



NÍ NEART GO CUR LE CHÉILE

**Irish emigrant community experiences during
the Covid-19 pandemic**

2021

migrant project



Government of Ireland
Emigrant Support Programme



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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THERE'S NO STRENGTH WITHOUT UNITY

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Executive Summary

Crosscare Migrant Project is an Irish-based, non-governmental organisation that provides information and advocacy support to Irish emigrants at the pre-departure, pre-return and post-return stages of their migration journeys. In working with Irish emigrant support organisations across the world, we saw how the Covid-19 pandemic demanded more from all organisations to reach out to Irish emigrants and support them during an unprecedented period of uncertainty, pressure and devastation. The impetus to capture the experiences of the Irish emigrant community emerged from an important need to identify the core issues, needs and strategies that developed during the pandemic, and the learning that this could offer the global Irish network.

This report gains insight, from the network of Irish support organisations abroad, into the impact that Irish emigrants experienced during the pandemic. It is a novel research study that analyses the main crisis issues emigrants experienced during the pandemic: their needs, how they were supported, and the future needs and challenges they may face. The research presents findings from both a survey and interviews conducted with emigrant support organisations funded via the Government of Ireland Emigrant Support Programme working directly with Irish emigrants, across Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States.

These Irish emigrant support organisations specialise in the provision of welfare, information and advocacy support. Their connection with the community and their capacity to support emigrants placed them in the most advantageous

position to gain insight into, and provide an overview of, the real experiences and challenges faced by Irish emigrants. Findings from the survey explore, through interviews with organisational staff members, deeper insights into the most dominant challenges faced by emigrants.

Financial insecurity emerged as the most severe impact, particularly among people made redundant and ineligible for state unemployment payments and among undocumented emigrants. Information needs consisted mainly of Covid-19-related information, travel restrictions and access to other supports. Isolation, wellbeing and mental health were the main challenges for older emigrants, vulnerable emigrants and Irish Travellers. Immigration insecurity was also a major challenge particularly among temporary workers in Australia, Canada and the United States. Less dominant but concerning challenges included health vulnerability, homelessness and domestic violence.

Diversity among the Irish emigrant community, their connection with Irish organisations, collaborative initiatives, regional responses to the pandemic and availability of resources were determinants of the challenges identified by the organisations. Many emigrants experienced multiple challenges simultaneously during the pandemic and were therefore in need of a variety of supports, such as immigration advice, financial support and counselling. The additional Covid response fund from the Department of Foreign Affairs enabled further capacity to support emigrants. The strategic planning, actions and collaboration of organisations, combined with the goodwill from the supportive and generous Irish community, formed the ultimate response and success of meeting the needs of Irish emigrants in distress during the pandemic.

Introduction

The Covid-19 global pandemic led to upheaval on a scale previously unknown in the majority of people's lifetimes. It affected the population of Ireland and the Irish diaspora, including Irish emigrants and immigrants, and caused a significant burden both for individuals and families. As well as affecting people's physical health, the pandemic impacted basic human needs (food, water and shelter), mental health, welfare and social supports, relationships (including an increase in domestic violence), work, and social and cultural life. It also highlighted and aggravated pre-existing social and economic inequalities that were already affecting Irish emigrants.

As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and based on our previous research and work with Irish citizens returning to and leaving Ireland, we conceived a research project that would help to capture and document the impact on the lives of Irish emigrants living abroad. This research was an opportunity to engage our network of Irish emigrant support organisations to collate insight and learning from the experiences of the emigrant Irish community and to reflect on the event for future planning. Research across many disciplines and subjects is underway on the impact of the pandemic, yet to our knowledge, research on the impact of the pandemic on Irish emigrants living abroad is not as of time of publication being conducted elsewhere.

The vision of Global Ireland – Ireland's Diaspora Strategy 2020–2025 (Government of Ireland, 2020) is to support the welfare of the Irish abroad and deepen and strengthen ties with the diaspora. Ensuring that the welfare of the Irish abroad remains at the heart of Irish diaspora support is one of the primary strategic objectives to achieve this vision. The Diaspora Strategy is implemented by Irish governmental supports, including the Minister

of State for Overseas Development and Diaspora, the Interdepartmental Committee on the Irish Abroad, and the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP) that is overseen by the Dept. of Foreign Affairs. This research focuses on ESP-funded organisations globally. The overseas ESP-funded welfare organisations were the unit of analysis (as opposed to individual emigrants), with representatives from ESP-funded welfare organisations invited to comment on conditions affecting Irish emigrants in their geographical area or region.

The DFA has identified new priorities, including rebuilding (post Covid-19), through digital inclusion initiatives which enhance organisations' delivery of welfare and heritage projects; building capacity and resilience within organisations; looking at new ways to deliver services; supporting volunteer community efforts; and promoting mental health and social inclusion initiatives. This report may inform some of the initiatives listed above.

In Crosscare Migrant Project's own work supporting Irish emigrants during the height of the pandemic, approximately 50% of our clients directly articulated "Covid-19 pandemic" as the reason for their return to Ireland (Crosscare Migrant Project, June 2020). However, more than 50% experienced issues relating to the pandemic, such as a hold on visas for family members or problems in accessing emergency and self-isolation accommodation. Many of our clients faced precarious and uncertain circumstances overseas when contemplating their return to Ireland, and after their return, due to the pandemic.

Since the year 2000, there have been significant changes in migration patterns to and from Ireland (Gilmartin, 2013). We anticipate that the Covid-19 pandemic further affects these already existing changes in migration patterns.

Recent Central Statistics Office (CSO) data from April 2021 indicates an increase in return migration of Irish citizens in the year ending April 2021, during the first year of the pandemic,

with 30,200 returned, up from 28,900 in the year ending April 2020. The number of Irish citizens emigrating abroad in the year ending April 2021 has also significantly decreased to 22,800, down from 28,300 in the year ending April 2020. Therefore, we are already seeing the possible impact of the pandemic as a factor that may affect inward and outward migration.

Crosscare Migrant Project's (2019) research report, *Coming Home in Crisis – Experiences of Irish Emigrants Returning in Crisis Situations*, identified seven areas of challenge experienced by Irish people returning to Ireland in crisis: housing insecurity, financial insecurity, family and support networks, health, immigration issues and detention/deportation, discrimination and threats, and violence and fleeing conflict. In these cases, people were experiencing issues that led them to return to Ireland under very difficult circumstances, requiring various supports. The research identifies similar challenges faced by emigrants that were exacerbated by the pandemic, other challenges that emigrants faced, and additional challenges faced by emigrants who chose to stay living abroad.

The regular ease of travel to and from the United Kingdom and Ireland that enables transnational lives for Irish citizens living in the United Kingdom was suspended during the travel ban throughout the pandemic. Early research is assessing the impact on family life, identity, belonging and mental health (Scully et al., 2021a; Scully et al., 2021b) this entailed.

Some early indications of existing inequalities among minority groups such as Irish Travellers causing a disproportionate adverse impact on the Traveller community are evident in Ireland and the United Kingdom, in terms of access to housing, basic facilities, and physical and mental health impact (Baker, 2021; Southwark Travellers Action Group, 2021; Villani, et al., 2021). A report from Fréa (2021) also outlines the barriers faced by the older Irish emigrant generation in accessing

supports and social connection through internet access during the pandemic.

We anticipated that there would be differences between the experiences of Irish emigrants determined by their geographic location and the challenges experienced there, such as potential recessions, and varied international political responses to the pandemic such as restrictions on travel, visas and inward migration. While there were efforts made by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to inform a global collective response to the unprecedented threat posed by the pandemic, it is clear that individual states formulated their own pandemic responses, based on their political, economic, social and cultural environments. It is important to consider these varying responses to the pandemic in the regions where Irish emigrants and support organisations are commonly found.

For example, rights to unemployment financial supports are restricted to emigrants with more permanent residency, as opposed to temporary visa workers in Australia, Canada and the United States. These three large countries also experienced variations in the impact of the pandemic, with states, provinces or cities determining restrictions regionally. Australia closed its border completely and enforced a strict exemption process for anyone seeking to leave or enter the country (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). There is also a history of Irish emigrants overstaying in the United States and becoming “undocumented”, working illegally, who are ineligible for state supports and health care. This is officially recognised through the appointment of a special envoy from Ireland to the United States to advance the position of Irish emigrants, particularly the undocumented.

With this research, we hope to address a gap in knowledge, to inform and support the work of the Irish Government, policymakers, statutory services and ESP organisations (and non-ESP organisations), through sharing knowledge, learning and non-profit practice development.

Methodology

Overview

We used a mixed methods approach utilising a primarily quantitative survey and following this up with semi-structured qualitative interviews. This type of sequential data collection is useful for social research and descriptive studies of environmental measures (such as patterns of resource use and of social metrics) that may defy easy categorisation, such as potentially related perceptions, attitudes or beliefs (Driscoll et al. 2007). When assessing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Irish emigrants, this approach and study design were selected as appropriate for collecting the necessary data to reflect participants' points of view as well as numerical responses.

We used convenience sampling, contacting Irish emigrant support organisations both known and not known to us who are listed under the 1,000 Irish organisations in the Diaspora Directory (Global Irish, DFA, 2020a). We limited our sample to welfare-focused support organisations in Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Creswell (2016) recommends 5-25 participants for the qualitative analysis of what people experience during a phenomenon. The findings from convenience sampling cannot be generalised to the target population (Irish emigrants), due to the potential bias in the sampling technique because of the underrepresentation of subgroups within the sample, compared to the population of interest (Irish emigrants). Therefore, inferences based on convenience sampling should only be made about the sample itself (Bornstein, 2013). We were limited by the type of organisation we could contact but applied criteria for study participants.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be included in the research, individuals had to work for a welfare-focused, ESP-funded organisation overseas. Non-ESP-funded organisations were excluded from this research unless they had a specific focus on the welfare of Irish emigrants. Irish community support organisations from non-traditional Irish emigrant destinations (e.g. Dubai, United Arab Emirates) were also excluded from this research, as they did not have a specific focus on welfare issues. Many of the organisations, such as those with a focus on sports and/or the GAA, would not have been relevant to our research. While we may have overlooked other Irish emigrant support organisations, we were as inclusive as possible, given the study resources, objectives and parameters. In terms of the Irish emigrant community itself, third- and fourth-generation Irish emigrants, etc., were excluded from this research. However, Irish citizens (i.e. people with Irish passports and emigrants who identified as Irish in a geographical area or region) were included.

Data Collection

We collected survey data from November 2020 to January 2021 and interview data in December 2020 and January 2021. A quantitative survey and qualitative interviews were the data collection tools. We designed a quantitative survey using Survey Monkey software (Appendix A). The survey was live online from November 2020 to January 2021. Participants were sent a link to the survey by -mail, as well as participant information and informed consent documents, which we asked participants to read prior to completing the survey itself.

The survey comprised four main parts: (1) profile of Irish emigrants; (2) communications and reaching out to Irish emigrants; (3) organisational service delivery and collaboration; and (4) the

future. We were seeking data in each of these four main distinct areas on variables of interest. We piloted the survey with an individual from our organisation and with expert individuals from external organisations. We adopted the feedback received from the survey pilot to improve the quality and usability of the survey. The last question on the survey asked participants to provide their contact details if they wanted to participate in a brief online interview. We drafted a semi-structured interview schedule for participants who agreed to be interviewed (Appendix B).

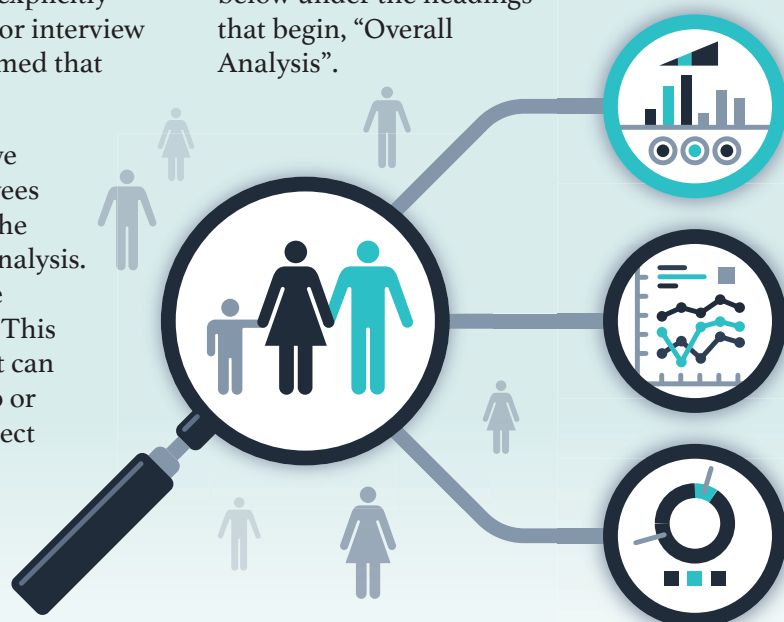
The units of analysis for this research were the ESP-funded organisations, as opposed to individual research participants. We were not focused on ESP organisations' organisational procedures and practices; rather, the individuals from the ESP organisations completed the survey and interviews and spoke from their organisation's perspective about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Irish emigrants in their area or region. Participants were free to answer, based on their experiences with clients and senior positions from which they were able to provide valid insights and also an overview of the impact of the pandemic on Irish emigrants. While the survey responses and interview transcripts were not directly derived from participant organisation's data, participants would have had access to their own data, which may have affected some of their responses. We did not explicitly ask participants to base their survey or interview responses on their data, but we assumed that some participants would do this.

Prior to conducting the interviews, we asked permission from the interviewees for the interview to be recorded for the purposes of transcription and data analysis. Interviews were conducted using the video-conferencing software, Zoom. This is a video conferencing platform that can be used through a computer desktop or mobile app and allows users to connect

online for video conference meetings, webinars and live chat. After each interview, an audio (.m4a) and video recording (.mp4) were stored securely on Crosscare's Terminal Server. We used the transcription software Happy Scribe to create Word documents of interview transcripts. Happy Scribe is an automatic transcription service available in more than 119 languages. Survey data and interview data were collated and cleaned for analysis.

Data Analysis

We used the functions available in Survey Monkey to analyse the quantitative data. This would provide us with demographic data and data on variables of interest in the four main parts of the survey. We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to qualitative analysis of interview data. This approach provided a framework for the process of identifying patterns or themes within the qualitative data. Qualitative data was coded independently by two researchers. We built from the initial coding of interview transcripts to broader categories of codes, to broader themes. Following this mixed methods approach, we analysed the quantitative survey data, then the qualitative interview data. The integration of the quantitative and qualitative data is presented below under the headings that begin, "Overall Analysis".



