



Next Generation of Irish America

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The Irish Abroad Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*

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Fig 1: Describe Ireland in one word.

Table of contents

Key Findings.....	4
Introduction.....	7
Sources and Methodology.....	10
Irish America in the New York Metropolitan Area.....	14
Demographics of Survey Respondents.....	19
Contact with Ireland.....	23
Organizations and Networks.....	28
Culture and Sport.....	31
Education.....	40
Social and Political Perspectives.....	44
Perceptions and Values.....	51
Identity.....	55
Conclusion.....	62
Recommendations.....	64
The Research Team.....	66
Acknowledgements.....	67

Key findings

- 781 survey responses and 41 in-depth interviews produced very fresh data and commentary on what it means to be young and of Irish descent in America today. This is the first such study of this younger (18-30) generation. It provides valuable insights at a time when there are signs of erosion and disconnection in the Irish diaspora in the US.
- 67% of respondents are 3rd generation or older. They are examples of “late generation ethnicity” – this refers to an ethnic formation that reaches back many generations in the US and is not being replenished from the country of origin. This “lateness” significantly colours their perspectives on Irish identity.
- These later generations may have multiple ethnic identifications, with Irish only one strand. This is an increasingly common feature of American identity as the US moves towards being a “minority majority” society.
- They are a diverse, fragmented populace, dispersed socially, geographically and virtually (with no singular online communities). This differentiation presents challenges for those designing diaspora engagement (and for researchers).
- Of those surveyed almost 60% hold a first degree or higher, and 38% are currently students. The people surveyed and interviewed constitute a highly educated cohort and this is in line with the maturation of the Irish diaspora within mainstream middle-class America.
- Their connectivity with Ireland is patchy. Over 50 % of those surveyed have not been to Ireland and only 31% maintain close communications, while use of Internet and social media to engage Irish content is infrequent. There is a need to develop social media outreach in ways that are targeted towards and responsive to the perspectives and platforms of young Irish in the US.
- 85% of respondents are not members of an Irish (American) organization or network, and only 9% perceive Irishness as very important to their networking. The traditional Irish organizations and networks in the US have few young members. The newer, mostly professional organizations and networks show signs of growth and have younger membership, though mostly Irish-born. There is a need for fresh ideas about how to engage younger Irish in the US on their own terms.
- While connectivity and networking are seemingly weak, there are strong vectors and indices of Irish identity among respondents. 37% identify as Irish American, another 24% identify as Irish and another ethnicity, and 55% indicated their sense of Irish identity was very strong or strong. These figures underline both the constancy of an Irish identity through the generations but also signify its profoundly symbolic and ephemeral nature.

- Irish ethnic identity in the US is increasingly symbolic, a matter of choice rather than need or circumstance. For the younger generation, this sense of choice is often felt keenly in relation to their maturation and life choices.
- This “symbolic ethnicity” is key to understanding the identity formation of young Irish in America today. Because the ties to Ireland and Irishness are more symbolic than material does not necessarily mean they are weak; rather, symbolic ethnicity refers us to the terrain of identity formation, the psychological, affective and ideological investments in Irishness as an element of identity.
- Culture is without doubt the key terrain on which to engage young Irish America but, as with media, this requires understanding of how tastes and interests shift and the optimal platforms and types of engagement. While that engagement can draw on an impressive canon of Irish culture that is still recognized and valued in the US it should also be adventurous and creative in divining newer cultural energies with particular appeal to younger audiences.
- 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. 93% of respondents said they would be interested in studying Irish history and culture, evidencing a strong appetite for study - there should be investigation of what kinds of platforms and programmes could feed it. Several interviewees suggested an immersive programme in Ireland for diaspora youth (similar to Israel’s Taglit programme) would have appeal in the US, and others noted that volunteer programmes or projects in Ireland would be appealing to them.
- 70% of respondents are liberal/progressive (only 15% conservative), reflected in their views on contemporary political and social matters, including immigration (83% said it is good for the US). Without reducing it to political ideology or tribe, there is a need to recognise this progressive worldview of young Irish in the US today in designing diaspora engagement.
- Respondents and interviewees had overwhelmingly strong, positive images and perceptions of Ireland. Family and community are at the core of these perceptions, suggesting Ireland represents an alternative realm of social connectedness to that experienced by young Irish in contemporary America. Those involved in diaspora engagement should consider how to articulate an appealing value exchange relevant to young Irish in the US, to show that Ireland in different ways meets the need for community and the desire to do something meaningful.



Introduction

The Clinton Institute at University College Dublin in collaboration with Glucksman Ireland House at New York University conducted research on young people (18-30 years old) of Irish descent in the New York metropolitan area. This research project was initiated in January 2019 and completed in October 2019.

The primary aim of the research project is to advance analysis of the identity formations of this “next generation” of Americans of Irish descent. It seeks to provide fresh knowledge that will be useful both to scholars and policymakers, and that may inform the Irish Government’s strategic objectives in engaging the diaspora in the US. The primary objective of the project is to engage in field research in New York, with particular focus on selected communities, organisations and networks in the city and metropolitan area. This involves primary data gathering via an online survey and interviews in the field with individuals and focus groups. In all, 781 survey responses have been submitted and 41 interviews recorded and transcribed.

The research provides fresh insights about the perspectives of younger generations of Irish in the US. This is especially important in maintaining a strong relationship between home country and diaspora at a time when there are signs of erosion and displacement in the relations. The research underscores the perceptions and worldviews of younger Irish, including their views of contemporary Ireland and what they identify and connect with in terms of Irish culture and identity.

The research follows on from an earlier collaboration between Clinton Institute and Glucksman Ireland House in 2017, which created online surveys of Irish America, via Irish Central, that have provided substantial and fresh data.¹ Those surveys took in a wide sampling of Irish in the US. The current study builds on this but with a more focused attention on a young generation and within a specific region. It also uses in-depth interviews to supplement and extend the survey responses. As such, it functions more as an immersive case-study of a defined population. Certainly, it is the first detailed study of this younger generation of people of Irish descent in the US.

An important context for the research 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.²

1. There were two surveys sourced via *Irish Central*, the first in February 2017, which had 3,100 responses, and the second in September 2017, which was aimed at “adults under the age of 45” and had 1,368 responses. See: <https://www.irishcentral.com/news/community/what-do-irish-americans-want-read-our-exclusive-survey>; <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/facebook-most-popular-way-for-young-irish-americans-to-explore-identity-1.3262240>.

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

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 2017 American Community Survey records 31.4 million Irish Americans.³ 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 2015, just 1,607 Irish-born people obtained legal permanent residency.

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.⁴

Our survey reflected this aging of Irish America, with 67% of respondents 3rd generation or older and only 3% born in Ireland. The younger generation of Americans of Irish descent that we study here are also "late generation" in historical terms. Their Irish identity is somewhat attenuated as a result of historical distance but also due to the inevitable and complex patterns of dispersal and intermarriage across the generations, reshaping their sense of ethnic identity. Today, they are illustrative of the more general move towards a "minority majority" society in the US, wherein "questions of boundaries and overlapping identities continue to grow only more nuanced and complex."⁵

The late generations' distance from Ireland is not only temporal but also spatial - over 50 % of those surveyed have not been to Ireland. And yet 37% identify as Irish American, another 24% identify as Irish and another ethnicity, and 55% indicated their sense of Irish identity was very strong or strong. These figures underline both the constancy of an Irish identity through the generations but also signify its profoundly symbolic nature. Young Americans do not need to have any material ties with or have visited Ireland in order to claim an Irish identity and at the same time many see it as but one strand of a multiple ethnic identity. Many of the interviewees were conscious of this multiplicity and flexibility of identity. One of them referred to his "four ethnic heritages, Irish, French Canadian, and Hungarian...when I go to Montreal I feel French, when I go to Ireland I feel Irish." Another interviewee observed, "my Irishness makes me different, it gives me a more specific identity, it is part of the type of American I am."

This "symbolic ethnicity" is key to understanding the identity formation of young Irish in America today. Because the ties to Ireland and Irishness are more symbolic than material does not necessarily mean they are weak; rather, symbolic ethnicity refers us to the terrain of identity formation, the psychological, affective and ideological investments in Irishness as an element of identity.

It should be noted that this research took place during a time of political and social turmoil in the US and this is occasionally apparent in survey responses and certainly inflected many of the conversations in interviews. This is not surprising as ethnic identity is often reflective or refractive of contemporary socio-political environments of the present as well as dependent on socio-political narratives of the past. It is instructive to see the ways in which this interaction is articulated by young Americans when they speak of their Irish identity.

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

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

5. Richard Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 165.



Irish America Survey 2019

July 23 · 🌐



Are you between 18-30, have Irish ancestry, and live in the Tri-State area? We want to hear from you! UCD, NYU, & the Irish government are working together to better understand Irish identity in America. Click the link to have your voice heard! <https://bit.ly/2VMDPhI>

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16,490

People Reached

595

Engagements

Boost Again

Boosted on Jul 23, 2019

By Sara Aitken

Completed

People Reached

16.0K

Link Clicks

488

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Molly Shannon, Daniel Baxter and 14 others

8 Comments 4 Shares



Like



Comment



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Sources and Methodology

The research includes primary data gathering in the field – among selected Irish communities in the New York metropolitan area – via an online 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 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 the New York region, including civil society organisations, service providers, educators, professional organisations, and other stake-holders. We also conducted interviews and field research with individuals and focus groups of selected young people of Irish descent. We conducted 41 in-depth individual interviews and two group interviews in the region between June and September 2019. 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.⁶

Individual interviews allowed subjects to range in discussion, while structured via questions on their Irish background, connectivity to Ireland, cultural engagement, education, socio-political perspectives, and views of Ireland. There were two group interviews with students of Irish descent. The first at Queens College in Queens, NY, involved 8 students. The second at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT, involved 14 students. These interviews were more free-form, facilitated by the Principal Investigator, and designed to allow the subjects to discuss issues among themselves.

In addition to the interviews, we designed and distributed an online survey via Qualtrix of 61 questions designed to capture information on demographics, organisations and networks, cultural engagement, social political perspectives, and identity. In order to target a young Irish-American audience through social media, the research team created an educational Facebook page titled “Irish America Survey 2019.” Through this page, two posts were made to gain the interest of Irish-Americans with a link to our survey. The specific demographic of respondents

6. 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; measures were taken to ensure informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

that we chose to engage were people aged between 18 and 30, live in New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut, and had Ireland among their interests. The first boost was successful in reaching over 2,300 people with 123 clicks to survey. The second boost was successful in reaching over 16,000 people with 488 clicks to the survey. In both boosts, those engaging in the greatest numbers included women as well as people residing in New York. On the whole, the engagements from using boosts on our Facebook posts resulted in an increase of several hundred respondents to our survey.

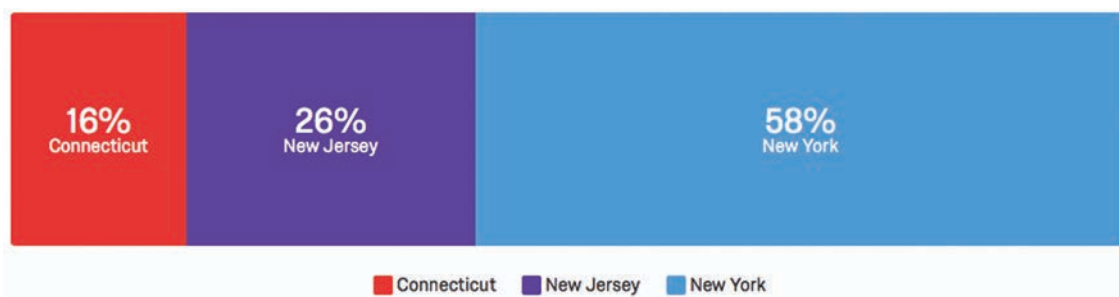
The survey received 781 responses. It has been analysed using statistical software once data collection was completed in August 2019. The results are used here in combination with our in-depth qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive and contemporary understanding of the next generation of Irish America.

It is important to note that the survey and interviews are skewed in terms of the demographics of respondents. Irish organisations and service providers were instrumental in initial dissemination of the survey and in accessing interviewees in the region. It is also evident that many of the cohort are already self-identifying as Irish and engaged with Irish community matters. That noted, it must be added that the great majority of the survey responses were generated via social media and not via Irish organisations and service providers and that many of the interviews were also sourced via social media and snowballing communications with interviewees and survey respondents.

That there is significant diversity and breadth in the responses is evidenced in part by the range of generations responding as well as by the fact that only 15% of those surveyed are members of an Irish organization or network. (In this regard, the survey and interviews may be considered more inclusive in scope than the Irish Central sourced surveys in 2017 which were more clearly skewed by polling readers of this leading Irish American news site).

There is also some regional skewing with the data and interviews. Although the project reached out to young people of Irish descent in the New York metropolitan area, the majority of respondents were from or based in New York.

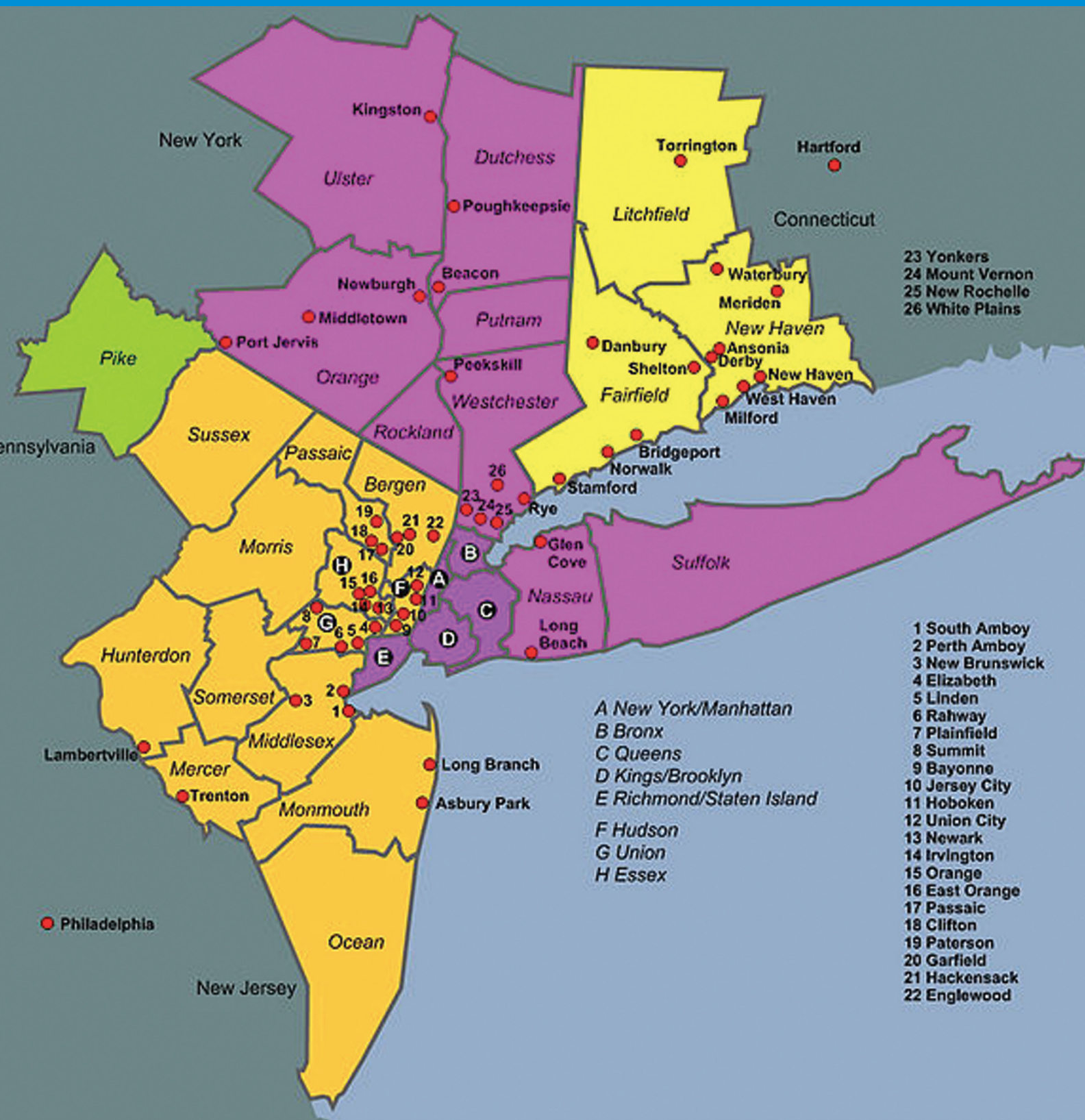
Fig. 2: In which state do you live?



