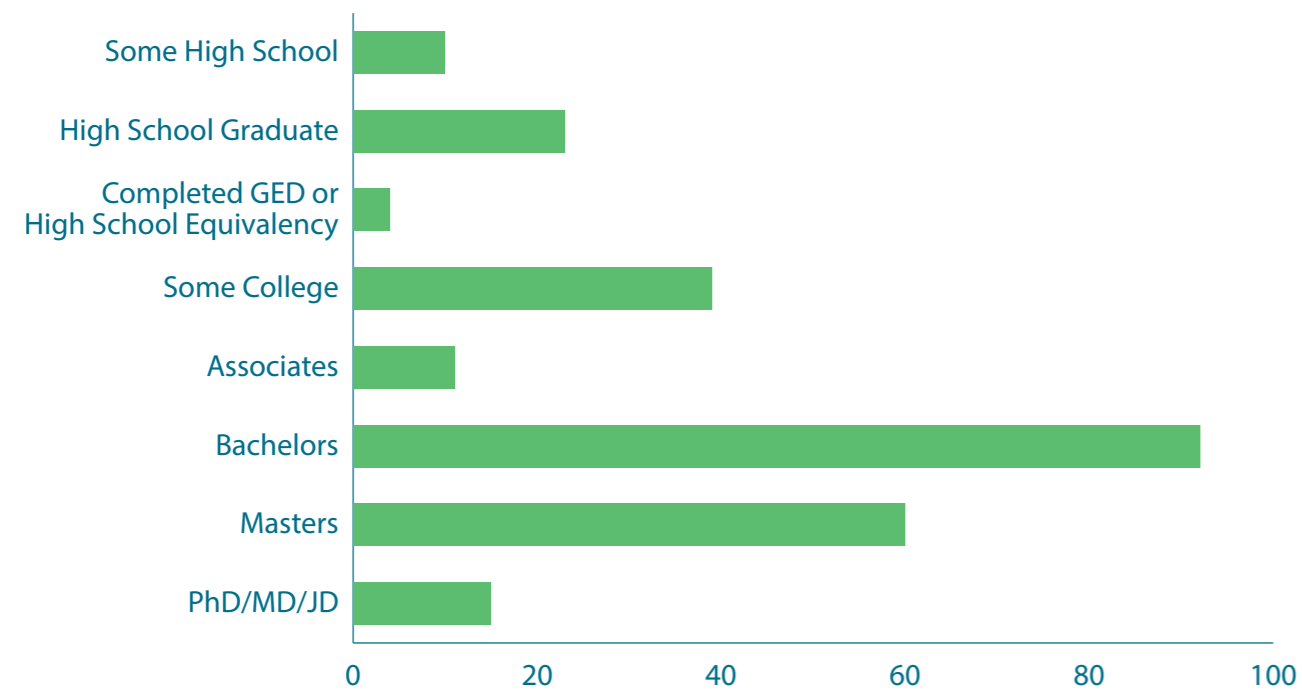
The largest is in Mount Greenwood with 32.5%, making it the fourth largest Irish American community in the US, followed by Edison Park with 28.32% and Beverly with 26.4%. The single largest population of Irish is in Lake View with 19,213. While these areas have the largest Irish populations and the Irish presence is made visible in the numbers of neighbourhood bars and shops they are also racially and ethnically diverse—none constitute an ethnic majority parish or enclave.

The 2015 ACS shows that Irish Americans across the US are relatively older, more highly educated and wealthier than the national means for ethnic groups. Our survey of Irish Chicago reflects these national findings; indeed, the figures for education, occupation and income show even higher levels than the national survey.

In our Chicago survey, 72.2% of respondents were aged 41 and above, evidencing an aging ethnic cohort. 65.31% have a bachelor's degree or higher, and the occupational distribution and status of the Irish in Chicago has greatly diversified, with the largest number of respondents working in the business sector. 70% own their own home and 96% have health insurance, with 62% of these covered by their employer.

Overall, this is a relatively successful, mature diaspora community and a number of our interviewees were very conscious of this: “*The Irish are no longer in the street car...they are in in the corporation boardroom.*” Today, the Irish in Chicago are very well represented in the upper reaches of government, law, labour and business organizations. In the view of an interviewee, Irish representation in

Fig. 3: What is the highest level of school you completed?



these sectors is “more than their 7.5% of the city population would seem to warrant.”

## Business

The Irish have evolved with the city’s economy as it has moved from its manufacturing base towards a more diversified economy, including business services, tourist and leisure sectors, high-tech industries, and health services. Irish names are common among CEOs and boards in both the older and newer sectors. They have substantial representation in the Economic Club, which represents top executives in Chicago industries and companies, and World Business Chicago, a public-private partnership that promotes economic growth, while there are also prominent Irish organisations that promote business networking in the city, most notably the Irish Fellowship Club and Irish Network Chicago (see pages 38-40). Irish philanthropy is also well served in the city by the Ireland Funds (see page

41) and the Irish American Partnership, which does not have an office in the city yet hosts Irish events there.

Few consider Irish success today to be a result of ethnic insiderism, rather they stress business comes first. As one interviewee puts it, “They come up through the same systems, go to the same schools, work their way up by achievement in ways that don’t have to do with ethnicity.” Yet, as another adds, “I wouldn’t say being Irish is a leg up, but it’s a leg in. I think it brings down a barrier.” Though they no longer have the bonds of an outsider status, the Irish can usefully leverage a kind of cultural capital that people of Irish heritage trade in.

Since the 1990s, globalisation has helped to facilitate Ireland’s economic growth, and a key element of this has been the strategic targeting of foreign direct investment, particularly from the US. IDA Ireland are

keenly focused on pursuing direct investment and so engaging an elite business clientele, mostly the CEOs of major companies. Their primary concerns are with the details of direct investment and the vagaries of globalisation—most recently, the potential impact of Brexit on investment opportunities. They are not promoting Irishness in the first instance and have limited interest in directly engaging the diaspora as a potential market; they tend to be circumspect about the rather dated views of Ireland that many senior American business leaders have.

The business relationship between Ireland and the US has become a two-way process in the age of globalisation and this has brought gains for a number of Irish companies seeking to enter American markets, often with the help of Enterprise Ireland. Chicago is on the map of this entry and there have been major trade missions and fairs in the city in recent years. In June 2017, Taoiseach Enda Kenny led a trade mission promoting a range of Irish companies as well as investment in Ireland. During the visit he announced the opening of an Enterprise Ireland office in Chicago, designed to support Irish companies in the Midwest. The Carlow-based Netwatch, which specialises in high-tech security, announced in the same month that they plan to open an office in Chicago which would create 15 jobs, supported by Enterprise Ireland.

## Politics

While Irish achievement is evident across many sectors in Chicago the Irish show an extraordinary ability to continue to take up leading positions in politics, holding what one interviewee termed “a disproportionate grasp on civic power.” An alderman pointed out that

*The Irish have been savvy politically...masters of coalition building...and providing for their constituents regardless of what race they are and they just happen to be Latino at this point...I definitely would not say the machine is dead...it’s taken a different form.*

Taking up a political career has become something of an ethnic tradition and civic vocation among later generations of Irish in Chicago. An interviewee observed:

*I wouldn’t say it is power for power’s sake...I look at Irish politicians in Chicagoland today, they are ideologically motivated, they are civic minded...in a very real sense that comes from an Irish America upbringing, a very real sense of pride in where you have come from...a sense of responsibility for this city.*

In a sense the Irish have been both the first and last white ethnic group of political leverage in Chicago, now a form of default whiteness in a city where ethnicity has given way to race in politics. “In the new, tri-cornered game of ethnic politics—whites, Latinos and blacks—the Irish represent the white faction.”<sup>2</sup> This said, there is an awareness of change that may yet leave the Irish on the sidelines. As one alderman put it:

*We’re on the wane...there are now people in power, in government, who will openly say you Irish have had it long enough, I don’t want to see any more white Irish guys coming through the door looking to become a judge or senator or this.*

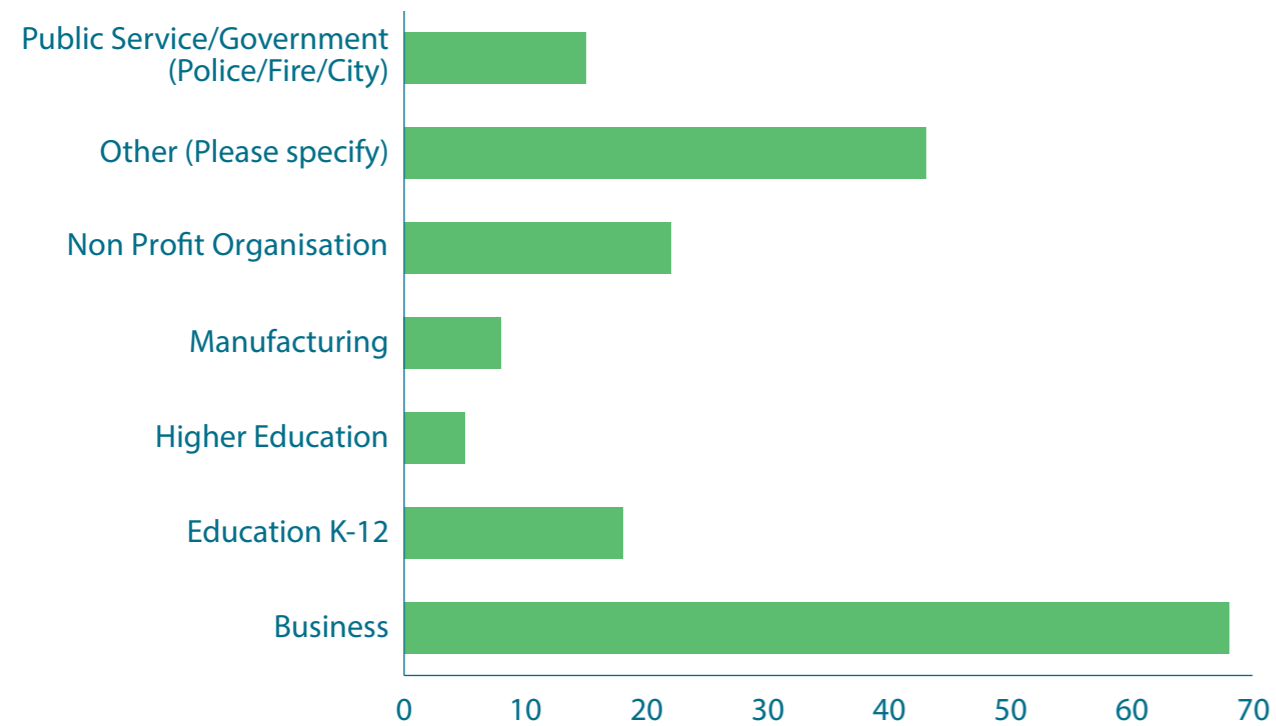
Politically, Chicago remains a staunchly Democrat city. In the 2016 national election, Chicagoans voted 83.7% in favour of Senator Hillary Clinton, and the city has taken on a leading role as a “sanctuary city” since the election of Donald Trump, pushing back against the his administration’s actions on immigration.

This is not to say that Irish Chicago is a homogenous

<sup>2</sup> Edward McClelland, “Why the Irish are More Important than Ever in Chicago,” Ward Room, NBC5 Chicago (19 January 2011), <http://www.nbcchicago.com/blogs/ward-room/Luck-of-the-Irish-114204744.html>.



Fig. 4: In what sector are you employed?



bastion of left-liberal values. While voting Democrat remains a relatively stable religion we encountered a broad range of social and political opinion among our Irish interviewees, and also noted some significant differences between longer settled and newer emigrants. A Chicago politician described new Irish emigrants as “*astonishingly progressive*” compared to the longer resident diaspora. Notably, the strong Irish presence in the immigration reform movement in Chicago and Illinois is led by Irish-born emigrants.

### New Emigrants

Chicago has received only very small numbers of Irish-born immigrants since the 1990s. Those who have moved to and settled in Chicago in this century have tended to be university-educated and cosmopolitan in outlook, taking up management and professional jobs. For the most part they settle

in the central city and do not mix very directly or consciously with Irish American communities or organisations, though some go to Gaelic Park for the GAA games. An interviewee remarked:

*There are not as many people coming out [from Ireland]. There were a lot of people coming out [in the 1980s], you got to know everyone and everyone helped everyone out. But now they already have their visas, their jobs, and they don't need that help, so you don't have that bond with them.*

For the new Irish emigrants in Chicago today, connectedness and embeddedness would appear to matter less than for preceding generations. Many are sojourners in the sense that they feel a sense of choice about their mobility and occupation, that theirs is a transnational life. This is a different

sense of Irish identity to that of the settled Irish American community and involves only very partial assimilation. An interviewee observes that these emigrants “*identify with what goes on in Ireland*” without having to engage the Irish American community, and retain strong links to the home country via social media and regular return.

