

Ethnic Boundaries and Legal Barriers: The Labor Market Experience of Undocumented Irish Workers in New York City

By Mary P. Corcoran

Mary Corcoran is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin and a PhD candidate in Sociology at Columbia University. The following paper on the work experience of illegal immigrants in New York is part of her dissertation research and was presented in May at a conference sponsored by the Center for Immigration and Population Studies, College of Staten Island, CUNY. Ms. Corcoran also participated in the Roundtable's sponsored panel on "Twentieth Century Immigration from Ireland" at the 1987 ACIS conference at Hofstra University.

Not very long ago Irish American scholars were predicting the demise of the Irish as a significant group in America's ethnic mosaic [Moynihan 1970, Fallows 1979, McCaffrey 1976, 1982]. In recent years however, a sharp increase in Irish immigration has revitalized the American Irish community. Since the early 1980s many thousands of Irish people have entered the United States seeking work. Although they enter legally on tourist visas, they stay on illegally to work. In several major American cities, they form part of the army of undocumented workers who find employment in construction, the service industry and as nannies and companions in private homes.

The illegal Irish may be thought of as an invisible population. Unlike the Mexicans who swim the Rio Grande only to be apprehended by immigration agents on the other side, the Irish arrive on jumbo jets, encountering only sporadic difficulties at JFK International Airport. The Irish are not easily identifiable by their racial characteristics, and so far have not come in sufficient numbers to warrant a clampdown by immigration officials. During the period 1980-1986, a total of 56 Irish aliens were deported, the majority of whom had failed to comply with the conditions of non-immigrant status.¹

Notwithstanding their invisibility from the immigration authorities, the new Irish face severe constraints in terms of employment opportunities, mobility, and security of tenure because of their illegal status. Given these constraints, how do they fare in New York City? What prompts their decision to come; how do they cope with life in the city; and what are the effects of illegality on their lives? I am particularly interested in the kinds of social and economic relations which they form with the established Irish community on the onehand, and with American society on the other. The kind of questions outlined above raise the more complex issue of how illegality—which interrupts the processes of adjustment and assimilation—affects ethnicity and ethnic identity. Will the new Irish, like the generations before them, be successfully incorporated into the ethnic community known as Irish America? Or do they constitute a distinct social and cultural group? If it is the case that they are largely a population of sojourners, when and under what conditions, will they return home?

To address these questions, the author is currently engaged in

field research in a Queens neighborhood, where many Irish immigrants have settled in recent years. Standard ethnographic methods are being employed—participant observation, in-depth interviews and research at immigrant organizations and other helping agencies. Ethnographic methods are particularly useful for studying the undocumented, for they enable the researcher to get close to people in their natural social settings, while at the same time creating the opportunity to build trusting relationships with informants over time.



Population Dynamics and Irish Emigration

In most developed societies approximately one fourth of the population are under the age of fifteen. For many historical and social reasons, however, Ireland's population structure more closely resembles that of the less developed countries. Fifty per cent of the country's population is under twenty five years of age, a demographic fact which makes Ireland unique among its partners in the European Community. In recent years, economic stagnation has led to increasingly high unemployment rates [approximately 20%] in both urban and rural areas. As a result, there is a surplus population of young educated people who find they have little choice but to emigrate. Looking beyond the official statistics, an altogether different picture of Irish immigration to the United States emerges.

Current Irish Emigration

It has proven virtually impossible to estimate the exact numbers of illegal Irish immigrants currently resident in the United States. According to a report issued by the United States Catholic Conference in March 1988, there are no more than 44,000 Irish illegals in the US. In contrast, the Irish Bishops' Commission on Emigration contends that up to 135,000 people have left Ireland to work illegally in the US since 1980. It would appear that the actual figure lies somewhere in between, probably nearer to the larger number.