This reflects, in part, the filtering of access via Irish organisations and networks that are denser in this area, and also the snowballing of interest among respondents in this area. It may also reflect a more immediate or intensified interest in Irish identity within dense urban environments, which a few interviewees commented upon.

Notwithstanding such skews, the survey provides invaluable information about the basic demographics and perspectives of young people of Irish descent in the New York region, 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 young 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. The challenge is significant for empirical research, as the researchers quickly discovered in setting out to source and engage young subjects who are dispersed socially, geographically and virtually, with few communal or connective elements. This challenge was further enhanced due to the ephemeral nature of the late generation sense of Irish identity.



Irish America in the New York Metropolitan Area

The New York metropolitan area has long been one of the most populous and popular areas of Irish settlement in the US. In the 19th century the city of New York was a magnet to many mostly impoverished Irish emigrants, as were albeit on a much smaller scale a number of cities such as Newark (called Irishtown in the late 1700s) in the region. From emigrant destitution they built parish-based communities and developed powerful footholds in urban trades and politics. In 1890, the Irish made up approximately 22% of the population of New York. In the twentieth century many of their descendants moved to the suburbs and interiors of New York state, New Jersey and Connecticut. They did so as part of a deeper process of assimilation that included rising standards of living and intermarriage, as well as movement away from the Catholic Church and from nationalist affiliations. It is a familiar enough narrative pattern of ethnic assimilation that can be told about other parts of the US and about other groups, but there are nonetheless distinctive features to the Irish story in the New York metropolitan area.⁷

In the twenty-first century the numbers of Irish people claiming Irish descent in the New York region have fallen, reflecting the interlinked assimilation and suburbanization processes, and also the relatively fewer new emigrants from Ireland.

Fig. 3: Population of Irish Ancestry in New York State⁸

Year	Irish Ancestry	% of Total Population
2000	2,451,042	12.9%
2010	2,509,092	12.9%
2017	2,201,422	11.1%

Fig. 4: Population of Irish Ancestry in New Jersey⁹

Year	Irish Ancestry	% of Total Population
2000	1,335,535	15.9%
2010	1,335,209	15.2%
2017	1,203,607	13.4%

7. See: Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996); Marta Mestrovic Deyrup and Maura Grace Harrington, eds., *The Irish-American Experience in New Jersey and Metropolitan New York* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

8. The 2000 figure is from the 2010 US Census. The 2010 and 2017 figures are from the American Community Survey.

9. The 2000 figure is from the 2010 US Census. The 2010 and 2017 figures are from the American Community Survey.

Fig. 5: Population of Irish Ancestry in Connecticut¹⁰

Year	Irish Ancestry	% of Total Population
2000	565,290	16.6%
2010	595,804	16.7%
2017	546,383	15.2%

Using the 2010 US National Census as a baseline for the state populations of Irish ancestry, we see each have reducing populations – each dropped by around 10% between 2010 and 2017. This is in line with the percentage of reduction in numbers in the national polling on Irish ancestry. While New York state maintains a much higher population of Irish, both New Jersey and Connecticut have higher Irish percentages of the total state populations.

New York City remains by far the most populous Irish ancestry city in the region (though with a more precipitous reduction than the state populations from a 1980 baseline).

Fig. 6: Population of Irish Ancestry in New York City¹¹

Year	Irish Ancestry	% of Total Population
1980	647,733	9.1%
1990	535,846	7.3%
2000	420,810	5.3%
2010	414,943	5.1%
2017	371,354	4.3%

Fig. 7: Population of Irish Ancestry in New York City by Borough in 2010 and 2017¹²

	2010	2017
Bronx	33,738	23,605
Brooklyn	89,985	95,370
Manhattan	118,141	111,226
Queens	110,930	88,389
Staten Island	-	52,764

All but one of the boroughs reflect the steady decline in numbers. About one third of those claiming Irish ancestry in the 1990 census lived in Queens; in 2017 that number is 24%. The exception to decline is Brooklyn with a notable if not substantial incline, perhaps reflecting the movement there of younger Irish including newer arrivals.

10. The 2000 figure is from the 2010 US Census. The 2010 and 2017 figures are from the American Community Survey.

11. American Community Survey.

12. 2017 American Community Survey – C04006: People Reporting Ancestry: New York City and Boroughs.

Only a few city neighbourhoods registered substantial Irish populations in the recent census figures, with the largest being Breezy Point/Rockaway Point in Queens with a 54.3% Irish population – the only neighbourhood in the US that has a majority-Irish population.¹³ Woodside in Queens and Woodlawn in the Bronx have also maintained significant Irish presence and identity into the present day.

The 2017 American Community Survey showed the largest concentrations of Irish in the New York metropolitan area were settled in Suffolk County in Long Island, followed by Nassau County, also in Long Island, New Jersey's Bergen County and Monmouth, and New York's Rockland and Westchester. All had larger numbers of Irish residents than New York City boroughs. In Connecticut the county with the largest percentage of people claiming Irish ancestry is Tolland County.

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. In many instances the signs and landmarks of Irishness in urban environments are partially erased as ethnic secession has resulted in areas once Irish now populated by Hispanic, African Americans and other incoming groups. This polyglot urbanism is most pronounced in New York City though evident across the three states. For instance, Kearny, New Jersey used to be a significant Scottish/Irish enclave and is now heavily populated by Hispanic immigrants. However, a Scottish butcher, Irish shop, and both Irish and Scottish heritage clubs still remain. There remains a visible Irish presence in the New York metropolitan area in terms of ethnic organisations, networks, public celebrations, and study programmes, though there are signs of decline in these - see the next section of this report.

The numbers of Irish-born in the New York region have also fallen. In 2017 the number of Irish-born immigrants in New York state numbered 28,007 (0.6%). Between 1980-2017 the number of Irish-born in New York City has gone from 42,000 to 12,227, with the largest portion (5,119) in Queens.¹⁴

The last major influx of Irish emigrants to the region was in the 1990s as people sought to leave an economically impoverished Ireland at that time. Many would overstay their visas and become "undocumented," leading lives askant from settled Irish communities in the region. Irish community centres were established, partially funded by the Irish government, to provide support for the Irish immigrants in need. These "New Irish" as they came to be called brought fresh cultural ideas and energies and have been associated with a cultural revival in Irish America that was national but with a New York hub. They also represented forms of Irishness that were sometimes in tension with settled Irish Americans, perhaps most visibly signified by protests around issues of inclusivity and the New York St Patricks Day Parade.

13. "Where Are the Most Irish Cities and Towns in the USA?," *Irish Central* (11 October 2019), <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/genealogy/most-irish-cities-usa>.

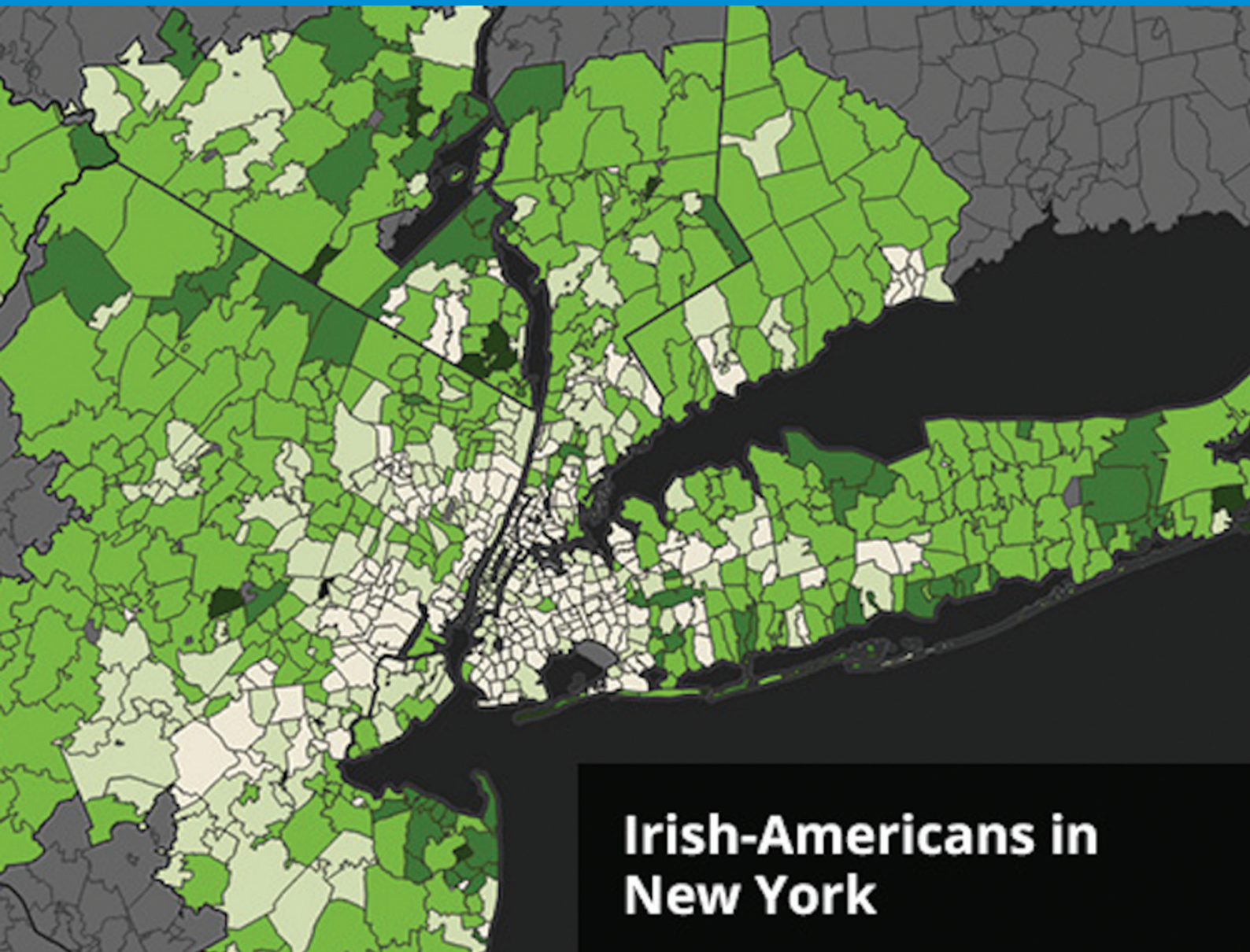
14. "Population and Geography: New York City," 2017, Baruch College, CUNY, <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/population-geography/foreign-birthcountry.htm>.



Fig. 8: McLean Avenue, Woodlawn, The Bronx.

Since the 1990s the numbers of new Irish emigrants in New York 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. Those who have moved to and settled in the city have tended to be well-educated and cosmopolitan in outlook, taking up management and professional jobs. Many settle in the central city and do not mix very directly or consciously with Irish American communities or organisations, though some engage in sporting activities. They are not replenishing traditional Irish organisations and institutions, both because they are small in number but also because these do not offer them meaningful forms of community.

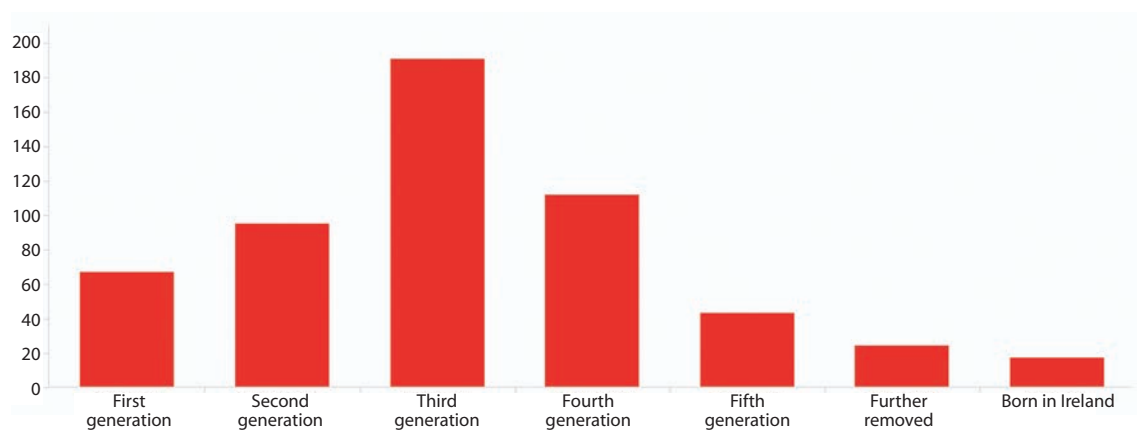
An unsurprising result of the patterns of settlement, assimilation, upward mobility, suburbanisation and restricted emigration is that there are different forms of Irish identity in the New York region, just as there are across the US today. As we surveyed and interviewed young people of Irish descent we encountered many of these differences, both in their individual stories and their broader perspectives.



Demographics

As noted, the majority of survey respondents and interviewees were “late generation” and this is an especially important factor in their sense of Irish identity.

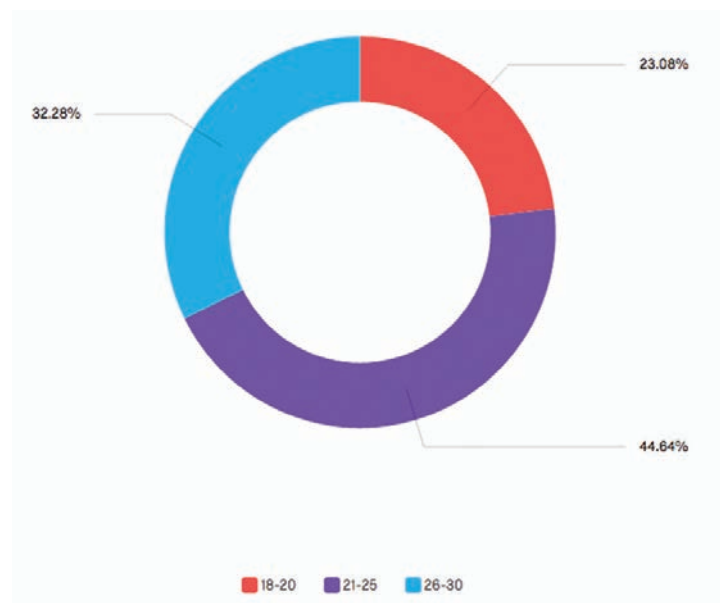
Fig. 9: If the term “first generation” refers to children born of an emigrant from Ireland, what generation Irish are you?



67% of the respondents are 3rd generation and older and only 3% were born in Ireland.

All respondents were aged between 18 and 30, as stipulated by the survey and interview criteria. We did not request individual ages but rather age bands, seen below, with almost 45% of respondents in the 26-30 band. Almost two-thirds, 62.5%, are female, a surprising figure and one we do not have any clear reasons to explain. 83% are single and almost 94% do not have children.

Fig.10: What is your age band?



Asked about employment and education, the responses are in line with national documentation on people with Irish ancestry, recording relatively high indicators of occupational and educational attainments among white ethnic groups in the US.

