

Hidden Poverty in Migrant Communities

Introduction

Gerry Callaghan is a volunteer with New Horizon, the Athlone refugee and asylum seeker support group. At various times he was a migrant worker in the Yemen, Indonesia, Sweden and Germany. This presentation is an overview of immigrant societies and the problems they face.

The Numbers

If this is a problem, it's a problem related to our recent success as an economy. In recent years emigration has fallen to a historic low of 20,000 per annum and immigration has risen to a minimum of 47,500 per annum. If the United States were accepting immigration at the same rate they would be receiving 3 million immigrants each year. This provides Irish society with a series of challenges. How we meet them will determine the way we work and live for a very long time.

The main driving force was the incredible expansion in employment in the past 20 years. There were 1.1 million workers in the labor force in 1988. In 2000, there were 1.6 million. That's 500,000 extra jobs in a population of 3 million. This is unprecedented change in Irish economy and society.

Where did these extra 500,000 workers come from?

Initially unemployed people and people who were outside the labor market took up jobs. Many women who had previously been engaged on home duties returned to the workforce.

By the middle '90s this pool of available labor had been exhausted and since then there has been a positive correlation between job growth and inward migration. Net immigration rose from 17,200 in 1987 to 47,500 in 2002. At the same time there was a dramatic reduction in the numbers emigrating, from a peak of 70,600 in 1992 to 18,800 in 2002.

Up until 1999 about 50% of this migration was due to the return of Irish emigrants with their (possibly) foreign-born partners and children. This has peaked and returned emigrants now comprise under 40% of the total immigration. The pool of Irish emigrants is in itself reducing and it seems reasonable to assume that the majority of Irish emigrants who are planning to return have already done so.

Immigration from the UK has actually declined from 8,300 in 1996 to 5,100 in 2002. Similarly immigration from the U.S has declined from 4,000 to 1,900 in the same time frame.

Immigration from other EU countries has increased slightly, from 5,000 to 6,100. There was less migration than might be expected from other EU states, for two main reasons. Firstly because the people are not there and secondly because the standard of living in Ireland was similar to the standard at home.

All the EU states, including Ireland, have a fertility rate that is less than the population replacement rate. As a result they need migration to maintain the working age population.

The big change is in the 'Rest of World' category. This went from 4,200 in 1996 to 16,400 in 2002. What this means is that immigrants are now much more visible in Irish society than they were before. They look different, speak different languages and follow different customs and religions. They are also much more likely to be poor.

In a word, the problem is that we want workers but we get people!

Issues affecting all migrants

The main problem is the lack of a clear and transparent immigration system in the entire EU. All EU systems are highly bureaucratic, there are long delays and there is no guarantee of being granted an entry visa or work permit.

However the pressures of poverty in many countries is so extreme that people will take almost any chances of reaching the El Dorado of Europe. As an example, unemployment benefit in Ireland at the lowest rate amounts to €7000 per annum. The person receiving this benefit has a greater cash income than 77% of the world's population.

As a result of the difficulty of gaining access to the EU legitimately a variety of alternative routes have come into existence. These include the highly dangerous and expensive sea routes into Italy or Spain and the abuse of the asylum process and English language schools. If there was an efficient and transparent immigration system then many of the unofficial alternatives to the system would fall into disuse.

All non-EU migrants have horror stories of their encounters with immigration officialdom. It is extremely difficult to get a visa to visit Ireland if you come from certain countries. I have an Algerian-born friend who has lived in Ireland for over twenty years and is an Irish citizen. Last summer his teenage daughter invited her cousin to come for the summer. The visa was refused for the reason that a fourteen year old girl might not leave!

Physical immigration facilities are generally very poor. Staffing at the visa office is limited, opening hours are restricted and it is almost impossible to make contact by telephone. Locally the situation can be even worse. For example, there is one immigration Garda in Athlone. She works normal Garda shifts so frequently there are twenty people, many with small children, waiting for her services at midnight in a room with a single chair.

There are many problems reported with immigration police in Dublin airport. People may be refused leave to land on an arbitrary basis. Carrier liability means that airlines and shipping companies automatically refuse passage to people without documentation. Last

year the Irish Refugee Council secured funds to monitor the operation of the immigration service. Cooperation was not forthcoming and the funding had to be returned.

If a person does not speak English very well they will find it almost impossible to live in this country. Government offices and health board offices have access to telephone translation services. However in many circumstances unofficial translators, frequently children, are used. As a result the quality of translation is suspect and children are being exposed to difficult cases that they may not be able to handle.

It is possible to apply for Irish citizenship after five years legal residency in the country. Unlike many countries there is no citizenship ceremony, a new Irish passport is delivered by post.

The availability and cost of car insurance is a serious problem. Insurance companies do not normally recognize previous driving experience in other countries.