The population of Ireland is 3.5 million. Except for a brief period in the 1960's and early 1970's the country has always had a high level of net outward migration. Data released by the Central Statistics Office [Dublin] in July 1986, show that approximately

(Continued next page)

75,000 more people left the country than entered it during the five years to April 1986. The actual rate of emigration is higher as the net figures issued by the CSO only give the excess in total numbers of emigrants over the number who entered the country, during the same period. The rate of emigration accelerated greatly in recent years, with net outward migration totalling 20,000 in the year to April 1985, and 31,000 in the year to April 1986². Experts have estimated that a further 50,000 would leave the country between April 1986 and April 1987³, and that the same number would leave the country this year⁴. The statistics are not completely reliable however, and many believe that the actual level of emigration is much higher.

More men than women are emigrating from Ireland in the eighties, reversing an historical tradition. Males constitute about 58% of all emigrants between 1981 and 1986. According to Gerry Sexton of the Economic and Social Research Institute [Dublin], one reason may be that men who lose their jobs may decide to emigrate alone leaving their families in Ireland. [My research confirms that this is a relatively common occurrence.] Excluding those who continued in education, Sexton found that 84% of all graduates found employment in Ireland in 1980, but only 64% found employment in 1986. The proportion of unemployed graduates rose to almost 20% during that period, and the proportion who emigrated rose to 17%. These figures would appear to point to a serious brain drain.

According to Sexton, the current rate of emigration equals the rate of natural growth. If the level of emigration continues the population of the Republic of Ireland will go into decline for the first time in twenty-six years.

The Context of the Study

Three major interrelated themes are being examined in this study: why Irish immigrants come to New York, how they adjust, and how illegality affects the quality of their lives. The current level of immigration is the result of a complex interplay of several push and pull factors, and must be examined in the context of the effects of uneven industrial development at home, and the presence of work opportunities and an international Irish ethnic community abroad.

Labor Market Structures and the New Immigrants

I believe that the majority of immigrants do not choose to leave Ireland, but are pushed out by economic forces which are to a certain extent, beyond their control. Structural changes in the international economy in recent years, have facilitated the movement of large numbers of workers from small countries like the Republic of Ireland to the United States.

The susceptibility of the Irish economy to the needs of capital in advanced industrial society has been clearly demonstrated over the last thirty years. The transformation in the performance of the Irish economy after 1958, which resulted in the dramatic downswing in emigration, was contingent on the opening up of the Irish economy to multi-national firms. Tax incentives, springboard markets to Europe, a skilled workforce and the virtual absence of pollution laws were all part of an attractive package offered by the Irish Industrial Development Authority [IDA]. The multi-national companies were quick to respond and many of them

located in Ireland during the sixties and early seventies, bringing a measure of economic prosperity to the country. More recently the policy of attracting foreign investment has run aground. More and more companies, responding to changing economic conditions internationally, have pulled out leaving empty factories and unemployed workers in their wake. In addition, the termination of tax-free incentive programs and the increasingly vociferous labor force, prompted many companies to relocate. These recent experiences suggest a hypothesis which might provide an overview for the current study. While the needs of capital in the sixties and seventies helped keep the Irish workforce at home, the changing needs of capital [exemplified by the expanding informal sectors in the major US cities] are now attracting the Irish workforce abroad.

Portes and Sassen-Koob [1987] posit a structural explanation for the increasing role played by immigrants [cheap labor] in the informal economy of the major cities of the United States. The informal economy includes the garment industry, footwear, construction and the provision of consumer goods and services. The majority of new Irish immigrants in New York find employment in the informal sector: jobs in small construction firms, as service staff in family-owned restaurants and bars, and as providers of childminding and companion services in private homes. All of these jobs are characterized by the fact that employment conditions fall outside the regulatory apparatus governing tax, health, safety and minimum wage laws. The Irish remain concentrated in the informal sectors of the economy because they lack the documentation that would ease their access to the formal sector. Although better educated than previous generations of Irish immigrants, they have little or no job mobility, and even less job opportunity.

Factors influencing the decision to come

Raised in the heady days of the sixties and early seventies, this generation of educated young people was to symbolize Ireland's coming of age. Instead, they have become a generation of immigrants fleeing rising unemployment rates, economic retrenchment, and the politics of austerity.