Fig. 11: Employment status

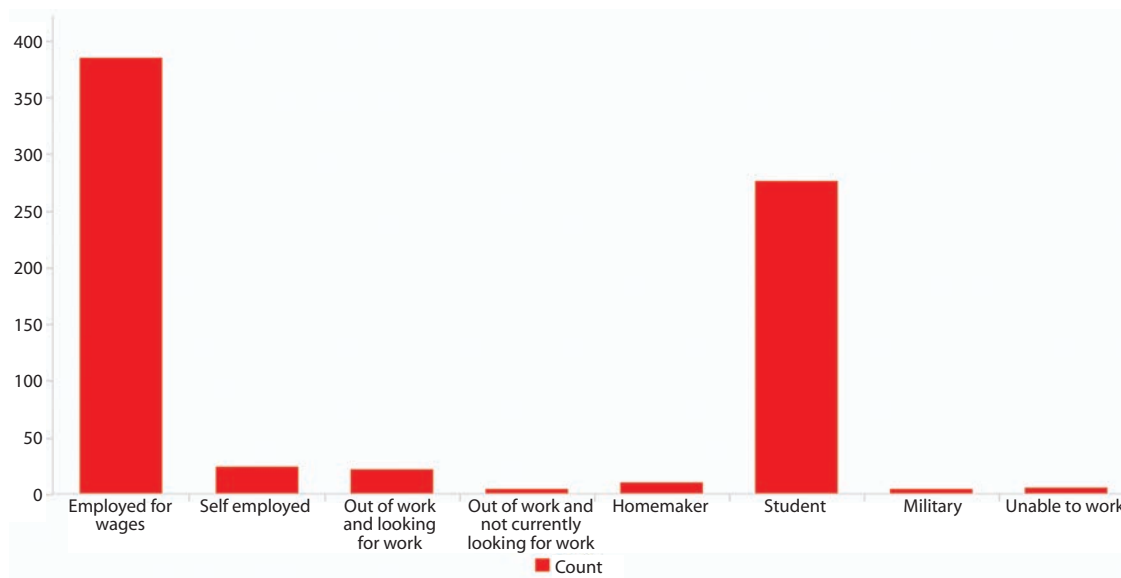
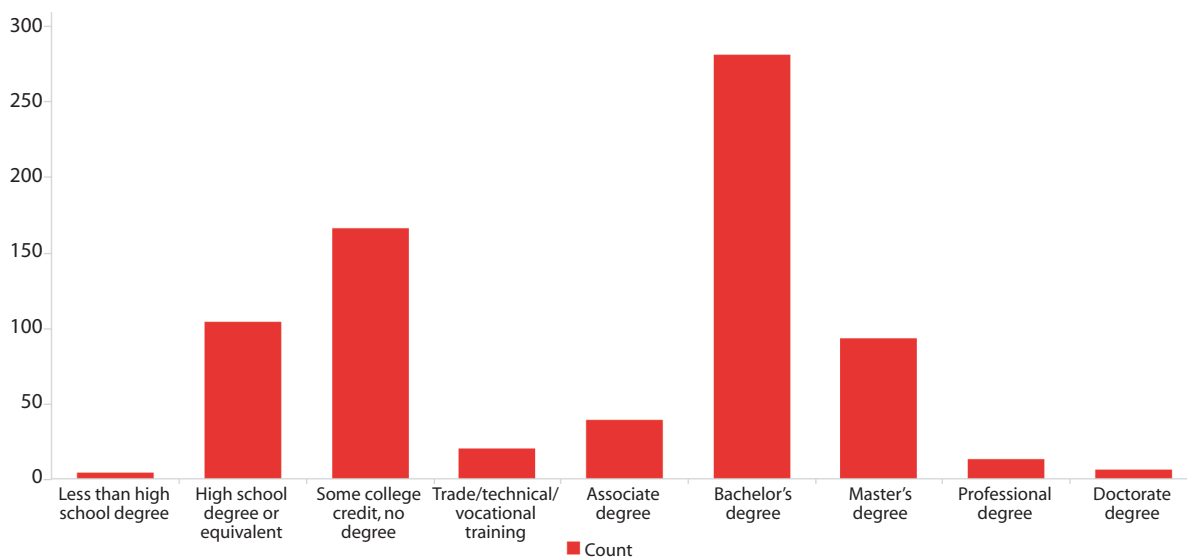


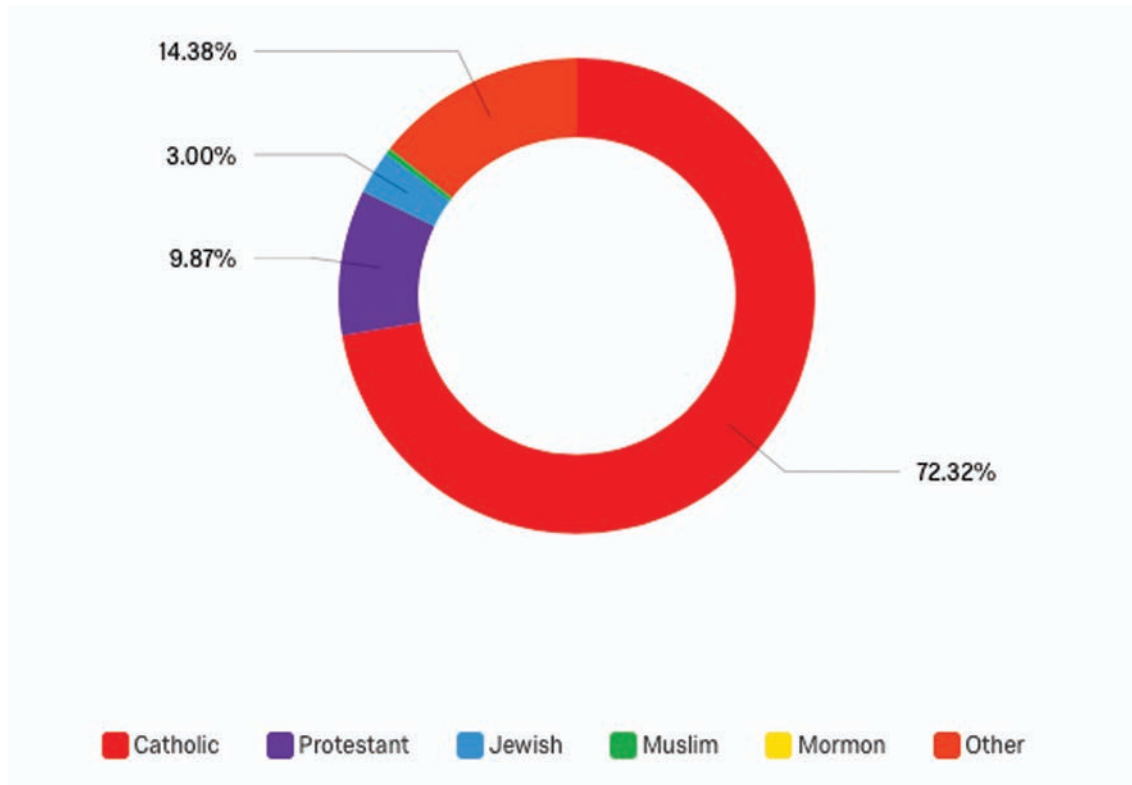
Fig. 12: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.



The people surveyed and interviewed constitute a highly educated cohort and this reflects the maturation of the Irish diaspora within mainstream middle-class America.

Asked about religion, 61% indicated they have a religion, while 72% of those that do are Catholic and 10% Protestant. In interviews several spoke of maintaining religious practice though most did not reference it or spoke of it in historical or general terms. One said, "I think for a lot of the family, being Catholic is almost more of an aesthetic identifier of Irish Americans more than religious practice."

Fig. 13: If you have a religion, which faith?

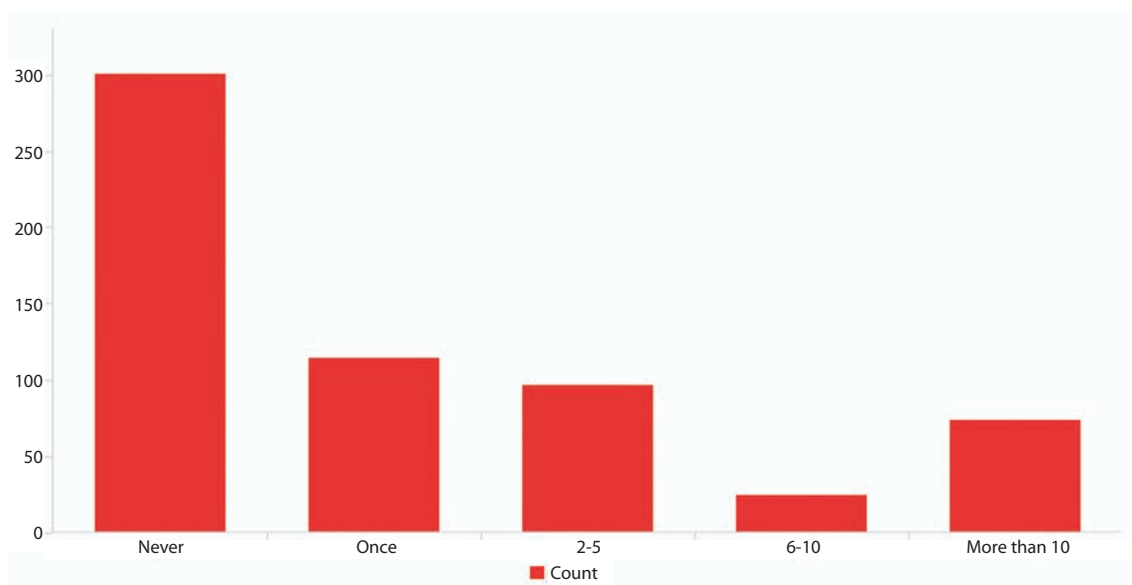




Contact with Ireland

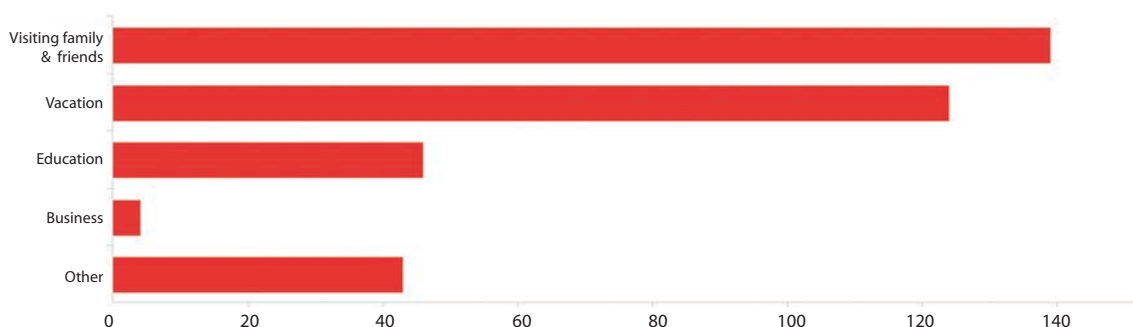
In the survey and interviews we posed questions about the subjects contact with Ireland, either via visits or forms of communication. The survey response was evenly split between those who have and have not visited Ireland.

Fig 14: How many times in total have you visited Ireland?



Those who had visited were mostly connecting with family or on vacation.

Fig 15: If you have visited Ireland, what is typically the purpose of your visit?



Some interviewees detailed regular, often extensive visits based on close family ties, and these were often key factors in describing their early sense of Irish identity. Several referred to visiting Ireland as marked by a sense of “homecoming” or “belonging” and of a potent impact on their sense of identity:

“So much of when you go to Ireland for 10 days after you know 18 years of family history, you spend almost the entire time just trying to... No, this is a real place. It’s not just an abstract concept that’s used to like invoke family unity. It’s a place, there’s history, there’s culture that’s very real... It’s not just a matter of rote repetition to keep things alive. Like so, then I felt a lot of the last few years for me has been trying to add depth to those... already closely held identifiers.”

“Just breathing the air... I see myself belonging”

“I found something” [on visiting Ireland]

“I feel more at home in Ireland” [than in the US]

“Return to Ireland” [will lead to a]

“sense of being complete”

“I went to find out who I am”

For many who have not visited, the desire to do so is often articulated in a similar way, as a strong component of identity. One interviewee anticipated, “When I go to Ireland... my Irish identity will be more engaged... it’s on hold.”

All of these comments indicate ways in which Ireland is associated with core aspects of identity for many young Americans and a visit there promises to vouchsafe or fulfil a nascent sense of Irish identity. These strong feelings are often associated with values – see the section “Perceptions and Values” in this report.

The connectivity with Ireland was also examined in terms of communications, principally via the Internet and social media. Those surveyed who maintain close communications with family in Ireland were in the minority - 31% - while those using the Internet and social media to engage Irish content were not doing so frequently.

Fig. 16: Have you family members in Ireland with whom you are in regular contact?

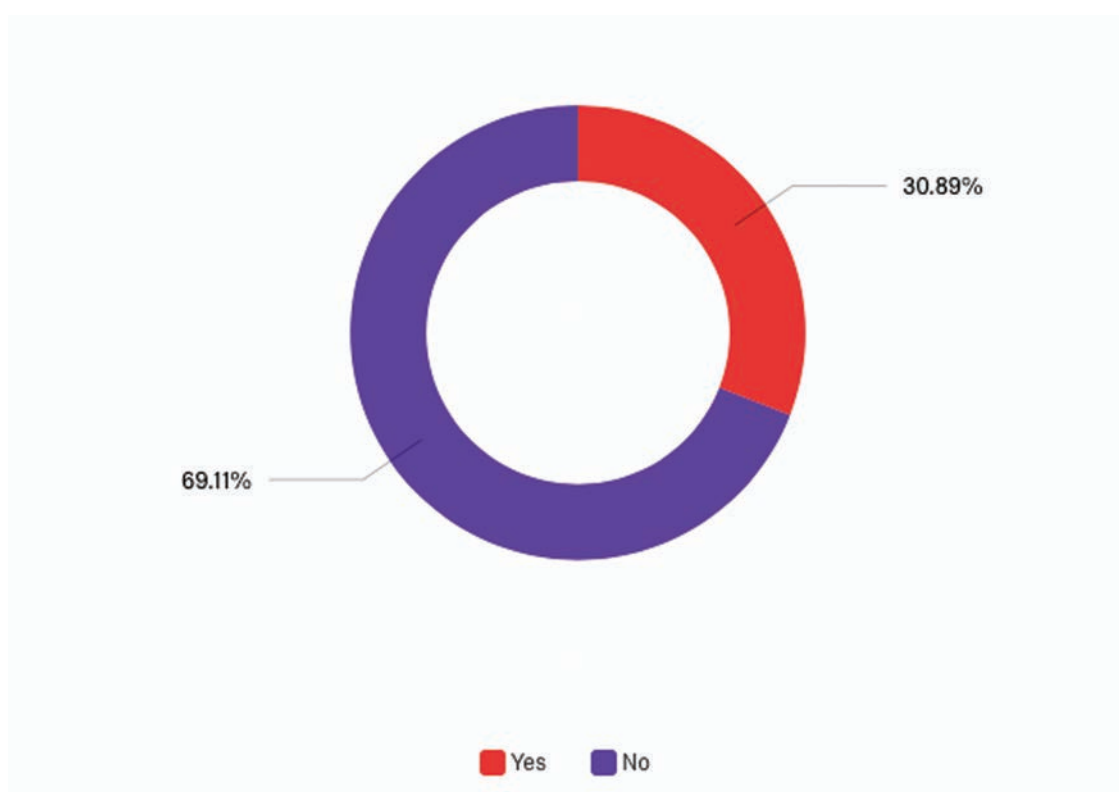
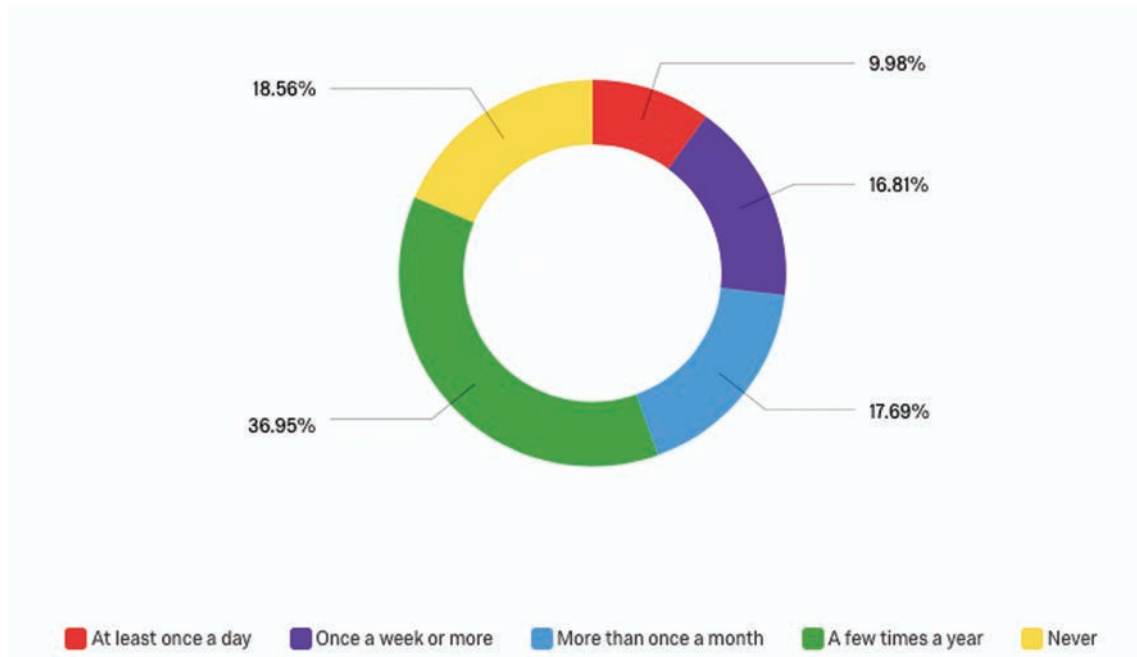


Fig. 17: How often do you go online to find out what is happening in Ireland?