As with the new business opportunities, globalisation has changed the dynamics of emigration and of

diaspora networking and engagements between the home and host country, while new technologies of communication have collapsed the sense of distance and difference between here and there. As we shall see, Irish Chicago today is a less cohesive or rooted community than in the past but it continues to have networks and organisations that maintain distinctive forms of Irish identity and Irishness continues to function as a significant vector of community and identification.



## Chapter 2

# Vulnerable Irish

*The generation changes, time changes, things improve and get better but there are still people hurting.*

Vulnerable Irish and welfare needs among the Irish community are barely visible issues to most Irish-Chicagoans today, particularly as the majority are relatively well-off. It was not always so. The early Irish settlers and much of the first generation of Irish in the city in the nineteenth century were deeply immiserated by poverty, poor health and lack of education. The Catholic Church was especially important in addressing the needs of the urban poor, building a social welfare structure for Irish immigrants in urban parishes. A number of ethnic societies, such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the County Associations, also provided services and regularly hosted benefits for people in need within the Irish community.

Today, the dissolution of the influence of the Church and of ethnic welfare associations bespeaks a more assimilated, healthy and wealthy Irish grouping in Chicago. However, there are still people who need support and formal and informal structures exist to provide this.

Informally, the Irish community has continued the tradition of providing benefits for particular individuals or families in need, often those struck by a sudden fatality or serious illness, and who lack the resources to deal with the consequences. An Irish priest we interviewed explained:

*Benefits highlight the sense of community and support that the Irish have for each other...a form of financial and social support for people who are very sick or who are deceased and have left dependents behind. It takes the form of a committee being formed and they will hold separate events to fundraise, these may be 25 card drives or other events, and it will culminate in Gaelic Park or the Heritage Center where the whole community comes and there is music and dance and raffles and auctions, all geared towards helping someone within the Irish community...a wonderful expression of how the Irish in Chicago come together to show*

*solidarity and support for those who are in need.*

Benefits highlight the continuation of an ethnic benevolence that caters to quite particular circumstances of need and support. Clearly, they continue to be a characteristic of Irish community in the city, as one interviewee observed *“it’s very social, we grew up going to benefits on a regular basis.”*

More formally, there are organisations and programmes dedicated to supporting vulnerable members of the Irish community in the city. While poverty is no longer a primary concern there are pockets of need, particularly among the elderly and the undocumented Irish, but also more broadly in terms of mental health and addiction. Today, Chicago Irish Immigrant Support, the Irish American Heritage Center and Gaelic Park all provide services for vulnerable Irish in the city. This is invaluable support to individuals and communities that otherwise might be very isolated. As one volunteer noted, *“There is a communication highway in the Irish community serviced by the organizations.”*

Chicago Irish Immigration Support (CIIS) is a non-profit immigration and social services provider that serves the needs of Irish immigrants in Chicago and the mid-West. It was established in 1998. Over the last twenty years CIIS has evolved in relation to immigrant needs so that most of the work now involves legal advice and services, particularly regarding citizen and immigration reform, and welfare, especially care for the elderly Irish in the community. All services are free of charge. The CIIS is partially funded by the Irish Government via the ESP and works closely with the Consulate of Ireland Chicago. In recent months, they have seen an increase in applications for citizenship and green cards and in those seeking advice on immigration enforcement policy. CIIS has reached out to undocumented Irish and works closely with the lobbying group Chicago Celts for Immigration Reform.

Fig 1: Who are the most vulnerable Irish in Chicago?



As the figure indicates, the elderly and the undocumented were highlighted as the most vulnerable members of the community in Chicago by survey respondents. This is congruent with our interview data. The only variation is that in the survey data these two categories are of similar weight but in the interview data the undocumented Irish outweighed the elderly in terms of vulnerability, almost certainly due to the heightened profile of immigration issues locally and nationally. While issues of mental health and addiction only rarely arose in interviews they are addressed in the survey, where the data suggests these are areas that require attention. As there were some concerns expressed about LGBTQ matters and about J1 students in the city, we include commentary on these in the last part of this section.

## Undocumented

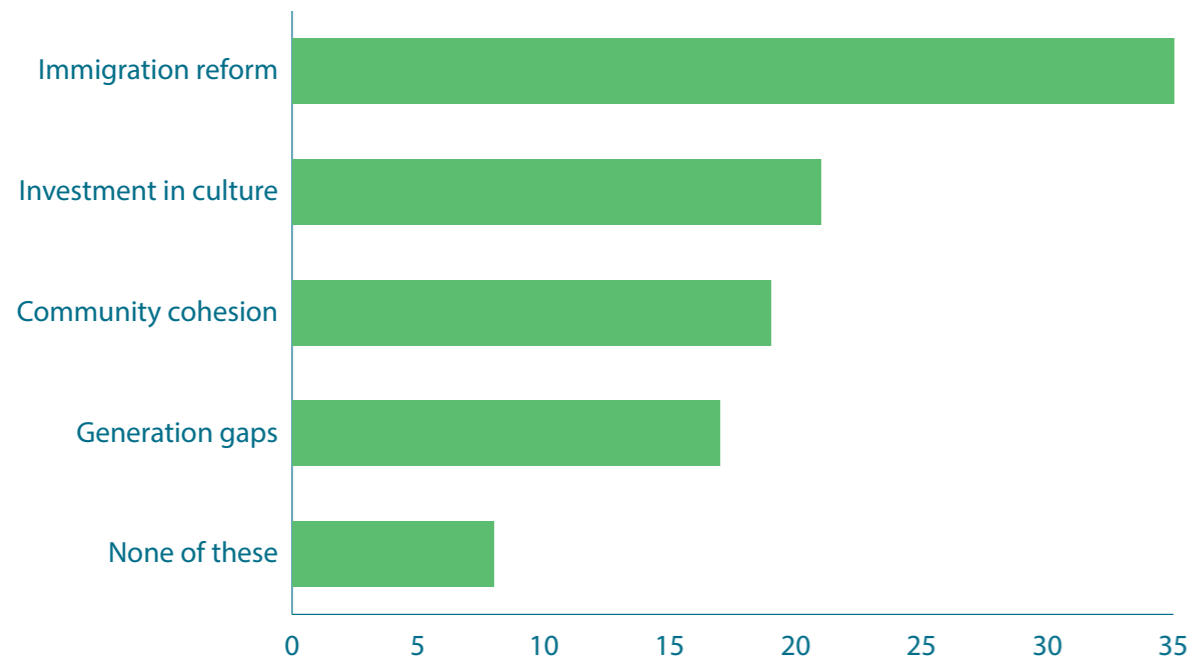
*I’ve thought about this, and people can be very cruel towards the undocumented. People have a picture in their head of who an undocumented person is. A lot of the time they don’t realise that it is actually the person they are sitting talking to. And I am one of those people—I am the face of an undocumented illegal living here in the US and have been for many years.*

As previously discussed in this report, the political climate in the US under the Trump Administration impacted our research. Nowhere is this more apparent than the issue of the undocumented Irish. Our research indicates that the desire for immigration reform has strong support. This is especially evident in our survey results where the undocumented Irish account for less than two per cent of our total survey sample, yet 35% of respondents believe immigration reform is the most pressing need in the Irish community in Chicago.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of immigration reform is further underlined when participants were asked if there should be reform to aid the Irish in particular—89% answered “Yes.”

<sup>1</sup> This is partly skewed by the high concentration of Irish-born in the survey. Among the settled Irish Americans we interviewed, some were not supportive of immigration reform to benefit undocumented Irish.

Fig. 2: What are the most pressing needs of the Irish community in Chicago?



### ► The 50,000 Fallacy

It is estimated that there are 50,000 undocumented Irish living in the United States<sup>2</sup>. This is a figure used by Irish immigrant support groups and advocates across the US. However, it is extremely difficult to accurately measure a hidden population like the undocumented. This is made even more challenging in the current political climate which has driven undocumented communities more underground thereby increasing their vulnerability.

The issue of accurate figures is not lost on our interview participants. Many were highly sceptical of the figure of 50,000 with several arguing that it is much less;

*The issue is how many are there really? They keep throwing around the 50,000 for years but I don't know if they have a true way*

<sup>2</sup> ...A contested figure...

*to substantiate that number. I would say in Chicago it's absolutely 100 but I would be shocked if it was over a 1000.*

Some interviewees noted that an accurate figure is required in order to aid immigration reform for the Irish. One undocumented participant argued that if we find the number of undocumented Irish to be lower then the community might stand a better chance at reform: *"At this point it is my own observation, is there 50,000 anymore? I think it's less, and if it's less than that it would be easier to work with less than more."* Ultimately, there is a high level of scepticism and confusion over this figure.

Interviewees noted that the undocumented Irish in Chicago are in their late 30s to early 50s. This would suggest they are a cohort who came to the US in the late 1980s and 1990s and that only very few have arrived more recently. This is congruent with the late generation ethnicity argument in which the Irish community is not being replenished by new Irish immigrants.

## Fears of the Undocumented

*One of the only things we want is to be able to go home and travel...definitely number one priority for me would be to be able to go home.*

*I know a lot of them and I feel so bad for them...I have to say the toughest time in my life was when I couldn't go home. I don't know if it's worth it. To not go home for parents funerals, or even celebrations like weddings.*

*I know people who haven't been home in 15 years because they overstayed their visas. They have houses, they run business. They rely on their families to come visit them because they can't go home. It's crazy to me that in 2017 this is happening.*

*I remember one girl around Christmas time and her dad passed away. We all got texts, everyone sent them around, for us all to be up at the church on the 30th December. We were all there, all the Irish, shoulder to shoulder. Everybody was there for this girl, and it was almost like a funeral without the corpse. I've been a witness to several of these and I don't intend to be one myself.*

*If you get caught there is no farewell party, no explanation to your children's teachers. You are relying on your friends to pack everything up and try to explain to your in-laws why their daughter has to move to Ireland with their grandchild.*

*I really don't think anything has changed in all the years I've been here in America, what you can do is limited...you could be finished off in the morning [job], no benefits no nothing, no security...even though, I am still paying taxes, have been paying taxes for years and years, have been paying taxes the same as everybody else.*

## ► Fear and anxiety

It is not surprising that the undocumented Irish in Chicago expressed a sense of increased fear and uncertainty in light of President Trump's deportation drive. They were especially concerned about Chicago's sanctuary city status and the process of deportation.

*There is a lot of uncertainty now. I've become a lot more unsettled too lately. I feel like something is going to happen. Things are starting to tighten in and maybe two years from now we might not be here. The pressure is on.*

*For the last while I am more conscious of having a huge clean up in the flat, basically I am subconsciously downsizing all the time. Things are going to the bin. Stuff I've kept for years, I opened up the back and I fired it in the bags because I thought, I won't be able to bring it when I have to go.*

Some are making plans to move home. One undocumented interviewee is married to an undocumented Irishman, both overstayed their visas, and now have children born in the US. They are saving for their move to Ireland and expect to return in 2019.

Being undocumented is psychologically wearing. Not being able to travel back to Ireland weighs heavy, affecting mental health and wellbeing. In the view of an interviewee: *"If they stay undocumented, they sometimes go back to Ireland very sick."* Being unable to "go home" to visit family in Ireland was stressed as the hardest part of being undocumented by all of the undocumented participants. Many have elderly parents in Ireland who are finding it more difficult to travel to the US to visit them. They are also concerned about the health of their parents and what they will do if they get *"the dreaded phone call"* to say a loved one is very sick or has died.

The undocumented we spoke with have built their lives in the US and they do not want to move back to Ireland. Many have spouses and children, and all pay taxes.

*I'd love to go home but America is the place to be. Home there's nothing, there's no money to be made in Ireland. That's why everyone comes here, to make a better life for themselves.*

*Sure there's nothing at home, Enda Kenny is saying 'come home come home, there's loads of work'; it's only horseshit.*

There is also the psychological strain of having to keep your status a secret and the different type of life you lead as an undocumented person.