In contrast to what I had expected when I initially embarked on the study, the majority of those interviewed were not unemployed when they left Ireland. Nevertheless, the reasons they cite for leaving are largely economic. Those who had jobs complain bitterly about the oppressive tax system which they say destroyed any incentive to work. They can still quote to the last penny the percentage of their weekly wage appropriated by the government. For some immigrants, this early aversion to excessive taxation develops into a pattern of tax evasion in the host country. Many who work without documentation do not pay taxes or social security contributions. They come to accept, and to a certain extent expect, this sort of arrangement. As one informant put it:

"I don't think it is illegal to work here off the books when you are just cheating the IRS."

Thus, when some people are presented with the opportunity of working legally through sponsorship or a Donnelly visa (see note page 10) they may choose not to avail of the option. Some prefer to work off the books rather than earn "dead money" even if it means foregoing union and other benefits. Part of the problem

(Continued next page)

stems from the transitory nature of their lives here. Few can visualize where they will be five years from now. Lacking the documents and legal status which would allow for some forward planning, people tend to see their sojourn here as temporary in nature. Hence, there is little rationale for paying taxes and social security contributions, the benefits of which may never be realized.

Professional and skilled workers who lost their jobs in Ireland, rejected the welfare system and saw emigration as the only viable alternative. One recent immigrant from Kildare remembers the demoralization of the unemployment office:

"The worst part was meeting people I had known from school on the same line. Although I was entitled to the dole, I couldn't bear to collect it and so I stopped going after a few weeks."

A twenty-three year old Belfast girl, whose father is also an illegal alien living in the metropolitan area, had this to say:

"My father is only 52 years old but he was terminally unemployed. The two of us would go down to the dole office together. That was no life. The simple fact is that he can get work here, but he can't get it at home."

Those who had a business or attempted to set up a business in Ireland point to the absence of an environment supportive of initiative or creativity. As one informant put it:

"Ireland is a cultural straitjacket; people who take the initiative at home are either laughed at or scorned."

Several remarked that their potential was not being fully utilized at home, and they wanted a new challenge. These are the people who are looking for a better way of life—admired by family and friends for "having the guts to leave."

While the majority of my informants fall into this category, I believe there are at least two other kinds of immigrants. One group is very definitely composed of sojourners. These are the immigrants who come from relatively well-off middle class families, who stand to inherit a farm or a small business when they return home. They see their time here as an extended working holiday, a period for sowing wild oats before settling down to adulthood and its attendant responsibilities. If they happen to make some money along the way, then it is an added bonus. The third category is largely composed of economic casualties from Ireland's rural and urban working classes. These are people who tried unsuccessfully to secure employment at home. Many of them have left their families behind as they desperately struggle to fulfill their roles as breadwinners. While their standard of living may have improved somewhat in New York, they are still very much on the margins of a society where opportunity and the right kind of breaks continue to elude them. Still others [and this is a cross-class phenomena] have emigrated as a way of dealing [or not dealing] with personal problems such as a broken marriage, family violence, infidelity or a death in the family. As one immigrant activist remarked:

"There are many lost souls in this city. People come over in

Note: In January 1987, 10,000 special visas, often referred to as "Donnelly visas" after the Congressman who initiated the scheme, were offered through a lottery system to citizens of the 36 countries which have been traditional sources of emigration to the United States. Unlike normal visas, these special visas did not require applicants to have special skills which are in short supply in the US, or to have a job offer from a US employer. Over 3,000 Irish citizens were successful in obtaining these visas.

not the best of circumstances. . . they don't even have to justify it anymore. The question more likely is 'Why don't you go?'"

The bitterness about being forced to leave translates into disillusionment with the political system. In general the immigrants do not believe that Irish politicians have the political will or vision to tackle the country's problems. Ironically, members of this generation who might have been a force for change, have forfeited their voting rights by leaving, yet do not enjoy the rights of citizenship in the country where they now reside.