We also asked about subjects' particular areas of interest when using social media and which social media they used in connecting with Ireland.

Fig. 18: In what ways have social media platforms increased your engagement with Ireland?

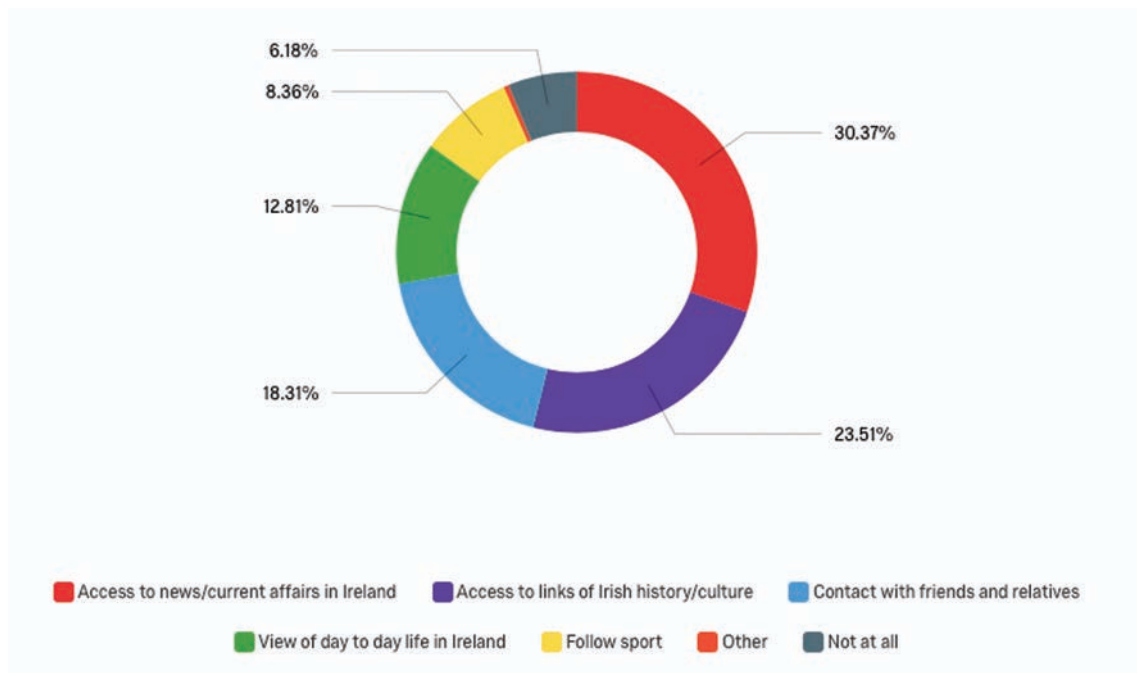
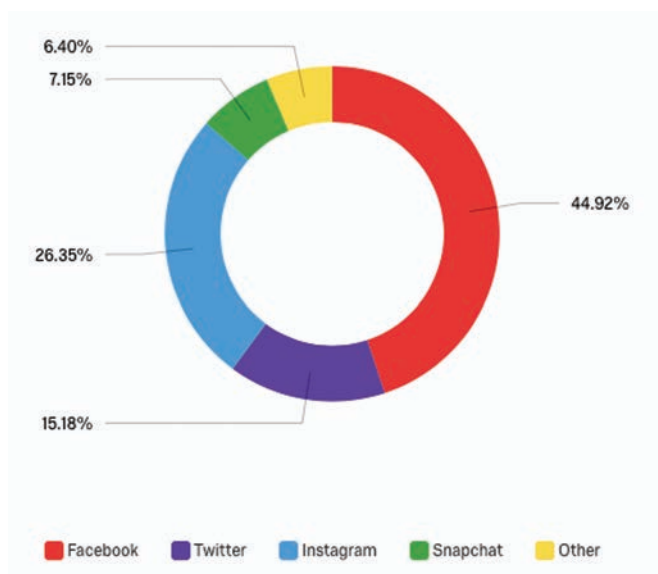


Fig. 19: What social media platforms have most increased your engagement with Ireland?



While the figures for Internet and social media engagement are not high they are significant and this is an increasingly important terrain for diaspora engagement, especially with diaspora youth. It is a terrain that is constantly shifting due to the evolution of new and social media. In the 2017 Irish Central survey 83% indicated they used Facebook to engage Ireland, while our survey has Facebook users on 45% and Instagram on 26% - indicating a younger cohort but also the shift toward Instagram in recent years among younger social media users.

Those that referenced Instagram in interviews often mentioned that they used it less to communicate with people in Ireland than to see "a cool picture" of "touristy" scenes such as the Cliffs of Moher, the Blarney stone, etc. In other words, Ireland was perceived as "Instagramable" in ways that appealed to a young cohort.

Interviewees talked about their interactions with social media and the Internet in terms of Irish content. They noted that on YouTube it is "easy to pick up on Irish culture" but that this tended to be quite random and there was no sense that it was "targeted at Irish." On the one hand this points up the ubiquity of Irish content online but also suggests that much of it is not curated or framed for Irish-identifying audiences. The attractions of Irish culture (see the section "Culture" in this report) led some to speculate that more could be done to target Irish subject matter to Irish Americans via online media and to "examine their viewing platforms and interests." One added, "you need to understand how digital space and dominant user groups work."

With just under a third of respondents using social media to engage Ireland this should be a wake-up call to policy-makers to understand this as a crucial area of opportunity to engage the next generation of Irish America. A few respondents were frank about what they saw as failings by Irish agencies to utilize and strategically engage Irish American communities online - "we have to engage more vigorously with them online" - or to utilize the soft power of Irish culture in this space. One interviewee suggested we view online Irish diaspora as a "Fifth Province" (knowingly referencing the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney) to indicate its symbolic power as an extension of the nation in the age of globalization.¹⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Understand the appeal of Ireland to younger Americans of Irish descent in terms of their identity journey/maturation.*
- *Research and develop social media outreach in ways that are targeted towards and responsive to the perspectives and platforms of young Irish.*

15. See: Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

NY
DIGITAL



IRISH

Organisations and Networks

Only 15% of respondents are members of an Irish organization or networks. Of these, 90% are in cultural and sporting organizations and 10% in professional organizations. The low numbers are in line with the erosion of traditional Irish organisations and networks across the US over several decades, leaving many with aging cohorts. Some are attempting to evolve and reinvent themselves and reach out to younger Irish (for example, the Ancient Order of Hibernians) and some newer entities are emerging (mostly for young professionals) but the trend has generally been away from membership.

A key reason in relation to the more traditional organisations and networks is that they do not offer meaningful forms of community to younger Irish. Several interviewees spoke of lack of interest in joining their parents' organisations, described as peopled by "older, Catholic, white, middle-class people." One interviewee observed, "I know I would say maybe 2 or 3 people that are my age that have joined the organisations themselves. I know a lot more people that are just going as family that aren't interested in actually joining." Various reasons for the lack of interest were offered: "I actually think it is more of a religious thing because not so many people younger are so passionate about organized religion;" "some of these organisations traditionally were only men;" "they are failing to reach young people" and have "little understanding of social media."

To be sure, those who have joined organizations and networks did speak enthusiastically about the benefits. For those in cultural and sporting sectors much of the enthusiasm was in terms of the work done to maintain Irish identity and to provide social opportunities to engage fellow Irish and Americans with Irish interests. The GAA came in for broad praise in this regard (see the section "Culture and Sport" in this report). Indeed, it is the one example of the more traditional organisations that was deemed to be successfully evolving and thriving and of particular importance in promoting and supporting a sense of Irishness among the diaspora. Irish community and arts centres and cultural organisations all had champions. At the same time there was often recognition of the struggle to engage younger Irish and some concerns about sustainability.

We encountered some notable exceptions to the sense of decline in cultural and community centres, with several showing great vitality and praised by interviewees, such as the Gaelic American Club in Fairfield, Connecticut. There is even evidence of new initiatives such as the Rutherford Irish American Association, established in 2017 in Rutherford, Connecticut. The challenge to reach out to and engage younger members remains though - the average age of the Rutherford association is 50.

With professional organisations, while membership was small among respondents, there was both considerable enthusiasm for the networking opportunities afforded and a sense that such entities were growing and not declining. A number were mentioned by survey respondents and interviewees, including: Irish Network New York City and Irish Network New Jersey, the Irish Business Organization, the Irish Business Network, and the Irish International Business Network.

Digital Irish, which is New York based and holds regular networking sessions in the city, came in for particular praise. The organisation membership is 70+% Irish-born and 20+% Irish-American, with most aged 27-40. It has been active in helping to place J1 visa-holders from Ireland in recent years. A leading member notes that the organisation is “not just for techies...but a network for like-minded individuals,” referencing “a new generation of Irish now coming over...with one or two degrees...who are rising high and accomplishing a lot.” The organisation has ambitious plans to grow membership in several cities, and build communications and outreach with a regular podcast. The vision is based on “recognising what the community wants and build out.”

There was also enthusiasm expressed for “young leader” initiatives both by those who had experienced them and others who had heard about them - the Leadership and Executive Acceleration Program (LEAP), which works to “empower Irish and Irish-American women to accelerate their careers by providing access to professional insights, mentors, and role models” – was praised as an “outstanding” example.

There is evidence these initiatives are of value to those involved, facilitating job-finding, peer-mentoring and also social connectedness among highly educated and mobile young Irish in the region. We found that the Irish-born were often more populous in the professional organisations and networks, clearly using these points of contact to help find their way in a new society. (Notably, among the later generation Irish Americans surveyed there was limited interest in ethnic association as a form of networking - asked if Irish identity is relevant when networking, only 9% said very relevant. On the other hand, several interviewees mentioned that it “eases connections” and one said that in networking “Irishness is not an opener...but it’s a deepener”).

Some interviewees noted there were more Irish organisations and networks in New York City today than in the past and that they are well connected, partly through the facilitation of the Irish Consulate. There are “more options in the community,” remarked one interviewee, who perhaps with tongue-in-cheek termed this phenomenon of organisational connectivity the “Irish industrial complex.” However, there were several interviewees who suggested “more outreach beyond New York City” was needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Encourage more strategic engagement with younger cohorts/generations by established organisations and networks.*
- *Seek fresh ideas about the establishment of entities that would engage younger Americans of Irish descent on their own terms.*
- *Continue to support initiatives that facilitate professional networking.*

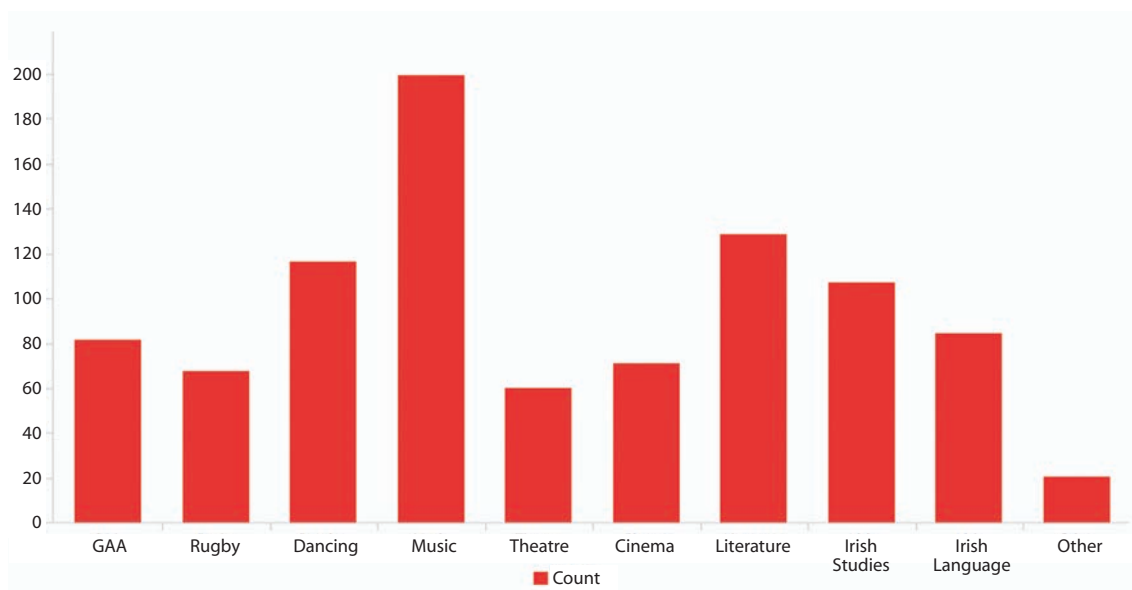


Culture and Sport

Culture is without doubt the key terrain on which to engage young Irish America but, as with media, this requires understanding of how tastes and interests shift and the optimal platforms and types of engagement. While that engagement can draw on an impressive canon of Irish culture that is still recognized and valued in the US it should also be adventurous and creative in divining newer cultural energies with particular appeal to younger audiences.

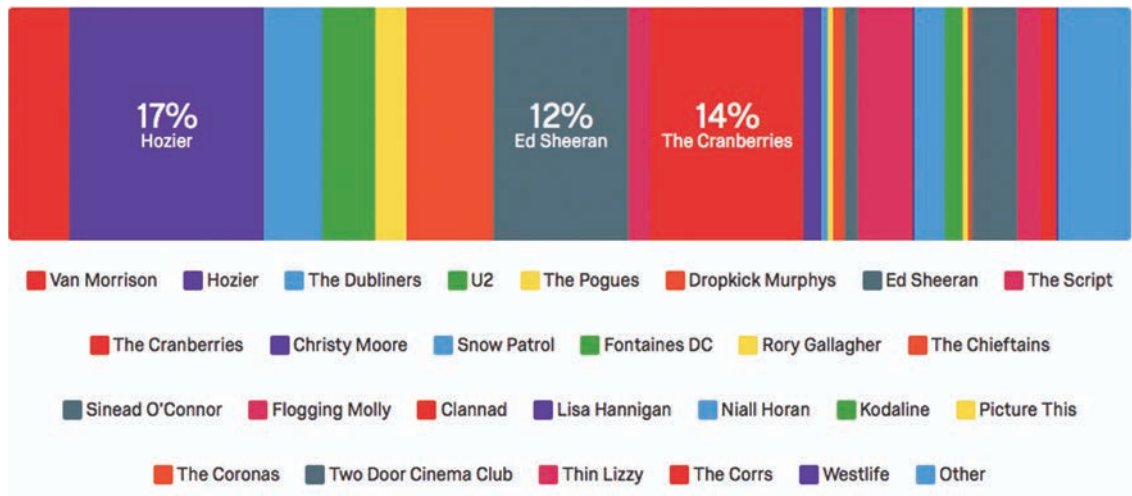
The survey and interviews show there is a healthy interest in a broad range of Irish culture and sporting activities, as audiences and as participants. 51% of respondents indicated they engage in cultural/sporting activities. Of their preferences, cultural activities were more popular than sporting activities, with music the most popular selection.

Fig. 20: What Irish cultural and sporting activities do you participate in or have an interest in?



