

# ESRI Research Bulletin

*Learning more about the causes and consequences of migration through the experiences of Ireland's older people*

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# Learning more about the causes and consequences of migration through the experiences of Ireland's older people<sup>1</sup>

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\* Alan Barrett and Irene Mosca

## Return migrants in the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)

The resumption of population outflows from Ireland since 2010 has regenerated an interest in the effect that migration can have on individuals. Data from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) provide a unique way of studying this issue. The TILDA data contain a representative sample of people aged 50 and over and living in Ireland. The first wave of data was collected between late 2009 and early 2011. Information on over 8,000 people was collected, covering topics such as health, wellbeing and economic circumstances.

The importance of the TILDA data for the purpose of exploring the effects of migration results from the fact that a high proportion of the sample are “returned migrants” – that is, people who have lived outside of their home country for a period of time but who have now returned. In the sample, 24 percent of men and 21 percent of women have lived abroad for at least six months. Forty six percent of the male return migrants and 43 percent of female return migrants have lived abroad for at least ten years. Of course, these proportions reflect the migratory experience of the country in general. As the ages of the TILDA participants range from the 90s through 50, many would have emigrated in the large outflows of the 1950s and the 1980s.

It is important to understand the challenges that this group have faced, and continue to face. It is also useful to see what we can learn about today's emigrants based on the experience of this older group. Even though technology and low-cost airlines are likely to have altered the migration experience, the fundamental experience of removing oneself from the familiarity of home remains the same.

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<sup>1</sup> This Bulletin draws on a number of recently published papers that look at various aspects of the lives of the returned migrants (Barrett and Mosca, 2011, 2013a and 2013b). The work was undertaken while Alan Barrett was Project Director with TILDA at Trinity College Dublin. Alan Barrett is currently with the ESRI and Irene Mosca is a Research Fellow with TILDA at Trinity College Dublin

## **The issues which we examined**

Rather than looking at return migrants as a single group, we divided them into four categories based on gender and length of time away. People who lived outside of Ireland for six months to ten years were categorised as short-term migrants; those who lived away for more than ten years were categorised as long-term migrants. The basic approach which we then took was to compare the return migrants to “stayers” – that is, people who always lived in Ireland. The analysis sheds light on the following questions: (a) why did people leave?; (b) did emigrants experience higher levels of psychological stress over their lives?; (c) now that the return migrants are back in Ireland, are they more socially isolated than those who never left?

## **Why did they leave?**

Economists have typically explained outward migration from Ireland in terms of depressed economic conditions but the TILDA data provide a new insight. In the survey, people are asked about circumstances and events in the early part of their lives and we have used this information.

We found that for men who lived outside of Ireland for up to ten years, almost 16 percent had experienced physical or sexual abuse as children. For men who had stayed in Ireland, the corresponding figure was just under 10 percent. Men who lived outside of Ireland for between six months and ten years were also more likely to indicate that their parents had alcohol or drug problems (13.3 percent), when compared to stayers (7.5 percent). A similar pattern is seen for women who were categorised as short-term migrants – they were more likely to have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse compared to women who stayed in Ireland (12.6 percent compared to 8.3 percent). No differences were found between stayers and the long-term returners.

## **Did emigrants experience higher degrees of psychological stress over their lives?**

In order to see if emigrants experienced higher levels of psychological stress over their lives compared to stayers, an indicator of such stress was needed. As part of the TILDA survey, people are asked whether they have had alcohol problems and this was used as the indicator.

The pattern across the four categories (male/female and short-term/long term) was not uniform and an interesting contrast emerged in the results. For either category of men, the return migrants were more likely to have suffered from

alcohol problem<sup>2</sup>. This was also found to be the case for female migrants who had lived outside of Ireland for less than ten years. However, for women who had lived outside of Ireland for ten years or more, the incidence of alcohol problems was *lower* than was the case for women who stayed in Ireland. Their lower levels of alcohol problems suggest a favourable migration experience relative to Irish women who remained in Ireland. Other studies (for example, Ryan 2004 and 2008) have suggested that for some Irish women of that generation, emigration allowed a level of economic independence which was not generally available to women who remained in Ireland.

### **Are return migrants more socially isolated than those who never left?**

The TILDA survey includes a group of questions which are designed to identify whether people are socially isolated or not. Participants are asked about their families, friends and social activities – depending on the answers given, people can be classified into four groups ranging from the most isolated to the most integrated.

For men, just over 30 percent of stayers are in the categories modestly or mostly isolated. For return migrants who have lived away for more than ten years, this proportion ranges from 45 percent to 62 percent, depending on the length of time back in Ireland<sup>3</sup>. For women who stayed, a third are modestly or mostly isolated; the proportions of return migrants in these categories range from 39 percent to 46 percent. In summary, the results suggest that social isolation is a feature of the lives of Ireland's return migrants.

### **Conclusion**

The work discussed above reveals a lot about the lives of Ireland's older return migrants. Although economic factors certainly played a role in the decision of many to migrate, there seem to be other factors present. In general, the return migrants were more likely to have suffered abuse as children than people who never lived outside of Ireland.

Now that they are back in Ireland, they are more likely to be socially isolated. Alcohol problems were more common among the male return migrants

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<sup>2</sup> Based on one measure of "alcohol problems", 7.6 percent of men who had stayed in Ireland reported that they had an alcohol problem. The figure for short-term return migrants was 15 percent; for the long-term returners, the figure was 12.5 percent.

<sup>3</sup> The longer people are back, the less socially isolated they appear so they seem to re-assimilate over time.

compared to men who stayed in Ireland. This was also the case for women who lived away for between six months and ten years. However, for women who lived outside of Ireland for ten years or more, they seem to have lower rates of alcohol problems compared to stayers.

Given the different circumstances in which emigration is now occurring, we need to be careful in drawing lessons for today's emigrants. Nevertheless, the results described above point to the stresses that emigration can give rise to and the fact that return migration may not be a simple matter of fitting in seamlessly to one's home-country.

### References

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