Adjustment: Getting a Job

The majority of immigrants rely heavily on family members, relatives and friends of friends during their initial period of adjustment. Relations between the new Irish and the established Irish

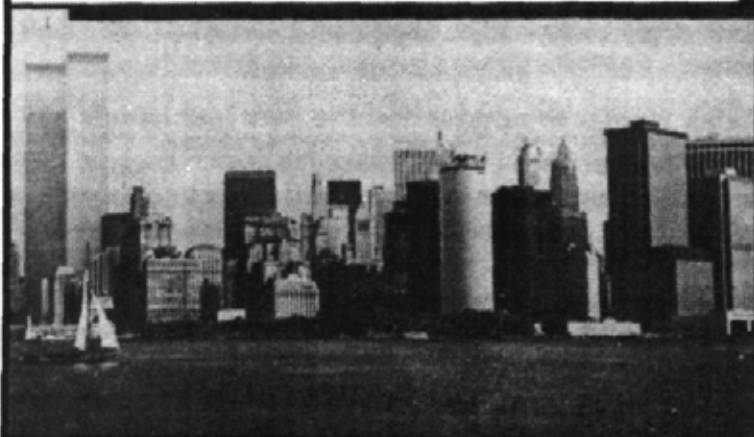


THE CITY OF
NEW YORK



HARRISON J. GOLDIN
COMPTROLLER

GUIDE FOR IRISH IMMIGRANTS



In 1988, NYC issued a "Guide for Irish Immigrants". It was prepared in conjunction with the Irish Immigration Working Committee, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Irish-American Labor Coalition, the Irish Immigration Reform Movement, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York and the Consulate General of the Republic of Ireland; and with the cooperation of the New York City Office of Immigrant Affairs.

(Continued next page)

community in New York are characterized by both co-operation and conflict. Given the tightness of the labor market, Irish American contacts are nearly always crucial for securing the initial foothold. The vast majority of new arrivals have gotten their first break through the contacts of an established Irish, or Irish American relative or friend. The most coveted contacts are those in the construction unions or in the Gaelic sports network. A union card does not confer a right to work but grants a certain amount of security of tenure. In addition, the benefits of medical coverage and insurance are a distinct advantage. Several of the construction unions are still run by the Irish, and with the right accent and cash up front, union membership can be obtained.

The Irish American construction network and recreation network are closely enmeshed, a factor which works in favor of an elite cadre of immigrants. An immigrant who can prove himself on the football or hurling fields is virtually assured a well-paid job in construction. Indeed, in some cases this is used as an enticement to emigrate. The way in which these networks operate harks back to the kind of clientelistic relations which still pervade Irish culture. In the same way as politicians secured jobs for people in exchange for their electoral support in the past, present day Irish Americans offer jobs to youngsters who can play vicariously for them on the sports field. Thus, the deep-rooted loyalty of Irish Americans to their county or origin, is given expression in the competitive football and hurling games which culminate in the September finals at Gaelic Park each year.

The new Irish are generally regarded as willing and compliant workers, but their illegal status creates a situation where they can be more easily exploited by unscrupulous employers. Several examples of such exploitation have come to light in the course of my research. Undocumented construction workers are often paid at a lower rate than other unionized and non-unionized workers, although they are all doing the same tasks. Employers may form cartels to lower their labor costs. According to one informant, five construction outfits [three of whom were Irish] in a New Jersey city got together and decided to fix wages. They dropped the carpenters pay from \$100 to \$80 per day; and laborers from \$80 to \$60 per day. The informant called a meeting of his co-workers exhorting them to withhold their labor until they got the right price, but nobody wanted to rock the boat. The general sentiment was that if they protested the employers might turn them into the INS. Another informant who has been working with an Irish construction firm, specializing in the removal of hazardous substances, has this to say:

"On the job they try to cheat you out of your lunch break and your coffee break. If they give you an hour, they try to take it back somewhere along the line. They constantly expose the workers, who are all illegal aliens, to hazardous substances but if you complain you are out the door. I raised some objections before Christmas about not getting paid the proper overtime rates, and not having enough protective material, and I haven't been called into work since."