*Obviously being undocumented life is different. Your choices are very limited to a certain extent, they really are, you are very limited to your work and what you can do and you are always very aware of it too.*

Two female participants use a different name when they are around new people or people they don't know very well like their US neighbours. Lying to protect their identities and status is part of daily life for many undocumented. One participant explained *"When someone asks me if I was home lately, I just lie and say yes"* because not traveling home is an indication of your status. She expressed her concern that she might eventually *"get caught up the in the lies."*

There is a sense of loss for the life that could have been if they could work legally: *"My life would have been different. I would not be doing what I am doing. Maybe I would be sitting in the chair your sitting in. Maybe I'd be the one asking the questions."* Undocumented people live with the strain that if they get hurt at work, they will not be able to do anything about it. One participant who

## ► Immigration Reform

Being white with an Irish name does not immediately signify "undocumented" in the US. It can be surprising to some to realise there are Irish undocumented:

*People don't think that we would be undocumented. I'm white, I can speak English, I'm Irish...that would never apply to me, that is not what the Americans are thinking of. When they are thinking of the illegals, they are thinking of the Mexicans.*

*If you ask someone to describe an illegal/undocumented to you they will probably come back and say somebody from Mexico, they would never say Irish.*

This lack of recognition as illegal provides cold comfort for the undocumented Irish, few of whom believe they will simply remain invisible to the authorities. They desperately want some form of immigration reform that will provide a pathway to citizenship and end their insecurity.

Most of those favouring immigration reform acknowledge that any such pathway is fraught with racial and political complexities. Some of the Irish undocumented talked in positive, empathetic terms about the Latino undocumented they encountered in working environments:

*I would rather work with a Mexican next to me than a yank. They are good grafters, they do the hours, they are like us, they just want to get on.*

*These 'Trumpites', they don't see the bigger picture, no American is going to cut their grass for \$10, the Mexicans will do it all day long and they get on, their kids are getting an education, they see their future. Their grass is going to be*

works in construction described it as a *"chance you take, there's no fall back here. If you fall of the roof and break your leg your fucked if you've got no insurance...so people are careful and they don't fall!"*

There is also a social stigma associated with being undocumented. *"Even among the community [Irish] themselves you're still a little bit of an outcast because you don't have the proper paperwork."* This becomes particularly apparent in social settings, a common example is the sense that using an Irish passport as a form of ID in a bar is a giveaway to illegal status.

*Not having a state ID is embarrassing sometimes like when you go into a bar and you bring out your passport. It's like oh look at this immigrant, especially now with Trump, everybody knows.*

The undocumented also worry about facing stigma in Ireland:

*A few weeks ago she was furious because she heard someone on the radio saying that if we were all going to get deported because we've broken the law then so be it, and these were Irish people saying this about us! Someone's dad was there and trying to say but that's not how it is and you don't understand. I don't think people really get it. Unless you've lived this life or have had close contact with people in this situation I just don't think you can get it.*

All of these fears and anxieties have been compounded by the current political climate in the US, yet they are also generated by a long-term sense of existing in a limbo with little hope of change, a sense of unbelonging that has become characteristic of the undocumented state of existence—as one interviewee put it, *"we are neither here nor there, we are just floating around and that's it."*



*up around their arse. They might actually have to go out and do it themselves!*

Despite these comments suggesting some degree of solidarity with the Latino population, just as many interview participants did not think it would be a good idea to work with other communities on immigration reform. Some argued that the Irish are “unique” and should seek their own pathway.

Few believe there is a quick fix and most acknowledged the Irish Government had not neglected the issues, yet expressed frustration with the lack of progress.

*It's up to Ireland to step up on an international relations front and be the voice for the people they had to turn their back on. The undocumented are people who could not find opportunity in their country of birth and so had to start a new life elsewhere...we need to get our foot in the door to find a path to legalisation. And if we can't, it is up to the Irish Government to provide an infrastructure.*

During our research visit in March we found that Taoiseach Enda Kenny's visit to the White House to mark St Patrick's Day was at the forefront of many interviewees' minds. Several commented on their hopes that the Taoiseach would press the case of undocumented Irish.

*I would like to think that when Enda Kenny stands there he realises that he is also representing the Irish in America. The ones who are undocumented. He needs to be very forward in his discussion with President Trump and he needs to give him figures as to how many Irish are here.*

Notably, the strong Irish presence in the immigration reform movement in Chicago and Illinois is led by Irish-born emigrants. The most prominent figure is

Billy Lawless, the Galway-born businessman who was appointed in May 2016 as the first overseas Irish Senator, selected to represent the Irish Diaspora in the Seanad. As such, he has continued to advocate for the undocumented Irish in the US and provides a strong link between Chicago and Ireland that many of the Irish community in the city take pride in. Lawless became an immigration activist in the early 2000s to help undocumented Irish and took up leading roles as Chairman of the lobby group Chicago Celts for Immigration Reform and vice-president of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, an umbrella organization that represents more than 140 immigration groups in Illinois. Lawless has lobbied at state and federal level for pro-immigrant legislation with a strong focus on bipartisanship.

The leaders of the Irish push for immigration for reform in Chicago consciously make use of Irish history and identity in their activism:

*We have taken a leadership role despite our small numbers within the immigrant rights movement here in Illinois...What we do as Irish immigrants is show the rich tapestry of the immigrant experience in the US and the Irish having their own historical experience as immigrants in the 1800s bring a certain narrative to the discourse that I think is palpable and is something that is readily understood by most of middle white America, particularly those of Irish heritage...I think the immigrant rights movement has embraced that particular piece of the narrative because it exposes bigotry I would say on the part of those who have denied the immigrant experience.*

It must be added though that while the majority of our interviewees and survey respondents favoured immigration reform for undocumented Irish many observed that there can be opposition to this within the Irish community.

## Elderly

While the survey identified Irish seniors as among the most vulnerable, we found that through the work of Irish organisations and networks they have opportunities to socialise and avoid isolation. Between them, CIIS, the IAHC and GP provide a range of services that bring large groups of seniors together for regular activities and general socialisation, and identify particular cases of further need or referral. There is also a community of self-help at work among the elderly Irish, as an IAHC interviewee noted:

*The people looking out for each other are all elderly. This is an interesting trend I see here. When a woman becomes widowed she starts attending the library groups. They take them in so that they know they are coming some place and they are not alone. When you go to the second floor where all the good cultural stuff happens—the readings, the genealogy, even some music—those are all widows, almost all of them.*

A GP interviewee made a similar observation:

*There is dancing and carvery and concerts, Irish festivals, so you see lots of Irish older people coming out. Irish breakfast once a month. If someone is missing someone will follow up and let us know they were in hospital.*

CIIS have seniors sessions at IAHC and GP every week and organise outings and events that are well attended by elderly Irish on both the North Side and South Side.

While this is a positive finding there are concerns about some members of the community.

*Elders who have a non-stable income are at-risk...also the ones who are in nursing care and a family don't connect with them...They*

*I have a brother who is very anti-immigration, and I have to explain to him that our father was an immigrant. That there is political, social and economic migration and that people don't leave their homes because they want to.*

*I think the documented Irish often forget about the undocumented Irish.*

*Those who have legal status in the Irish community are not supportive, and sometimes opposed to the undocumented Irish, there's pushback more so than in the Latino community. It's subtle though, you would have to have a beer with someone to get it out of them but it's there...I don't believe that if you gathered all the Irish to a gymnasium to talk about it, they would be sharing pleasantries over this topic. I think the Irish are quite divided over this.*

The uncertainty of the settled Irish American community regarding immigration reform reinforces the sense of vulnerability felt by undocumented Irish, so that many feel isolated in the community and even more reluctant to raise their voices in public. Several interviewees stressed the irony of this during the St Patrick's Day period.

*I feel for the undocumented youth who says what do I do, show up and get my Shamrock Shake at McDonalds and go get my Guinness and what does that even mean to me when no one will listen to my voice even though we stop everything to honour my culture.*

This difference in perspectives on the undocumented and immigration reform speaks to a deeper schism between settled and sojourner Irish in Chicago that we will return to below.

*are a group to review...Concerned about their healthcare package...might be partial coverage plan and this can leave them vulnerable.*

*I imagine a few of them fall through the cracks, I'm only here long enough to know people in their 60s/70s. I know Gaelic Park do a lot. I know guys that retire and do voluntary work there just to keep themselves ticking over and stay around. But I imagine there must be people out there that just don't do that...*

*I worry about the people we are not reaching. That are in their 70s and 80s living in the south part of the city that are alone and we are not reaching. They left the Irishness behind them and settled in neighbourhoods. They are the ones I worry about...alone and with no support systems. I am sure there are projects of them out there.*

Some seniors may “fall through the cracks” as the Irish population is now so dispersed across Chicago, multiplying the difficulties in identifying and reaching out to them.

Many of the seniors we spoke to had come to the US in the 1950s. They stressed they had left a deeply impoverished Ireland and that they have had opportunities in America for which they remain grateful, “*singing the American anthem hand on heart.*” As they reflected on the changes in Irish Chicago during their lifetimes, many observed that religion remains an important part of their Irish identity. One recalls, “*We said the rosary every night, communion every Sunday and Latin mass. All before Vatican II. We were happy but it was very strict.*” It was also clear that Irish culture is a vital resource for the elderly Irish, having a therapeutic impact. As one carer remarked, “*A song and a scone...it is what gets them out of the house.*” Many listen to local Irish radio shows, remarking that they grew up listening to the Irish hours and Irish music. For

many, the *Irish American News* is a major source of information about the community; they often collect a copy at the IAHC when they are attending an event or luncheon.

The seniors talked in some detail and often emotionally about their relationships to Ireland. Some would like to move back to Ireland in retirement or at least had considered it but found it too expensive to buy a house and they are distrustful of Irish healthcare having heard news stories about “*waiting on hospital trollies*” or the length of time it takes to get an ambulance in rural areas. A few visit Ireland regularly – “*We have Irish snowbirds, they take off to Ireland for three or four months of the year*” - while others are happy to visit once a year or every two years. A number have simply lost their connection to Ireland; their children are American and they do not know anyone in their hometowns in Ireland. Several expressed a concern that they cannot hire a car due to age restrictions and this has stopped some from visiting. A senior interviewee suggested it be made easier for seniors to be able to retire to Ireland by establishing assisted living centres: “*that would be an interesting industry for Ireland to promote...They identify by county so what if they could retire back to their county?*”

The seniors we interviewed were fulsome in their praise for the work of the CIIS and the communities of support they have within the IAHC and GP. They were remarkably sanguine about the difficulties advancing age can bring and about the changes in Irish Chicago in their lifetimes. Most of them empathised with the plight of the undocumented Irish, with several remarking that their journey was different and being undocumented in the 1960s was *much easier than it is today*. As they discussed their memories and immigrant journeys, a few seniors suggested it would be useful to undertake some audio archiving of Irish-born seniors, “*so that we don't lose the stories of the people that came in the 50s and 60s.*”

The challenges regarding care for elderly Irish in Chicago were more forcefully voiced by a small number of interviewees. A few were voluble about a lack of attention or coordination in recognising the challenges or dealing with them. A middle-aged Irish-born American who does not have family in the US said he was concerned “*we don't recognise the loneliness of elderly Irish here...they are not seen, or seen as being productive, having value.*” Another suggested that “*the Irish don't want to accept ageing...don't like to talk about it,*” so hindering any collective or coherent policy of care. Another interviewee, who is active in the healthcare field, expressed a strong opinion about what he saw as the failure of Irish organisations to recognise the aging Irish in Chicago as “*a 'naturally occurring retirement community,'*” a term used to describe a community with many members over 60 but that has not planned to meet the needs of seniors living independently in their homes. He recommends the creation of “*a continuing care retirement community*” based on the principle of “*aging in place*” and so maintaining the demographic and culture of the Irish elderly within particular parts of the city. This could include assisted living units and he suggests there might be potential for IAHC or/ and GP to function as such within a CCRC plan. He acknowledges this would require “*broadening Irish services*” and may not gain support as such but that it would primarily be funded by assessments.

Several interviewees observed there may be benefits in bringing providers and Irish organisations together to better identify and to cooperate in meeting the needs of the elderly Irish in Chicago. This was mentioned within broader discussions on identifying future needs in the community.

## Mental Health and Addiction

While not a prevalent theme within the interviews, the survey clearly identified those experiencing mental health and addiction as among the vulnerable Irish (see Fig. 1.)