The nature of migrant life leads to sudden demands for large sums of money for airfares, and family crises at home and in Ireland. Most people have incurred considerable debt to finance their ticket. Many migrants are outside the normal financial services world due to lack of documentation or permanent address. Access to normal sources of credit such as banks and credit unions is difficult, leading to unlicensed money lending. There are reports of couriers carrying large amounts of paper money to Romania and Nigeria every week.

There is very little recognition of the cultural needs of the new Irish societies. Planning permission for the mosque in Clonskea was granted with the proviso that the muzzain or call to prayer should not be made. As a Christian church has never been prevented from ringing bells, it's hard to see this as anything but official discrimination against the Muslim community.

One result of the arrival of the new communities has been the growth of African churches in many towns. These churches provide a very good social and support function for their communities. However as they have few or no Irish members they do nothing for the integration of the community in Irish life.

Communities need to have social gatherings to celebrate events such as weddings and births. Insurance costs make it almost impossible to hire a room where ethnic food can be served. It's very difficult to get Halal food in many towns even though we are the largest producer of Halal meat in Europe. There is no recognition of non-Irish cultures in school materials. Primary school textbooks are depressingly bland, middle-class, white and mono-cultural.

Muslim and Jewish citizens require male circumcision. It is very difficult to arrange this through medical channels and as a result some unqualified people are making a trade of

it. One child has already died in Waterford as a result of a botched circumcision. I am personally aware of some near misses locally.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a distinct possibility in some communities. Support groups have been asked where it can be done. They say that it is illegal but people may decide to obtain it from within the migrant community.

There is evidence of ghetto development in many towns. Urban renewal tax incentives have led to the construction of many new houses in areas of high unemployment. Migrants are attracted by the good quality housing and low rents. However the underlying unemployment blackspot has not been removed and so it's difficult to get work in this particular area.

Migrant workers

Migrant workers are concentrated at both the upper and the lower end of the employment spectrum.

Non-EU Workers in high demand, particularly in the high technologies and medical fields, come in on working visas. The visa terms allow them to be accompanied by immediate family. They are a scarce and valuable commodity and so there is considerable competition between EU countries for them. As a result there is pressure to improve conditions from employers.

Originally the visa conditions did not permit the spouse to work. This proved a significant disincentive to people remaining in Ireland and was changed in 2004. Work visas were issued on the basis of working for a specific employer, this had the effect of tying the employee to a specific employer for the duration of the visa. A 'green book' system has recently been announced that will allow people to change employers during the visa term.

At the lower end of the spectrum are the low skilled non-EU workers. These come on work permits which do not allow family members to join them. Work permits are issued to employers, rather than directly to the worker. This gives an employer greater leverage than they would have over a local worker.

Migrants work in all sectors of the economy; the three main areas are Services (37%) Catering (25%) and Agriculture/Fisheries (16%) They are to be found in all areas of the country, though concentrated in Dublin. In 2002 621 work permits were issued for employers in county Westmeath. Locally the main employers of work-permit labor are the meat factories and catering.

Up until May 2004 work permits were required by workers from the EU accession states. This is no longer required. The predicted 'flood' of eastern Europeans after EU accession has failed to materialize.

Other EU countries have put restrictions on free movement of labor from the EU accession countries. Ireland and UK have not, but do require that people be resident in the country for two years before they are entitled to claim social welfare benefits.

Working conditions for top-end workers are good, basically because of the leverage they have. Conditions for others are extremely poor. These include long working hours, poor health and safety conditions, being paid under the minimum wage, unpaid overtime, excessive deductions for poor quality housing and illegal deductions for the cost of work permits.

Trade Union representation of migrant workers is very patchy. SIPTU have recently started to recruit Lithuanian and Latvian members, but most migrant workers are not represented by the trade union movement.

Refugees

There is considerable confusion in the public mind about refugees and asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are people whose claim for refugee status under the United Nations 1951 convention are being considered. Refugees are people whose status has been officially recognized by the government.

In theory, refugees have all the benefits that Irish citizens have. In practice the difficulties involved in rebuilding a life in another country are very daunting.

Most refugees have very little money. This means they have serious difficulty in the ordinary tasks of life such as finding a house to rent, making a deposit, organizing furnishings, arranging schools and transport.

They find themselves in the least-desirable housing, one street in an Athlone estate has been unofficially renamed 'Lagos Street' ! There was serious flooding in this area in 2002 when many people lost a lot of property.

Many people have untreated health problems. Some of these, such as sickle-cell anemia, are not immediately recognizable by Irish doctors. Some have illnesses, such as tuberculosis, that have not been seen in Ireland since the 1950's.

Unemployment remains a very serious problem among the refugee community. It can take up to six months after getting status to get the green book which permits you to work. There are serious problems in getting jobs of any kind. There is also great difficulty in gaining recognition of non-EU (indeed non-Irish) qualifications. I personally know a civil engineer that drives a fork-lift truck, a senior accountant that works as a cinema usher and a senior staff nurse that works as a ward assistant.