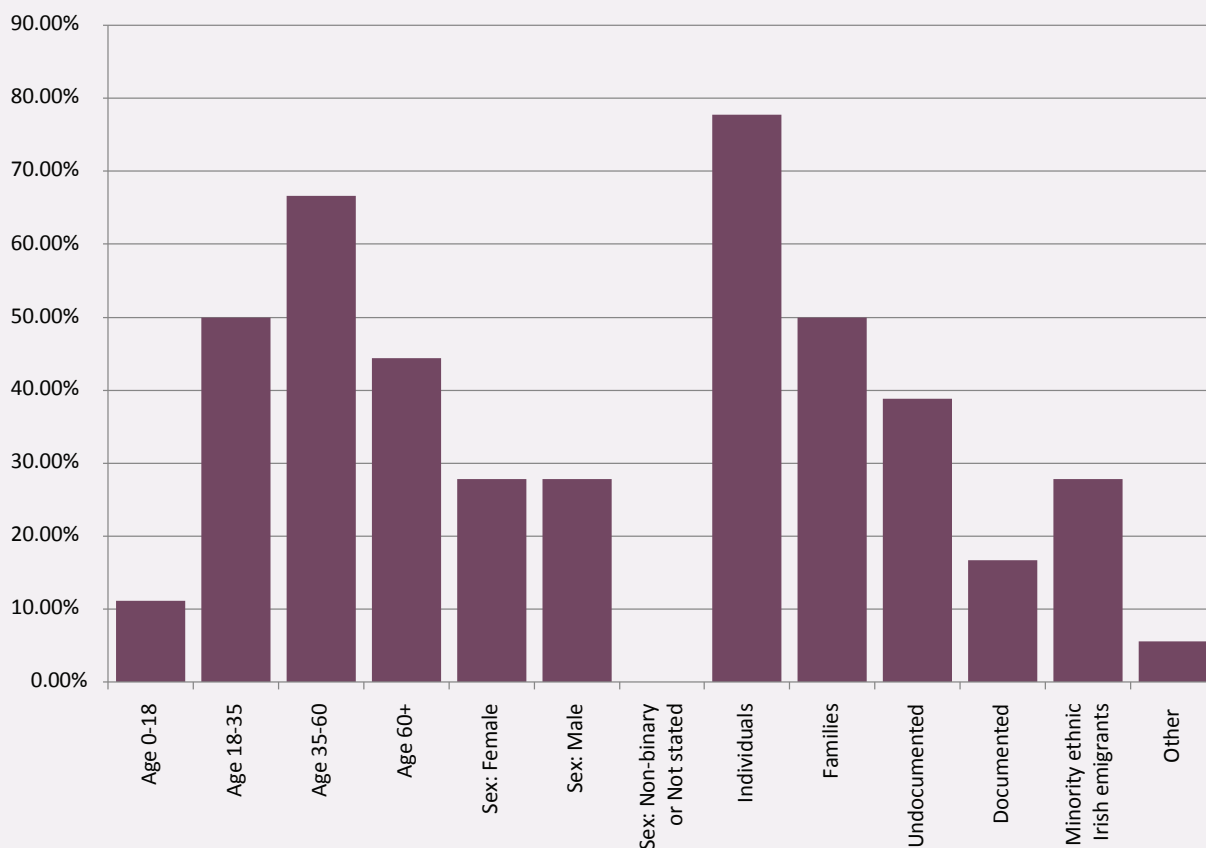
Findings & Analysis

Survey

A total of 20 Irish emigrant support organisations responded to the survey. Representatives from these organisations were self-selected and included nine from the United Kingdom, seven from the United States, three from Australia and one from Canada. It is important to note that organisations based in the United States, Australia and Canada are regions that require immigration permission for Irish citizens residing there.

Demographics

Groups of Irish emigrants having increased contact with organisations since the pandemic



A total of 18 organisations (90%) noted an increase in the number of Irish emigrants contacting them during the pandemic. Increased contact was noted more commonly by the 35-60 age category across 12 organisations, with 9 organisations noting an increase in the 18-35 age category and 8 noting an

increase in the 60+ age category. Only 2 organisations noted an increase in the number of minors contacting their services. An equal increase in contact from both men and women was reported by 5 organisations (25%). There was an increase in individuals contacting organisations reported by 70% of respondents (14), and an increase in families contacting organisations reported by 45% of respondents (9). A total of 7 out of 11 organisations based in the United States, Canada and Australia noted an increase in contact from people identified as undocumented, with only 3 organisations noting increase in contacts from documented Irish emigrants in the United States and Canada. A total of 5 organisations in the United States and Canada also noted an increase in contact from Irish emigrants from minority ethnic groups.

Interviews

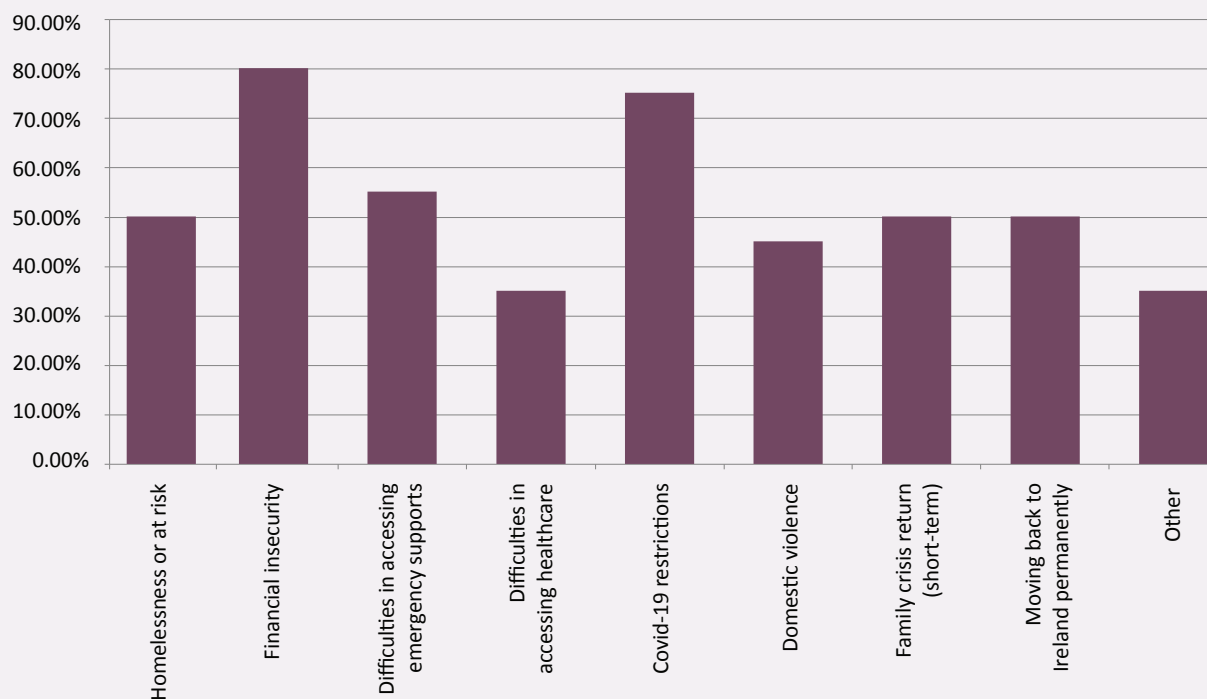
Eleven interviews were conducted with representatives from Irish emigrant support organisations based in four countries. These organisations receive funding support from the ESP, under the DFA, and are ongoing contacts of the Crosscare Migrant Project. Interviewees were provided with an information and consent form, and interview schedules for semi-structured interviews were prepared, following consultation with the survey results (see Appendix B). Four interviews were conducted with organisations in the United Kingdom, four with those in the United States, two in Australia and one in Canada. The interview schedules included five broad questions seeking further elaboration on areas of interest (Appendix B).

Main Pandemic-related Issues and Impact Experienced by Emigrants

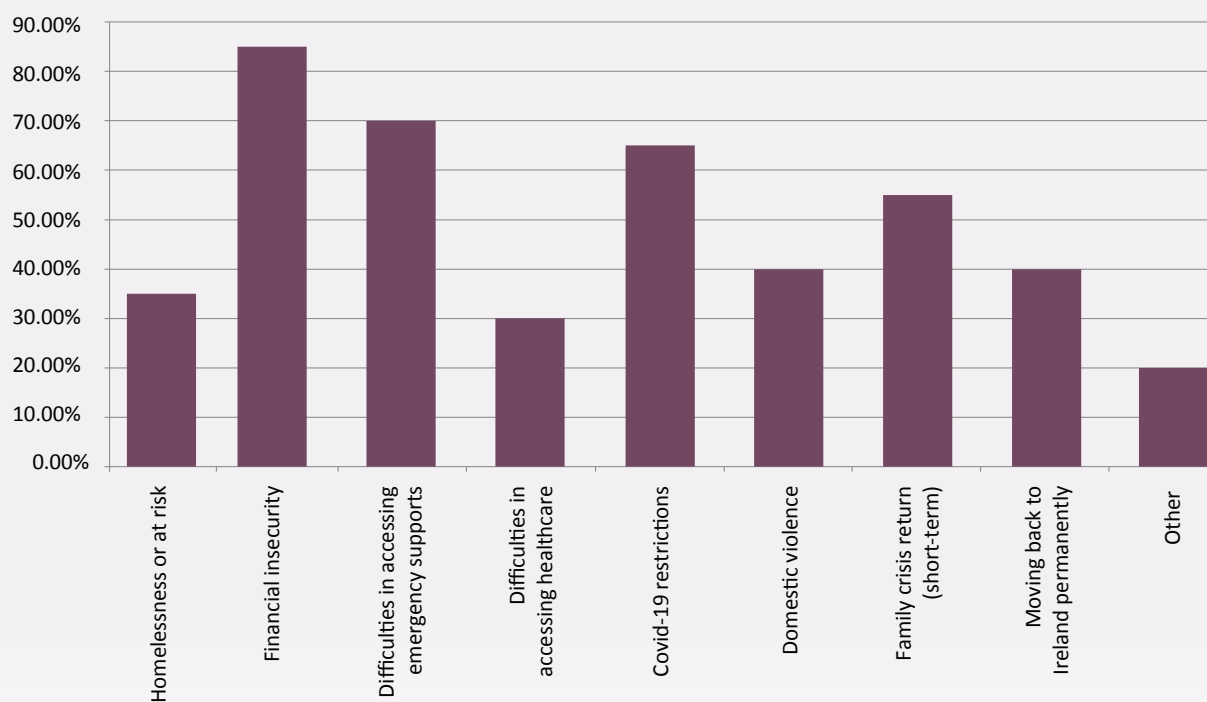
Survey participants and interviewees were each asked what they considered to be the most serious pandemic-related crisis issues their organisations were contacted about during the pandemic, and how this compared to the main issues presenting before the pandemic. The main issues discussed are categorised into the following eight themes:

1. Financial Insecurity
2. Informational Needs
3. Isolation, Wellbeing and Mental Health
4. Housing Insecurity
5. Immigration
6. Return Migration
7. Domestic Violence
8. Health Care.

Main pandemic-related crisis issues experienced by Irish emigrants



Increase in crisis issues experienced by Irish emigrants since the pandemic



Financial Insecurity

Survey Results

- A total of 80% (16 out of 20 organisations) reported that the main pandemic-related crisis issue for Irish emigrants seeking support was for financial insecurity (e.g. loss of employment/reduced income)
- More than 50% (11 organisations) noted people seeking support with difficulties in accessing essential emergency supports (e.g. food/emergency medical/welfare supports)
- “Other” issues were recorded, including that of access to superannuation funds in Australia (Australian pension)
- A total of 17 organisations (85%) identified income or financial insecurity as the most dominant crisis issue during the pandemic, when compared to issues presented before the pandemic
- A total of 9 organisations (45%) received offers of support to fundraise from the broader Irish community
- A total of 10 organisations (50%) formed new partnerships for collaborative fundraising, to support Irish emigrants; and 8 organisations (40%) connected with public figures in the Irish diaspora, to raise awareness and support for Irish emigrants (e.g. politicians, business people, and individuals with a public profile).

Interview Results

The financial impact of the pandemic was the most widely discussed major issue for Irish emigrants in contact with the organisations. This was particularly felt across the United States and Australia, where lower income households, temporary or casual workers, temporary visa holders and undocumented workers were at higher risk of being made redundant, particularly within the hospitality and construction sectors. In this context, “undocumented” refers to people whose immigration permission has lapsed or who did not have valid permission to work in the country.

Losing employment meant:

“[they] can’t afford the bills, can’t afford the rent, obviously, and the ambiguity of how long the uncertainty of how long this will last has really just increased the stress levels.”

(Aisling Irish Center, New York)

Irish emigrants who had valid immigration permission and were put on furlough (employment being on temporary hold while restrictions were in place, with the intention of returning to work afterwards), or made redundant, were able to qualify for the state unemployment benefit and so, while financially impacted, were not experiencing urgent financial risk. Many people with precarious immigration status were ineligible for state unemployment or Covid-19 related benefits, so did not have that

financial safety net available to them, and relied on their own savings or financial support from their family and support networks.

Others did not have access to local supports:

“they were not able to claim any unemployment, any assistance or help from the government. So, they were very much just left completely on their own. And I know employers had been very great ... trying to help them through.”

(New York Irish Center)

This was a stressful time for people in the immediate months following the outbreak of the pandemic, with the uncertainty of how long it would last. ESP organisations prioritised and coordinated the allocation of fundraised finance for people who were more seriously financially affected, for example, those with mounting debt and no access to state unemployment benefits. The financial impact led to some Irish emigrants, with limited access to state support services, requiring support with basic needs such as food and household goods.

Five organisations in New York collaborated to coordinate fundraising and allocation of supports to Irish residents, in a partnership launched as “SLÁINTE 2020”. This work involved coordinated fundraising and an application process to issue donations by cheque to support the worst-affected Irish emigrants. The Aisling Irish Center

arranged food parcel deliveries to some members, with the help of volunteers. Irish Community Services in Chicago set up an emergency response fund to which people could apply for support. By contrast, in San Diego, the Irish community was more established and less at risk financially. The J1 visa holders were at most risk of losing their summer work and the majority returned to Ireland.

Those who did stay did:

“very well, they formed the little communities and they helped each other. So, they got through it.”

(Irish Outreach Center, San Diego)

In Canada, many young working Irish emigrants became unemployed and would soon lose their immigration permission with limited options to re-apply and faced a reluctant return to Ireland (The Canadian Immigration Center). Irish emigrant groups in Canada ran food insecurity programmes which the Irish Canadian Immigration Center directed people to:

“there has been significant and worrying uptake of the food and insecurity programme offered in Toronto for the Irish.”

The Irish Canadian Immigration Center noted that many Irish emigrants volunteered to assist the Irish community group with deliveries and visiting older people.

Fewer need in terms of basic needs and food parcels, shopping and medical support were reported in Australia, where the pandemic was having a slower impact. Access to services and

support were less impacted and people were directed to resources and state supports,

“None of our seniors got sick, none of them.”

(Irish Support Agency, Sydney)

Those facing income insecurity from losing employment were temporary visa holders who were not entitled to access welfare benefits in Australia. However, within a short space of time, the Australian Government made an exceptional decision to open access to superannuation (the compulsory pension fund in Australia to which all taxpayers are required to contribute) funds for temporary visa holders, which allowed people to claim back the funds they had accrued to assist them financially in the short term. However, those who did not have this safety net were encouraged to return to their home countries. Some people who had travelled to Ireland for a crisis, such as family illness or death, encountered difficulties with immigration services when trying to return to Australia, thus leaving them or their family struggling financially in Australia (Claddagh Association, Perth).

In the United Kingdom, self-employed Irish Travellers also felt the impact of the loss of work and limited access to financial supports. The majority of Leeds GATE members are self-employed and work in manual labour, for example, landscaping, tree work and tarmacking. The majority of this informal trade stopped when the pandemic happened. In the initial months, they were strongly supported by family networks, but when the money ran out “people were really struggling”.

There was some reprieve when they were able go back to work over the summer, until the

second lockdown happened. Many of the UK organisations mainly support the older Irish community (e.g. 50+ age range) and regularly hosted weekly meals and social gatherings. Without this support, there was concern that people would struggle to access food and cooked meals:

“They needed support with shopping, food supplies and regular updates on restrictions”

(Lewisham Irish Centre, London).

Lewisham Irish Centre (London) set up Meals on Wheels, delivering weekly meals to members. Luton Irish Forum recruited volunteers who had been vetted by the local authority to assist with food shopping and delivery for members. In Manchester, an older group of men who were working all their lives in construction were hit with long-term unemployment for the first time:

“this time, when people’s jobs quickly dried up, they knew that they had to claim benefit ... [at that] stage because there was no alternative.”

(Irish Community Care, Manchester)

This presented challenges in terms of IT literacy skills and access to applications for payments online, with which Irish Community Care in Manchester provided significant support.

Overall Analysis of Income Insecurity

Irish emigrants who became redundant, or who lost their work at short notice, felt the immediate impact of the pandemic. Access to state benefits was an overriding factor in determining whether Irish emigrants experienced merely a loss, rather than financial insecurity. For those who did not have entitlements or access to state benefits, their “safety net” of savings, superannuation and borrowings quickly depleted. The long and extensive period of unexpected unemployment greatly reduced the capacity of emigrants with insecure immigration status to maintain their living costs. This access to entitlements was the biggest barrier for this emigrant group to remain financially stable during the pandemic.

This group was the most likely to get in contact with Irish emigrant support organisations to seek some assistance with their situation. The organisations made efforts to conduct needs assessments in order to prioritise the worst-hit financially, including those who were on temporary visas, those who were undocumented, and the older, isolated community. This emigrant group was then able to access alternative financial support in the form of cash donations fundraised by organisations, and in the form of benefits in kind, by accessing food and meal deliveries coordinated by the organisations.