### ► Mental Health

Survey participants were asked if they or a family member were ever diagnosed with a mental health issue. Fig. 3 below depicts the most prevalent mental health issues faced by those who responded “Yes.”

Of those diagnosed just 43% have received treatment for mental health issues. The survey also shows 11% assist in care for someone with mental health issues, while 44% of respondents believe that Irish people are less likely to seek help if they are experiencing mental health issues than other groups. Asked if they or a family member had ever attempted suicide, of the 49% who responded 15% responded ‘Yes’. A respondent suggested that “*it is the older people in their 50s and 60s suffering from depression*” and interviewees offered many comments on the links between immigration, Irish culture and mental health:

*It's the Irish thing again and the way we grew up, you just go on. I remember being 4 years old and banging my head against the wall thinking f\*\*k it if I split my head open then they will take notice of me...My mother God bless her I wouldn't bring this up with her now, it wouldn't be right, that was just the society that we lived in.*

*So anyway immigration can be depression, can be the way Irish society grew up in the 60s, 70s and mid-80s.*

*Someone in their 50s who came here with all that baggage. You know we don't all have*



*baggage, but the f\*\*ked up ones didn't leave. If you dig deep enough you'll find something f\*\*ked up.*

*There was awful shame in our family. My father would say to the girls, whatever you do don't come home pregnant. My sister was raped in Switzerland at 16 years of age. She couldn't tell our parents because it would bring such shame to the family. That's Irish society. Everybody's guilty.*

Shame or embarrassment and perceived social stigma remain the biggest obstacles to seeking help, according to 45% of survey respondents.

► **Addiction**

Almost 60 per cent of respondents indicate that addiction is an issue among the Irish community in Chicago. Alcohol is the substance of most concern.

*I drank all my life and then I went off drink for 10 years. I studied and went to AA meetings. My wife told me to live with my brother because I had a drink problem, but a drinking problem is just something else going on that you drink...Abusive childhood is the biggest thing...I didn't go to talk to someone but I studied it for 10 years when I was sober. I take a drink now...But I refuse to go into a bar anymore and look at the TV and get depressed." If you let depression take you over, it will take you over.*

*They go to the bars and drink. They die younger or commit suicide. There was a benefit there a few months back for a young man that died, he was getting divorced and he lost his house in the recession. He drank too much one night and took his own life.*

*Maybe they got into problems. They get into a problem with drink. Thank God for the people that mix with them in the bars because they have a get together and collect enough money to send the person back home...because otherwise they would end up on the street... You know maybe they were working for six months and now nothing. All sorts of reasons, depression without drink, depression with drink, whatever it is. A lot of the Irish here legally and they will get together in the bar and have a fundraiser in the bar and make sure that person gets on the plane and goes home. Or else they*

*will call their families at home and let them know that there is a person out here that has a problem.*

*The Irish-born who came in the 90s...many are still drinking heavily...in our culture there is a lot of shame around alcoholism, drug addiction and depression...We finally seem to be talking about depression but there is a stigma still to alcoholism...more so than out here [the US]... "fond of a drink" we say...in America it's a disease, an illness...at home there's a stigma, you've failed.*

There is little formal knowledge or study of the types and degrees of mental health and addiction problems in the Irish community in Chicago. This is partly due to a lack of visibility and discussion about the issue as ethnically specific or as clear areas of need. There is currently little focus or resource

Fig. 3: Have you or a family member ever been diagnosed with a mental health issue?

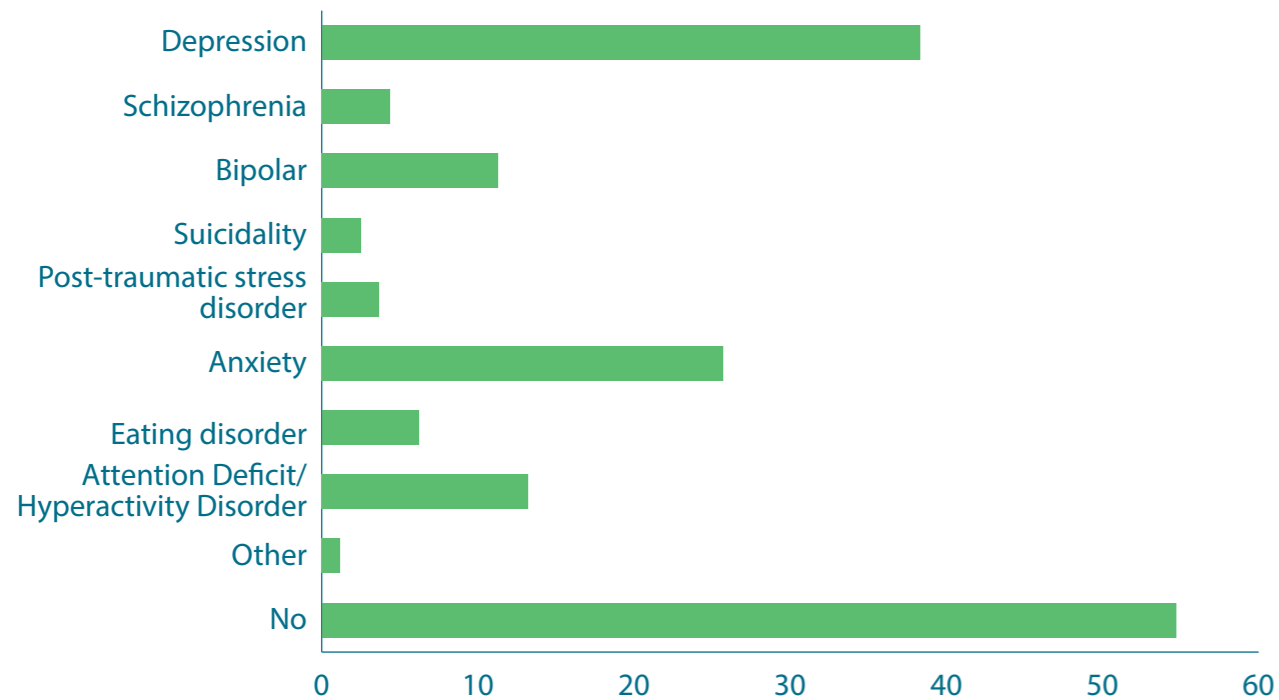
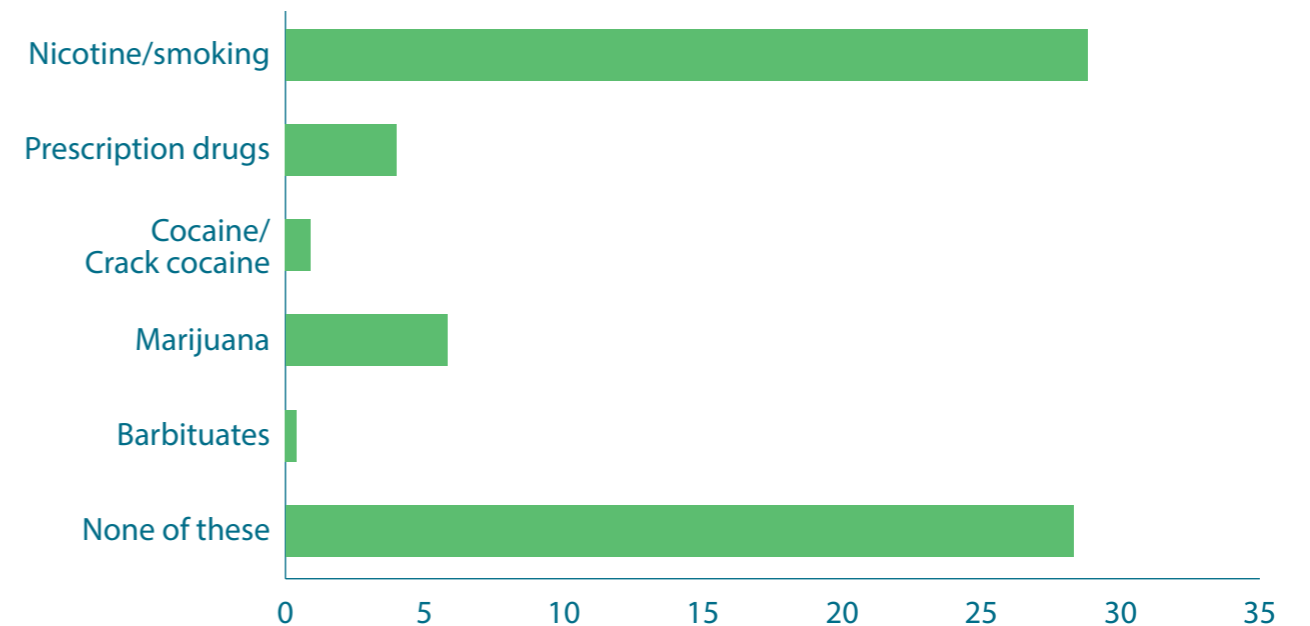


Fig. 4: Have you or a family member ever experienced addiction to any of the following substances?



dedicated to these areas, though a few commented on the Darkness into Light initiative created by Pieta House to combat suicide. *“They are having that walk for darkness into light. That should be advertised a bit more and supported. There should be some place that people should go and be able to talk. I don’t know how you do that.”*

Pieta House does not currently have a presence in Chicago. There are mental health and addiction issues among the Irish community that do not appear to have attracted the attention of Irish service providers. CIIS might usefully examine this area when considering future orientation of their resources and funding requests.

## Other Vulnerabilities

### ► LGBTQ

Survey participants identified the LGBTQ community as among the vulnerable Irish (though just 3% of the survey identified as gay/homosexual), but this was not an issue that came up in interviews apart from an interview with one member of that community. It is impossible to make any confident comment on whether there are vulnerabilities within the community.

The interviewee observed that there is *“no sense of an Irish gay community in Chicago”* and reflected: *“I am part of the Irish community and part of the gay community...they don’t really come together in a social way [for me.]”* He also commented on the same-sex marriage referendum in Ireland in 2015, describing it as *“a big momentous thing for us...it stirred up so much...the resounding vote yes and what that did for our esteem was absolutely huge.”* He went on to express pride in the election of Leo Varadkar as Ireland’s first gay Taoiseach, while noting with some irony,

*I left Ireland to get away from living a closeted life...I left a place where gay bars were hidden to come to a place with a whole strip of gay bars...I love America...but I have a lot of shame and fear about the way this country is going.*

While this interviewee’s apprehension is being sounded in terms of the broader political climate in the US, we have to add there were a few “off-the-record” (not recorded) comments in the Irish community that were disparaging about gay sexuality. Again, this was too low-key for our research to pick up a coherent narrative or point of view that could be ascribed to the community.

### ► J1 Students

The numbers of Irish students entering the US on J1 visas has been reduced due to new regulations introduced in 2015 that require pre-placement of students in employment before they can journey to the US. In Chicago the numbers have been stable, in part due the commitment of volunteers who have been helping Irish students find jobs and accommodation in the city for many years. Among volunteers we interviewed there was some discontent expressed about the way in which the programme is currently being managed. A few are unhappy with the role of private companies in running the programme, that sponsors and agents are lifting their job contacts, and that support on the ground in Chicago was being left to CIIS and volunteers. At the same time, we heard more positive comments on

*how much the employers enjoy hiring J1 students. We had many employers contact us specifically looking for Irish kids because of their sense of humour and customer service skills. To many employers, students are not a burden, they are a great gift.*

As several interviewees noted, the J1s are important to the future of Irish-US relations.

*The J1 programme (J1 Grad and J1 SWT) is the last great cultural and people-to-people connection between Ireland and the United States...With Ireland only being granted 124 green cards through the lottery last year, and only a couple hundred H1Bs there is no way for the Irish to come to the US aside from through the J1 programme.*

*They are the people who get ideas to set up business or have the potential to be high-level professionals...some will return to Chicago on H1B visas. They are important to the future*

*success of Irish/Irish American business in Chicago.*

There were some suggestions for improvement:

*They should raise the eligibility age for J1s and graduate visas...up to 35...Canada has a young professionals visa that is valid for two years and people are eligible up to the age of 35. The US should have something similar with Ireland. Currently the grad programme is too restrictive, applicants can only apply within 12 months of graduating and only lasts for one year. No wonder there are issues.*

*Why not start a mentorship programme for J1 students in Ireland to connect virtually with someone in Chicago first before coming out looking for a position? Get the advice and build the network before landing in Chicago.*

*The [Irish] government should do more to showcase the value young J1 graduates add to the economy back home.*

*Maybe someone to do some career coaching for J1s...Teach them how to do their resume...because we are not good at selling ourselves.*

There is great support for the J1 programme and it is recognised as a flagship of Irish public diplomacy and essential to the future of Irish-US relations. All prudent care should be taken to ensure a positive environment for its administration and delivery on the ground.