The high interest in music corresponds with the results of the Irish Central survey and suggests this medium carries particular emotive and cultural impact with younger Irish of older generations. The answers to survey questions about favourite performers and songs revealed a very varied taste band.

Fig. 21: Who is your favourite Irish band/musician?



The favourite songs ranged broadly across genres and periods of origin, with *Galway Girl* (Ed Sheeran) and *Zombie* (The Cranberries) coming out on top.

Fig. 22: What is your favourite Irish song?



The question about Irish cultural and sporting activities did not distinguish between participation and interest in the activity and we may assume many are responding in high numbers on music based on interest rather than participation. However, the interviews threw up many examples of people participating, in some cases as a childhood activity encouraged

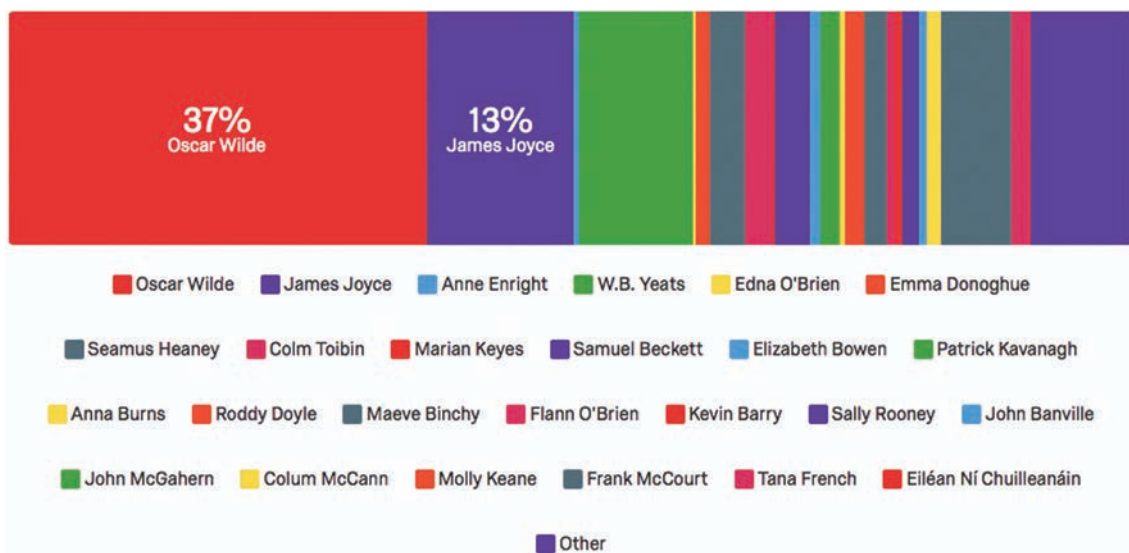
by family and in others as an ongoing or new activity - in almost all instances it was mentioned as a key indicator of Irishness, both in terms of individual identity and as a collective social activity. Several mentioned the extraordinary concentration of Irish music talents and activities in Pearl River in Rockland County, New York.

One Irish music teacher interviewed commented that Irish music is currently “very strong in NY” in terms of popularity and also participation, noting that her school has 400+ students per week and regularly takes student groups to festivals in the US and in Ireland. She also noted that “the parents are mostly from Ireland” with “a few Americans showing interest.”

Dancing was also popular among respondents. Several interviewees noted that there had been an explosion of interest in Irish dance following the Riverdance phenomenon in the late 1990s and that while that had fallen off the numbers were slowly rising again. One participant, a competitive dancer who has danced since childhood, noted that the numbers of people taking up dance in the New York area has been rising, and reckoned that at his school it included “20% Americans and growing,” with Irish-Americans being “1st, 2nd and 3rd generations.” He also observed that Irish dance had “appeal to Americans,” due to factors of “form, communication and competition...they love to compete.”

In questions about Irish literature there was a notable favouritism for established writers and texts. Asked about favourite, writers, respondents put Oscar Wilde well ahead, 37% selected him as their favourite Irish author, followed by James Joyce 13%, W.B. Yeats, Frank McCourt 6%, Samuel Beckett 3%, and Seamus Heaney 3%.

Fig. 23: Who is your favourite Irish author?



This is a very traditional (and dead and male) selection, suggesting the literary canon is well established and accepted with little recognition of contemporary Irish literature. This is further underlined by the selection of favourite books among respondents.

Fig. 26: Who is your favourite Irish influencer?



Perhaps the most interesting responses, borne out by several interviews with the younger end of the age spectrum surveyed, were those identifying Youtube “influencers” who were Irish or Irish-American. Some of these figures, such as Jacksepticeye (who has over 22 million subscribers worldwide), have very large followings in the US and will be better known among American teenagers than say Bono or Conor McGregor.

Interviewees were effusive in their comments on Irish culture – one described Ireland as “a cultural touchstone” – all echoing the common perception that culture is Ireland’s “secret weapon” and the “key bit of Irish soft power.” One cultural administrator observed that “younger Irish Americans are not invested in organisations as much...but they are engaging music and culture.”

In New York City there is a sense of Irish culture being a key element of connectivity and community, likely due to the density of the city and its many cultural offerings. There are “more opportunities to engage” in the words of an interviewee. There is a cultural thickness to Irishness in New York that is less evident in the rest of the metropolitan area. One interviewee commented that when he moved to New York City he “felt not Irish enough...I was behind the 8 ball in conversation...I began to engage the culture and learn the vocabulary”.

Irish language registered minority engagement in the survey (77% did not speak it, 20% spoke it a little, and 3% were fluent) but several interviewees spoke enthusiastically about its community-building and networking properties. They referenced the niche but growing interest in “pop-up Gaeltachts,” with participants both Irish-born and Irish-American and levels of fluency ranging from very high to absolute beginners. They appear to function with a strong sense that these are social gatherings rather than educational opportunities.

New York City is also a crucible for fresh thinking about diaspora culture and engagement. The Irish Arts Center, which will open a new building in 2020, sees its mission in terms of “saying something about how Irishness has changed” and developing “a new sense of Irish culture...that is inclusive and innovative.” Its Executive Director observed that their target market is not so much people who see themselves as primarily Irish but rather

“a much larger group...for whom Irishness is maybe 4th, 5th 6th 7th or 8th...it is not at top of the list...my view would be you have to meet them where they are...so what’s at the top of the list...so for some of them it’s finance for some of them it’s culture...maybe its politics...so what is the connective tissue between the Irishness in someone’s identity and these other things...and can you build something that encompasses all of those aligned things.”

The New York energies can be both sustaining of Irish identities and adaptive to change, invoking innovation and fresh thinking. However, there is also a risk of being too New York-centric in thinking about Irish culture - the Irish Arts Center is a niche community, seeking its audience via the “cultural pages of the New York Times.” A few interviewees touched on this to suggest a need for more cultural production and engagement beyond New York. Others noted that there were regular and popular Irish festivals in all three states, though we found limited evidence of large engagement of young generations. Nonetheless, there is a vibrant festival scene that attracts families across the states, beyond the urban centres. Several spoke of these gatherings as being of ongoing importance within their family units.

As indicated in Fig. 20 above, when asked about interest or participation in Irish culture and sport only 9% signalled the GAA. While there is much evidence of the continued appeal of the GAA to Irish-born and perhaps also to early generations it appears to hold limited interest for later generations. As noted already, the GAA came in for effusive support among a number of interviewees (mostly first generation). One, involved with an Irish community center in New York, described the GAA as the “single greatest aggregator for instilling Irish culture” in the region. Several interviewees described childhood memories of accompanying family to watch games at Gaelic Park, in Riverdale in the Bronx, or watching it on television at home or in pubs. Many observed that there have been significant challenges to the development of leagues and support systems, particularly given the reduced numbers of Irish immigrants but most believed that the GAA in the New York region is currently “in good shape.” Shannon Gaels GAA in Queens and Rockland GAA in Orangeburg, NY, came in for particular praise as communal enterprises that have been strongly resourced by local Irish people (though also by the GAA in Ireland) and act as cultural magnets and networks in the region.

GAA personnel commented on the healthy state of the 8-14 years old category of players, with 2,500 children and teenagers registered to play in New York, due in large part to the fact that “the parents are driving.” Over 14 there is a greater challenge due to the competition from established sports in terms of popularity, outreach, and scholarships, though the game still held much appeal due its social and community elements. There has been a push to extend the interest among American-born players, with signs of growth in this area, but it has been challenging to get a foothold in US schools. A new initiative is to promote camogie in the schools with the view that it will have off-season appeal.

The figure of 51% of respondents engaging Irish culture and sporting activities includes large numbers of passive rather than active engagement. When asked where/how they meet other Irish, they answered: socializing 28%, home 24%, 17% cultural events, 13% festivals. This indicates that their Irish culture is mostly mediated at a distance and enjoyed in private as much, maybe more than collectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

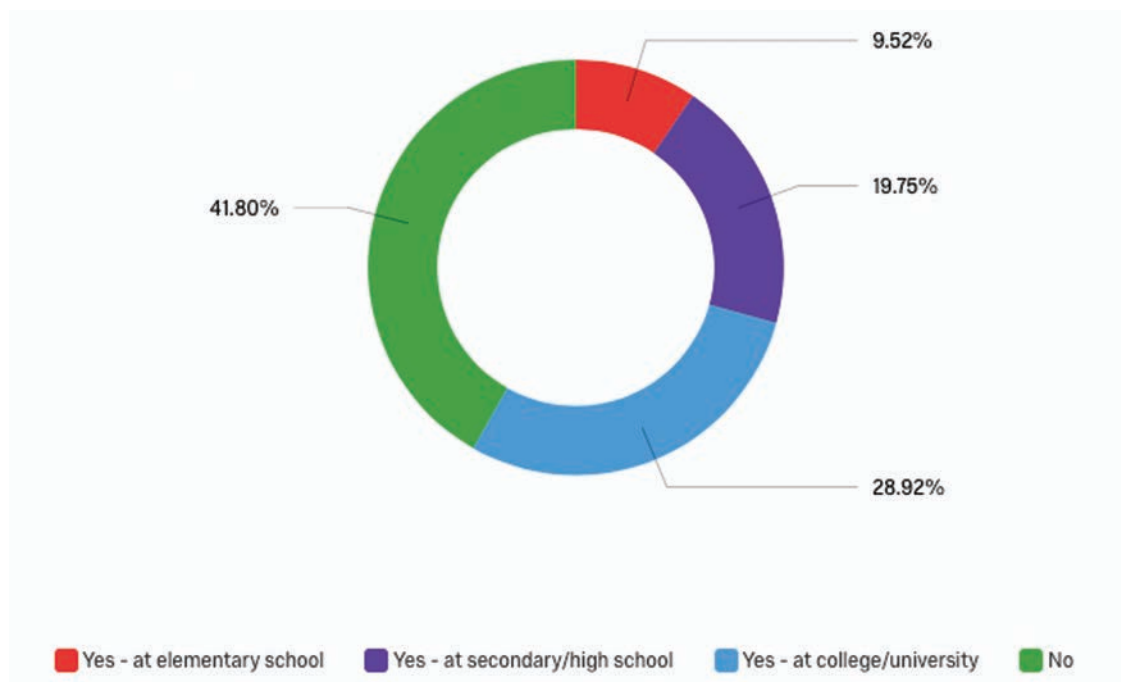
- *Continue to promote Irish culture as the spearhead of engagement with young Irish America.*
- *Attend to the shifts in tastes and platforms used by younger diaspora cohorts.*



Education

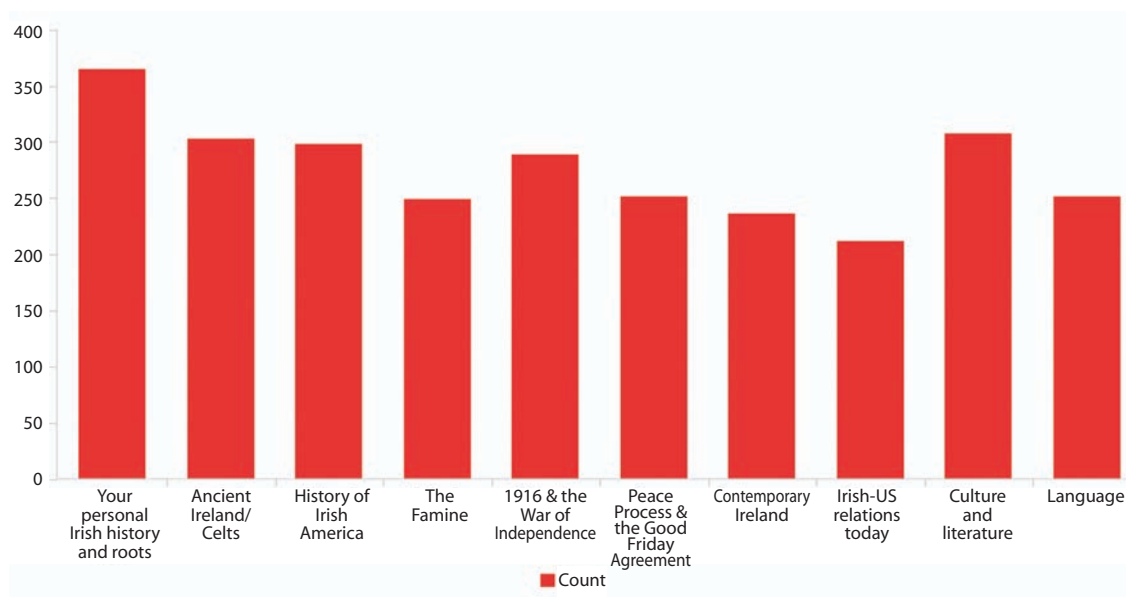
The people surveyed and interviewed constitute a highly educated cohort. Of those surveyed almost 60% hold a first degree or higher, and 38% are currently students. The survey also posed questions about the respondents' level and degree of interest in study of Irish history and culture.

Fig. 27: Have you ever studied Irish history or literature?



Asked if they would be interested in studying such subject matter, 93% said yes. This is a strikingly high number affirming interest in study (and in line with the Irish Central surveys). Asked about which aspects they would be interested in studying, there was a broad range registered in the responses.

Fig. 28: What aspects of Irish history and culture are you interested in studying?



There is clearly a strong appetite for study of Irish history and culture but little clarity about what kinds of platforms and programmes will successfully feed it. Some indicated a desire to study in Ireland but there was also apprehension about the costs involved in undertaking study abroad and about the transfer value of qualifications. Others expressed their interest more strongly in engaging with studies online or in short-term sessions either in Ireland or the US. There were also observations about American students being “very job oriented” and that this meant any Irish-based programme needed to address this and “offer internships.”

In interviews, there were also several comments suggesting Ireland support a programme for diaspora youth that would bring a number to Ireland each year for a schedule of events and educational sessions. A few interviewees mentioned Israel’s Taglit (Birthright) programme as a model. One remarked “so many of the Jewish kids do Birthright...I think that if they did something similar in Ireland to encourage American kids to engage...there would be a lot of interest.” The idea is not new and may merit fresh and open discussion to engage multiple stakeholders (including sponsors and educational institutions) with a view to formulating a sustainable and attractive programme. It is a very tangible form of recognition and interaction with diaspora youth, offering immersive experiences, building personal connections and creating opportunities to form future networks and seed diaspora leadership. It might be tailored to some of the predominant perceptions of Ireland among diaspora youth (see the “Perceptions and Values” section in this report), while also linked to “Global Ireland” messaging and to development goals.

Several respondents referred to an interest in volunteering (some speculated this was connected to their sense of Irish identity) and a desire to travel and “do good” in the world. One respondent wondered if there might be some form of Ireland-run programme or award “for young Irish diaspora doing development work in Ireland or elsewhere.”