At several of the meetings of the Irish Immigration Reform Movement [an organization which is lobbying for legalization of illegals who came to the country after 1982] it was pointed out by lawyers and others present that workers were being allowed to go on scaffolding in dangerous weather, even though they had no insurance

coverage for injuries received at work. Irish nannies report that they are paid less than a minimum wage for a twelve hour day. The job description tends to expand once they take up residence in the household. Apart from infringements of their privacy, some have had their personal belongings confiscated and have been threatened with the INS if they raise objections.

Illegality intensifies dependence on patrons and power brokers in the established Irish community. As undocumented workers the Irish are dependent on employers who won't ask awkward questions. Hence they gravitate toward Irish contractors and the Irish-owned bars and restaurants. The employer may hire and fire at his discretion, for his employees have no recourse under the law. Dependence on clientelistic relations for survival contributes to the heightened parochialism among the new Irish community. The greater the extent of the clientelism, the more difficult it will be for the illegals to organize around their own interests. Perhaps this is why the IIRM has had problems mobilizing mass support among the new Irish.

A related effect of illegality is to foster informal support systems within the immigrant neighborhoods themselves. The institutional means of support, to which illegals have little or no access, are replaced by informal intra-group support systems. These informal networks may take the form of lending one another money until payday, tipping each other off about jobs, and sharing accommodation to cut down on living expenses. The new immigrants also make use of the check cashing facilities offered by bars in the ethnic neighborhoods. Several fund-raisers have been organized in New York City to finance medical treatment for young Irish people stricken with tragic illnesses or accidents while working here. In addition, the Catholic Church through its outreach agency, Catholic Charities, has begun to play an instrumental role in the provision of services such as medical and legal aid, which would not otherwise be available.

Closely tied through their economic relations, there is considerable social and cultural distance between the new Irish and the old. The new Irish grew up with a strong sense of entitlement in a country which would be unrecognizable to many of the older immigrants. Many of the Irish Americans balk at the "rudeness and arrogance" of these street-wise immigrants who "don't seem to know their place." The misunderstanding works in both directions, however. The new Irish are skeptical about the image of the old country which feeds the dreams of the American Irish. They feel that the symbolic representation of Ireland in the hearts and minds of many Irish Americans bears little relation to the country they themselves have left behind.

Impact of Illegality

The illegal status of the new Irish in New York is a structural condition which has important consequences for the process of adjustment and assimilation. Illegal status may alter the self identity and group identity of the immigrant, leading to a redefinition of Irish identity. Does illegal status make people more or less likely to claim their Irish identity? Does interaction with the older Irish community make for ethnic solidarity or ethnic fragmentation?

My population is unique in the sense that I am dealing with an immigrant group which, speaking English, ought to have a much

(Continued next page)

easier time moving out of the ethnic enclaves and ghettos—but which is also illegal and thus limited in how much assimilation can be carried out. To a great extent this is a population of “unwilling sojourners”—people who are unable to make more than a temporary commitment to the host society because of their untenable legal position. Although culturally the new Irish may Americanize successfully over time, their illegal status implies that their social and economic relations are different.

Several people speak about the “barrier of paranoia” which goes with being an illegal alien in New York City. The new Irish crowd into low-rent neighborhoods in Queens and the Bronx which were Irish strongholds before the flight of the older ethnic groups to the suburbs. Now the Irish find that they must share their turf with the Hispanic and Asian communities. Despite the heterogeneity of the neighborhoods, the new Irish in New York remain a community apart, retaining ties only with those who are trusted or known. They mix almost exclusively with other Irish people, although even within this tight-knit community strong regional loyalties emerge. Social life is mainly confined to bars where people can watch videos of Irish news and sports, and listen to Irish music. On Saturday and Sunday mornings the Irish import stores do a roaring trade in bacon, sausages and brown bread. The national and local parish pump newspapers from Ireland are snatched up as soon as they are delivered to the bars on Monday night. Within the sprawling metropolis we know as New York, these young people have succeeded in creating a community which is more aggressively Irish and parochial in character than many of the villages and towns they left behind. The unfortunate consequence of this insularity is that some of the immigrants develop racist attitudes to those outside of the community.