Informational Needs

Survey Results

- The second most common issue, reported by 75% (15 organisations), was requests for information or support on Covid-19 restrictions (e.g. travel restrictions, lockdown, quarantine, medically vulnerable)
- A total of 65% (13 organisations) reported seeing an increase in these queries, compared with before the pandemic
- A total of 55% (11 organisations) provided information and advocacy services to support Irish emigrants that they had not provided before the pandemic.

Further comments that referred to information needs as main pandemic issues included:

“Support from other community organisations and the Irish Government has been incredible. All organisations and the Irish Government have adapted quickly to the circumstances.”

(Irish Community Services, Chicago)

“We hope to learn lessons from our new work patterns that will have positive impacts for clients. For example, can benefit forms be completed over the phone instead of people needing to [come] into the office? This will hopefully benefit people who financially cannot afford to come to the office or who are suffering from a disability that restricts mobility. We can review digital access for clients; should we have a hub that people can be supported to maintain benefit claims such as UC, which are largely done online?”

(Irish Community Care, Manchester)

“[Crosscare’s] ongoing information sessions with Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers with resources for clients returning to Ireland [were] very helpful.”

(Emerald Isle Immigration Center, New York)

Interview Results

In the immediate weeks of the pandemic and global lockdowns, organisations supported people with the stressful situations of understanding what the Covid-related restrictions entailed, how they would manage, concern for their family in Ireland, and difficulties with travelling back to Ireland. The onset of the pandemic triggered many diverse difficulties for people who urgently needed accurate information to form their decision-making and to ease their stress. The information needs covered Covid-19 regulations, travel restrictions, immigration status, access to state benefits and emergency financial supports, and physical and mental healthcare needs.

“we got a list of ... I think 90 people ... we make a telephone call to every week. And it’s partly just to check you are alright. It’s partly passing on the most recent government advice and guidance and to make sure people understand it, because a lot of our members don’t have literacy so would struggle to read that information.”

(Leeds GATE, Leeds)

Organisations had to close their centres, offices, face-to-face services and all group activities. They quickly transitioned their support to remote online service. Irish emigrants relied heavily on their services, especially those who experienced

barriers to access to supports and required support and advocacy to navigate administrative systems.

“There [were] kind of barriers to people who needed to claim the self-employed income support scheme, which was, again, because a lot of our clients are self-employed labourers, they ... need to either access it online or they’d need to use the phone, now a lot of the people we speak to are just very, very uncomfortable using the phone, I think; so, that’s been quite a difficult one to overcome.”

(Irish Community Care, Manchester)

Some also provided information and updates for people seeking information on access to welfare supports on returning to the island of Ireland. The Irish Support Agency in Sydney explained how they had received an overwhelming volume of calls in relation to cancelled flights, while working with the Consulate General and the Irish Chamber of Commerce to assist people in distress and trying to travel to Ireland (see the Return Migration section).

There were people who needed urgent assistance with arranging family members to travel to Australia to help them with stressful situations:

“a family who had a premature newborn who was so very seriously ill, that the mother and father both had to be in the hospital all the time and the other two kids outside the hospital; there was no one to care for them, and so we were working with them, trying to get a mother over here.”

(Claddagh Association, Perth)

The urgency and volume of contact from Irish emigrants to the organisations eventually calmed down when travel restrictions were more definitively in place and the uncertainty had eased.

“Once it got to about May or June the travel restrictions became less big of a deal because I think a lot of folks had gotten their questions answered ... and the travel restrictions [had] been in place a good few months ... So, folks [were] kind of aware of what the policy was and who it applied to.”

(Irish Community Services, Chicago)

All surveyed/interviewed organisations reported an increased exchange of information between Irish support organisations and established networks, Irish Embassies and General Consulate offices. The networks helped each other to gather and disseminate important and accurate regional and national information to inform Irish emigrants.

“I’ve been so comfortable to pick up the phone, call someone and email ... and I think you’ll find that across the board. There is great collaboration.”

(Irish Outreach Center, San Diego)

Overall Analysis of Information Needs

Information and advocacy needs were very dominant among Irish emigrants in contact with the organisations, particularly in the first few months of the pandemic. While the needs varied, organisations worked to stay informed, updated and in contact with all relevant sources, in order to inform and support emigrants. The dissemination of the information was conducted through various modes, including websites, telephone calls, social media, emails, newsletters both by post and email, text messaging and broadcasting, webinars, Facebook live and Zoom calls (see the Communications section).

The pandemic continued to create uncertainty for emigrants, as the “second wave” began to form in most countries and the lockdowns resumed. This

drove a “second wave” of uncertainty and need for Irish emigrants, to which Irish organisations responded with resolute resilience. The new connections made between organisations and external agencies, along with established networks, proved vital to maintaining steady support for emigrants in distress, particularly as organisations were facing into a “third wave” in January 2021.

Isolation, Wellbeing and Mental Health

Survey Results

- A total of 35% (7 organisations) noted other pandemic-related crisis issues including isolation, exclusion and mental health
- A total of 75% (15 organisations) provided social support services to support Irish emigrants that they had not provided before the pandemic
- New support service also included: digital inclusion supports, mindfulness, Telehealth for counselling, online cultural activities, Irish heritage project, The Irish 30 (a mental health & wellbeing webinar); the delivery of home-baked cakes to isolated members, and online tutoring for children and young people.

Further comments that referred to isolation, wellbeing and mental health included:

“Covid-19 has impacted every person of every age and has brought on [the] one hand some beautiful stories of kindness, generosity and community. On the other hand, the impacts of covid-19 on the Irish in Britain have been huge: the restrictions, uncertainty and lack of connection are just not what the Irish are built for. We thrive on social engagement, on connection, on storytelling and more, and our elders have really felt this so much harder than other groups. Their regular social and independent activities have been stripped away and we have seen some of the most bubbly, full-of-life characters become shells of themselves because of the restrictions. We acknowledge that this is the best way to keep people safe and tackle the virus until vaccines can be rolled out, but it has been a marathon of a struggle for many. Covid-19 has taken many of the community; it has taken many friends and relatives; and it has meant that couples are unable to see each other with restrictions on nursing homes and caring facilities. There is so much that can be said, and this only breaks the surface.”

(Irish Community Services, South-East London)

“Many Irish parents have had to work and home school/oversee online school. This has been very stressful for them. I can see more people seeking counselling in the future to help deal with the ongoing stress of this.”

(Rian Center, Boston)

“Australia just seems so far removed from everything and people are really feeling the distance for themselves and out of concern for relatives at home. There is also a real frustration with the constant opening and closing of internal borders, etc.”

(Irish Support Agency, Sydney)

“Mental health struggles, as a result of the prolonged lack of access to Ireland, Irish friends and family and important family/community rituals like funerals, etc.”

(Claddagh Association, Perth)

“It has made us understand the importance of services such as the lunch clubs to our clients as a way of reducing social isolation and of course the reverse to this is that lunch clubs help build friendship and social networks.”

(Irish Community Care, Manchester)

Interview Results

The social and emotional impact of the pandemic on Irish emigrants known to the organisations was widely discussed. They noted the deepening isolation of individuals, particularly among the older community, and people not well connected. Many organisations identified the older community as the most at risk of feeling the absence of social outlets and connections with people with whom they would normally be able to socialise. This was a dominant finding among organisations that run regular social groups and activities, such as lunch clubs for the older Irish community, which encourage and maintain human contact, along with

other vulnerable groups of people. This is the case, for example, among the Irish Traveller community in Leeds who:

“come [to Leeds GATE] and get support around anything they need ... and ... just also have company and combat loneliness.”

(Leeds GATE, Leeds)

Members of the older community were required, across all regions, to shield at home and stop all face-to-face contact with others. This sudden absence of people’s social connection was an abrupt severing of healthy social outlets to maintain their wellbeing. It led to feelings of hopelessness, losing familiarity with their friends and connections, and had a negative impact on their emotional and mental state.

“... whenever we were doing phone calls to clients to give our users the lunch clubs or during the ‘Cáca deas’ project, when we were dropping cakes off, the first question that they asked was when are the lunch clubs going to resume? So, that’s ... something that really has impacted on clients quite a lot.”

(Irish Community Care, Manchester)

Isolation was particularly felt in countries where it would be much more difficult for people to travel back to Ireland for their own needs or to help family:

*“people talk about it first:
‘I feel so far away. I feel so
isolated. I feel so guilty that
I can’t be there to help.’”*

(Claddagh Association, Perth)

Organisations responded to help people get through this challenging period by thinking outside the box, to enable them to continue connecting and supporting their members. They transitioned a lot of support services to online support with staff working remotely, through emails, phone calls, video calls and arranging activities and events to keep up people’s spirits up and to stem hopelessness. Some organisations that usually ran lunch clubs arranged for meals to be delivered to members, particularly those who did not have family in the area. This was mainly coordinated with the help of volunteers, which was described as “a crucial sort of social outlet” (New York Irish Center). Combining the delivery of meals with a quick chat and social interaction was:

*“... very effective because ...
the feedback from the elderly
people was they look forward
to the meal every week.”*

(Lewisham Irish centre, London)

Two organisations referred to “safeguarding”, that is, putting supports in place for people who were more vulnerable, including those experiencing isolation, loneliness, mental health needs and loss. Organisations provided emotional support and reassurance through phone calls, and those with established counselling services, such as the Irish Support Agency in Sydney and The Aisling Irish Center in New York, continued to deliver them remotely. Others offered practical help, such as the New York Irish Center, whose members picked up medication or groceries, and delivered lunches to seniors every week.

Organisations identified a digital divide among older emigrants, when arranging their transition of social groups and activities to online platforms, such as private Facebook chat groups and live video calls. They noted that additional support was required from staff and volunteers to set up access to online engagement for members. In response to this, Leeds GATE developed their digital inclusion work in supporting the Irish Traveller community in North Yorkshire:

*“And a lot of our staff
members are Gypsies and
Travellers. So, they’re able
to do that kind of like ... a
really nice thing of passing
on community news ... who
got married with a baby,
like all that kind of thing,
just to make sure people feel
included and supported.”*

(Leeds GATE, Leeds)

Prolonged Isolation led to further crisis for people in deteriorating situations such as mental health needs, domestic violence and abuse, food poverty, debt and risk of homelessness.

Demand for emotional support phone calls and counselling services increased throughout the pandemic and organisations noted their concern for people who were developing mental health risks. Services were particularly mindful of members known to them with mental health support needs, and some recruited volunteers – existing and new – to assist with checking in on members through regular phone calls to those who requested them. They offered this support as a means to support members already in vulnerable situations, pre-pandemic, and to help prevent other members potentially from developing mental health risks. Concern arose for more serious cases:

“some people talked about suicide, hopelessness, you could see people’s confidence ... had reduced.” However, people were described as having ‘risen to the occasion’ ... [and] after a couple of weeks of returning to their social groups, adjusted.”

(Luton Irish Forum, Bedfordshire)



Overall Analysis of Isolation, Wellbeing and Mental Health

Stress, isolation, emotional and mental health impact were described to be some of the most dominant areas of support work that participant organisations offered to Irish emigrants. The gradual realisation of the potential long-term effect of the pandemic began to have an impact on some people’s emotional and social wellbeing. Withdrawal from social contacts, delayed trips home to Ireland, less to look forward to, and general support reduced to remote online support gradually built up anxiety and negative impacts on mental health for some people.

Members of the older Irish community were identified as being particularly isolated and, within the context of the pandemic, they were the most at risk and were required to self-isolate in their homes compared to the rest of the population. Some regular Irish emigrant clients who were used to a socialising and connecting with other Irish emigrants missed out on their regular outlet to relieve loneliness and isolation for many months. The concern was that the condition of some older emigrants would start to deteriorate and that there may be some eventual difficulty to re-engage them with supports during and after the pandemic. Organisations were forced to close their centres and face-to-face contact, which hindered the humane and caring nature of their work and support for particularly vulnerable Irish emigrants. Their quick transition to offer supports online was an important step to maintaining these connections and relationships with the Irish community, and to continue to offer supports remotely, as far as possible. Emigrants provided good feedback on the positive impact they felt from doorstep visits and meal deliveries. The lengths that organisations went to with innovative, new initiatives to extend their support and social connections were evidently appreciated by the demand and ongoing attendance, including by people beyond their usual locality.

Housing Insecurity

Survey Results

- A total of 50% (10 respondents) recorded emigrants contacting them for support with homelessness or at risk of homelessness.
- A total of 40% (8 respondents) identified increased contact from people experiencing housing insecurity due to the pandemic.

Interview Results

The loss of income inevitably led to rent debt for people in rented accommodation and they became at risk of losing their tenancy. Fortunately, steps were taken in most regions to enforce a moratorium on evictions to prevent homelessness and protect people during the pandemic. This measure eliminated one potentially major problem for Irish emigrant tenants and allowed breathing space for people to find solutions to loss of income and source funds for their rent.

However, organisations reported that rent debt eventually accumulated among Irish emigrant tenants and there was concern that rent accrued could lead to future evictions when the eviction moratorium was inevitably lifted. The fundraising supports allowed donations to support people in these situations (Irish Support Agency, Sydney; Slainte 2020, New York; Irish Community Services, Chicago).

Calls were received from Irish emigrants who were experiencing homelessness, some of whom had ongoing issues prior to the pandemic (Lewisham Irish Centre, London). The most

seriously impacted members of Leeds GATE were “roadside families”, who are classed as statutory homeless. The organisation worked with the local authority during the first lockdown to secure access to water and facilities and:

“then [the] ability to stay in one place for those three months rather than being evicted and moved around, which was brilliant but, after that ... then ... things slipped back to evictions.”

The roadside families also experienced increased stigmatising and hate crime during this time, representing Travellers as posing a risk to other people.

Overall Analysis of Housing Insecurity

The main housing concerns among Irish emigrants were focused on the accrual of rent arrears following loss of employment due to the pandemic. The widespread moratorium on evictions from tenancies averted a lot of pressure and risk of homelessness. However, few cases of homelessness were reported. Roadside families were among the most vulnerable of emigrants experiencing homelessness, with the additional risk of hate crime.

Immigration

Survey Results

Immigration was not included as a specific category of main pandemic-related crisis issues in the survey. However, queries in relation to the implications of the pandemic and Covid-19 travel and immigration regulations were captured under the “Covid-19 restrictions (e.g. travel restrictions, lockdown, quarantine, medically vulnerable)” option:

- A total of 75% (15 respondent organisations) received requests for information or support on Covid-19 restrictions (including the impact on immigration permission)
- A total of 65% (13 organisations) saw an increase in these queries, compared with the situation before the pandemic.

Further comments that referred to legal immigration impact included:

“Quite a few of them let their Irish passport expire a long time ago.”

(Irish Community Services, Chicago)

“Irish Passports ... expired and we had a lot of J-1 Work and travel grads here and they needed support.”

(Irish Outreach Center, San Diego)

Interview Results

Irish emigrants living in Australia, Canada and the United States in a restricted immigration status were at much higher risk of falling into crisis during the pandemic. Temporary visa workers and undocumented workers were particularly at risk of losing work and falling into financial debt. There was also the fear that they would be forced to return to Ireland, abruptly leaving their life behind in the host country. The Covid-19 restrictions imposed more restrictions for temporary visa workers who were still employed but needed to renew their visas. Irish Community Services in Chicago recorded an increase in demand for their immigration clinic with people needing support and information.

Those immediately impacted were on year-long J1 visas and people going through the family-based immigration process, for example through a spouse, where one family member may have been based abroad. The travel ban and the closure of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service caused prolonged delays. Also, for:

“A lot of H-1B [visa holders], if your renewal came up during that time period, that was problematic because there was a ban on re-entering on certain ... types of temporary visas. So, you might be employed but you’d have to go back [to Ireland] to renew your visa. You know, there was a lot of uncertainty whether you’d be ... let back in. And ... there [were] some restrictions depending on visas that you couldn’t really work remote on a visa. So, there was a lot of confusion.” (Irish Community Services, Chicago)

The New York Irish Center received a lot of contact from young Irish emigrants seeking support, who were “out of status”, had lost their jobs and were unable to access state unemployment supports: “So, they were very much just left completely on their own.”

The Irish Canadian Immigration Center identified immigration insecurity as the most

significant impact on Irish emigrants contacting their service. A lot of work permits were expiring and around a third of “new” emigrants who had arrived within the last two years applied for permanent residency, but the pandemic had stymied their application:

“they haven’t been able to get together the documents required to apply for permanent residency here because there are significant delays.”