As with culture, education has strong mnemonic and affective associations among interviewees, with several pointing up aspects of their studies, including studies in Ireland, as important to their identity formation. For some, it is a significant aspect of the identity search of adolescent and young adult years - one said his university level studies of Irish history and culture led to a “deeper sense of Irishness” and helped him to “connect the dots” of understanding his identity in relation to that history and culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Explore the provision of educational programmes in Irish history and culture, tailored to relevant platforms and diaspora interests.*
- *Engage stakeholders to design an attractive and sustainable immersive programme for diaspora youth.*
- *Consider initiatives that stimulate and engage young Irish diaspora in volunteer programmes or projects.*

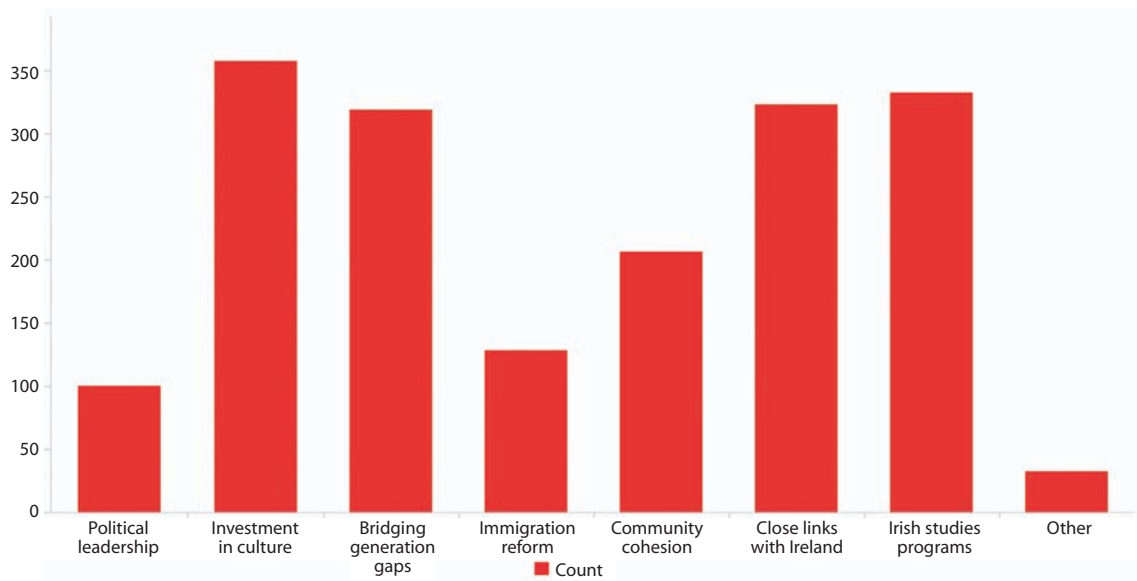


Social & Political Perspectives

Questions about social and political perspectives threw up illuminating data and drew some fascinating comments about the worldviews of young Irish Americans.

Asked about the future of Irish America, views were divided: 38% thought it flourishing, while 31% thought it in decline, and 31% did not have a view. In interviews, the stronger views tended to be expressed by those perceiving a “gradual decline,” with several viewing this as “terminal.” On the survey question of how to best sustain Irish identity in the US there was a spread of opinions, while in interviews, investments in culture and Irish studies were most volubly supported.

Fig. 29: What will best help to sustain Irish-American identity in the US?



Several survey questions asked for views on domestic politics and respondents’ political perspectives - the great majority proved to be progressive in their views.

Fig. 30: In political terms, do you regard yourself as:

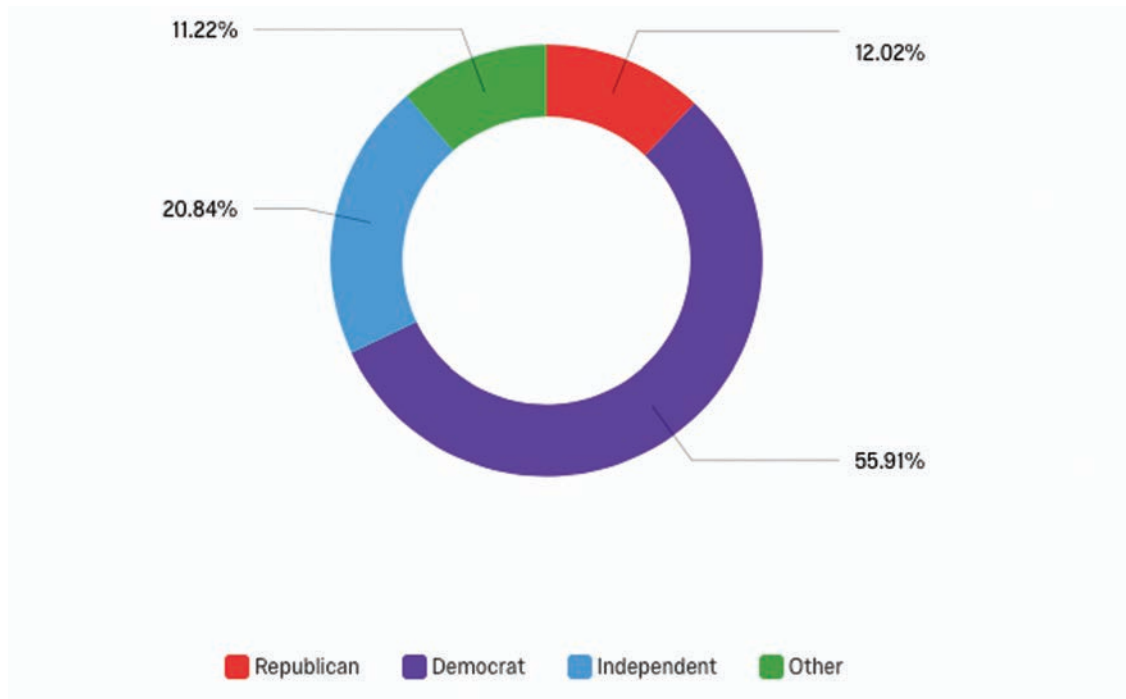
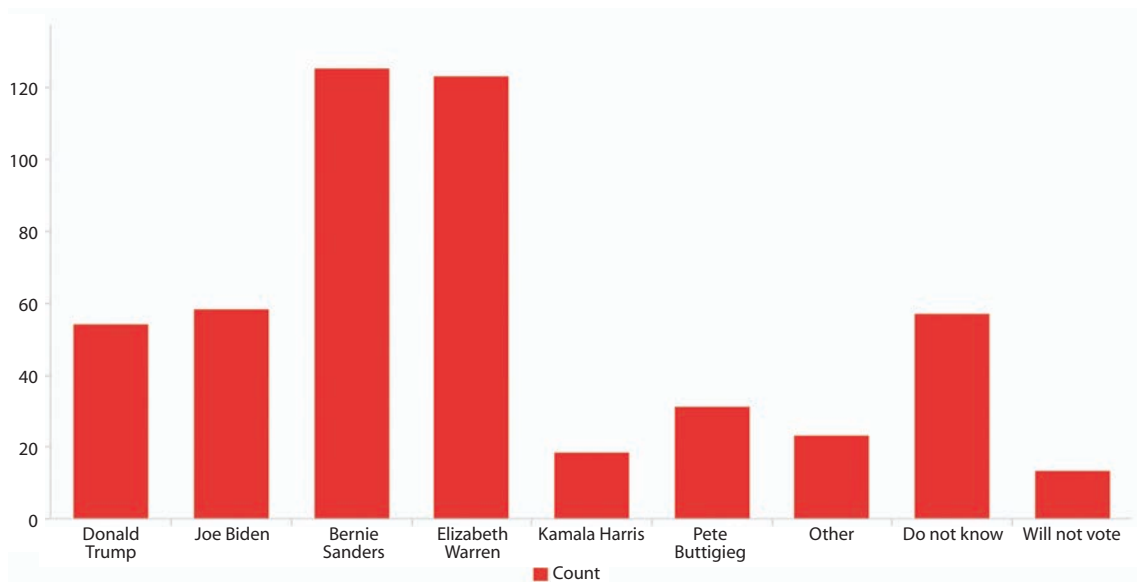
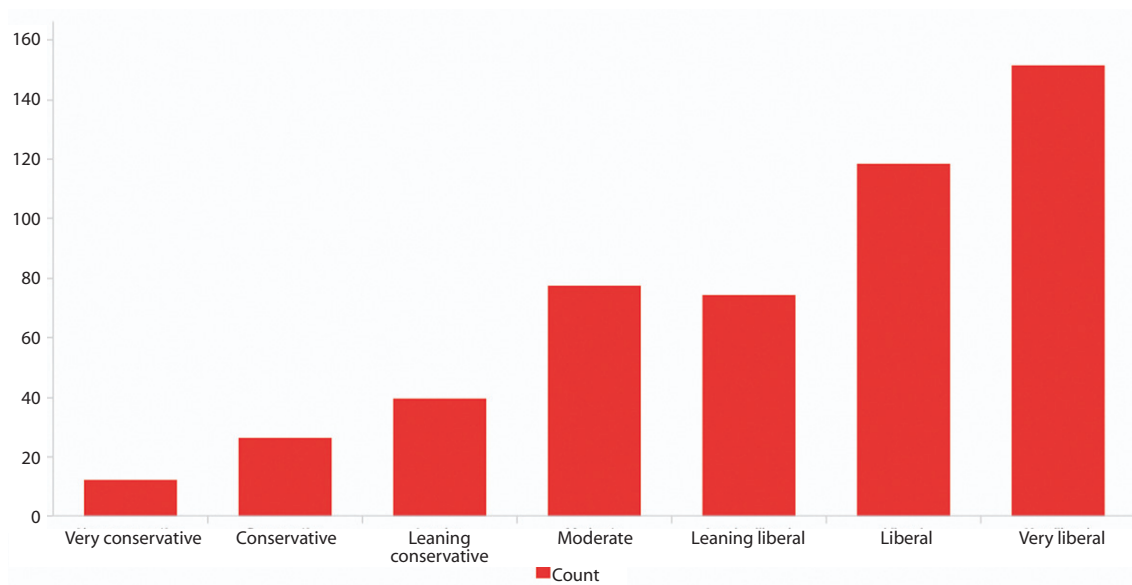


Fig. 31: If the American presidential election was tomorrow, who would you vote for?



Asked a broader question about their political orientation, the strong liberal/progressive leaning is very apparent.

Fig. 32: How would you describe your political orientation?



The question of how salient these identifications are in terms of ethnicity remains an open and complex one (asked if Irishness influenced their political views, they responded 31% somewhat, 29% not at all, 18% very little) but there is certainly a strong liberal/progressive presence in this young generation of Irish America.

In interviews it was just as apparent. Such views were sometimes expressed in generational terms, with references to older generations of Irish America as relatively “conservative” and “pretty reactionary.” One said his “dad’s side of the family is extra conservative...I feel very distant from that.”

Similar perspectives emerged in relation to questions about immigration.

Fig. 33: On the whole do you think immigration is a good thing or a bad thing for the US today?

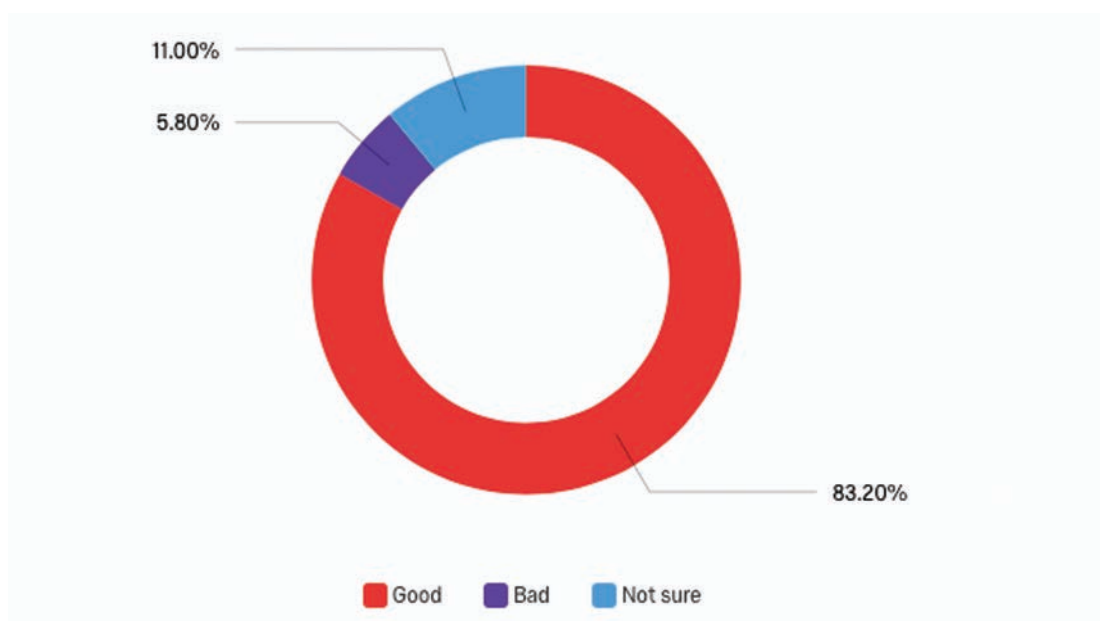
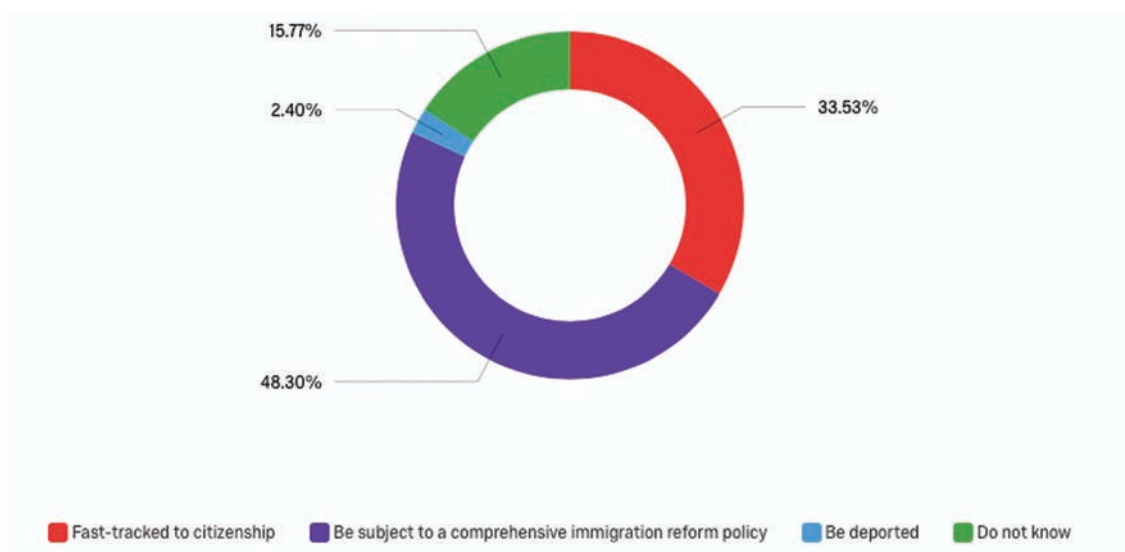


Fig. 34: There are estimated to be at least 10,000 undocumented Irish in the US. Do you think they should be:



In interviews there were many comments on immigration, both with reference to the history of Irish arrival and settlement in the US, and the present political turmoil around matters of immigration. For many, there was a clear correspondence between being Irish and viewing the US as a welcoming nation of immigrants. In relation to this, several interviewees made explicit reference to what they perceived (negatively) as a growing conservatism in older generations of Irish-America. One observed that Irish-Americans “have forgotten their history...of oppression,” and another commented that “people in America use the historical plight of Irish America to say Irish people are oppressed too.”

The socio-political opinions were certainly not all one-way progressive, though those were very much the majority. A few presented more conservative perspectives, though usually somewhat defensively. One lamented that the “younger generation is rejecting Irish Catholicism in a big way” and added “Irish America is losing faith.” The same interviewee decried what she viewed as “dogmatic opinions on immigration” in the US today and said “you can’t tell your story” in such a climate. Another commented that “white people...have backgrounds...they matter too.”