## Chapter 3

# Networks and Organisations

*There are multiple layers to the Irish community in Chicago and there are many different vehicles through which you can move within the Irish communities.*

The history of Irish settlement in American cities and their passage into the mainstream of American life is one of networking and association, both within the ethnic group, the city of settlement and with the old country. Diaspora networks and organisations have existed since the first Irish emigrants settled in the US, providing communication and community, and they have evolved over time in line with the changing conditions of settlement. Today, they still exist but in very different forms and with some different functions. 51% of survey respondents said they were a member of an Irish network or organization based in Chicago.

Fig. 1: Are you a member of any Irish-focused network or organisation?



The early Irish networks and organisations in Chicago were generally founded on county kinships and affiliations. They were created to provide services to newcomers and cement community in the cities. They included cultural and political associations, many with some form of nationalist appeal or agenda. In the nineteenth century, prominent and influential associations included the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), Clan Na Gael, and the Gaelic League, all with activities and followings in Chicago. With the formation of parishes, this burgeoning civil society formed an ethnic glue around the anchoring role of the church, so that the parish and the ward

shared an ethnic communalism. The establishment of Catholic schools, clubs and sports, along with leadership and high membership in unions and local politics created a vital ethnic culture.

Once strong networks can become weakened over time as the conditions of ethnic urban settlement and identity change. In Chicago the role of the Catholic Church was steadily weakened across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first and the diminishment of this key anchor of ethnic identity has been of immense importance to the character and community of Irish Chicago.

*Years ago the church was community and religion but now its just religion—the parishes are gone.*

At the same time, the county associations, so important to new Irish emigrants for much of the twentieth century, declined in number and influence.

Yet, the weakening and dissolution of once strong organisations and institutions of Irish life do not alone mean the demise of Irish Chicago, as some older entities successfully evolve while newer ones emerge. With the advent of globalisation networks have become more virtualised, with Irish American communication and community being established via new media and social media as well as face-to-face networks. The GAA remains a remarkably robust network, if anything made even stronger by the new forms of communication. At the same time there have emerged new networks, such as Irish Network-Chicago, responding to new diaspora constituencies. Today, there is an admixture of organisations and networks serving the Irish in Chicago, occasionally intersecting but more often meeting the needs and identifications of particular sectors of the diaspora.

## Networks and Organisations

Historically, Irish American associations in Chicago have often been “fellowship associations,” which exist to provide communal identity in the city and do not have a significant connection to Ireland. That remains the case today, though there are a few significant exceptions.

**The Irish Fellowship Club (IFC)**, founded in 1901, has proved a consistently popular and influential body among successive generations of Irish Chicagoans. It was established to give the Irish community in Chicago a form of representation that signalled middle class respectability. As such, it was set against the regnant nativist prejudices in the city and apart from more fractious Irish clubs and fraternal organizations. As a former club president observed, “*The club was founded to take the Irish off the streets.*”<sup>1</sup> It was made up of educated members of the judiciary, business and media and celebrated Irish success and achievements in the city. It also reflected a sense of cultural patrimony, claiming pride in Irish cultural heritage. Over its history it has hosted visits by distinguished Irish leaders, including William Cosgrove in 1928 and Mary Robinson in 1991.

For all the hosting of Irish dignitaries however, the IFC was chiefly a fellowship organisation of parochial vision and service, and a significant network in Chicago. It was part of the Democratic machine in Cook County and one interviewee recalls that “*it used to be you could not win office without being endorsed [by the IFC].*” Today, it is said to retain some aspects of these origins, though membership has diversified, with not only business but trade leaders prominent. Members provided warm endorsements of its importance:

*It’s a great networking opportunity to stay in touch with fellow Irishmen and fellow Irishmen who are successful...the who’s who of the Irish community.*

*The IFC is a real show of power for the Irish community...a real expression of feeling established and successful...a show of pride in how far the Irish community has come.*

*There is a sort of ceremony in being part of [the IFC]...It is part of growing up Irish...if you want to make a name for yourself in Irish Chicago... you network.*

The IFC hosts two major annual events, a St Patrick’s Day Dinner and Christmas Luncheon, and sponsors occasional events in support of Irish business networking. It is also involved in civic engagements, most notably the annual award of “needs-based grants” to students of Irish descent in each of the Catholic high schools in the Chicagoland area. The Irish Educational Scholarship Fund was established in 1979, when it provided \$9,000 in funds, in 2016 the funding awarded was \$156,000. There is a Young Irish Fellowship Club (YIFC) that is active in a range of fund-raising activities for charities and that is important to the sustainability of the organisation.

For those committed to the IFC it instills a sense of pride due to its history as the “*most established group of its kind*” in Chicago. It is clear the IFC retains a strong sense of identity and a stable membership though there is some concern that the numbers of young members joining are beginning to wane. Some within the organisation noted that there is some dubiety about how best to take it forward, whether it should step up or diversify its philanthropic activities, or take on certain lobbying opportunities. For those outside the organisation we interviewed, a few described it as “*clubby*” and “*not appealing to new Irish immigrants,*” but views were generally positive about the importance of the IFC’s

<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. O’Gorman, *A History of the Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago, 1901-2001* (Chicago: Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago, 2001), 3.



role in keeping a sense of Irishness alive amongst influential Chicagoans.

**Ireland Network Chicago (INC)** was established in 1998. It was the first chapter of the now national Irish Network USA, which has 21 chapters across the US and a membership of approximately 5,000. It was created in dialogue with the Department of Foreign Affairs and with early funding support from the IDA, with a view to providing a network for Irish-born or new emigrant professionals in the US. This early incarnation caused some discomfort due to the focus on “Irish born professionals” being seen as restrictive. The leadership opted for a more inclusive branding, which now reads: “Ireland Network Chicago is a business and social network of Irish or those with a strong affinity to Ireland living and working in the Chicago area.” INC is one of the few organisations set up to benefit the new Irish and to connect them with the established Irish businesses community. This focus has helped the organisation carve out a distinctive diaspora space and grow its membership, distinguishing it from more distinctly Irish-American organisations like the IFC.

INC has evolved with a certain self-consciousness about its role, which reflects its youth and the nature and timing of its creation. It is alert to shifting dynamics within the Irish diaspora in the US, and maintains a close relationship with the DFA&T and local Irish consulate. It hosts a series of talks on Irish and Irish-American matters and lends support to J1 students from Ireland seeking temporary employment in Chicago. It’s new Irish clientele hedges against the more sentimental or mawkish versions of Irishness sometimes celebrated within Irish Chicago and helps shape its vision - in the words of one member, *“We tend to think we are looking forward...while other organisations are looking back.”*

**The County Associations** were once a driving force of Irish community in Chicago, including a force for matrimony and reproduction of the tribe—several of our interviewees mentioned they or their parents had met at a county association function in the city. The early societies, formed in the mid and late nineteenth century were mostly male but increased their numbers greatly in the twentieth century with female inclusion, and became hugely popular sites of ethnic gathering and sociality. They were especially important to the many rural immigrants for whom county identity was important and the associations aided with reorientation in the alien metropolis. They also provided programmes of support and benevolence for the Irish community, helped new immigrants in finding work, and had strong links with the unions.

In recent years though county association membership has been fast dropping. A senior interviewee noted that *“the people that set [the associations] up are dwindling”* and one of the service providers commented that the associations *“went from dinner dances to lunches,”* also signifying the aging and slow passing of this cohort of the diaspora. One interviewee remarked that the associations *“made the mistake of not bringing in younger people,”* which may be true but that has proved a demanding challenge for all organisations in recent years. It may be as some remarked that the lack of immigration between 1965 and the mid-1980s was particularly deleterious to the county societies as it created a large generation gap. Also, while county identity remains important to most Irish nationals and many emigrants, it is not the most powerful point of identification or association for younger Irish immigrants and certainly not for the later generations of the settled Irish community in Chicago.

Many of the county associations in Chicago are moribund though some continue to function. The Clare and Mayo Associations, for example, have

maintained regular activity. The Clare Association celebrated 50 years in 2016 and currently has a membership of 200, of which *“10 or 20”* attend meetings. They host a dinner dance once a year, host an outing for children with special needs at Gaelic Park, and organise an annual picnic for members and families. The Mayo Association has over 300 members and meets for several functions during the year, including a summer picnic, a Race Day and a Christmas Party.

While activities remain and these are supported by passionate members, the county associations are generally waning. Their key function appears to have been played out in the earlier periods of Irish settlement in the city, providing a nexus of ethnic connectivity that is no longer needed or sought by Irish Chicagoans.

**The Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH)**, the Irish Catholic fraternal organization, enjoyed a significant and popular role in nineteenth century Chicago but its numbers have fallen dramatically over several generations. One member noted, *“There used to be over 100 divisions in Chicago 100 years ago. One in every parish. Guys just coming straight off the boat. They would help guys get jobs. Not now.”* They acknowledge they are an aged cohort - *“I joined them when I was in my 40s and I came in and looked around at all the old guys sitting in the room, and now I’m the old guy sitting in the room.”* – and that the challenge to renew the membership and involve younger Irish is a daunting one. They maintain monthly meetings and run annual social events including a benefit hosted at the IAHC, golf outings, parade marching and a picnic. They also support several charities and have a close relationship with Misericordia Heart of Mercy. One member noted that annual soup kitchens are run by the AOH in Chicago:

*especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas. We feed between 150-200 people...People*

*who attend have mental issues, alcoholics, and folks in there who show up because it’s free. We focus on Irish neighbourhoods but if someone approaches us we will help them... The AOH is not a party, it’s about charity.*

They also provide a small number of stipends for students at Catholic schools and for seminarians. Today’s members are conscious of the reduced membership and power of the organisation – one wryly noted, *“The plumbers run Chicago. In New York the AOH run everything.”*

**The Ireland Funds (IF)** is a global philanthropic organisation supporting Irish communities in Ireland and the diaspora. It differs from the other organisations mentioned here in that it is Irish-based and its focus is singularly philanthropic. Yet it is also a significant networking organisation in Chicago, with a distinguished Regional Advisory Committee and popular functions and outreach activities. Their Chicago Young Leaders, made up of professionals between 25-40, is a popular networking forum and a fundraising source; it also signals their focus on cultivating a new generation of philanthropists. As with the other organisations there is some concern about how to attract that new generation, reflecting their particular need to engage the sympathies and imagination of predominantly diaspora Irish. An interviewee noted that the IF are acknowledging fresh challenges in this respect, *“they realise the Irish American vision of Ireland has not evolved but you have to be respectful...have to find new ways to engage and build bridges...building on emigrant feelings.”*

These are not the only Irish networks and organisations in Chicago but they are the most significant, their fortunes waxing and waning as the conditions of diaspora life change. There are also a number of transnational initiatives linking Chicago to Irish cities and regions, drawing on diaspora links to promote investment and tourist opportunities.

Chicago and Galway have been Sister Cities since 1997 and there has been a partnership between Cork County and Cook County since 1999.

There is limited communication or collaboration between these networks and organisations. One interviewee observed that *“by and large Irish organisations in Chicago are not set up to connect to Ireland,”* and others observed that there is limited communication between the organisations in Chicago or between those in Chicago and Irish diaspora organisations in other American cities. This is a useful reminder to those involved in diaspora engagement in Ireland that the connectivity of the diaspora cannot be taken for granted, it is too segmented and disaggregated to function as an organic web of communications. The diplomatic team at the Irish Consulate are not unaware of this and are trying to facilitate greater connectivity among Chicago Irish. One interviewee remarked that *“the DFA wants diaspora organisations to talk together...they’re pushing idea of diaspora...it didn’t get discussed before in Irish Chicago.”*

## Unions

The role of unions in Irish Chicago and of Irish in Chicago unions is likely not very visible to outsiders or those unfamiliar with their linked history. Without doubt the most visible manifestation is the St Patrick’s Day parade which is buoyant with union floats and which is organised by a leading plumbers union (Plumbers Local 130). It is a strong reminder that unions have been very important to Irish settlement and advancement in Chicago. As one of our interviewees notes, *“the Irish in Chicago benefitted from overlapping power structures, not just the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church but also the labour unions...a triptych.”*

In the 1830s, Irish immigrants made up the majority of workers on the Illinois and Michigan Canal and in the later nineteenth century took on leadership roles in the fastgrowing and often militant unionisation

of the city’s industrial and manufacturing trades. At the turn of the century the Irish were instrumental in creating the first national organization of unionized meat packers. Throughout the twentieth century, the unions continued to be a significant locus of ethnic patronage and family traditions. In the twenty first century they are less prone to ethnic insiderness but the traditions have remained strong and so there is still a significant Irish presence in the unions today, mimicking that in city politics.