An “unusual and a different trend” was noted by the Irish Support Agency in Sydney in working with the Consulate General on cases of repatriation for long-term Irish residents who were undocumented. Previously, the understanding was that there was reticence among some people without immigration permission to approach their organisation, the Irish Consulate General or the Irish Embassy for assistance pre-pandemic, for fear of facing legal consequences. However, with the onset of the pandemic restrictions, people who had been undocumented for some time had no choice but to seek the support of the Irish Support Agency and Consulate General.

Overall Analysis of Immigration

Some emigrants who were undocumented were faced with the reality that they would not be able to sustain their lives in the United States, which was hugely significant to people who had made a family and career or business there, and would be risking a ten-year ban from there, if they returned to Ireland. This could result in the separation of families for indefinite periods and cause huge stress and emotional impact for the wider family networks.

Only organisations based in Australia, Canada and the United States reported supporting emigrants with immigration matters. UK-based Irish emigrants were not at risk in relation to immigration status and were therefore relieved of the additional stress that emigrants were experiencing further abroad. Some organisations offered more legal- or immigration-based information supports for Irish emigrants and therefore more of their queries were in relation to immigration, compared with organisations supporting mainly members of the older, settled Irish community. The main groups of people seeking information or support in relation to immigration were temporary workers (seeking to renew their visas); green card visa holders in the United States (who wanted to retain their visa); and undocumented (out-of status) emigrants. The organisations reported long delays with the immigration system in their country and uncertainty on how or when people could renew or stabilise their visas.

Return Migration

Survey Results

- A total of 50% (10 organisations) reported support with returning to Ireland both short-term (for a family crisis e.g. bereavement, caring for a family member) and support with moving back to Ireland permanently as being amongst the main pandemic-related issues
- A total of 55% (11 organisations) reported seeing an increase in queries for short-term return to Ireland, compared with before the pandemic, and 40% increase in queries for long-term return.

Further comments that referred to Return Migration included:

“People who have lost a family member due to Covid in Ireland but cannot return home for the funeral.”

(Rian Immigrant Center, Boston)

“We have heard of many individuals returning home to Ireland permanently.”

(Aisling Irish Community Center, New York)

“The support of agencies like Crosscare and Safe Home Ireland has been invaluable, particularly for our most vulnerable returnees.”

(Irish Support Agency, Sydney)

Interview Results

There was an immediate and emergency impact on Irish emigrants with the declaration of pandemic lockdown and travel restrictions. Organisations particularly noticed this impact among the younger community, temporary workers and student visa holders in Australia, Canada and the United States. The organisations experienced a surge of contact from concerned younger Irish emigrants on temporary visas, who had lost employment, and some of whom were out of status ineligible for state benefits, and in need of immigration information or support to acquire flights to return to Ireland. They also received calls from people who needed to return in distressing and crisis family situations, from people with mental health issues that escalated during Covid, and from people seeking information on the developing travel restrictions.

In Australia, the government advised temporary visa workers to return to their home countries if they were unable to sustain themselves and they had been made redundant. Further complications and pressures were added to the mix with the closure of airports and the enforcement of a process to apply for exemption on exceptional circumstances to leave or return to Australia. In the immediate weeks of the pandemic, support organisations in Australia assisted with many

calls from people experiencing distress about their situation and needing support to arrange flights, re-arrange or re-route their flights; or getting refunds when their flights were cancelled, and fewer airlines were offering flights:

“we could have one client talking to us 20 times in absolute angst ... on a flight-related thing”

(Irish Support Agency, Sydney).

A resolution was presented when the Irish Chamber of Commerce linked with Qatar Airways to arrange flights via Qatar for Irish emigrants. They worked closely with the Irish Consulate General and the Irish Embassy to assist people in returning to Ireland. They also provided information and updates for people seeking information on access to welfare supports on returning to the island of Ireland.

The Irish Canadian Immigration Center noted the decision people were faced with, having limited options for renewing visas, to stay in immigration limbo or to “go home”.

Others who had been planning a return to Ireland were in need of legal advice around retaining their green cards and options for their children, and the additional impact of travel restrictions on them in the immediate weeks of the pandemic:

“We did have some folks who did need to relocate to Ireland. Some were planning

before the pandemic and some [were] triggered by the pandemic”

(Irish Community Services, Chicago).

Overall Analysis of Return Migration

Return migration was a dominant theme and more common among people who were on short-term visas, particularly young, single emigrants, who would not have employment, income or sufficient savings to remain living abroad in the short term.

A medium- to long-term impact was felt among more settled emigrants, who faced a difficult decision to uproot their life abroad and return to Ireland long term. There was some diversity in this group, including visa holders who were uncertain of how or when their visas could be renewed; green card visa holders who felt the need to return to Ireland for family reasons, but wanted the option to return abroad again; and the undocumented emigrants who would lose their livelihoods and risk separation from their partner and children long term.

Organisations helped to alleviate the crisis for many people experiencing difficulties with accessing and communicating government updates and explaining complicated information. They assisted with the immediate needs of people who faced financial loss and were at risk of poverty. The “push” factor was dominant among emigrants who were left with no alternative but to return to Ireland. The “pull” factor that was drawing emigrants back to Ireland, some of whom had already been planning to return, was triggering more urgent action with the impact of the pandemic.

Domestic Violence

Survey Results

- Domestic violence was reported as an issue for which Irish emigrants sought support by 9 organisations (45%)
- A total of 40% (8 respondents) identified an increase in domestic violence cases due to the pandemic.

Interview Results

Domestic violence was a very serious issue that came to the attention of organisations including Leeds GATE (Leeds), the Irish Support Agency (Sydney), Lewisham Irish Centre (London) and Claddagh Association (Perth). Some of these services operated outreach work and had individual outreach workers or access to counselling supports to support individuals and families who needed additional support. Others provided emotional support and information by phone. Through this close contact with the community, they were trusted among members who sought support for family crisis and domestic abuse or violence. Leeds GATE, in particular, supported a lot of families who had been coping with the dual crises of domestic violence and loss of income,

“living together in very small spaces, not being able to go out, isolation and lots of different reasons tipped over into crisis ... we were supporting a lot of people who had experienced domestic violence.”

Women who were supported through domestic violence situations were identified as the most distressing cases, as they were unable to “jump on a plane and go home where they had support” and “[were] delayed in Australia trying to get out of the country because of Covid, and in the second case, a very violent, dangerous man” (Claddagh Association, Perth).

Overall Analysis of Domestic Violence

Influential factors of loss of income, isolation and being confined to home exacerbated the risk of domestic violence among some emigrants. Organisations supported emigrants experiencing some serious and concerning cases of domestic violence among Irish emigrants during the pandemic, with heightened risk for people who could not leave their homes or return to Ireland. Two organisations (in Australia and the United States) both reported that, while the volume of domestic violence cases was low, the severity of the cases was concerning.

Health

Survey Results

- A total of 35% (7 organisations) reported contact from Irish emigrants experiencing difficulties in accessing health care (physical and mental health care)
- A total of 30% (6 organisations) reported an increase in emigrants seeking support with accessing health care compared with before the pandemic

Further comments in relation to health included one reference to mental health (Irish Community Care, Liverpool).

Interview Results

Access to health care presented as an issue for Irish emigrants, particularly in the United States, with organisations outlining concerns about the affordability of health care, or people not having health insurance when they had contracted Covid or experienced other healthcare-related issues, and who therefore struggled to afford medical care. Healthcare issues were mainly avoided in Australia, as processes were set up to manage such needs: “it didn’t come to that” (Irish Support Agency, Sydney).

Delays with access to GPs in the United Kingdom was an issue for some Irish emigrants seeking appointments for medical reviews to process their benefit claims (Irish Community Care, Manchester). Concern was also referenced for people with “mental health vulnerability” and those with existing mental health conditions before the pandemic, who might experience a deterioration with their mental health, and

people who developed new mental health needs during the pandemic.

Overall Analysis of Health

Difficulties with access to health care was an issue mainly affecting Irish emigrants in the United States who did not have health insurance in place prior to the pandemic and were unable to access any free alternative health care. The UK groups refer to concern around delays in access, as opposed to affordability, and there is no reference to healthcare-access issues by the groups in Australia and Canada. Access to mental healthcare supports is included in this finding and is connected to the findings in the section on Isolation, Wellbeing and Mental Health.

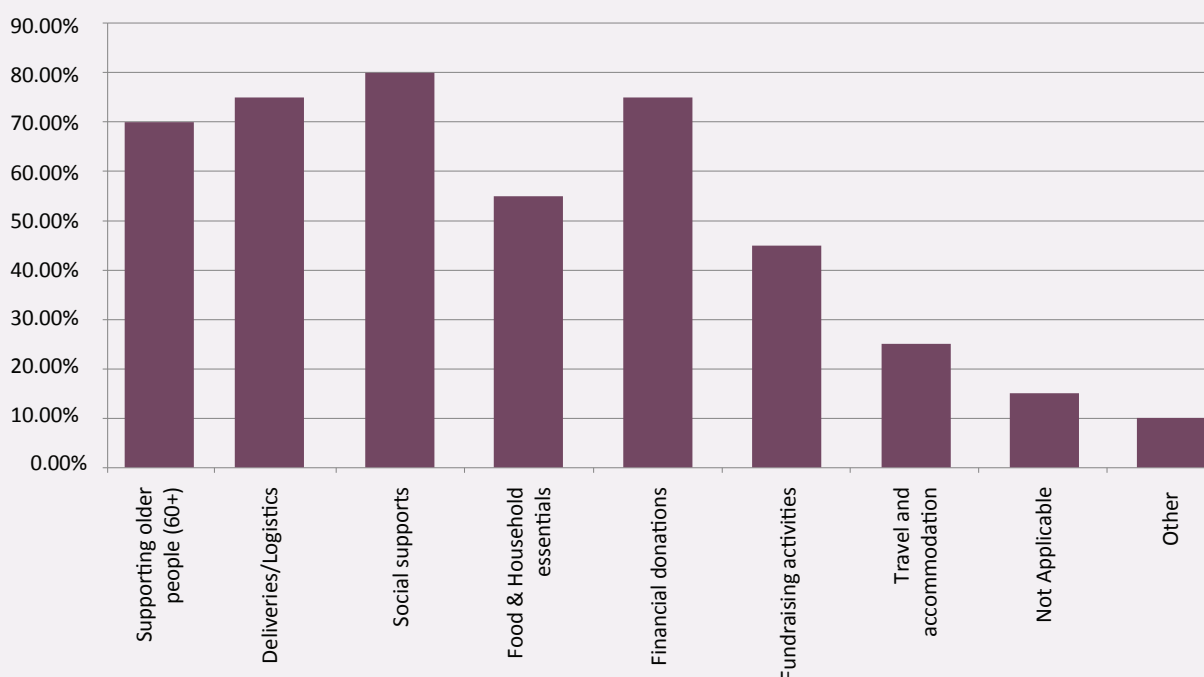


Offers of Support from the Irish Community to Irish Organisations

Survey Results

Survey respondents were asked if Irish emigrants in their area or region had contacted their organisation to offer support to other Irish emigrants during the pandemic.

Offers of support from Irish emigrants to Irish organisations during the pandemic



- A total of 80% reported that Irish emigrants had offered social support (phone calls, befriending, etc.)
- A total of 75% of the respondents reported offers of support with deliveries/logistics (e.g. with food deliveries) and offers of food and household essentials as donations
- A total of 70% reported offers to support older people aged 60+
- A total of 45% reported offers of support with fundraising activities
- Five organisations received offers of support with travel and accommodation for Irish emigrants.

Interview Results

• Volunteering

Access to basic human needs such as food was notably more in demand among the groups in the United Kingdom and the United States than in Australia. Volunteers assisted with shopping and the delivery of food parcels and “care packages”.

Recruitment and safety vetting was an important consideration for organisations accepting offers of help from volunteers wishing to assist with community support. Volunteer recruitment is an additional responsibility that can be time-consuming in terms of making vetting applications to authorities. For example, in the United Kingdom, Luton Irish Forum (Bedfordshire) explained that there was an expectation that the local authority was coordinating community volunteers who they might have been able to avail of for support with grocery shopping for isolated people, but that there was a financial issue with the transfer of money which prevented the roll out. However, the Luton Irish Forum was able to avail of volunteers once it had completed a Disclosure Barring Check (police vetting), and got around the transfer of money issue by asking volunteers to pay for the food upfront and submit a receipt for reimbursement:

“So, it meant then we were able to be a bit more selective around, you know, access to people.”

In the United States, Irish Community Services (Chicago) noted the limitations to safely

recruiting new volunteers, and that they tended to rely more on the existing volunteer pool with food deliveries, befriending or “check-in” calls with their senior Irish citizen members. Aisling Irish Center (New York) had volunteers delivering meals to seniors. New York Irish Center ran its support calls to its senior members internally and is transitioning this to a volunteer-based support.

The organisations in Australia received many offers of volunteering, but there was less need for direct outreach work to engage them with, as their members were less at risk; and they also wanted to avert any insurance risks. The Claddagh Association (Perth) did run training for new volunteers, with an emphasis on moving on “from the idea of charity to an idea of solidarity”. Both Australian organisations were able to engage some volunteers by making befriending phone calls, too.

Referring to volunteers in general, in Canada, the Irish Canadian Immigration Center talked about:

“people who stepped up in droves to deliver food to seniors and baking at Christmas to seniors and cards and things to keep people in contact.”

• Fundraising & Donations

A collaborative fundraising initiative in New York, “Slainte 2020”, fundraised, managed and coordinated financial donations and the transfer of funds to Irish emigrants in adverse circumstances through an application process. Aisling Irish Center and New York Irish Center

were two of the five organisations that came together to collectively raise funds for Irish emigrants in New York during the pandemic. Irish emigrants could make applications for financial support, and the organisations coordinated the application process by local areas and “were then able to cut cheques and get them out to people as quickly as possible” (New York Irish Center). This programme was “somewhat replicated here in Chicago” (Irish Community Services, Chicago).

Volunteers in the Irish community in Vancouver and Toronto in Canada were reported as having stepped up to fundraise also. Again, in San Diego, there was less of a financial impact: “We were very lucky that we ... never had to give any financial aid to any particular person” (Irish Outreach Center, San Diego).

Both organisations in Australia noted that the most useful offers of support were the financial donations. The Irish Support Agency (Sydney) utilised the Community Forum group through the Irish Consulate General to update the Irish community groups, who then donated generously to support their fundraising. They highlighted that this was the main offer of support they could use for Irish emigrants.

The UK organisations did not report specifically on fundraising or financial donations.

Overall Analysis of Offers of Support from the Irish Community to Irish Organisations

There was a strong sense of community among the Irish emigrant community and with the Irish emigrant support organisations in all the countries in the study. Most organisations received offers of support from the Irish

community to support Irish emigrants in difficulty. These varied in terms of logistical support for food deliveries, fundraising, financial support, support phone calls to isolated individuals, and various other remote social activities. Interviewees commented on the sense of community that the situation had reinforced, as well as the coordinated fundraising and generosity in donations:

“it’s been a difficult time, obviously, politically, too. So, you have people definitely on different sides politically, but it’s sort of managed to, despite all that, come together ... You know, people are very proud of what they did.”

(Aisling Irish Center, New York)

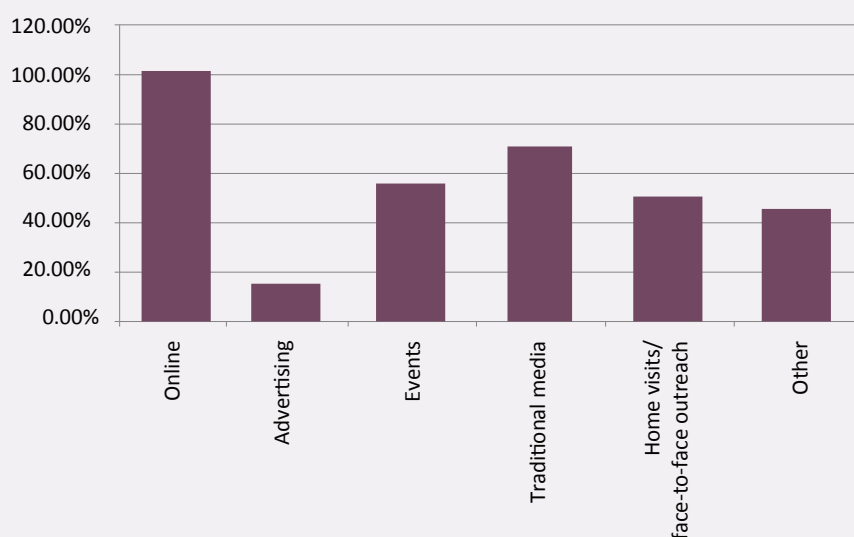
Commenting on new connections made in the community from new volunteers, the Lewisham Irish Centre (London) representative said:

“it’s been a lovely connection with younger Irish people and older Irish people.”