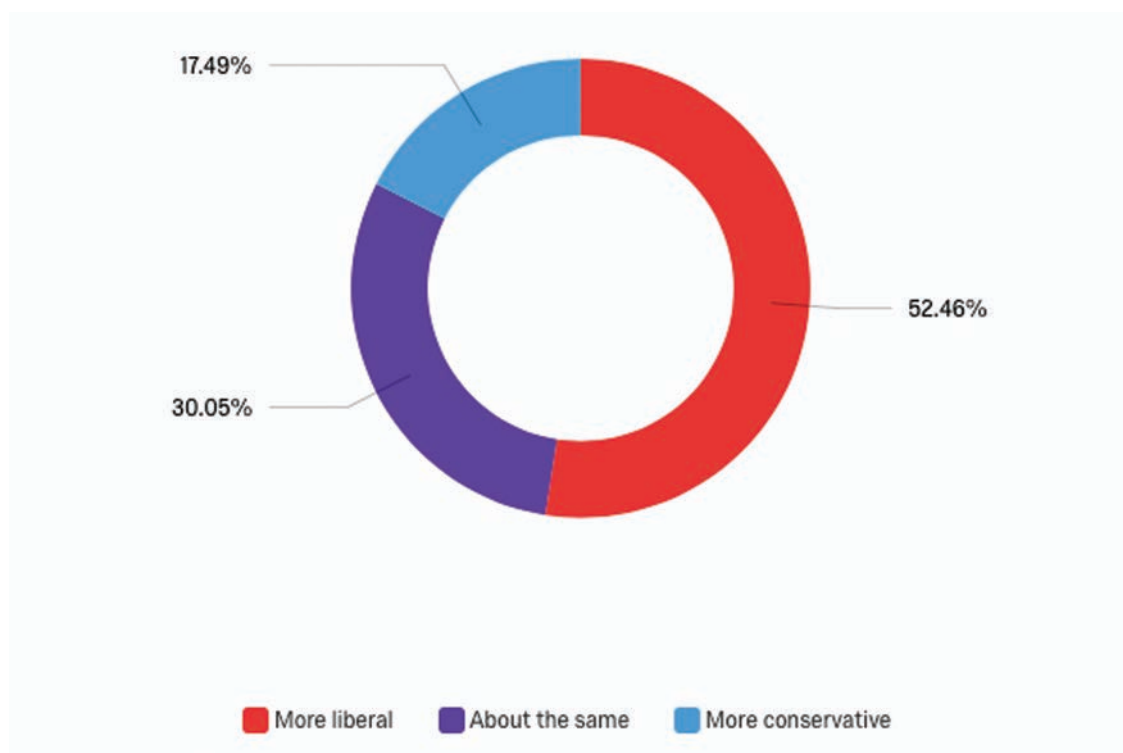
While such views were rare in those engaged by this research, they signify as do the more progressive views indicated above that the pronounced political tensions in the US in recent years have impacted on how Americans articulate their Irish identity, calibrating it in relation to broader concerns. In this context, a progressive sensibility seems to accentuate the self-consciousness about Irish identity, sometimes leading to tensions, but only rarely to disavowal, rather a synthesis is often expressed, a recombinant identification that fuses disparate social and political values and perspectives. A few interviewees talked about the tensions – “How to square progressive identity and Catholic identity,” for example, or on growing up gay and Irish¹⁶ – but none had outrightly refuted their Irishness. Rather, several spoke of understanding Irishness as a supple identity that should not be essentialised in terms of a singular value or political perspective.

16. Others suggested more be done to engage LGBT Irish in the diaspora, with one observing “you have to be Irish or gay...if gay, you have no role in the national narrative.”

While many survey respondents and interviewees associated Irishness with a historical story of oppression and persecution, none saw this as a contemporary reality and there were very few references to discrimination. A large majority of respondents said they have never experienced discrimination due to their Irish identity - 79% said no, 21% yes. Of the latter, 66% said discrimination took the form of offensive remarks or insensitive humour.

Survey respondents and most interviewees were also asked about their views of contemporary Ireland in social and political terms.

Fig. 35: Relative to the US, do you think Ireland today is:



It is unlikely the same response would have been recorded even twenty years ago and it indicates that most respondents had some sense of major social changes in Ireland in recent years. Interviewees shared many opinions on contemporary Ireland, almost all positive. Several observed that they perceived “Ireland moving forward” by which they tended to mean it is “more inclusive.” Some were clear that a “changing Ireland is good” and meant “no less heritage.” Others thought that in the US there was a “lack of understanding about Ireland in the 21st century” – a view often tied to experience based on visiting Ireland in recent years.

Again, the views were not all one way. One interviewee was uncomfortable with social changes in Ireland, referencing the “Repeal the 8th” campaign and saying she found Ireland to be “almost hyper-progressive...and that “Irish people dogmatically embrace progressivism.”

The predominant if not exclusive liberal/progressive outlook of the young respondents and interviewees is a notable, perhaps defining feature of their worldview. The relationship between that outlook and their sense of Irishness is difficult to discern precisely though and it would be

an error to simply combine these variables of identity formation.¹⁷ However, there is a relationship and several interviewees picked up on this in suggestive ways in terms of diaspora engagement. Some suggested Ireland should “promote a progressive Ireland” or promote “progressive causes” and believed this would be attractive to diaspora youth. One interviewee was more precise, stating that the Irish government should “reach out to the young Irish in the US in line with Irish goals...in areas such as climate change and humanitarianism...and give a platform to and find influencers” in the diaspora.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Recognise the worldview of young Irish in the US today in designing diaspora engagement.*
- *Continue to reflect the diversity of the diaspora in designing policy and supporting outreach.*

17. Some interviewees made direct connections, one said “My Irishness is rooted in empathy for others,” while another connected his sense of Irishness with “sensitivity to oppressed groups.”

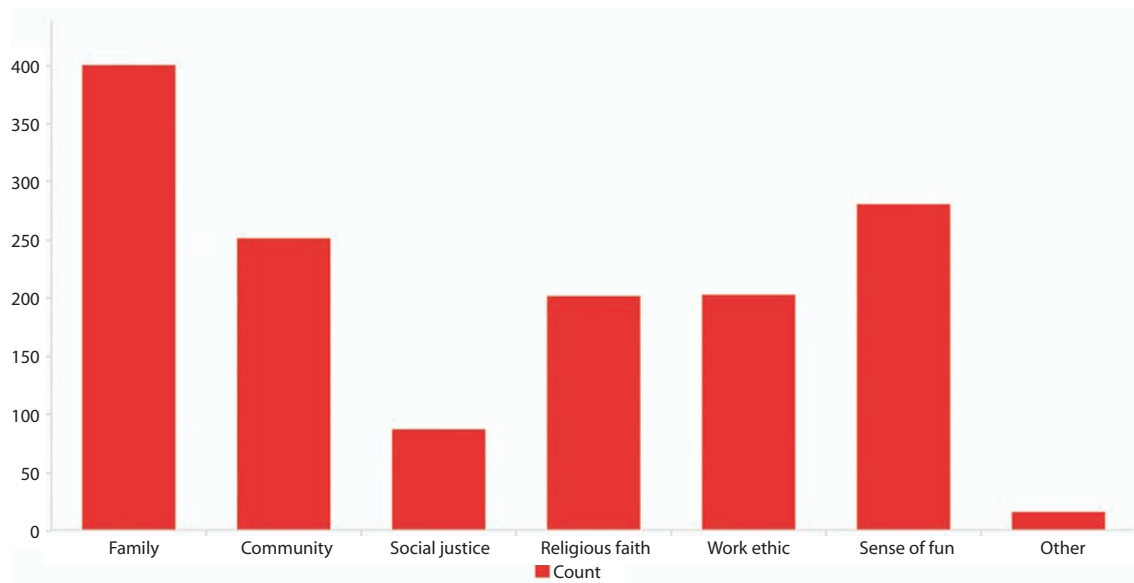


Fig. 37: Which living Irish or Irish American person do you most admire?



This reinforces the association between diaspora identity, family and ancestry. (The only named individual who was on a popularity par with relatives was Saoirse Ronan). The family association was to the fore again in a question about values.

Fig. 38: What do you consider to be the core Irish or Irish American values today?



Family and community are at the core of these young peoples' perception of Ireland (the words "welcome," "friendly" and "comfort" were also prominent in the responses to the question asking for one word to describe Ireland). There are strong aesthetic and emotional tropes in the perceptions (perhaps somewhat idealized and gesturing towards stereotype) suggesting Ireland represents an alternative realm of social connectedness to that experienced by young Irish in contemporary America. In one sense this is not surprising as their domestic social experience as what is sometimes termed Generation Z is broadly characterised as precarious and insecure. It may be that "Ireland" connects with innate desires for community and civic engagement. The mindset of self-focus and individualism associated with this generation is to some degree offset by the desire to volunteer or address social issues. Without reducing this to a political perspective, it affords those involved in diaspora engagement an opportunity to tap into this value system to articulate an appealing value exchange relevant to young diaspora in the US, to show that Ireland in different ways meets the need for community and the desire to do something meaningful.

RECOMMENDATION

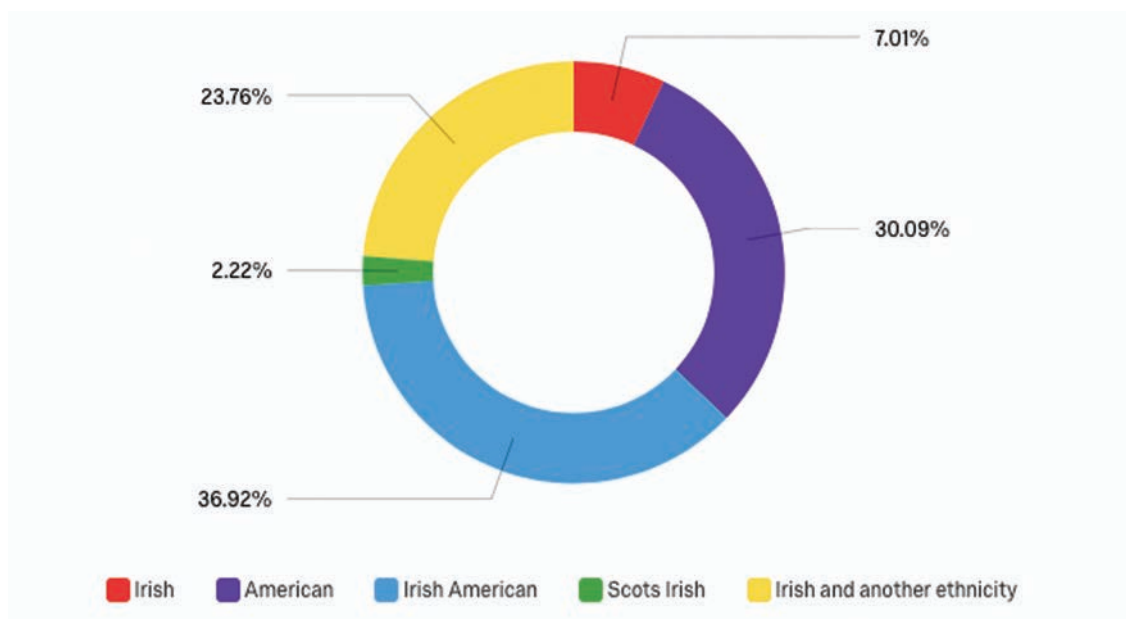
- *Design an appealing value exchange with the young diaspora in the US based on their values and perceptions regarding Ireland and sense of Irishness.*



Identity

Asked how they choose to identify in ethnic or national terms, we found a range of claims among survey respondents.

Fig. 39: Do you consider yourself to be:



The responses are suggestive of an array of ethnic identity choices for people of Irish descent and the differences both indicate and conceal some of the complexities of choosing an identity. Perhaps the most significant figure here is the large number, almost a quarter, who chose “Irish and another ethnicity,” reminding us (as we noted in the Introduction above) that boundaries and overlapping of identities grow more complex as the US becomes a “minority majority” nation.

Much of the research conducted revolves around questions of identity because of course identity is the core matter of why and to what effect people claim ethnic descent. Identity is of course highly contextualised and fluid, even though it is often thought off and described in terms of essential factors, such as blood lineage, birthright, bodily appearance, or character traits.

Interviewees spoke casually in such essentialised terms when describing Irishness.

“Look at my hair, of course I’m Irish”

“My grandmother told me the freckles on my face were a map of Ireland.”

A group interview became especially animated when the participants began to discuss Irish “traits” in family members and among friends.

“In my family...Irish how we acted... like dry humour...like not much support, if I’m doing well they’re not going to say anything, if I’m not doing well they’ll say something.”

“There’s always something to correct...mom nitty picks so her son can be great.”

“My family’s thing is like bustin chops!”

“Mine too!...don’t you call that banter in Ireland?”

“My dad says ‘oh that’s your Irish temper...you can’t control that.’”

“The guilt-tripping...that’s the Irish thing.”

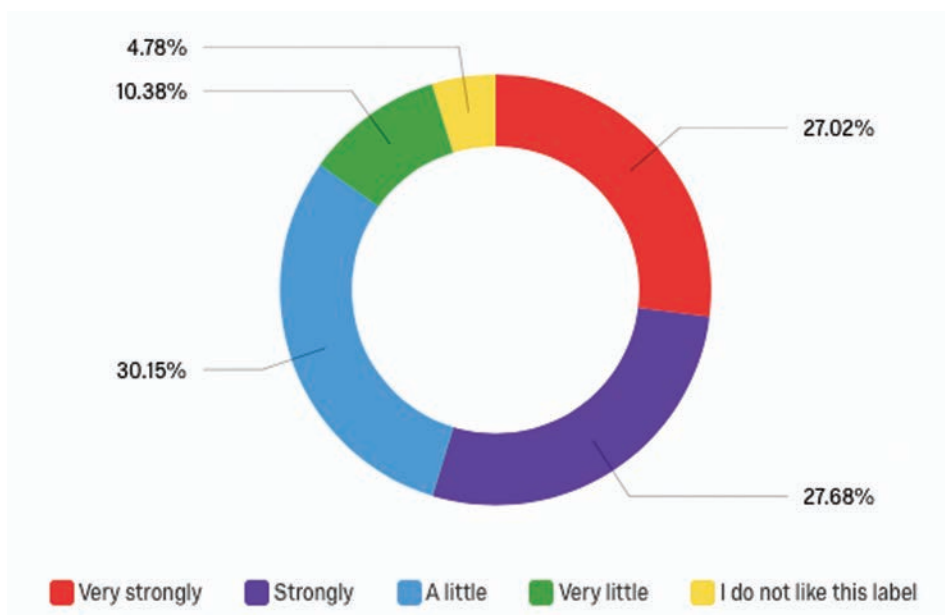
“How I’ve grown up I didn’t have another culture in my life...so I associated my traits with being Irish...my stubbornness, my temper.”

As observed earlier in this report, for “late generation Irish” in America, which make up the majority of our respondents, Irishness is only one of many vectors or facets of identity. On the one hand, they have multiple ethnicities, ancestries, stories of origin and ethnic connections that can lay some claim to their contemporary sense of identity. On the other hand, Irishness is rarely lived as an everyday, communal or collective identity for these later generations, nor does it have an urgent claim on them as an identity under pressure or in peril. Rather, it is an identity of choice, though that term can mask less conscious drives in the formation of identity.

This is not to say that ethnic identity is not felt as a given, a birthright based on ancestry. The sociologist Max Weber, writing in 1922, commented that ethnic group members “entertain a subjective belief in their common descent.”¹⁸ However, while this remains a pertinent observation, ancestry and identity may have become more divergent due to the complex interconnections of ethnic lineages in the US. This is why it is useful to consider late generation ethnicity as “symbolic ethnicity,” no longer a primary feature of lived experience but a nonetheless significant investment - psychological, affective and ideological – in Irishness as an element of identity.