The Irish American Labor Council is a non-profit organisation for various trades and unions, mostly people from the building trades. It was founded in 1995 to raise money for a statue in Union Park to honour the Irish labour leader James Connolly and remained active. It hosts an annual dinner and raises money for several charities. In 2015, it was the Grand Marshall of the South Side Irish St Patrick’s Day Parade.

## Media

The Irish presence in Chicago is not substantial enough to merit or sustain a major media provision but there are particular forms of ethnic media serving niche elements of the diaspora in the city and region.

The *Irish American News* is the most significant Irish newspaper in that it is available across the city and region in both hardcopy and online formats. Founded in 1977, it publishes 15,000 copies weekly, reaching approximately 60,000 readers. The readership is widely dispersed, with the largest concentrations in Beverly, Evergreen Park, Tinley Park and Oak Forest. The newspaper highlights community events and advertises Irish-focused businesses in the city; it has regular columns on Irish and Irish Chicago community matters but has little or no editorial content.

There are a number of neighbourhood newspapers and websites that profile Irish events and advertise

Irish-focused businesses. The *Beverly Review* has the most Irish content, regularly featuring news about Irish community events.

There are a large number of Irish-related radio programmes in the Chicago area aimed at Irish listeners. Most tend to reach an older demographic, as evidenced by the admixture of music discussion and phone-in formats and content. Among them: The Hagerty Irish Hour is something of an institution in Irish Chicago, broadcast since 1953, firstly by its founder Jack Hagerty, and continued by his children since 1980; The O’Connor Show, debuted in 1971, is similarly a family affair; The Good Morning Ireland Show, has a focus on news and sports in Ireland; The Skinny and Houli Show, launched in 2000, is recorded live at an Irish pub in Chicago and features live music as well as comic banter; and Gaelic Park has its own radio programme, broadcast from a studio at GP. Many of the shows are live streamed or available as podcasts; most are unscripted and function as open forums for the Irish community to publicise events and discuss parochial matters.

There appears to be little use of social media by Irish Chicagoans in any collective form, which may reflect the paucity of recent emigrants to the city. Most activity is around J1 students looking for help finding their way in Chicago and so having discussions about where to socialise. Facebook’s Irish Chicago content is mostly advertising businesses. The “Irish in Chicago” Facebook page is inactive.

Interviewees and respondents mentioned using social media to connect with friends and family in Ireland and to access Irish news and entertainment. At the same time, a few noted some irony in the growth and use of social media and internet, making it easier to communicate and engage but also potentially isolating:

*Before it was a big deal to go read the Irish newspapers in the bar and now they can just read it on their phones. Same thing with the GAA. Now they are not going to bars to watch GAA games and soccer games because they can stream it at home...GAA Go erodes Irish community.*



## Chapter 4

# Culture and Identity

*Chicago might be the third biggest city in America but it is very parochial, provincial when it comes to the Irish.*

As noted, the Irish are dispersed widely across Chicago and the region, they have become a diverse, fragmented populace, no longer bound by neighbourhood and church. The sense of identity once shaped by place and culture has weakened though can remain strong in memory. A middle-aged interviewee who grew up in the city said that for her generation:

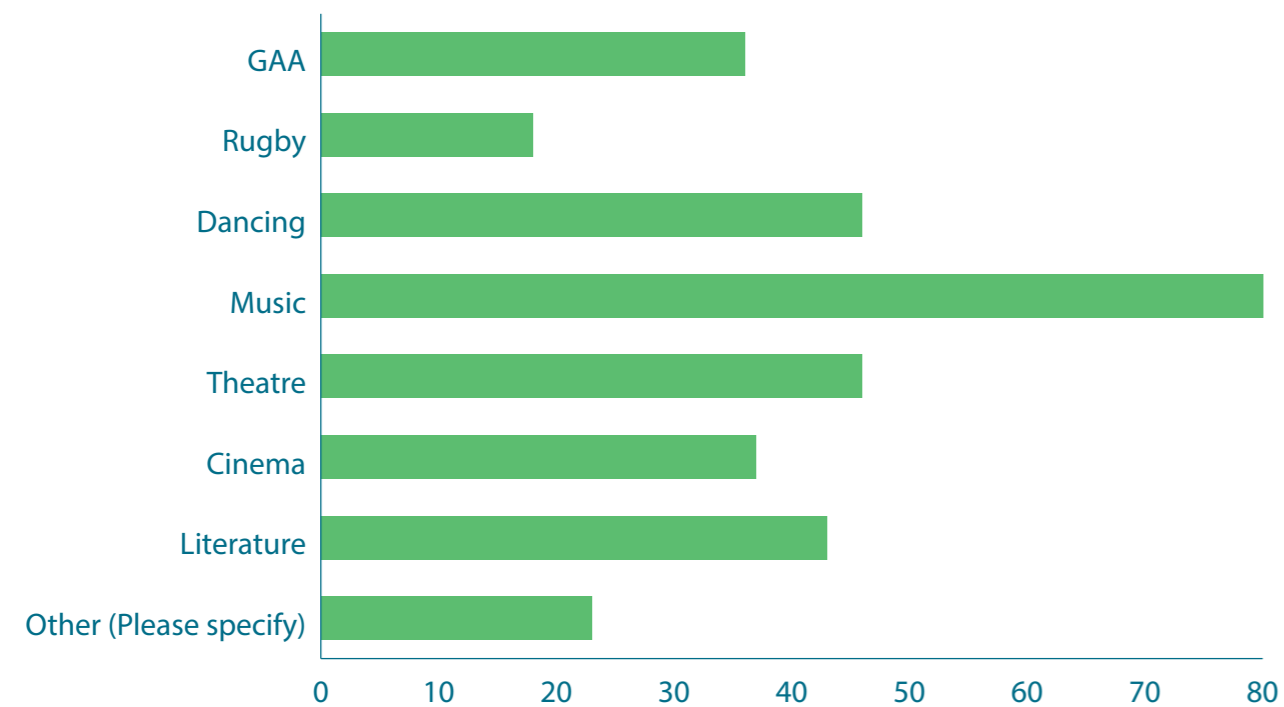
*Being Irish means you probably went to a single sex catholic school, your grandparents were probably Irish, you made your confirmation, you celebrated St Patrick's Day, probably went to one of five or six colleges and went to political rallies...a pathway...self-identifying as being Irish.*

This is becoming a less and less common narrative of Chicago Irish identity, for this is a pathway that

barely exists today. To be sure, it remains a powerful narrative for those whose experience growing up in the city it affirms. But that city has more or less disappeared except in memory.

In our interviews we heard many stories of cultural loss and community diminishment, often laced with some anxiety about the future of Irish Chicago. Yet, while stories of loss were common among the older generations, there were also many stories of ethnic pride and energy in building and maintaining cultural identity through institutions and activities. In particular, there was warm support for the two major institutional anchors of Irish culture in the city, the Irish American Heritage Center on the North Side and Gaelic Park on the South Side, and for the St Patrick Day parades. 68% of survey respondents take part in Irish cultural or sporting events.

Fig. 1: In what cultural activities do you participate?



An article in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1998 proclaimed *“Being Irish is hot. From dance and the cinema to music and publishing, the popularity of things Irish has reached impressive proportions.”*<sup>1</sup> Some of that heat has cooled in the last twenty years but Irish cultural production remains broadly popular, both in its kitschy incarnations and more high-end outputs. There also remains a strong sense that culture is both the dynamo and the glue of Irish community and identity even as some of the ethnic foundations have fallen away.

### Cultural Change

Many interviewees spoke of a loss of immediacy and authenticity in their cultural history:

*Feeling connected to Ireland was a much bigger thing in my childhood than it is for my children right now. My grandparents were born in Ireland and we saw them all the time and heard their stories. Kids from Northern Ireland stayed in our house in summer...Ireland was in the news...You were always being reminded of your connection to this ethnicity.*

*Irish culture was just something that was typical...now I won't say the word is forced... but I'm seeing kids being put into Irish dancing...the kids are Americanised...I have gone to a couple of feis and I've never seen so many little girls crying in my life...people are trying to keep the Irish traditions alive but I think it is more forced than in the past...that's the difference between when I was a kid and now.*

*Through my father I was exposed to Irish culture and sport...I played Irish sport, none of my children do. At the St Patrick's night [get*

1. June Sawyers, “This Jig’s for Reel,” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 March 1998, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1998-03-13/entertainment/9803130442\\_1\\_riverdance-irish-community-irish-saved-civilization](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1998-03-13/entertainment/9803130442_1_riverdance-irish-community-irish-saved-civilization)

*together] my kids know a few of the songs, my brothers and our friends know them all, my grandkids will know none of them...you're kind of losing that part of your ethnicity.*

This sense of a falling away of ethnic cultural identity was expressed by many middle-aged and older interviewees, often as a progressive process, a sense that with each generation there is another gradation of loss or assimilation. Such expressions reflect the state of late generation ethnicity that Irish America more generally finds itself in. In Chicago as elsewhere this is enhanced by the lack of new immigrants. A few interviewees spoke of this lack in terms of a disappearing bar culture:

*The Irish bar scene is dying because immigration has stopped and the young Irish are not coming out...ones that came in the 80s and 90s are in their 40s and 50s, have families, have grown out of the bar scene. And there's other ways to be in contact with social media and they go back to Ireland more frequently and so the need to be in Irish bars and to interact on a daily/weekly basis with other Irish people is less; especially the neighbourhood bars.*

*Irish pubs are suffering so much...they don't have same base crowd that they did...20 years ago on a Friday night 30-to-40 25-to-35-year-old guys dressed up and ready to go...now if they are coming in they are in their 50s and there's 5 or 6 of them and the rest are at home with wives...with there not being a huge base population in Irish coming over I have seen decline in sales, demand and population in the last few years.*

The growth in more up-market Irish bars in the city in recent years may speak to this particular aspect of late ethnicity. It is also an indicator of transition rather than terminality in the ethnic culture, though not surprisingly this can be experienced as a significant cultural depletion.

## Institutions

**The Irish American Heritage Center** (IAHC) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of Irish culture and heritage. It settled into its physical home in 1985 following the purchase (for \$502,000) of the former Mayfair Junior School on the Northwest Side, just off the Kennedy Expressway. The site covers a full city block and the imposing building is 90,000 square metres. Major renovations were required and while these were partially funded by the Irish government and diaspora organisations it was an extraordinary volunteer crew who undertook the major work to transform the dilapidated building into a functioning cultural centre. This included replacing 40,000 panes of glass and restoring many badly deteriorated rooms, work described by one volunteer as *“a labor of love.”* Interviewees spoke with awe and gratitude about the time and resources people gave to make the center a reality.

Today, the centre has a 658-seater auditorium, banquet rooms, a bar and dance practice studios. It also has a library, a museum and an art gallery that house significant collections of Irish and Irish-American cultural and political artefacts and documents. It hosts concerts, talks, and has two resident cultural groups, the Irish Heritage Singers and the Irish Heritage Players. It is a primary centre for Irish traditional music and dancing, hosting several dancing schools, including Trinity Dance whose director Mark Howard has been an innovative presence in the field. The dancing is particularly popular, with many of the children enrolled from non-Irish backgrounds. There are also language classes, mostly taken by first and second generation Irish.