Communications with the Irish Community and Adaptation during the Pandemic

Survey Results

New ways organisations communicated with Irish emigrants since the pandemic

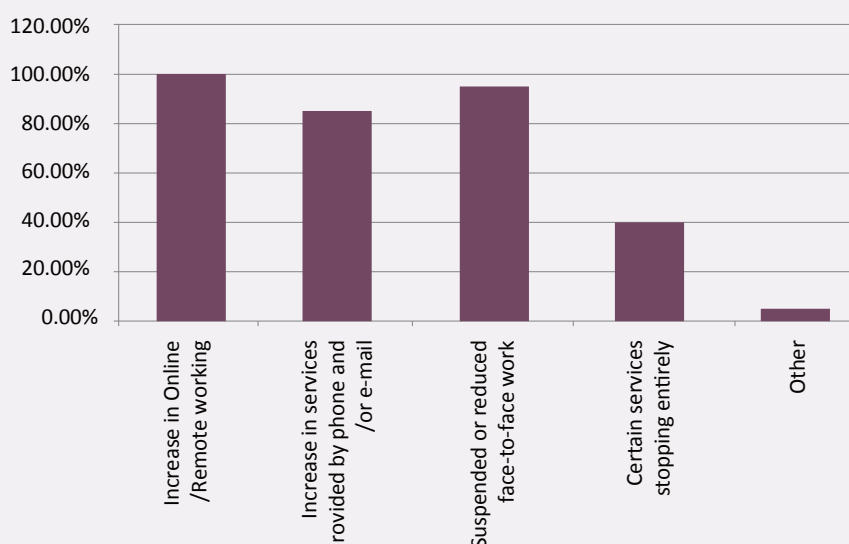


Organisations were asked if and how they used new ways of communicating with Irish emigrants regarding the pandemic.

- All 20 respondents (100%) reported conducting more communication online through emails, social media and changes to their website
- A total of 70% (14 respondents) used traditional media including phone calls, newsletters and letters
- A total of 55% (11) reported that hosting online events proved a popular mode of communicating
- A total of 50% (10) reported making face-to-face outreach/no-contact home visits to Irish emigrants
- Only 15% (3) reported using advertising to communicate with Irish emigrants.

- Nine organisations (45%) utilised other innovative ways to communicate, including digital inclusion support, Zoom calls, WhatsApp, virtual groups online, Irish news media articles, radio interviews, collaborative meetings with other organisations and Irish consulates, and conducting oral history projects
- When asked which of these new ways of communication they would continue to use post-Covid, three organisations said all of them, two organisations said most of them, four said they would continue use of social media, and two said they would continue with digital inclusion activities
- Respondents gave further comments on how and why they would continue with the new ways of communication:
 - Doing this “makes services more accessible for people, and gives them more flexibility”
 - Continuing with their social services team/councillors
 - Using Telehealth to meet clients
 - Using immigration team using phone appointments
 - Driving traffic to their website with SEO development and Google adverts
 - Seeking more funding to continue an oral history project
 - Using virtual groups
 - Using media adverts.

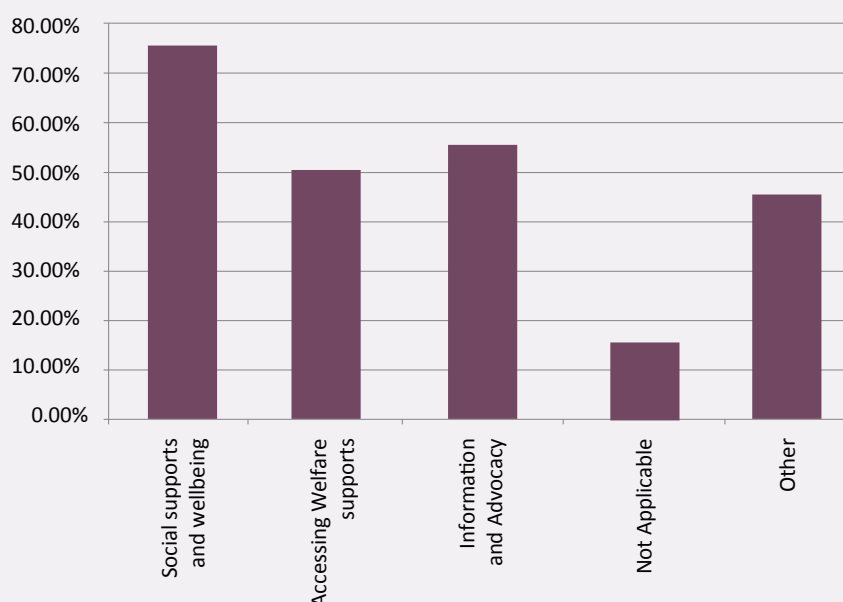
Adaptation of organisations’ support services provided to Irish emigrants since the pandemic



We asked if and how organisations changed the way they work to support Irish emigrants.

- All the organisations (100% / 20) reported an “Increase in online/remote working (e.g. video-conferencing, Zoom calls, etc.)”
- A total of 95% (19) had suspended or reduced face-to-face work
- A total of 80% (16) had increased services provided by phone and/or email
- A total of 40% (8) had stopped certain services entirely.

New supports provided by Irish organisations for Irish emigrants since the pandemic



In response to asking organisations if they provided new services to support Irish emigrants that they did not provide before the pandemic:

- A total of 75% (15) had offered social supports and wellbeing services (e.g. online social activities) that they had not previously offered
- A total of 11 (55%) organisations offered new information and advocacy services (e.g. on travel, visas, lockdown restrictions) that they had not previously offered
- A total of 50% (10 organisations) offered new supports with accessing welfare supports (e.g. Covid-19-related emergency financial supports)
- Nine organisations (45%) offered other new services, including digital inclusion activities, mindfulness/wellbeing webinars, Telehealth counselling, online cultural activities, Irish heritage project, online tutoring for children, financial support, and home-baked treats.

Interview Results

• Reaching the wider Irish Community

Organisations noticed an increase in contact from Irish emigrants both locally and from outside their regular geographical region, particularly for online social, cultural and fundraising events. For example, Irish emigrants in the United States and Brazil joined online events organised by Luton Irish Forum (Bedfordshire) and the Aisling Irish Center (New York) had attendees from Boston and Philadelphia join their online events. Irish Community Services (Chicago) recorded receiving queries from the south and mid-western United States, such as Minnesota, Michigan and Texas.

This was made possible both through promotion of the services through the community and online and through remote engagement. For example, Claddagh Association (Perth) invested funds from the ESP Covid fund to employ a communications consultant to develop a communications plan, which involved the dissemination of the oral history research (“Home from Home”) conducted on their website and on social media during the pandemic. This has resulted in increased traffic to their platforms:

“we’re getting over a thousand people following through on and moving on to the publication and downloading it and spending over 10 minutes on it as a result of that.”

Similarly, the Irish Outreach Center in San Diego conducted an oral history research with the older Irish community during the pandemic, with volunteers visiting older members to record their emigration experience:

“through the Irish Heritage Project, we identified new members of the community the we didn’t know were out there.”

More long-term Irish residents of Vancouver were noted to have joined coffee morning calls around Christmas 2020:

“who wanted to come on to support anybody new ... So that was beautiful ... the pandemic certainly has provided those opportunities for altruism.”

(Irish Canadian Immigration Center)

• New modes of communication

All organisations adapted to the Covid-19 restrictions and lockdown by closing their drop-in information clinics, face-to-face services and clubs. The services transitioned to remote online and phone-based supports, including information phone lines, befriending/support phone calls, email communications, text messaging, WhatsApp messaging and calls, and group video calls through Zoom and Facebook. While these modes also made it easier for assistance with transfer of information and documents to process benefit claims, the more complex forms were still difficult and in-person communication was preferred. Some organisations working with the older community sent out postal newsletters or magazines and offered doorstep outreach visits (e.g. Luton Irish Forum, Bedfordshire; Irish Community Services, Chicago).

Leeds GATE (Leeds) was able to reach more isolated Irish Travellers with low literacy by broadcasting information on WhatsApp for specific contacts on topics such as wellbeing, addressing misinformation on Covid-19 and vaccines, family supports, and income support information. They also carried out a digital inclusion survey via weekly calls to assess community needs around access to digital communications.

Digital inclusion was also raised as an issue for other organisations where online engagement such as Zoom calls did not suit older emigrants, who were unfamiliar with the technology and had limited support to hand. Some organisations continued to mail out traditional newsletters to members, while others created new email or traditional mail-out newsletters:

“we created what we titled ‘The Celtic magazine’, which is kind of a magazine for seniors in the Irish community. So, it’s a way to kind of keep people connected with one another through print media.. and the Celtic magazine was so folks had an opportunity to see their friends knowing that they were doing well. You know, we put their picture in there and did short little interview with folks.”

(Irish Community Services, Chicago)

Digital access was also a new challenge to meet for staff: “Even for myself, I found it really challenging to begin with, communicating via Zoom” (Lewisham Irish Centre, London).

Online engagement and the use of Zoom calls enabled increased reach within the community, “the Zoom calls ordinarily as a social worker, wouldn’t have been your ideal mode of communication, but we found it increased our outreach.. I started getting phone calls from people in Boston or Philadelphia” (Aisling Irish Center, New York).

- **New online social activities**

Many social activities were moved on to online platforms, most commonly Zoom. Some new activities were introduced for the first time online, ranging from social to cultural including quizzes, tea and chat groups, Irish language classes, art classes, cultural seminars and live concerts. Some of these were targeting the older community, the youth groups and people with mental health support needs: all to combat social isolation.

The Irish Support Agency (Sydney) used a “remote connectivity fund” to support digital inclusion for seniors by offering online classes such as “Irish music for seniors” and “Silver Surfers” lessons. As with other organisations, they also sought donations of old mobile or IT devices to give to the seniors.

Good interest and engagement with the online events and Zoom calls meant that more people, who would normally be restricted by mobility or distance, could attend:

“that’s actually meant that it’s been so much easier for people because you don’t have the journey time and expense in terms of attending and leaving meetings and events ... Zoom has been brilliant.”

(Luton Irish Forum, Bedfordshire)

Overall Analysis of Communications with the Irish Community and Adaptation during the Pandemic

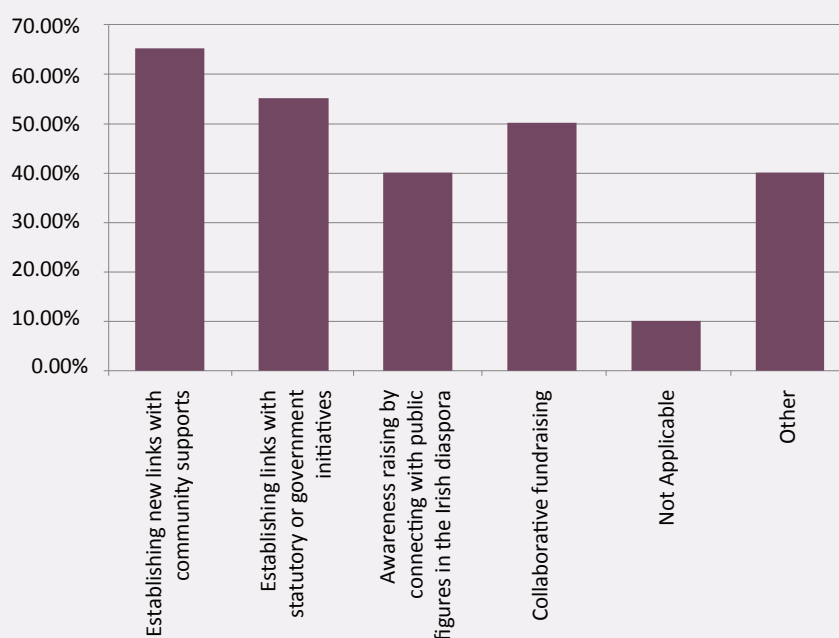
The unprecedented impact of the pandemic meant that organisations needed to adapt quickly to maintain contact with the community, assess their needs, and deliver responsive support services. All organisations received an increase in demand for supports and they responded with flexibility in hours of service delivery, logistical operations, online support, and innovative and creative ways of reaching the community to keep up their spirits and offer hope. Services adapted beyond their regular offerings to deliver additional supports were possible in the most significant crisis to face society in decades.

Collaboration and Partnerships

Organisations worked in partnership with other organisations to share information, exchange ideas on service delivery, and to communicate and promote engagement with the wider Irish community.

Survey Results

New partnerships with Irish organisations since the pandemic



We asked if organisations made new links or worked in new partnerships with other local organisations or statutory bodies or national/international organisations.

- A total of 13 organisations (65%) established new links with community supports (e.g. distribution of food deliveries)
- A total of 11 (55%) established new links with statutory or government initiatives (e.g. health initiatives)
- Ten (50%) formed new partnerships for collaborative fundraising to support emigrants
- Eight organisations connected with public figures in the Irish diaspora, to raise awareness and support for Irish emigrants (e.g. politicians, business people, people with a public profile)
- Other respondents cited creating partnerships with other Irish emigrant support organisations in collaborative initiatives including Cara (United Kingdom), Leeds Irish Communities Association (United Kingdom), Boston Irish organisations (United States), Sláinte 2020 New York (United States), Coalition of Irish Immigrant Centers (United States), local organisations (Australia), and links with other black and minority ethnic third-sector groups (United Kingdom).

Interview Results

- Embassies, Consulate Generals and network organisations

Regular communications with Irish Embassies and Consulates were outlined as important partnerships among several organisations working to support Irish emigrants in securing

official documents, passports and emergency travel to Ireland. The level of contact increased, and an interdependency developed to ensure that Irish emigrants in crisis were adequately supported. Organisations expressed their gratitude for the responsiveness of the embassies and consulates, and highlighted the importance of these partnerships to their service provision:

“I couldn’t say enough nice things about that, the Consulate in Chicago, we were kind of on weekly phone calls there for a while ... from the direct onset of the pandemic ... we really worked in unison ... they were very helpful.”

(Irish Community Services, Chicago)

Regular engagement with the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers in the United States was noted as a valuable source of peer support and shared information, including weekly meetings with the Irish Embassy in Washington. Irish Community Services (Chicago) were able to replicate the fundraising programme of “Sláinte 2020” through the ongoing, shared information and shared thinking:

“certain centers came up with different ideas and different solutions that we could implement in different areas.”

- **Fundraising partnerships**

Several organisations joined forces to set up fundraising initiatives, including “Slainte 2020” among the New York-based organisations and the “Wish You Were Here” concert among the Australia-based organisations. All groups engaged in these partnerships expressed the importance of the additional help to their members and their support and learning as an organisation. Some worked in multiple partnerships in a joint effort to pool resources and support. For example, the Aisling Irish Center (New York) worked with a local priest for a Christmas toy drive, then with the local fire department, with the City of Yonkers, and with “Slainte 2020”.

In Sydney, the “Le Cheile” community groups forum, coordinated by the Consul General, gave the Irish Support Agency (Sydney) “a platform to update the community, and just increasingly everybody kept coming in with offers of support”.

Partnerships and collaboration in these initiatives stemmed from the needs of the community during the lockdown. Most had either not existed at all, or had not existed in the form that they did during the pandemic.

- **Local partnerships**

Luton Irish Forum saw the impact on Irish cultural and sport groups and connected with the local Irish dance group to assist with connecting people and running online classes.

As outlined in the Housing security section, Leeds GATE (Leeds) worked in partnership with the local authority to secure extended permission for “roadside families” to stay in one area and with access to facilities during the first lockdown. They noted that evictions started to increase again after the first lockdown, and they had to “keep up the pressure to keep doing things in a different way.”