The rootlessness of the Irish illegals results in a present rather than a future orientation. People live day-to-day, they tend not to plan ahead, and few can envisage where they will be five years from now. The transitory nature of their lives has implications for both personal and social relations. Most people remark that they see America as a country of acquaintances and they still retain strong ties with friends in Ireland. Both women and men comment on the difficulty of forming a relationship or making a real commitment when they are unsure if they are going to be able to stay. As a result, sexual encounters tend to be casual.

Normal routines of everyday life are denied to the illegal alien. He cannot open a bank account legitimately, cannot obtain medical coverage for accidents, and cannot easily obtain a driver's license. If he witnesses an accident or is involved in an accident he fears going forward. If he is mugged or injured he may be afraid to seek the help of the police. For help and advice he must turn inward to his own trusted group. Hence the importance of maintaining ties with your own.

Two recent innovations within the new Irish community have gone some way toward breaking down the “barrier of paranoia” which defines the lives of the illegals. Firstly, the Irish Immigration Reform Movement [IIRM] was established in May 1987, to lobby for immigration reform and to provide help and assistance to Irish illegals. At regular monthly meetings they disseminate information on all aspects of the immigration problem, and provide a forum for discussion. Guest speakers have included representatives of the police department, representatives from other ethnic groups,

officials from Harrison Goldin's office, and several immigration lawyers. The IIRM also operates a hotline.

Since its inception, the varied organizations in the Irish American community have rallied around the IIRM. Illegal immigration is not as contentious an issue as Northern Ireland. The Irish American community has found itself with a cause which unites all its constituent bodies and creates the potential for the rebirth of the Irish lobby as a force among other ethnic groups.

Secondly, the *Irish Voice*, a new ethnic newspaper which arrived on the newsstands in December 1987, has become a firm favorite among the new Irish community. In its strongly worded first editorial the newspaper committed itself to fight for the legalization of the new Irish. Stating that “there is no greater issue confronting the Irish American community in the present than the one of illegality”, the editorial stressed that the issue needs to be addressed “clearly, forthrightly and without equivocation.”

Little or no research has addressed the issue of Irish ethnicity in recent years. My own view is that the ‘imminent demise of Irish identity’ thesis was premature. One of the major reasons advanced for the decline of the Irish as a powerful ethnic group was the decline in Irish immigration. No one anticipated the renewal of mass emigration from Ireland in the nineteen eighties, and the influx of thousands of young Irish people into the ethnic enclaves of the East Coast. On the one hand, the newcomers offer the potential for revitalizing the Irish ethnic identity. On the other hand, their wetback status poses a threat to the respectability of the established Irish American community. The fact that this new generation of Irish immigrants are illegal, sets them apart from previous generations. They are at once exiles from the land of their birth, and aliens in the land of adoption. How illegality interacts with ethnicity, and what effects that produces will be explored further as I go on with this study.

REFERENCES:

- Blessing, Patrick J. “The Irish” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980
- Fallows, Majorie *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1979
- McCaffrey, Lawrence *The Irish Diaspora in America* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976; and “The recent Irish diaspora in America” in D.L. Cuddy [ed] *Contemporary American Immigration* Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982
- Moynihan, Daniel P. “The Irish” in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan [eds] *Beyond the Melting Pot* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970
- Portes, Alejandro and Saskia Sassen-Koob. “Making it Underground: Comparative Material on the Informal Sector in Western Market Economies” in *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 93 Number 1 [July 1987] pp 30-61

FOOTNOTES

1. *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*, 1986.
2. *Irish Times*, July 24, 1986.
3. *Sunday Independent*, July 27, 1986.
4. *Irish Voice*, April 9, 1988.
5. *Ibid.*, December 5, 1987.