The IAHC is a feat of great ambition reflecting a very strong ethnic pride and communality among those who created it and those who maintain and support it today. To many of its members and habitués the IAHC is akin to a second home, providing a needed

Fig. 2: Irish dancing at the Irish American Heritage Center, March 2017.



sense of Irish community in twenty-first century Chicago. In the words of one member, *“This is like a parish but you do not have to go to church.”*

The center has approximately 2000 members, aged 35 to 95. From the start it has faced funding challenges in terms of maintenance and development and has met these in part by diversifying and commercialising its spaces, so that many rooms are now regularly booked and large events such as weddings and banquets and an annual festival provide further income. There is a professional staff as well as hundreds of volunteers and the governance and budget of the organisation is described by leading members as being *“in good health.”*

There are some doubts about sustainability however, voiced both by members and others. Some interviewees referred to a *“membership problem,”* saying the centre is challenged to renew or extend its functions and appeal to a younger membership. Again, we heard the refrain about generational loss:

*“There used to be like a 100 guys here twice a week working on the building and now there’s 15. Where is that next generation of people?”* Some suggested it presents a version of Irishness that lacks appeal to the Irish-born, *“They find it very hard to get Irish in the building, they get Irish Americans in the building but not Irish.”* A member of the staff commented that

*the centre here is pushing into an identity crisis. The older people think of it as a place for them, to come for dances and teas and hang out for lunch and that’s beautiful and it can absolutely continue but their fundraising game has been pretty low.*

The leadership of the centre are aware that *“the main challenge is finding the next generation down”* and are actively seeking fresh ways to engage younger Irish or those with Irish interests. Among several of the members we spoke to there was enthusiasm for a form of “Irish school” to be hosted in the centre:

*I’d like to have Irish school again for children... To learn Irish but also more about music, dance and arts, history, social studies... If you are Polish in this neighbourhood you have got to go to Polish school every Saturday... there hasn’t been Irish school in this community for as long as I can remember and we need to have that, we need to have that, kids need to know that when they come with their parents on St Patrick’s Day that isn’t the only thing about being Irish... For the long term health of the centre and to fulfil our cultural mission, I think things like that are important.<sup>2</sup>*

2. Polish Saturday School is facilitated by the Consulate General of Poland. It “conducts classes from the first grade of elementary school to the fourth grade of high school, providing an educational program that complements the curriculum of the American school. The school activity is supervised and coordinated by the General Education School

If sufficiently resourced and efficiently managed this may cultivate an interest in Ireland and Irish American heritage among a new generation of the diaspora—certainly, this remains a principal challenge not only for IAHC but for the future of Irish Chicago.

**Gaelic Park** (GP) was constructed in 1982 following the purchase of a site in Oak Forest on the South Side, and was a welcome solution to a long-term problem of finding a suitable space for Irish games. Like the IAHC it relied heavily on volunteer labour for its construction, in this case as a new two-level building that hosts several function rooms suitable for weddings, conventions and corporate events. It has a small library and a schedule of popular music, language and dancing classes. GP is on a 62-acre site, with six full-size pitches and a picnic area. Its calendar of cultural and sporting events includes an annual Irishfest on Memorial Day weekend, Ireland on Parade in March, and a Cultural Camp every August, for 6–12 year-olds to learn about Irish history and culture.

GP is home to the GAA in Chicago. The GAA first organised in Chicago in 1890 and had 15 clubs by the mid-1890s. The number of competitive clubs has risen and fallen in line with Irish immigration to the city. It was particularly vibrant in the 1950s with new clubs emerging and hosting visiting teams from Ireland. A tradition grew of Gaelic teams bringing out Irish players for the summer, sometimes sponsored or provided with jobs and accommodation. The number of clubs began to deplete in the 1970s and though late 1980s emigration provided another boost they have been falling over the last fifteen years with some of the major teams struggling to remain competitive. Currently, there are 7 male football clubs and 5 hurling clubs, 3 ladies football clubs and 1 camogie

Association in Warsaw.” See: [http://www.chicago.msz.gov.pl/en/consulate/saturday\\_school/](http://www.chicago.msz.gov.pl/en/consulate/saturday_school/).



club, and 3 youth clubs. GP hosts games every Sunday from the beginning of June to the end of August. It is one of the finest GAA facilities in the US; it hosts North American County Board tournaments and in 2015 hosted the USGAA Finals.

Several interviewees had warm memories of how intricate the park was to their cultural histories:

*GP was a big part of our lives growing up. We would watch the Clare games with my dad there. He paid \$20 for the telecast and we would watch the games and wear our Clare jerseys. We would go to mass after then for breakfast, then back to GP to watch the hurling...Parents would be in the bar and kids play in the park. During the summer it was the Sunday event. Kept the connection to Ireland alive.*

Today, the park still has strong community support. Like IAHC, GP provides a second home for many elderly Irish. Also like IAHC, GP's numbers of new Irish have fallen away:

*More and more it is second and third generation in GP rather than first. Irish Americans come for weddings and large social events.*

*There is zero relationship between the newer Irish downtown and Gaelic Park...They don't support it or come out...You would see the Irish Americans.*

GP also has challenges in attracting younger Irish though the games give it a ready advantage in this regard. There are Gaelic games for different age groups at GP, ranging upwards from the Under-6 programme, "almost all second generation." Some programme numbers are healthy, others less so. Concern about a decline in numbers has led the GAA to promote Gaelic games in Chicago schools via the Chicago Gaelic Games Development and there is an administrator dedicated to this initiative. J1 students are cited as very engaged and helpful in the summer months.

Fig. 3: A float at the St Patrick's Day parade, March 2017



## St Patrick's Day

Chicago has a history of Irish parading to celebrate St Patrick that stems from 1843 but the main city parade was stopped in 1901. In 1956 Mayor Daley created a new downtown parade and with the dying of the Chicago River green beginning a tradition in 1962 the city centre parade has become one of the most renowned St Patrick's Day celebrations in the US. The parade is organised and executed by Chicago Plumbers Local 130 with the help of several hundred volunteers and is a vibrant spectacle of marching bands (103 in 2017), floats and colourful marchers.

In 1979 a South Side parade was created and held in Beverly and was well attended. It was cancelled by the city in 2009 after residents complained about the boisterous behaviour but successfully relaunched in 2012 with a zero tolerance alcohol policy.

In our survey, 66.34% said they participated in St Patrick's Day events and there is no doubt it is a signature feature of Irish Chicago and a major fillip for ethnic identity. Among interviewees though, there were some sceptics:

*I worry about St Patrick's Day not being as big as it used to be. Before it was a cultural thing, now it's more of a mass-market party.*

*St Patrick's day 40 years ago was a huge civic celebration...schools gave the day off...now it's a tourist attraction, not a local celebration of Irish identity.*

Once again, the emphasis is on cultural loss, a sense that a more authentic Irish culture has been displaced. This year, there was also some political resonance around the event due to the heightened anxieties about immigration. Bridget Gainer, Cook County Commissioner, gave a speech stating:

*The real story of St Patrick's Day is people were*

*fleeing economic or religious persecution. Not long ago, it was 'Irish need not apply,' and there are a lot of parallels to what this country is going through right now.<sup>3</sup>*

It is impossible to know how many Irish celebrating the event in Chicago would have supported this sentiment—it goes to the heart of current tensions in Irish American identity.

The broad and fulsome support for the parades among the Irish community and beyond in Chicago is not in question though. The main parade has benefitted from the stewardship of its Local 130 organisers to make it an unparalleled celebration of Irishness in Chicago that promotes the city nationally and globally.

## Identity

In a speech he gave at the IAHC in May 2014, President Michael Higgins remarked:

*through the generations, a new Irish-American heritage has emerged here in Chicago—one that has seen the strands of two rich cultures mingling, interacting, and creating something that is not reducible to one or the other but which combines the best of both heritages. It is a reflection of the different versions of Irishness that have evolved throughout our history of migration, forming a rich and complex tapestry of inherited identity.<sup>4</sup>*

President Higgins' comments are a salient reminder

3. Heidi Stevens, "For St Patrick's Day: Who's the Modern Version of Irish Immigrants," Chicago Tribune (16 March 2017), <http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/stevens/ct-st-patricks-day-immigrants-bridget-gainer-balancing-0316-20170316-column.html>
4. President Michael D. Higgins, "Speech at a Reception Hosted by the Irish American Heritage Center, Chicago" (11 May 2014), <https://www.dfa.ie/irish-consulate/chicago/our-role/irish-us-relations/president-higgins-irish-american-heritage-center/>.

that Irish American culture is a hybrid entity, shaped by dialectics of cultural exchange formed over generations. Among these different “versions of Irishness that have evolved” in Chicago, as elsewhere in Irish America, an “authentic” Irish identity is a chimera. As the Irish Chicagoan writer Finley Peter Dunne pointedly observed via his fictional bartender Mr Dooley in the late 1890s, “th’ rare boney fide Irishman is no more than a foreigner born away from home.”<sup>5</sup>

The desire for authenticity can remain strong though, a deep-seated component of ethnic identity formation. One interviewee articulated the paradoxical nature of this desire:

*When I was growing up everybody was famous for the songs they would sing at a party...the immigrant population needs to re-establish those things and be part of that...but they're not as much because they're not as much in Ireland that way anymore, at home.*

This speaks to a sense of authentic Irish culture while at the same time realising that it does not exist any more, either at home or in the diaspora. Perhaps it is this sense of loss that most acutely expresses the state of late generation ethnicity. It is experienced as a disorientation, for not only has the ethnic identity of Irish Americans moved into a late stage but Ireland has changed in ways that mean it no longer comfortably functions as a locus for Irish American imagination and identity.

As noted earlier in this report, we were made aware of a number of tensions or disconnections within Irish Chicago during our research. Many interviewees and respondents commented on a growing gap between the settled Irish American community and newer arrivals:

5. Finley Peter Dunne, “The Irishman Abroad,” *Mr Dooley: In the Hearts of His Countrymen* (Boston: Small, Maynard and Co., 1899), <http://gutenberg.readingroo.ms/1/3/7/8/13784/13784-h/13784-h.htm>.

*As the actual population from Ireland gets smaller we in quotations ‘Irish’ are further and further removed...it becomes something else...saying you are Irish in America is something completely different from being properly Irish.*

*Over the last twenty years I do think the divide between Irish community and Irish American community gets bigger and bigger.*

*The people that come out [from Ireland] that are professionals when they come they are downtown and live in those areas and there is no Gaelic Park or Heritage Center. They go to the bars in those areas. Lots of people we will never meet.*

Some attributed the difference to political and cultural values:

*Irish Americans are more conservative...the further you are removed from ancestors’ background you don’t necessarily identify as an immigrant but you need to identify with those who came before you.*

*The older Irish Americans tend to be a bit more Republican...I wonder when they arrived if they were as Republican...which is why we need the blend of younger ideologies coming up as we all get crustier...to keep a balance.*

Some also commented on a disconnect between Ireland and Irish America:

*Irish America is getting more conservative while Ireland is getting far more liberal...one thing that blew me away was the lack of religion...I understand it but it was shocking to me.*

All these comments register cultural and political values as the point of difference and several of the interviewees spoke at length about these matters. Notably, it was mostly Irish-born interviewees who

raised the points about difference and disconnection.

Nowhere was this tension more pronounced than around the issue of undocumented Irish. As noted, some of the undocumented expressed anxiety about becoming stigmatised within the Irish community in the city. That anxiety has symbolic resonance, a reminder that the undocumented Irish do not fit into the common ethnic success narrative of how the Irish “made it” in the US.

This is not to suggest that all settled Irish Americans would comfortably fit into that narrative but there is no doubt that contemporary Irish America has moved into a late stage of ethnicity wherein the struggles for identity are behind them. As a veteran Irish American alderman in Chicago observed:

*Being Irish American has become a benefit to the Irish, in the past being Irish American was something you had to overcome...you don’t have to stay in shape if you’re not going to fight anybody.*

To be sure, this is the perspective of late generation ethnicity, and indicative that Irish ethnic identity in the US is increasingly symbolic, a matter of choice rather than need or circumstance. It is an identity that is no longer associated with immigrant trauma or oppression but with pride and distinction.

This is not to disavow the powerful pull of diaspora identifications for these persist as a sense of belonging in conscious and unconscious ways. As one of our interviewees observed “*What the parent forgets, the child remembers*”—a comment that indicates the complex ways in which ethnic memory can function to maintain or reinvent ethnic attachments. Ethnic identity can endure long after ethnic structures and practices have dissolved, and we know all too little about how this works among Irish Americans. 64.5% of the survey respondents reported that they “feel Irish at all times,” but we have limited information on when, where,

how or with what effects this sense of identity is experienced.