In the Lewisham Irish Centre (London), local partnerships worked well with Catford Fridge, a food poverty charity based in the centre, along with the Good Home Café and Wheels for Wellbeing charity, working collectively to organise meal deliveries to the older community.

In New York, The Aisling Irish Center worked in partnership with the City of Yonkers in making links to support food deliveries. The New York Irish Center worked closely with the Emerald Isle Immigration Center (New York), which was located locally and could assist with legal and immigration queries. They were also able to join up their seniors groups and collaborate on individual cases. The Sláinte initiative has also increased further collaboration between the New York Irish Center and Aisling Irish Center (New York) in their youth Foróige programmes.

Overall Analysis of Collaboration and Partnerships

More than half of the participant organisations collaborated with other partners to fundraise and to deliver both services and goods. These partners ranged from the DEAs’ missions abroad and statutory services in the host country, to local organisations and public figures. In some regions, embassies worked very closely with organisations, such as in Chicago and Sydney. Organisations based in Australia and the United States were particularly engaged in joint collaboration to raise funds to support the Irish community members most in need. Good existing links with local organisations made good partnerships during the pandemic, and several talked about strengthening these links, the benefit to Irish emigrants, and the continued growth of these connections.

Overall Impact on Irish Emigrants

Interview Results

Interview participants were asked specifically about what they thought the overall impact of the pandemic was on Irish emigrants, and commented on both positive and negative impact.

Negative Impact

The immediate impact of the pandemic on the Irish emigrant community varied by age, employment and immigration status. The hospitality and construction industries were reported as the most adversely affected for Irish emigrants. Temporary visa holders who lost employment and were not entitled to unemployment benefit support were most at risk in the United States, Canada and Australia. This cohort consists generally of younger adults on summer work visas and graduate visas in the United States and Canada, or the 18-35 category temporary visa workers in Australia. Many of these young people returned to Ireland and were in contact with the organisations mainly to seek assistance with the logistics of returning home and some expenses in crisis cases.

After the initial months of the pandemic, Irish Community Services (Chicago) noted a change in the needs among the community, particularly for people on low incomes, temporary workers and the undocumented. Restrictions on workers meant that people needed support and information on renewing their visas. Aisling Irish Center (New

York) highlighted the anxiety and guilt felt among emigrants, particularly among the undocumented Irish for their choice to stay in the United States and the impact it had on their family.

Feelings of guilt were also expressed among emigrants who could not return to help Ireland and their families, particularly in circumstances concerning the serious illness of family members and funerals. The strict approach to exemptions to travel out of Australia left people feeling inadequate, especially when refusals stated that other family members in Ireland were there to help with family crises there, so that they (the applicants) would not be seen as eligible for exemption. There was a perceived different cultural attitude to funerals in Australia, compared with Ireland. Others felt guilty about making the decision not to pursue an exemption due to the risk of contracting Covid, facing long delays to return, or the financial cost.

The older communities were negatively impacted by social isolation and bereavement, but as regulars at social clubs, they were offered online social activities and deliveries of food parcels or lunches, particularly by the UK-based organisations. Notably, more serious mental health needs, suicidal thoughts, hopelessness and loss of confidence were recognised among older Irish members of Luton Irish Forum (Bedfordshire), citing the second lockdown as worsening the isolation, with fewer people engaging in older age-group activities and having their “lifeline taken away”.

Similar feelings were experienced by older Irish emigrants in Australia, with Claddagh Association (Perth) explaining that people feel connected to Ireland by being able to visit yearly, but with the travel ban, they felt more isolated, and this affected their mental health:

“the isolation as a result of that [Covid] has been very, very noticeable. And people talk about it first; ‘I feel so far away. I feel so isolated. I feel so guilty that I can’t be there to help”

(Claddagh Association, Perth).

This was echoed by the New York Irish Center, where there had never been an issue with going home before and this possibility being removed from people “was tough for a lot of them.”

Leeds GATE (Leeds) noted that the temporary absence of the service and outreach from the lives of some Irish Traveller members who were roadside families, or classed as statutory homeless, was significant. They also noted an increase in media and public stigmatisation of Travellers and hate crime during the pandemic.

Positive impact

There was a shared expression of positivity that came about from the solidarity felt and expressed among the Irish emigrant community. The community pulled together to support people and prevent adversity among those in more vulnerable circumstances. The wider Irish community became more aware of the organisations which they may not have previously been aware of or inclined to connect with. This was particularly the case with the younger Irish emigrant community. As noted by several organisations:

“more people have become aware of us ... within that older group, everybody knows about Claddagh, but amongst the younger group people didn’t ... and they’re the people we’ve struggled to reach, and so now ... we’re getting many more people contacting us ... So, there’s more word of mouth, more younger people.”

(Claddagh Association, Perth)

Fundraising activities, calls for volunteers, community networks, information needs, and word of mouth drew attention to the work of the organisations and increased contact from people seeking support and enhanced collaboration from people seeking to offer support.

In the United States, one interviewee noted how people put their political differences aside and worked together and found a sense of pride in offering supports and fundraising. Another noted how younger Irish emigrants had become more close-knit due to the online social support groups set up, after many people’s fellow emigrant friends had returned to Ireland, leaving them with fewer contacts. Senior citizens who were shielding were less impacted, needing support mainly for social isolation or bereavement, rather than economic or health impacts. Luton Irish Forum (Bedfordshire) noted the support

needs among isolated older Irish members and therefore assisted them with resilience, adjustment and having a sense of hope through reassurance calls and befriending.

The learning from the whole process of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis was viewed as a positive aspect for organisations. They had to review their service provision, programmes and initiatives to develop innovative responses to the needs of the community forced into lockdown, isolation and uncertainty.

Strategic partnerships between organisations and other agencies proved important in bringing about some positive impact in terms of shared information and support:

“Oftentimes, issues that the immigrants have are not individual to San Diego, they’re not geographical, they’re around the whole country.”

(Irish Outreach Center, San Diego)

Leeds GATE (Leeds) specifically achieved successful support outcomes to reduce risk for Irish Traveller families, through working in partnership with the local authority during the first lockdown. Lewisham Irish Centre cited the “extremely helpful” partnerships with Catford Fridge and Good Home Café in organising food deliveries.

How the Needs of Emigrants Have Changed Due to the Pandemic

Survey Results

Survey participants were asked about how the needs of emigrants have changed due to the pandemic. The main needs identified were:

- Support for isolation, loneliness, homesickness, loss/bereavement, uncertainty, and fostering hope connection with Irish community

“[There is an] ongoing need to encourage connection, foster hope (Facebook Live, online support groups, telephone outreach).”

(Emerald Isle Immigration Center, New York)

- Support for mental health

“[The] mental health legacy will be huge.”

(Leeds Irish Health and Homes, Leeds)

- Support for digital inclusion, information and support among the over-50s
- Support for financial insecurity, unemployment/close of business, Traveller community loss of self-employment, difficulty accessing welfare.

“Unemployment was already high. The impact of this has seen a massive spike in requests for support [from] frontline welfare services.”

(The Traveller Movement, London)

- Support for risk of homelessness
- Support with securing immigration status, risks to undocumented emigrants, obtaining passports.

“We suspect there are more undocumented now and that individuals will continue to fall out of status in the coming months. These people, if they come forward, will require complex paths to regaining status – if this can be done at all.”

(Irish Canadian Immigration Center)

- Support with addiction needs
- Support with returning to Ireland information

“The rules and application process are not entirely clear.”

(Claddagh Association, Perth)

- Safeguarding against isolated and family vulnerabilities, increase in domestic violence, family separations, children falling behind in education.

Interview Results

Many of the needs of the Irish emigrant community from the start of the pandemic have slowly dissipated, such as emergency income support, emergency food delivery support, urgent healthcare needs, and urgent support for immigration and returning to Ireland. However, enduring needs remain for physical, mental health and wellbeing support, physical and mobility support, digital inclusion support, immigration regularisations support, unemployment and income insecurity support.

The needs of Irish emigrants nine months into the pandemic developed from emergency crisis and short-term impacts to more medium-to-long-term impacts. Organisations outlined their work to continue reviewing and developing their supports to address these needs. Examples include:

- Investment in equipment and skills to promote and empower digital inclusion among older Irish members and Irish Travellers

“we’ve been doing a lot of work with a local organisation, part of the local authority, called Digital Leeds, to try and get their digital inclusion strategy to include Gypsies and Travellers ... alongside trying to provide equipment and trying to skill people up as well.”

(Leeds GATE, Leeds)

- Transport restrictions still apply in many areas, affecting people with restricted physical mobility
- Increased interest in regularising immigration status and obtaining citizenship is in renewed demand in the United States
- In areas where there was a second lockdown in the United States, more emergency assistance for the unemployed emerged, and contact increased from people in wider regions across the mid-west United States
- Mental health support needs still are of concern with isolation and uncertainty continuing. There is fear that this can lead to a long-term impact on the health and wellbeing needs for seniors. The New York Irish Center noted that Solace House, a suicide prevention counselling Irish charity, is based in the same building and works with mainly Irish immigrants.

“[We] have seen a major shift and an increase in their referrals for mental health services.”

Claddagh Association (Perth) also reported an increase in mental health needs among people they supported during the pandemic, with 9 out of 10 cases during the early days of the pandemic presenting with secondary issues of mental health intertwined with the primary issue

- The New York Irish Center also has a medium- to long-term concern for older emigrants with Alzheimer’s and dementia, who became more isolated, and whose situation may have a negative and longer impact.
- Access to Medicaid in the United States was also highlighted among organisations as an ongoing issue for people without health insurance or savings to pay for health services. There is also an uncertainty around how applying for Medicaid will affect an application for change of immigration status. Savings and financial security are still threatening some people, particularly in the hospitality sector in Australia, Canada and the United States, and there is a perceived risk to the economic recovery and employment in the sector, which may lead to an eventual return to Ireland for some people in the coming months. Complex cases and potential loss of access to benefits in the United Kingdom are also mentioned as a concern in the short term

- Young families in Perth were identified as a cohort in the community in need of further support to connect with the Irish community as part of long-term life in Australia. The normality of having parents over to visit their young families may no longer be as easy as it once was.

Overall Analysis of How the Needs of Emigrants Have Changed Due to the Pandemic

Results from both the survey and the interviews outline similar key needs that have changed for emigrants due to the pandemic. Major areas of concern for their short-term needs include isolation, wellbeing and mental health, immigration impact, income insecurity, information needs (particularly around digital inclusion), mobility, health care, return migration, and addiction (in a reference not mentioned before). These correspond with the main issues outlined in the Main Pandemic-related Crisis Issues section.



Future Challenges for Irish Emigrants

Survey Results

Respondents were asked for their insight into any potential future challenges for Irish emigrants. The responses included:

- Isolation, loneliness, mental health impact, reintegration to society, confidence and independence building, particularly for older people and men.

“I fear the challenges will be trying to get people back to the active lives and activities they used to take part in, and also getting them back to their sense of confidence and independence.”

*(Irish Community Services,
South-East London)*

- Sustainability of supports, digital inclusion in services, building capacity of organisations to support vulnerable groups
- Financial insecurity, access to welfare support (particularly older men and low-skilled workers), long-term unemployment (particularly in hospitality and low-skilled workers), supporting rebuilding Irish businesses:

“[We will need to provide] ongoing financial support of undocumented clients effected by unemployment”

(Emerald Isle Immigration Center, New York)

- Travel restrictions, people unable to return to the United States, unable to return to, or visit Ireland, impact on the United States J1 and graduate programmes
- Access to health care, digital exclusion in access to digital health care, communications around vaccines, health risks to the Traveller community:

“Lack of update of vaccine due to myths could mean increased death rates in Irish Traveller communities going forward. Overcrowded and insecure accommodation means infection rates are higher.”

(Leeds GATE, Leeds)

Interview Results

Key future challenges identified for Irish emigrants reported by the organisations include:

1. Recession outcome of the pandemic, long-term economic recovery, impact on employment and long-term sustainability living abroad, and poverty in the United Kingdom

“Most definitely those people in the service industry are deeply, deeply impacted.”

(Irish Canadian Immigration Center)

2. Long-term effect of loss and bereavement on the health, wellbeing and mental health of the community, requiring enhanced supports and encouragement from organisations to re-engage members and rebuild social networks, connections and hope, particularly among people who were bereaved, older or isolated:

“the importance of a community centre in a building and people meeting face to face ... And in contrast the challenge that comes with working with an ageing community ... there’s always thoughts about what is the future of Irish organisations working with elderly people. Needs are more complex, far more need for outreach in the short-term.”

(Lewisham Irish Center, London)

“Mental health struggles as a result of the prolonged lack of access to Ireland, Irish friends and family and important family/ community rituals like funerals, etc.”

(Claddagh Association, Perth)

3. Access to and delivery of public services and priority for Irish emigrants and Irish Travellers

“the going, the returning ... it’ll bring up a lot, mental health I think, and also in terms of what services will be needed on the Irish side for those returning.”

(Irish Canadian Immigration Center)

“a recession and changes to the way public services are delivered ... I’m really concerned ... that that’s going to have an impact on us. And ... then the knock on impact is to our membership ... if we’re not able to provide some of those ... safety net services really that stop people from

falling into and further poverty or destitution.”

(Leeds GATE, Leeds)

4. Digital inclusion and capacity building for the older community. Several organisations identified the challenge of continuing ongoing support for older emigrants to access technology including online activities, Irish radio and TV, and learning the skills and confidence to use them independently:

“if people don’t feel confident ... in accessing online technology ... then this continues to exclude them. So, figuring out a way of dealing with that, both in terms of getting people to technology and getting them to be financially able to have the technology ongoing.”

(Irish Community Care Manchester)

5. Awareness of Irish emigrant supports abroad and the need for more communication and awareness raising of the Irish support networks:

“having the support on the ground ... just knowing that there is somebody on the ground.”

(Irish Outreach Center, San Diego)

6. Impact on the temporary visa programmes, such as the J1 visa in the United States and the holiday worker visas in Australia and Canada – both in uptake by new Irish emigrants with low employment availability sectors like hospitality, and in the sustainability or continuation of the programmes

“in the past they didn’t need a job. Now, will they need our services more to try to connect them with employers?.”

(Irish Canadian Immigration Center)

7. People out of status or undocumented continue to be at risk if there is a prolonged lockdown and they have not already returned to Ireland. They will have no access to work, income or unemployment benefits. This risk is particularly acute for people who have been living in the United States for several years:

“the fear would be that for those people who still don’t have that safety net back [work] and probably won’t for quite a while and who are living paycheck to paycheck at the moment, that if something arises, be it a health crisis ... or

another shutdown ... that those people would just immediately have to return home and there would just be nothing we could do.”

(New York Irish Center)

8. Long-term impact on the future of Irish emigration to the traditional destination countries:

“immigration from Ireland to the United States had slowed over the last seven years anyway, and I think this will slow it even further unfortunately.” Referring to immigration policies in the United States, there was an expression of doubt about whether they would “go back to the way it was”

(Irish Community Services, Chicago).

“I think that we’d be missing a very important ... (people) growing up and exchanging of cultures, reciprocal, going back and forth, new ideas

... it would be robbing both the US and the Irish society of the wealth of worldly information that's out there and those relationships."

(Irish Outreach Center, San Diego)

With reference to future young single emigrants and prospective emigrants to come:

"I think we're going to get a lot of what I would call circular migration in the next couple of years, because we've had people.. (who) were forced home, who never really wanted to leave, who may want to come back. And then we have a lot of young people who want to come but may get here and find out that the economy's weakened and they they're better back in Ireland where they can avail of a safety net"

(Irish Canadian Immigration Center).

The pandemic has also created an awareness and caution around future Irish emigration to the United States;

"I think it just makes people take more of a global look or like a wider look at their circumstances ... whereas before they were comfortable sort of taking chances and going day to day. It think it really makes people examine the circumstances and their choices a lot more."

(Aisling Irish Center, New York)

And, in relation to the future of Irish emigrants currently living and settled in Australia:

"I think increasingly a lot of people are re-evaluating ... people are just going 'no, do you know what, I've had enough,' this has really taught me that ... this 26-hour [travel distance from Ireland] is enormous in ... these kind of circumstances where even in terms of the crisis ... I want to be home ... The balance has changed in terms of it's not such an adventure."