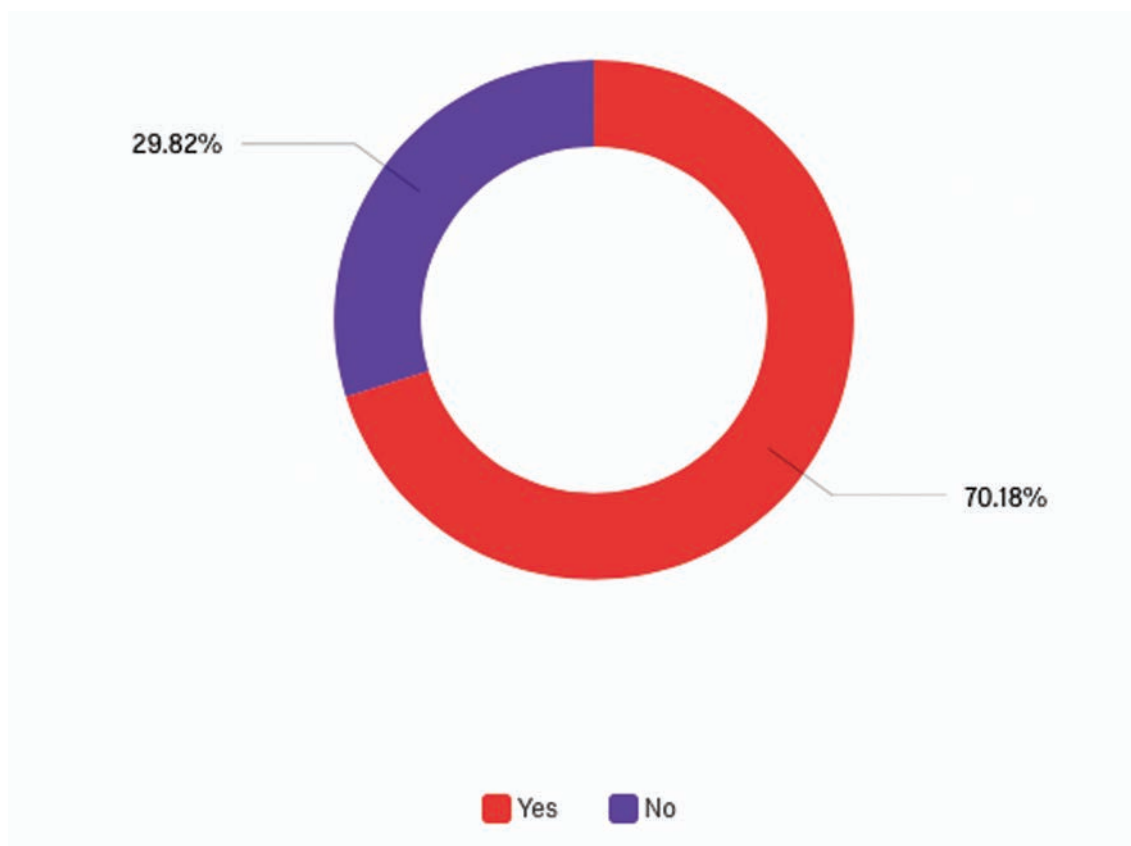
This investment can be powerful but also somewhat tenuous and wax and wane in intensity.

Fig. 40: How strongly do you identify as Irish-American?



18. Max Weber.....Max Weber ([1922] 1968: 389)

Fig. 41: Do you feel more strongly about your Irish ancestry rather than other possible ancestries?



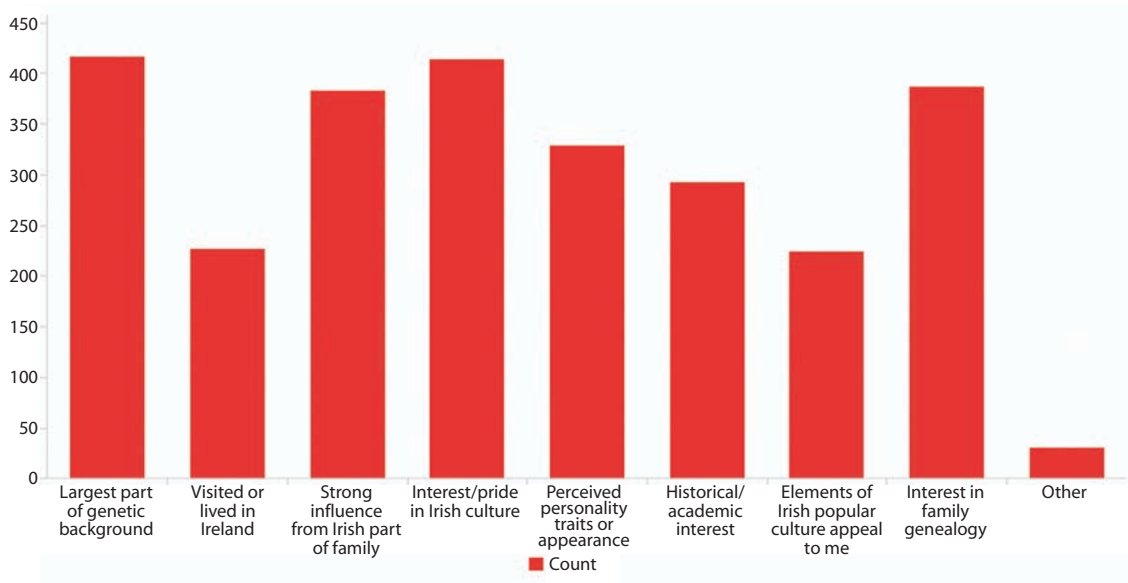
The numbers identifying “very strongly” as Irish-American may not seem high given all the respondents are of Irish descent, but it points up the factors of choice and complexity around ethnic identity already mentioned (as well as the reluctance of some to accept the moniker “Irish American” while still identifying as Irish). At the same time, 70% of the same group of interviewees feel more strongly about their Irish ancestry than other available ancestries. Taken together, these responses serve as a reminder of the contingencies of choice.

The sociologist Herbert Gans argues that late generation ethnicity “is apt to be an ephemeral reality” and observes: “I think of ethnic identity as a felt connection to a constructed or imagined collectivity, which may or may not resemble an empirically verifiable ethnic collectivity.” And so, to understand this form of ethnic identity requires attentiveness to how this “felt connection” is articulated or performed, the form this takes, and the contexts that invoke or produce it.

This ephemerality of late generation ethnicity makes it difficult to pin down or categorise, or to target and engage in diaspora outreach. That said, the very elements that render it ephemeral and tenuous mean that culture is the most important form of engagement, because it speaks to identity in emotional and affective ways and provides narratives into which subjects can place themselves, and which can activate a sense of identity otherwise nascent.

The survey and interviews were sensitive to this ephemerality and approached matters of identity via questions that explored the contexts, triggers and conduits of identity formation and performance. The underlying question, occasionally asked bluntly in interviews, was “Why do you choose to be Irish?”

Fig. 42: Why do you identify as Irish?



The response shows a range of factors triggering or sustaining a sense of Irishness. Two further questions parsed this.

Fig. 43: Did a particular experience trigger your interest in your Irish identity?

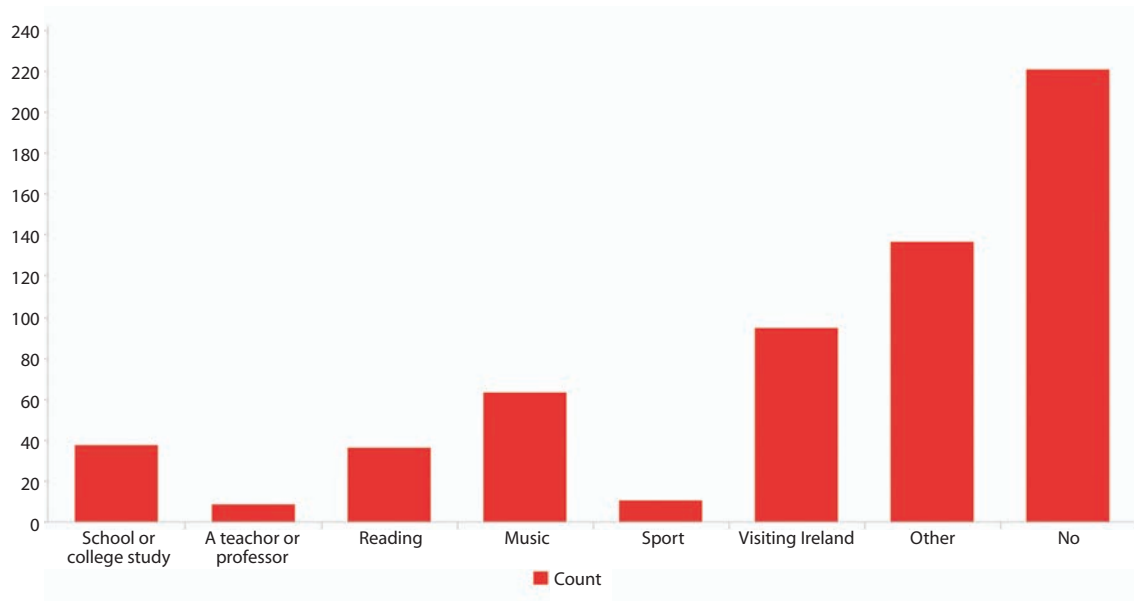
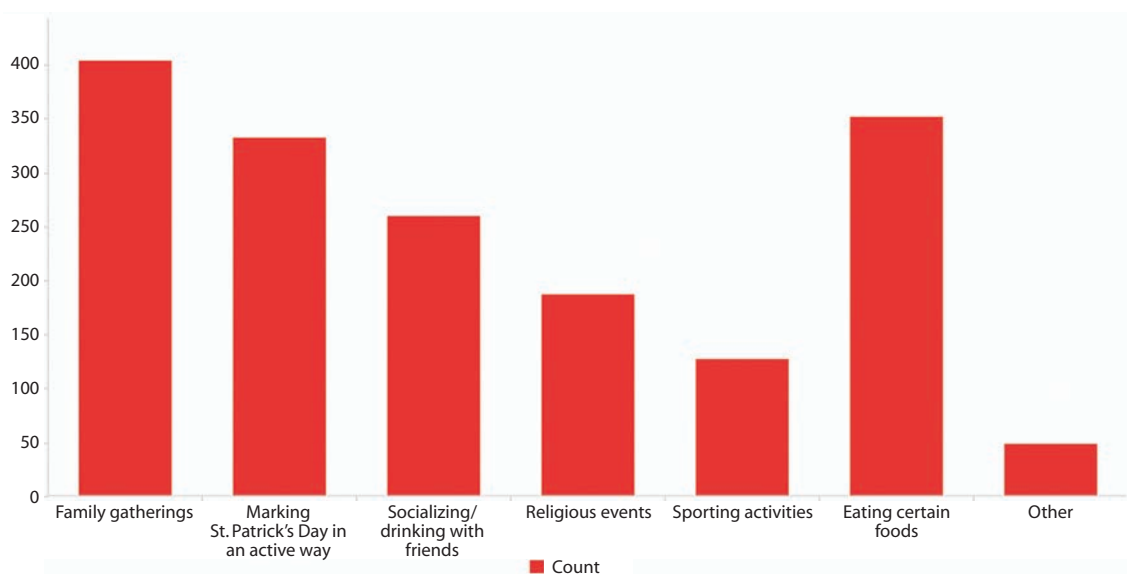


Fig. 44: Are there particular rituals that sustain your sense of Irish identity?



The responses are interesting in part because they only go so far, restricted by rather instrumental questions on matters of identity.

In the interviews, the question “Why do you identify as Irish?” received some similar stock responses but more commonly elicited lengthy, sometimes insightful, sometimes rambling comments, and occasionally abashed bemusement. Interviewees were being pressed to be more reflective about the matter than in filling in a survey and the responses were both allusive and revealing.

“...when it comes to my identity, I don't really know if I've ever felt that things were permanent. I kind of always feel like I'm always in a state of fluctuation... Where am I. Where do I fit?... I look forward to setting roots somewhere and really investing in a community.”

*[Irishness is]
“something felt
viscerally... that
beats in your heart
and moves in your
blood”*

“I guess I've become more aware of what an Irish identity is but I guess less secure in... I don't know if that really describes me because I feel so disconnected from Ireland.”

“...for me identity isn't something you can choose on a whim. It's something that you can I guess sort of accept. Accept your role in it, plot your place on the chart.”

“Irishness... makes me different... more specific... part of the type of American I am.”

“I haven't arrived to what Irishness means to me... Like what does it mean in the feelings I can't express in words? It's not, I don't know. I haven't reached the place there.”

Such articulations express both the ephemerality and potency of Irish identifications. Many interviewees told stories of growing up in terms of their memories of what it was in their childhoods that signified an Irish identity. And just as many indicated that in adolescence or/and early adulthood, often as students, they were in search of a stronger or alternative sense of identity and Irishness offered this.

Several spoke in more explicitly racial terms about how Irishness offered a sense of identity that differentiated their whiteness:

“Choosing Ireland... means that you are not another white American... it makes you interesting”

“I think at a certain point, it does get to become a choice because you have assimilated into the United States and now are considered white. And so you don’t really have to identify that way if you don’t want to.”

“I think that people are feeling that they don’t want to be lumped into this generic form of white. I could see that as a result of that, people might reach out to reconnect with their heritage...I am not interested in having no culture and having no attachment to an identity according to my heritage. I don’t want the cliched American white identity.”

All of the above comments and many more we have not included here underline the significance of symbolic ethnicity in the choice and maintenance of late generation Irish identity in the US. We are only beginning to understand why and how young Americans of Irish descent invest in Irishness as an element of identity.

RECOMMENDATION

- *Policy-led engagement with young people of Irish descent in the US should be cognizant of symbolic ethnicity in designing outreach and communications.*



Conclusion

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.

In 21st century America, late generation ethnicity has become sublimated, rendered largely invisible, with specific practices forgotten and once sustaining institutions eroded. As such, it becomes associated less with practices and institutions and more with emotions and values; less material but not necessarily weaker. This seeming paradox, a divergence between irreversible decline of the ethnic habitus and continuing investment in ethnic identifications, characterises the lateness of late generation ethnicity.

Research soundings and policy calibrations must attend to this reality. This research report is one such sounding. It is necessarily partial due to its scale and focus, but nonetheless suggestive of the changing dimensions of Irish ethnicity at this late stage of settlement and assimilation. As such, it is also a window into the future of Irish America.

This is the first research project to undertake a detailed study of young people of Irish descent in the US, the majority of whom are 3rd generation or later. It combines an online survey and in-depth interviews to produce textured information on a generation that has few communal links beyond its investments in the symbolic ethnicity of Irishness. Such ephemeral forms of ethnic identity cannot be taken for granted. Engagement with this young generation requires understanding of how symbolic ethnicity encodes their sense of Irish identity. It also requires tuning in to their worldviews and values to understand how and why their Irishness becomes salient.

Overall, young Irish America represent a highly educated, relatively successful, and mature diaspora generation. However, they do not represent a community in any traditional sense of the term and their differentiation must be understood if effective engagement is to be advanced. Irishness, to paraphrase one of the interviewees, is likely “not top of their list” of identifications nor a daily lived experience. And so that engagement, to echo several interviewees, needs to “meet them where they are” and offer compelling value propositions.

Culture and education are keys to the regeneration and sustainability of the Irish diaspora and to diaspora engagement across all generations. They spur the activities of ethnic memory and identification and facilitate social interaction. For the younger generation they are also keys to successful engagement but attention needs to be paid to the particular needs and interests and the shifts in tastes and platforms used by younger diaspora cohorts. Social media outreach, as many interviewees noted, will be important to successful engagement.

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, and considerable contextual turmoil in transatlantic relations more generally. 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. Understanding and engaging the next generation of Irish America will be crucial to that future.

Recommendations

Contact with Ireland

Understand the appeal of Ireland to younger Americans of Irish descent in terms of their identity journey/maturation

Research and develop social media outreach in ways that are targeted towards and responsive to the perspectives and platforms of young Irish

Networks and Organizations

Encourage more strategic engagement with younger cohorts/generations by established organisations and networks

Seek fresh ideas about the establishment of entities that would engage younger Americans of Irish descent on their own terms

Continue to support initiatives that facilitate professional networking

Culture and Sport

Continue to promote Irish culture as the spearhead of engagement with young Irish America

Attend to the shifts in tastes and platforms used by younger diaspora cohorts

Education

Explore the provision of educational programmes in Irish history and culture, tailored to relevant platforms and diaspora interests

Engage stakeholders to design an attractive and sustainable immersive programme for diaspora youth

Consider initiatives that stimulate and engage young Irish diaspora in volunteer programmes or projects

Social and Political Perspectives

Recognise the worldview of young Irish in the US today in designing diaspora engagement

Continue to reflect the diversity of the diaspora in designing policy and supporting outreach

Perceptions and Values

Design an appealing value exchange with the young diaspora in the US based on their values and perceptions regarding Ireland and sense of Irishness

Identity

Policy-led engagement with young people of Irish descent in the US should be cognizant of symbolic ethnicity in designing outreach and communications

The Research Team

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