It is useful to recall that ethnic identity is but one aspect of identity and that its significance is relative to multiple factors of identity formation in specific contexts. Still, it endures. In the survey, asked to designate identity, 42.7% selected “Irish American,” 40.8% selected “Irish,” and 12.1% opted for “American.” Again, we should be aware of a skew in the survey but this is nonetheless an indicator of how strongly forms of Irish identity perpetuate, even when it is often only one facet of a multi-ethnic heritage. One of our interviewees cheerfully remarked: “*The Irish Americans love to tell you they are Irish. They could be half another nationality, they will always tell you they are Irish.*”

Fig. 4: The Irish American Heritage Center.





# Conclusion

This study set out to research vulnerabilities among the Irish in Chicago but extended in scope and focus to take in and report on a fuller picture of contemporary Irish Chicago. We so extended the research with a conviction based on our findings that the changing nature of the Irish diaspora in the US entails interlocking questions about identity and community among the Irish abroad and about relations between Ireland and Irish America. As such, the vulnerable Irish should not be understood in isolation but as a feature of these broader changes.

Irish America is at a stage of late generation ethnicity, no longer refuelled by new emigrants. It is a singular though not at all homogeneous entity, more dislocated from the home country and more distant from its roots. For the Irish government and those with an interest in engaging Irish America and cultivating linkages between Ireland and the US there are challenges in this new stage of development. It is not a terminal state of affairs, but it is a transitional one, and we need to recognise and understand its features and implications.

This will not be news to those state actors with close knowledge of Irish America and Irish-US relations. The 2014 review of Irish-US relations by the Embassy of Ireland in Washington registered a concern that “the ancestral ties with Ireland are growing more distant” and that future links should not be taken for granted.<sup>1</sup> Research soundings and policy calibrations must attend to such concerns. This research report is one such sounding. It is necessarily partial due to its scale and focus, but nonetheless suggestive of the changing nature of Irish Chicago and beyond to the future of Irish America. The survey and interviews have provided a unique documentary snapshot of contemporary Irish Chicago, tracing key demographics and recording its fractured ethnic worldview.

“Irish America” is not a place or even a mosaic of places in the conventional sense, it is an imagined community (differently imagined in Ireland and the US), made up of affinities and discontinuities, connections and disconnections. For all the connections between Ireland and the US, old and new, there is a surprising lack of knowledge on both ends about the other, which signifies not so much ignorance as unspoken and unchallenged assumptions about the lives and worldviews of very different cultures. Ireland and Irish America would appear to currently be out of synch in terms of the predominant political and cultural values expressed each side of the Atlantic. To be sure, there have been major disconnections in diaspora relations in the past, most notably around nationalist matters. Relations between home and diaspora are never static. This new phase of the home/diaspora relationship is marked by sometimes difficult to discern currents of globalisation

1. “Ireland and America: Challenges and Opportunities in a New Context” (Washington: Embassy of Ireland, Spring 2014), [https://www.dfa.ie/media/embassyusa/ourrole/Five-Year-Review\\_140305\\_Spring\\_2014.pdf](https://www.dfa.ie/media/embassyusa/ourrole/Five-Year-Review_140305_Spring_2014.pdf).

and ethnonationalism that are disrupting the relations between nation, state and citizen. These dynamics are reshaping Irish America as well as the Irish-US relationship.

The demographics of our survey respondents in Chicago are very much in line with broader indices of contemporary Irish America. They are relatively wealthy, highly educated, healthy, and well represented in upper reaches of business, law, politics, and labour in the city. Yet, Irish Chicago today is not a homogenous entity, rather it is dispersed and fragmented, with little communications across some of the segments, most notably between elderly and young, and between settled and new emigrants. Given the very diverse constituencies of Irish in Chicago there are different expectations of engagement with Ireland and different varieties of Irishness represented in the city that need to be carefully mapped and nurtured to deliver sustainable engagement.

While the majority of Irish in Chicago are relatively comfortable, there are areas of vulnerability, some of which are being very directly addressed by Irish organizations and the Irish government through its Consulate resources and its Emigrant Support Programme, and some that have so far received little attention. As we anticipated, the undocumented and the elderly are the most visible and most commented on cohorts in need of support. Both posit challenges for service providers and government offices.

The undocumented Irish feel anxious and precarious, and there is evidence they do not have strong support among the settled Irish community. As a result, they are very difficult to engage and distrusting of any “official” agency or intervention, including those seeking to interview them. At the same time, there is a strong Irish presence in leadership for immigration reform in the city and state, and the appointment of Senator Billy Lawless to represent the Irish diaspora in the Seanad has lent even higher profile to this while creating a strong link between Ireland and Chicago.

Proponents of immigration reform have been frustrated by the recent history of failures to achieve comprehensive reform and have been appalled yet also energised by the Trump administration’s recent push to deport illegal immigrants. The undocumented we interviewed mostly acknowledged the Irish government has attempted to press for reform but their old frustrations and new fears have made them very sceptical of this source of support.<sup>2</sup> There was similar scepticism about the capacity of CIIS or other Irish government-linked organisations to provide help to the undocumented in their quest for regularisation of status. One

2. As we conclude this report, a special envoy (TD John Deasy) has been appointed by the Irish Taoiseach to represent Irish undocumented in the US Congress.

observed that *“The hands of CIIS are tied by the current political situation,”* while others suggested such organisations needed to do more to *“gain the trust”* of undocumented in the city. Notably, of the 25% of the survey respondents who have sought formal assistance with immigration matters, 56% engaged a private attorney and only 3% approached a not-for-profit organisation. While the matter of immigration reform remains a national political matter, there are local challenges to engaging the undocumented in Chicago given their precarity.

The challenges posed by caring for elderly Irish in Chicago is of a different nature. There are strong, effective and highly appreciated programmes of support in place via CIIS, the IAHC and GP. The challenges are in considering how the services might be either expanded beyond those coming directly to IAHC and GP and coordinated to make the best use of resources. Several of the interviewees currently active in caring for the elderly observed there may be benefits in bringing people together to identify present and future needs and take joint responsibility to meet demand.

The findings on mental health and addiction problems in the survey somewhat surprised us, though several interviewees referred to instances of depression and alcohol consumption among Irish in Chicago. This is clearly an area that requires further, more focused research to ascertain the scale and depth of the problems in these areas and provide guidance on what forms of intervention may be suitable on behalf of Irish service providers. CIIS should accordingly consider the optimal orientation of their services and funding requests.

While mostly middle class Irish students on J1 visas may not fit any conventional category of vulnerability we heard several strongly worded complaints about the management of the J1 programme. The good will to help and promote the programme remains very strong though and there were suggestions on how to improve it. The proposal to raise the age of eligibility for the J1 programme to 35 posits a number of clear benefits in ensuring the quality and sustainability of the programme.

It is important for Ireland to continue to engage and support vulnerable Irish in the American diaspora. The needs are real and while the return can seem nebulous it is deep and meaningful, not only to those directly aided but to many in the Irish communities for whom it signals a positive and caring investment by the home country. A focus on frontline services should remain central to the ESP agenda. Maintaining and developing a programme of care and support at the heart of diaspora policy underscores the mutually beneficial relationship that exists between government and diaspora in the Irish context.

While some interviewees in Chicago expressed surprise that the Irish Government

provides welfare support for sections of the diaspora (this may be a matter of communication that the ESP responds to), there was widespread praise for it doing so. In particular, there was praise for the work of CIIS in its efforts to provide legal advice and welfare support for vulnerable Irish in the city. 55% of survey respondents were familiar with the work of CIIS. One commented. *“I think, through CIIS, the Irish Government is tremendously supportive of seniors here.”* Another observed, *“CIIS are a help to the Irish in Chicago...you take someone who gets in trouble who do you turn to? It has to be the immigrant group.”* Although CIIS have managed to provide targeted support in niche areas of need and draw on an enthusiastic board and volunteers, there is a constant struggle for resource and competing claims on strategic focus. Any future planning of how to engage the vulnerable Irish in Chicago should consider how best to leverage CIIS capacities and more strategically link these to the broader resources and energies of Irish civil society in the city.

That civil society includes the Irish diaspora networks and associations in Chicago. We found that these have evolved in line with changing conditions of settlement, with some withering, some successfully adapting and some new entities emerging. They serve different sections and needs among Chicago Irish, only occasionally intersecting. The Irish Fellowship Club has maintained its role as the stalwart flagship of Irish American success in the city, while the Ireland Network Chicago appeals to newer Irish immigrants. More generally though the Irish networks and associations are facing a common struggle to engender a new generation of Irish members.

The same may be said of the cultural institutions, notwithstanding the popularity of Irish culture in the city in commercial and symbolic terms. Our research evidences that culture remains crucial to the making and maintenance of Irish ethnic identity in Chicago. We heard many stories of cultural loss and diminishment, that *“traditions have worn thin,”* but also that there remains great ethnic pride and energy in maintaining identity through particular institutions and activities. The IAHC, GP and St Patrick’s Day parades do immense cultural work in servicing ethnic identity as well as promoting Irish culture and heritage more broadly. At the same time, we encountered many comments on the need for these institutions to *“find the next generation.”*

This recurrent refrain of the waning of Irish Chicago and concern that the next generation of Irish will prove to be a *“lost generation”* presents particular challenges to those seeking to steward and support Irish heritage and community in the city. All evidence points to the conclusion that there is an urgent requirement to regenerate Irish community and identity, not only for the health of Irish Chicago but also to reinvigorate ties between Ireland and Irish America.

There were no distinctively thought-out proposals from the field as to how best to pursue this regeneration. There were a number of suggestions pointing to needs for coordination and collaboration, investment, and education. Several interviewees mentioned the need for a *“coalition of Irish organisations”* in Chicago that would be based on a principal of collaboration between diverse stakeholders, but there was little clarity on how this would work or whether it would receive sufficient support to be practicable. Some noted that the key organisations and institutions are *“parochial”* and would be worried about *“stepping on toes;”* others noted it *“would need ownership and funding...where is that coming from?”* While there is evidence of sporadic forms of collaboration across sectors, there may be opportunities to create mechanisms that would facilitate more productive interactions. The Consulate may helpfully facilitate such interactions though the primary responsibility remains with the diaspora actors.

Culture and education are keys to the regeneration and sustainability of the Irish diaspora and to diaspora engagement—they spur the activities of ethnic memory and identification. Irish culture in many forms is a powerfully attractive, integrating force and we saw much evidence of this in Chicago. It provides sensitive support for a range of welfare needs, acting as an invaluable therapeutic and combating social isolation. It also motivates social interactions among different segments of the Irish diaspora, helping to bridge generations and accommodate difference.

Given the challenges posed by late generation ethnicity, education must be at the centre of any strategic effort to engage the next generation of the Irish diaspora in the US. Currently, there are some initiatives afoot such as the GAA’s efforts to bring GAA games to high schools in Chicagoland and there was strong support in interviews for the creation of an Irish school at IAHC (modelled on the established Polish Saturday School), perhaps with ancillary programmes elsewhere in the city. More broadly, there may be opportunities for Irish universities to directly engage American high school and college students in terms of the merits of undertaking studies at various levels in Ireland. Several interviewees enthused about the cultural and cost benefits of this for diaspora youth and a number also asked about summer educational programmes in Ireland. As the ideas around educational provision are currently ad hoc, there is an opportunity to devise a strategic overview and identify both immediate and longer term opportunities, so that education may be placed at the forefront of efforts to nurture the next generation of the Irish diaspora in the US.

Collective Irish identity in the diaspora is increasingly fluid and fragmented, no longer tied to traditional sites and networks of connectivity (for example, pubs and county associations). The recent survey of Irish Americans via Irish Central revealed demographics and opinions that, like our survey data and interviews in Chicago,

points to the changing profile of Irish America.<sup>3</sup> In Chicago, as in much of the US, the diaspora is not being refuelled by new Irish immigrants and the settled Irish community has moved into an attenuated state of late generation ethnicity. This does not necessarily entail the end of Irish America as some declaim but rather a new stage of development, one that requires strategic understanding and engagement.

Ireland’s maturing diaspora policy must respond to the fluidity and fragmentation of diaspora cultures and relations. The overarching challenge for those leading Ireland’s diaspora engagement is to develop imaginative and pragmatic means to support changing diaspora communities. Diaspora stewardship must be inclusive, recognising there are different varieties of Irishness active in the diaspora at any one time. Our research of contemporary Irish Chicago demonstrates the need to align resources, aims and objectives with the changing nature of the Irish diaspora in the US, and place the next generation at the heart of future diaspora engagement.

3. See: <https://www.irishcentral.com/news/community/what-do-irish-americans-want-read-our-exclusive-survey>.

## The Research Team

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