Refugee status confers, in theory, the right to family re-unification. Again, this can only be done by a long and difficult process. Anyone without excellent English and a good network of Irish and home country friends has very little chance of succeeding. At present the timescale involved is two to three years.

Refugees are entitled to a travel document. This is obtainable after the usual one-year wait. This document, in theory, allows them to move freely between EU countries. In practice it's the equivalent of a home country passport rather than an Irish one. Visas are required to visit relatives in the UK or mainland Europe. These visas are expensive, of short duration, and frequently refused.

Access to third level education is inconsistent and may be very costly. Some third-level institutions refuse to allow refugees to attend courses until they have been two years in the country, others don't have this requirement. Some attempt to charge full foreign fees to refugees.

There are long delays in issuing and renewing resident cards. When your passport expires it can be very difficult and expensive to get it renewed at your home country's embassy,

even if there is one in Ireland. If you have been a high-profile government opponent at home it may actually be dangerous to let the embassy know where you are.

People with leave-to-remain

These are people who have not been granted refugee status but have been granted leave to remain for various reasons. The main reason is being the parent of an Irish citizen born before January 2003.

These people have the same problems as refugees with a few additional ones. There is no right to family reunification. Travel outside Ireland is difficult, there is always the risk of being turned back or arrested at border crossings. In addition there are problems with various members of the family having differing educational rights. The Irish citizen child has rights to third-level education denied to her non-Irish brother.

There is a serious and continuing problem in renewing original country documentation. Some countries insist on applicants returning to their home country before renewing a passport. There are strong suspicions of unauthorized payments being demanded in some cases.

People with unclear status

The major group here were approximately 17000 parents and siblings of Irish citizens whose application for leave-to-remain were frozen after the Supreme court decision of January 2003. A process has finally been established to resolve this and it probable that this number will be dramatically reduced by the summer.

There are other people with unclear status such as totally undocumented workers and students that have overstayed their students visa. They work in the black economy and live in a vacuum with a constant fear of deportation. This leads to depression, spouse and family abuse and mental illness.

Asylum-seekers

Asylum-seekers are people whose application for recognition or refugee status is being processed. In 2004 there were 4,265 applications for asylum. 359 of them live on the Direct Provision site in Athlone.

This group of people experience significant and deep poverty. Uniquely among deprived groups in Ireland, this poverty is mandated and enforced by a government department.

Asylum seekers in direct provision get accommodation, food, and a weekly allowance of € 1950 per week for an adult. There has been no increase in this allowance since 1999 when direct provision was first established.

Under the terms of their asylum application asylum-seekers are prohibited from working, running a business, attending third-level education or doing industrial training .

While processing speed has improved since the early days it still can take one year for an application from a non-priority country to be dealt with.

The definition of a refugee shows its origins in the early 1950's. It's much easier to succeed with a claim if you have been persecuted by a government agency. In recent years repressive governments have learned to subcontract their dirty work to 'unofficial' militias such as Arkan's Tigers or the Janjaweed.

Many people who need protection fail to get it because of the highly political definition of refugee status. The 1951 convention does not offer protection to many people who need it. It does not protect victims of the tsunami or other natural disasters or women who are fleeing female genital mutilation or forced marriage.

There seems to be serious mismatches in the application process. Out of 100 people granted refugee status, 75 will have been granted at appeal stage and 25 at first instance application. From an a cost-effective point-of-view this should be the other way around.

Direct provision directly fosters a dependency culture. Boredom is a permanent and all-pervasive condition. Residents are physically and economically isolated from the surrounding community leading to unfounded fears and mutual suspicions.

Conditions in the smaller hostels can be very basic. In some cases six unrelated single people sleep in bunks in the same room. Residents ask for raw food so that they can prepare their own dishes but this is refused.

A direct provision site overloads already-stretched health and community services. Volunteer groups frequently find themselves having to supply state services such as translation and information provision. These groups have serious funding difficulties because funding for Asylum-seeker programs falls between Government departments. Many programs are aimed at people who wish to reenter the workforce and as a result Asylum-seekers are specifically excluded from them.

Conclusions

This is a serious problem, but it is a problem of success, not of failure. For 200 years we have exported our best and brightest children to build the societies of other lands. Now we have people coming here to make a life for themselves and their children.

How we handle this is critical. If we allow an 'insiders' and 'outsiders' society to develop it will cause very serious problems in both the old and the new Irish societies for many

years to come. African culture did not melt in the American melting pot and traveller culture is still outside the Irish mainstream.

I'll conclude by saying that, though this situation is highly unusual for Ireland, we have actually been here before. Various groups have come and made their homes here and have made a great contribution to Irish life. Historically these include German Palatine, French Huguenot and Russian Jewish refugees. The Italian families who came in 1948 to set up fish and chip shops in every little town have made this land their own. The Chilean and Vietnamese refugees of the 1970's have had problems but have made their way.

We can do it again.