(Irish Support Agency, Sydney)

The Irish Support Agency also expressed a concern for the ageing Irish population in Sydney and the needs that will arise for those who are alone and isolated.

Overall Analysis of Future Challenges for Irish Emigrants

As with the short-term needs, the responses to future challenges to Irish emigrants following the pandemic are focused on the main issue themes and vulnerable emigrant groups. The key themes of isolation, inclusion, financial insecurity, immigration and health feature strongly in the survey results. The interview results expand on the potential negative impact from prolonged isolation and health vulnerability, unemployment, immigration uncertainty and the future of Irish emigration. The majority of the organisations cite concerns about the issues affecting vulnerable groups in the community, including older emigrants, low-skilled unemployed people, and those with health vulnerability.

The United Kingdom again is the only region to mention the future challenges for the Irish Traveller community. The organisations in Australia, Canada and the United States all discuss the future challenges for emigrants currently living in these countries and at risk of losing their immigration status or being unable to access a pathway to secure immigration status. They also refer to the ongoing concerns about the decreasing emigration of Irish citizens to these countries, the potential additional negative impact the pandemic will have on future emigration choices by Irish emigrants, and the future of immigration policies.



Discussion

Variances in experiences reported should be understood within the context of different geographical regions and the progression of the pandemic, the level of Covid-19 related restrictions, and lockdown occurrences. For example, the extent of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia was slower, but travel was very restricted. The Irish Support Agency in Sydney received more contact from people seeking support with travel restrictions and returning to Ireland than the older population, whose members were less at risk of health needs, isolation or support in need of food, shopping or medication support. However, in the United Kingdom, support needs for the older emigrant community was much more dominant, because the organisations there were traditionally and predominantly engaged with the older community.

Young, individual adults, many of whom were in contact with organisations for the first time, were more prominent in the organisations based in Australia, Canada and the United States. This can also be explained by the differences in service provision among organisations, such as the focus on immigration support services in Canada (Irish Canadian Immigration Center) and the United States (Irish Community Services, Chicago). These may have been in prior contact with more of this group in relation to immigration queries and support with visas renewal, permanent residency, options for people who are undocumented, and return to Ireland.

The majority of the organisations reported an increase in contacts from the 35-60 (working) age group, which can be explained as the most financially affected age cohort from loss of employment and income due to the pandemic closing down businesses and workplaces. The

increase in contact from the 18-35 age group by 9 out of 20 organisations is explained, in part, in interviews, as young people on temporary visas with mainly information needs and in stressful situations with their visa status or seeking support in deciding whether to return to Ireland. This cohort group, which is in the working age category, also experienced loss of employment and financial loss. The increase in contact from the 60+ age group by 8 out of 20 organisations is explained by the increased need for emotional and wellbeing support for those who were isolated and needed to connect with others, as well as for support with access to services, goods and health needs.

While there was an equal increase in contact by men and women, more individuals (70%) were in need of support, compared to families (45%), indicating more risk of isolation.

Concern was particularly prevalent in Australia, Canada and the United States for Irish emigrants identified as undocumented, with increased contact within seven organisations compared with documented emigrants (three organisations). The organisations explained that they were aware of the heightened risks, particularly financially and legally, for Irish emigrants who were undocumented.

Contact from Irish people from minority ethnic backgrounds was reported by five organisations in the US and Canadian groups, although specific reference to minority ethnic groups was not made in interviews with these organisations. In the United Kingdom, Leeds GATE (Leeds) and Lewisham Irish Community Centre (London) both referred to working with the Irish Traveller community (Leeds GATE working mainly with Travellers and Roma communities). The findings on the experiences of emigrant Irish Travellers are therefore limited to the communities in the United Kingdom.

Main Crisis Themes

Financial Insecurity

Financial insecurity was the most dominant pandemic-related issue affecting Irish emigrants in contact with respondent organisations (85%), with 80% reporting that it was the most serious issue. Countries started to go into lockdown from March 2020 and an immediate impact on the labour market ensued, with high numbers of workers put on temporary hold or made redundant globally. Governments responded to the devastating impact on the labour market with fiscal mechanisms such as unemployment payments and financial packages for businesses to retain employees. The rate of unemployment in the United States peaked at 16.4% among all immigrants in April 2020 (all legal immigrants) (Capps, Batalova and Gelatt, 2020).

Irish emigrants who had secure immigration permission and the safety net of access to state welfare, plus any personal savings, were less likely to contact the respondent organisations. Some emigrants working in Australia and paying into superannuation funds were able to access these for a limited time to allow them a financial breathing space during the initial months of the pandemic. For other temporary workers who were living abroad for shorter periods, including students, new graduates, and working holidaymakers, their permanent residence was Ireland, so their most immediate option was to return to Ireland, to their usual support networks and access to social welfare entitlements.

Undocumented Irish emigrants in Australia, Canada and the United States were immediately financially impacted, with limited or no access to state welfare or financial supports.

Respondent organisations initiated fundraising activities to raise emergency funds for Irish emigrants in serious financial distress. This finding corroborates with earlier research

findings on financial insecurity and the risk for emigrants unable to access social protection abroad (Crosscare Migrant Project, 2019). The lack of access to supports ultimately resulted in the return of Irish emigrants who left with no choice, once savings and cash supports from organisations were depleted.

Informational Needs

The urgency and volume of calls for informational support during the “first wave” of the pandemic and first lockdown in each country was significant. Irish emigrants contacted organisations seeking a range of information on Covid-19 regulations, travel restrictions, immigration status, access to state benefits, emergency financial supports, and physical and mental healthcare needs.

Organisations not traditionally set up to provide urgent informational needs made themselves available remotely and kept emigrants informed via as many modes of communication as possible, with 55% of organisations providing new information and advocacy services. This involved the organisations in a lot of time, coordination and resources, often working outside of normal working hours and working remotely.

The evolving pandemic meant fast-paced changes to restrictions, which demanded constant updating among organisations, many of which benefited from shared information and peer support from other organisations, community groups, networks and Irish Embassies and Consulate Generals. The feedback from the emigrants they worked with was very positive and proved to be a lifeline for many people.

The immediacy of informational needs and the speed at which information changed or was updated began to ease during the “second wave”, once emigrants were more attuned to the situation in their host country and resolved regarding the ongoing pandemic situation.

Isolation, Wellbeing and Mental Health

Organisations shared commonalities in the main pandemic-related crisis issues they reported as being experienced by the emigrants who were in contact with them. Dominant across all organisations were isolation, wellbeing and mental health needs, particularly among the older and vulnerable groups in the Irish emigrant community.

The traditional client group of many of the organisations is the older community. Their regular engagement in social activities in the Irish centres, which were regarded as a weekly need or a lifeline to many, came to a sudden halt when the lockdowns started. In a bid to retain the engagement of their client groups and to prevent crises developing for people, these organisations responded with multiple forms of remote-based and outreach contact for those who were self-isolating and had to remain at home. The organisations reacted speedily to offer a compromise within their capacity, in order to retain some engagement. This consisted of a combination of the provision and delivery of basic necessities such as food and household essentials, doorstep outreach visits, food or meal deliveries, and phone and remote online engagement.

The transition to online engagement was a steep learning curve for many people who were unfamiliar with using IT, internet, video calls, and text or WhatsApp messaging. Organisations provided a lot of support and safeguarding, to ensure the inclusion of people who needed assistance with accessing online supports and activities. Groups in the north of England collaborated on research to examine the digital inclusion needs among older Irish emigrants and received positive feedback on the digital inclusion supports by the organisations during the first lockdown (Fréa, 2021).

The research identified results similar to the experiences reported by other ESP organisations in the present research. It found that, despite 65%

of older Irish people in their sample in the north of England having access to the internet, and 75% having access to a technology device, they were less likely to be active online due to personal fears, anxieties and a lack of confidence with using digital technologies. Some respondents preferred to learn about using digital technology in a face-to-face setting, and others expressed their fear of their literacy issues being exposed, while being assisted with digital learning. The findings of the present research have identified similar findings on the issue of access to digital learning and a reluctance or difficulty in learning or access to digital technology.

The Fréa report (2021) also links the existing issue of older people being digitally isolated to a greater level of intensity as a result of the pandemic. This is also identified in the present research findings of organisations immediately responding to supporting isolated older Irish emigrants, based on their assumption and fear that the pandemic would further isolate them and that they would become further digitally isolated. Isolated individuals were also noted as being at higher risk and requiring more intense support from groups in earlier research prior to the pandemic (Crosscare Migrant Project, 2019).

Comparatively, members of the Irish Traveller community were identified as being significantly digitally isolated. Both respondent organisations working with Irish Travellers identified barriers with access to technology and learning. This finding shares similarities with the experiences of Irish Travellers living in Ireland, with a survey showing that only 41% of Traveller families in Galway had digital access for children to do their homework during lockdown (Baker, 2021). However, the Irish Traveller community was not specifically mentioned or identified as a vulnerable group by research participant organisations in Australia, Canada and the United States, indicating their absence or lack of visibility in these countries.

Organisations working with emigrants with mental health conditions worked to address

concerns of deterioration and prevention by offering “safeguarding” supports and counselling services such as the Irish Support Agency (Sydney) and the Aisling Irish Center (New York). However, while other mental health supports were available for Irish emigrants (Crosscare Migrant Project, 2019), they were not specifically mentioned as services to which referrals were made by respondent organisations during the pandemic.

Housing Insecurity

Housing insecurity was not experienced as an immediate impact by Irish emigrants among the respondent organisation, due to a moratorium on evictions put in place by the host countries. However, organisations expressed concern about the potential accrual of rent arrears among emigrants who had become redundant and who could not access financial supports. Homelessness, fortunately, was not strongly reported, apart from where it related to people who were already experiencing homelessness. Many people at risk of homelessness may have returned to Ireland and stayed with their family or friends, or accessed emergency accommodation through their local authority. Irish Travellers in the United Kingdom were the most at risk, with insecure sites for roadside families, lack of access to facilities, and hate crime incidents (Leeds GATE, Leeds). Again, pre-pandemic housing issues among the Traveller community was shared with the experience of the Irish Traveller community in Ireland (Baker, 2021).

Immigration

The impact on Irish emigrants’ immigration status and legal immigration permission to reside and work was an issue identified by organisations in Australia, Canada and the United States. Immigration was not present in issues reported

by the UK organisations, as the United Kingdom is part of the Common Travel Area in which Irish citizens can move and live freely between the two jurisdictions.

Variations in experiences occurred between regions, particularly in relation to immigration issues. In the United States, for example, emigrants with expired Irish passports sought assistance in renewing their passport in order to travel back to Ireland. In Canada, many emigrants were in contact with the Irish Canadian Immigration Center for assistance with seeking an extension of their visas or applying for permanent residence. In Australia, emigrants on temporary visas, particularly working holiday visas, were encouraged by the Australian Government to return to Ireland if they no longer had work or means to stay. This led to a surge of queries to organisations for support with finding flights to return to Ireland, as the international airports started to close down.

The emigrants most significantly impacted were undocumented Irish citizens, particularly in the United States, where some emigrants were known to have lived and worked for many years. The impact of the pandemic was multifaceted for undocumented emigrants. It included loss of employment or businesses, loss of income, restricted access to state supports and health services, dwindling savings, and limited support from networks. Many faced the decision to leave their life, and in cases, family, in the United States and return to Ireland long term. The respondent organisations prioritised this cohort group as the most vulnerable and offered financial support from donations and fundraising, where possible. The risk to livelihoods being pulled from undocumented Irish emigrants overnight was sharply demonstrated during the pandemic and outlines the clear needs for support to achieve pathways to secure documented status for undocumented Irish emigrants.

Return migration

Returning to Ireland was the only option open to many Irish emigrants abroad during the pandemic, particularly among temporary visa holders. The most prevalent presence of this cohort group was reported by the Irish Support Agency (Sydney), where contact from people in this situation was dominant at the start of the pandemic. As mentioned above, the message from the Australian Government to emigrant temporary workers was to return to their home country, and the urgency of this was exacerbated by the cancellation of many flights and the closure of stop-over airports and routes to Ireland. People experienced stressful situations of cancelled flights and unaffordable costs to rebook flights or availability of alternative flights, leading to fear and widespread panic among the emigrant community of being left abandoned. The Irish Consulate and Irish associations coordinated assistance with the Irish Support Agency to ensure the safe return of many Irish citizens. The unforeseen chaos was unprecedented, and presence of strategic Irish organisations and state agencies were vital in reducing the impact on emigrants in Australia.

Return to Ireland was reported less as an immediate or chaotic impact on Irish emigrants in Canada and the United States. Emigrants requiring support with renewing Irish passports faced delays due to the temporary suspension of the passport office in Ireland and needed direct services from the Irish Embassy or Consulate General. However, the majority of the contact with organisations was in relation to retaining their immigration permission, or support to sustain their living there. People deciding to return to Ireland in the medium to long term was dependent on whether they could return to work. Again, the most-at-risk cohort group in Australia, Canada and the United States was that of the undocumented Irish emigrants who would need to return to Ireland if unable to stabilise their situation and sustain their living costs without supports. This “push factor” of

returning to Ireland, where there was the security of being able to count on a network of family and friends, and state supports, to help them recover, is reflective of earlier findings among returning emigrants (Crosscare Migrant Project, 2019).

With half of all participant organisations reporting support with returning to Ireland both for the short term, or permanently as a main pandemic crisis, there are potentially high numbers of Irish emigrants who did return to Ireland during the pandemic. Some will have returned to visit family or loved ones temporarily. Others may have made the permanent move to Ireland. Assistance with decision-making was a key support for emigrants in these predicaments. While specific statistics of Irish emigrants returning to Ireland during the pandemic may be unavailable for some time, organisations are aware of many people who did return to Ireland and are still considering a return to this country.

Returning to Ireland was not specifically identified by UK organisations as a main pandemic issue among Irish emigrants in the United Kingdom.

Domestic Violence

The increase in the presentation of domestic violence among some organisations aligns with reports of increased domestic violence globally and in Ireland (Doyle, 2020). The increase in cases arising due to the pandemic among this data group (40%) is higher than the average national Irish figures (25%) (Doyle, 2020).

Traveller women also experienced a rise in domestic violence, which again is also reported among Traveller women living in Ireland, where the lack of information about support services was a barrier to accessing domestic violence accommodations (Villani et al., 2020). Fleeing from situations of domestic violence was therefore a restricted option for women, and the findings highlight the higher risk to the lives of women and Traveller women during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Health

Access to health care was an issue reported mainly in the United States. Health insurance can be expensive for emigrants, particularly if they have a precarious immigration status or have become undocumented. Organisations in the United States explained that many Irish emigrants with whom they work do not have health insurance and are reluctant to access Medicaid, in case it affects their application for renewed immigration permission. Access to health care was not reported as an issue among emigrants in Canada or Australia. This may be due to the fact that the Irish Government has bilateral agreements for reciprocal emergency health care in Australia and Canada for visitors. However, this is not accessible to emigrants who are undocumented, or who have temporary residence, such as new arrivals on working holiday visas.

Earlier research shows that these emigrants are at risk of very limited access to health care at times of crisis and can be a driver to return to Ireland (Crosscare Migrant Project, 2019). Some of the organisations offer wellbeing and mental health supports, but none can offer free or affordable access to GP health care. Comparatively, Irish citizens living in Ireland can access free healthcare supports when unemployed and some limited free health care for workers. This access to basic and necessary health care was a major issue for emigrants, particularly in the United States during the pandemic. Undocumented emigrants who are reluctant to give up their livelihoods in the United States are particularly at risk if they have healthcare needs.

Health care in the United Kingdom is mainly free under the NHS and there is a reciprocal healthcare provision between Australia and Ireland, so Irish emigrants are covered, to some extent, by the Australian healthcare system.

Health issues among the Traveller community during the pandemic was particularly

concerning, with Travellers being 2.6 times more vulnerable to Covid infections than White Irish (Enright et al., 2020). Organisations working with emigrant Travellers in the United Kingdom reported concerns around lack of information and misinformation on Covid-19, the regulations, over-crowded accommodation, and lack of facilities to adhere to health guidelines. This finding reflects the explanation of the higher risk of Covid infections among Irish Travellers (Enright et al., 2020).

Recent research in Ireland found that existing inequities such as in housing experienced by Travellers have greater influence on their long-term health (Baker, 2021). The organisations worked with local groups and the local authority to support the inclusion and safeguarding of Travellers. This approach to partnerships has been identified in other recent Irish research to be a viable approach to mitigate the disproportionate effects on Travellers (Villani et al., 2021). Villani et al. (2021) also argue that empowerment among Travellers is achieved through greater knowledge of Covid-19 prevention and support, which leads to increased control over their life choices.

Offers of Support

Around 80% of the organisations surveyed received many offers of support from both existing contacts in the community and the wider Irish community who contacted them for the first time. Volunteering support was one of the main offers, including social support, deliveries, fundraising, accommodation and travel. Existing volunteers were asked to assist with logistical support to deliver food and to make befriending phone calls to support older, vulnerable and isolated Irish emigrants. In most cases, these were new initiatives that had been introduced in response to the needs that arose from the pandemic. The volunteering work was mainly crisis prevention work and wellbeing support and care. However, some issues arose in relation to

accepting certain offers of volunteering, in terms of vetting, insurance risks, cost reimbursement, and health and safety. Therefore, not all offers of support could be utilised and organisations often reverted to receiving support from existing volunteers, or vetted volunteers from third parties, such as local councils. The duty of care and prudence in protecting both volunteers and clients was taken very seriously among organisations.

This altruistic drive among the Irish community abroad was often referred to in the news and the occurrence of altruism across nations, where unprecedented risks to society called on people to help and contribute where they could. Irish emigrants understand the fear and pain that fellow emigrants can experience in situations of loss, isolation, poverty and ill health, with the result that many Irish people stepped up to assist emigrant support organisations in helping the most vulnerable. This support and community spirit was often referred to in social media as the common Irish phrase “Ní neart go cur le chéile” – “There is no strength without unity”.

Fundraising support was dominant in the United States and Australia, with Irish organisations, businesses and public figures collaborating to raise awareness and funds to support Irish emigrants in financial distress. However, fundraising was not reported as an activity among the UK organisations.

Communicating with the Irish Community and Adaptation during the Pandemic

New modes of communication and online activities became the “new normal” for all the respondent organisations, as centres suspended all in-person contact and adapted and implemented changes to their services. In the initial weeks of the pandemic lockdowns, organisations provided extensive, essential

support to emigrants, often involving out-of-hours work. This adaptation was essential to sustain engagement with the emigrant community and to provide a source of hope for people in difficult situations. In doing so, and as an unexpected outcome, many emigrants from the wider Irish community, beyond the local areas, became aware of the supports and came into contact with these organisations.

Together with traditional forms of communications (email, phone, newsletters), organisations either extended their use or started to use newer, remote modes, including digital inclusion support, Zoom calls, WhatsApp, virtual groups online, Irish news media articles and radio interviews. A total of 50% of the survey respondents continued to offer outreach or face-to-face support in a non-contact way, such as in doorstep visits or in delivering food parcels. Two organisations even conducted new projects which involved collecting oral history records with older Irish emigrants, as a means of maintaining their engagement and simultaneously establishing an oral history archive.

The organisations’ adaptability, flexibility, innovation and stress-relieving support helped to stem the impact of the pandemic for clients and vulnerable groups.

Collaboration and Partnerships

All the participant organisations are recipients of partial funding from the DFA under the ESP that is underpinned by commitments within Ireland’s Diaspora Strategy (2020b). The Irish government announced a Covid Response Fund for Irish Communities Abroad in April 2020, which was available for emigrant support organisations that wished to apply for funds in order to support work with

“protecting the elderly and mitigating the impact of social isolation; meeting the needs of those made vulnerable by the crisis and responding quickly and effectively to cases of particular hardship; providing additional mental health supports and bereavement counselling; and supporting the provision of services online.”

(DFA, 2020b)

Organisations that were successfully awarded funds utilised them to expand their services under the criteria outlined. This partnership with the DFA was an important emergency requirement to meet urgent and essential needs to protect the welfare of the Irish abroad.

Further direct support from the Irish Government was made available to emigrants and emigrant support organisations through Irish Embassies and Consulate General offices throughout the globe. Participant organisations emphasised the importance of the coordinated response and working in partnership with the missions to support emigrants in urgent and crisis situations that required consular assistance, particularly with those returning to Ireland. In some cases, there was a strong interdependency for referrals to support citizens.

Network and coalition groups were highlighted as particularly important in the United States and Australia as key for information exchange and peer support. While not specifically indicated by

participant UK organisations, the Irish in Britain umbrella network of Irish emigrant support organisations coordinates shared information and provides capacity building.

Broad support from the Irish community abroad was harnessed through fundraising collaboration between organisations in Australia and the United States. Organisers were creative and sought support from other Irish connected organisations, businesses and public figures. Artists, musicians and public figures participated in online events and concerts. Fundraising was a need that arose in Australia and the United States, as these are countries where immigrants have no access to welfare benefits if they become unemployed on temporary visas, or if they are out of status or undocumented. There was awareness in Canada of income distress among the Irish community and fundraising was organised by smaller Irish community groups. While the UK organisations did not organise fundraising, as Irish citizens have entitlements to welfare benefits, there were some issues with (digital) access and delayed payments.

Local partnerships also played a key part in joining supports for Irish emigrants, through other charities, in recruiting and vetting volunteers and in coordinating food and meal deliveries. Collaboration with local councils also provided key support with food allocation and the protection of Irish Traveller emigrants. Most of these partnerships and collaborations were newly established during the pandemic and assisted with the coordination of support for a broad reach of the community.

Overall Impact of the Pandemic on Irish Emigrants

The overall impact of the pandemic on Irish emigrants was often described by participants as having both negatives and positives. Negative outcomes, predictably, reflect many issues already

known to affect Irish emigrants returning to Ireland in crisis situations (Crossare Migrant Project, 2019). However, pandemic-specific pressures made these and other issues more pressing, with limited options, particularly in terms of travel and financial support. Financial insecurity affected many people across all immigration permission statuses who lost employment due to the pandemic, resulting in the “push factor” to return to Ireland. The hospitality and construction sectors, traditionally common among the Irish emigrant community, were widely reported as being hit the hardest, and emigrants either returned to Ireland or waited out the lockdown, in anticipation of returning to work. The uncertainty became a long-term issue when the pandemic continued into a second wave and, at the time of interviews, was hitting a third wave.

The emotional impact was poignant in the description of emigrants feeling guilty about not being able to return to Ireland to help care for loved ones, or to say goodbye or attend funerals. Many older emigrants experienced bereavement, with higher numbers of deaths among members of the older community. Coupled with the requirement to self-isolate, and fears of contracting Covid-19, the older community experienced considerable emotional strain and isolation.

Many people felt particularly far from home in Australia, Canada and the United States, where their fail-safe option was always to visit Ireland to see family and friends and relieve homesickness. Without this option, emotional wellbeing and mental health suffered. As a stigmatised minority group, Irish Travellers in Leeds were reported as subject to an increased risk of hate crime and discrimination.

Conversely, the development of a more close-knit community, solidarity, altruism, strength in community, more awareness of the organisations and need for support, awareness of vulnerable Irish community members, and generous

support for people far away from home, were all described as examples of positive outcomes – perhaps, even, unexpected positive outcomes. The immediate commitment of organisations to take on the responsibility to provide support for Irish emigrants as far as they could appeared to generate wider community support and inspired many initiatives, online social groups and wide attendance of online activities and events. Collaboration and partnership among organisations and key stakeholders also developed stronger and more supportive links than those that had existed before the pandemic, which could prove valuable in the future development and awareness of supports for Irish emigrants.

Outcomes, both positive and negative, have shed light on how exposed emigrants can be to extreme global crises, and how communities, agencies and governments can respond to avert adverse impacts.

How the Needs Have Changed for Irish Emigrants

The short-term needs that have changed for Irish emigrants are the continued main crisis-related issues that include isolation, wellbeing and mental health, immigration impact, income insecurity, information needs, digital inclusion, mobility, health care, domestic violence and return migration. Many issues continued into the second and third waves, in terms of the needs arising and supports provided by organisations.

Organisations further outlined their plans to review their services and the needs of emigrants, as they arose and progressed throughout 2021. Examples of planned work are investing in outreach and digital inclusion programmes, providing unemployment supports, regularising immigration status and obtaining citizenship, providing further mental health supports, and connecting Irish families within the community.

The challenges and the support needs are diverse, and emigrants can often be faced with multiple and complex needs. Organisations are frequently set up to focus on a specific area or areas of supports and services and therefore do not have capacity to meet all needs for all emigrants. However, the dedication demonstrated among organisations during the pandemic has shown their potential and capacity to innovate and adapt to changing needs and future developments.

Future Challenges for Irish Emigrants

The changing needs for Irish emigrants link strongly with the expected, future short-term and long-term challenges for emigrants. The potential for short-term challenges such as unemployment, isolation and mental health needs becoming long-term challenges are concerns for the future. Vulnerable groups facing future challenges include older emigrants, low-skilled unemployed people, undocumented emigrants, emigrants with health vulnerabilities, and the Irish Traveller community. Organisations with an acute awareness of these issues are actively working to support people affected by them, and are planning ahead for further, potential support needs.

There is also concern about how the pandemic will cause a downturn in Irish emigration, and in turn, the slowing presence and contribution of Irish emigrants to society particularly in Australia, Canada and the United States. The future of more restrictive immigration policies also poses a threat to the attraction of Irish emigrants to live abroad, reducing Ireland's footprint abroad and the potential benefits from the diaspora to Ireland.

There is a wealth of insight and experience among organisations to help inform stakeholders and policymakers for future strategic planning for the prevention of future crises and risks to Irish emigrants.

Strengths and Limitations of the research

Strengths

A mixed-methods approach allowed for the collection of two types of data, quantitative and qualitative. This allowed for rich information that could not be obtained using each method alone. This approach provided for a broader and more complete picture of the impact of the pandemic on Irish emigrants.

Approaching individuals who worked for ESP funded organisations allowed us to get a sense of how the pandemic affected a large population of Irish emigrants in four different regions. Effectively, the Irish emigrant support organisation acted as a representative for Irish emigrants in this research. This may have been a more effective method of assessing the impact of the pandemic on Irish emigrants than recruiting individual Irish emigrant participants.

Limitations

Sampling of participants was a limitation of this research. It is not possible to generalise the findings to all Irish emigrants from this work. However, by surveying and interviewing participants in four different geographical regions, commonalities within across regions were reported.

There were 20 survey responses. This was a small scale survey and the size of the survey limits what can be inferred from the survey results. Scaled-up surveys on the same or similar topics may inform future research.

The survey and interview responses were not data-driven but relied on self-report from participants. The bias inherent in self-reported data is acknowledged.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to capture the experiences of Irish emigrants who were living abroad during the Covid-19 pandemic and who were in contact with Irish emigrant support organisations. The research collected insight from the organisations on the challenges faced by Irish emigrants, their needs, how they were supported, and what we can learn from these experiences to help prepare for future challenges facing Irish emigrants.

The findings show that there were many diverse experiences among Irish emigrants and that the most serious issues affected the most vulnerable emigrants. These included financial insecurity, immigration status issues, isolation, wellbeing and mental health needs, healthcare needs, housing insecurity, and domestic violence. Such issues were experienced by various vulnerable groups within the Irish emigrant community, including older emigrants, undocumented emigrants, isolated emigrants, emigrants with health vulnerabilities, Irish Traveller emigrants, and emigrant victims and survivors of domestic violence.

The main crisis issues were present across Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. Variations in issues and needs were evident and were dependent on the locality and core client groups of the participant organisations. The majority of organisations work mainly with an older Irish emigrant demographic, whose members are more at risk of needing isolation and health supports. The younger cohort, assisted by a smaller number of organisations, was more likely to face financial and immigration insecurity.

On a broader note, many Irish emigrants contacted organisations for the first time. These people may never have needed to access support in the past, and for them the pandemic had

caused unexpectedly stressful and uncertain situations. Many emigrants experienced emotional strain, especially during the initial stages of the pandemic. Stress, anxiety and uncertainty affected particularly those who wanted to return to Ireland either short term, to support family, or to move back permanently. Others either could not afford to be refused return to their host country or could not risk the chance of being refused. The wider impact of these situations affected many family members and loved ones in Ireland.

Irish emigrant support organisations were often the first port of call for emigrants in need of assistance. The organisations responded to emigrants' needs with a considerable level of innovation, flexibility, reliability and creativity, and adapted their services to best serve the Irish community in their region. They collaborated with other organisations, Irish associations, stakeholders and state agencies to organise supports, services and funds. They galvanised volunteers to provide remote and doorstep social supports and food deliveries. They reached out to the wider Irish emigrant community to achieve a stronger connection within the community and to raise awareness of the needs of other emigrants. They held out a virtual hand and raised spirits among people who were isolated, stressed, afraid and devastated.

The strength of the Irish diaspora community across Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States shone through as a beacon of light for the diaspora during the most unprecedented and devastating event in recent times. The Irish diaspora, the emigrant support organisations and all other stakeholders maintained a safety net and lifeline for many Irish emigrants. This research presents a snapshot of their experience and efforts. Ní neart go cur le chéile: there is no strength without unity.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey

Sample survey questions

As a result of the pandemic, has the total number of Irish emigrants contacting your organisation:

Increased. Decreased. Not Changed?

If your organisation has seen an increase, please select which groups you are seeing more of. Please select the relevant option(s). You can select more than one option.

Age 0-18

Age 18-35

Age 35-60

Age 60+

Sex: Female

Sex: Male

Sex: Non-binary/Not stated

Individuals

Families

Undocumented

Documented

Minority ethnic Irish emigrants (including Traveller/Black/Asian).

What have been the main pandemic-related crisis issues that Irish emigrants have contacted your organisation about? Please select the relevant option(s). You can select more than one option.

- Homelessness or at risk of homelessness.
- Income or financial insecurity (e.g. loss of employment/reduced income).
- Difficulties in accessing emergency supports (e.g. food/emergency medical/welfare supports)
- Difficulties in accessing health care (physical and mental health care)
- Covid-19 restrictions (e.g. travel restrictions, lockdown, quarantine, medically vulnerable)
- Domestic violence
- Family crisis return (short-term) (e.g. bereavement, caring for a family member)
- Moving back to Ireland permanently
- Not Applicable (N/A)

Have Irish emigrants in your area or region contacted your organisation to offer support to other Irish emigrants, because of the pandemic, if any? Please select the relevant option(s). You can select more than one option.

- Supporting older people (60+ years old)
- Deliveries/logistics
- Social supports (e.g. phone calls, befriending)
- Food & household essentials donations
- Financial donations
- Fundraising activities
- Support with travel and accommodation
- Not Applicable (N/A)

Most organisations have had to adapt their work in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

How has your organisation changed the way it works to support Irish emigrants, if at all? Please select the relevant option(s). You can select more than one option.

- Increase in online/remote working (e.g. video-conferencing, Zoom)
- Increase in services provided by phone and/or email
- Suspended or reduced face-to-face work
- Certain services provided by your organisation stopping entirely
- Not Applicable (N/A)

What is your insight into how the needs of Irish emigrants in your area or region have changed due to the pandemic, if at all? (OPEN)

Appendix B: Interview schedules

Sample interview schedule

1. What would you say is (one of) the most serious pandemic-related issues that Irish emigrants have contacted your organisation about?

A) During the pandemic (please elaborate)?

B) Compared to before the pandemic (i.e. was there a change in the most serious issue because of the pandemic) please elaborate?

2. Which offers of support have been the most helpful, if any (e.g. was financial/social/other support the most helpful to Irish emigrants)?

3. Which new ways of communicating with Irish emigrants did you find to be the most useful/beneficial/effective, if any? (please elaborate)

4. In terms of organisational changes, new services provided by your organisation and new links/partnerships (due to the pandemic) overall, what effect has the pandemic had on Irish emigrants? A positive effect/negative effect/no effect on Irish emigrants?

5. Do you have any further comments on how the needs of Irish emigrants have changed because of the pandemic (short/medium/long term, e.g. 2021 – 3 – 5 – 10 years)?

6. Do you have any further comments on future challenges for Irish emigrants in your area or region (short/medium/long term, e.g. 2021 – 3 – 5 – 10 years)?



Government of Ireland
Emigrant Support Programme



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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NÍ NEART GO CUR LE CHÉILE

THERE'S NO STRENGTH WITHOUT UNITY