

Symposium: ‘1997-2022 - A Generation of Change’

Second Surge: Population Growth in Ireland since 1995

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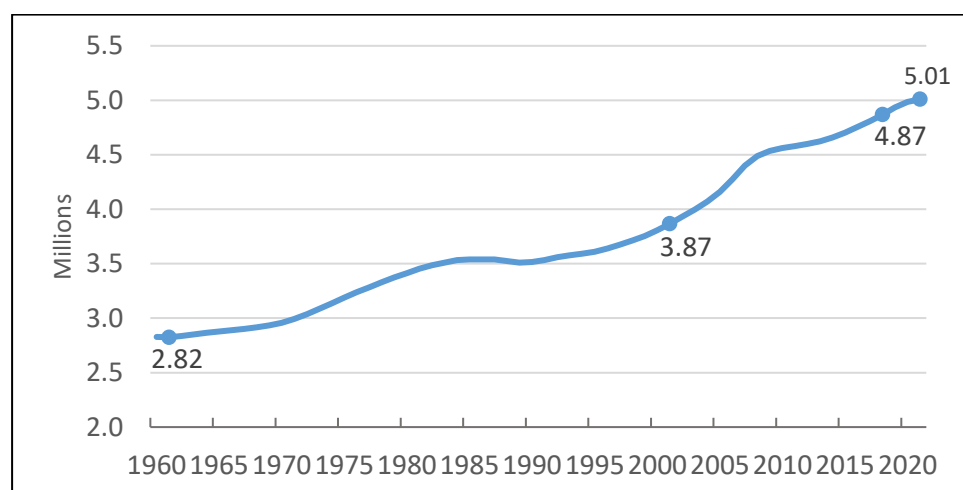
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Following more than a century of population decline, Ireland’s demographic upturn began in 1961. Since then, the population count has increased by just over two million. The first million took 40 years (to 2001) to arrive, while the second million was added in only 17 further years, that is, by 2018 (Figure 1). This indicates that the rate of increase had speeded up in that latter period. For present purposes, we can capture the changing tempo of this increase by dividing the period since the 1960s into two surges of near equal duration separated by a plateau in the middle. The first surge ran from 1961 to 1985 (24 years) and added 714,000 to the population, bringing the total from 2.82 million to 3.54 million. A near-flat decade followed, associated with a bout of emigration during the late-1980s recession. In 1995, with the advent of economic boom, a second surge took off. That has slowed in recent years but has not yet petered out. By 2021, it had added 1.4 million to the population and brought the total to 5.01 million, an increase of 39 per cent over the 26 years since 1995.

Figure 1. Population of Ireland, 1960-2021



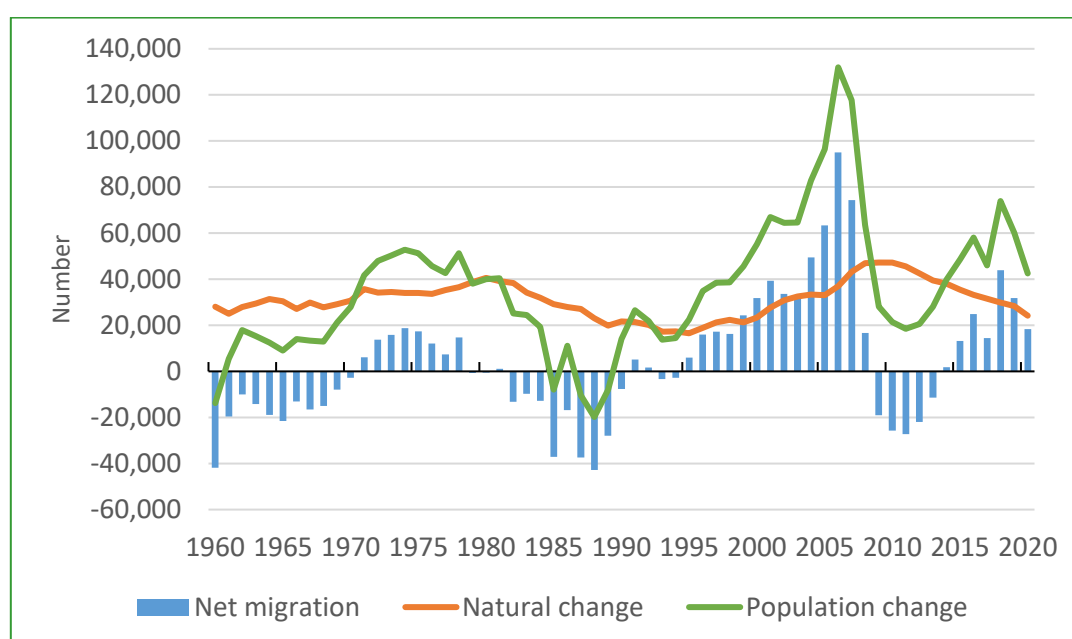
Source: Eurostat database [demo_gind], CSO

This ‘second surge’ is the topic of the present paper. Although it was a period of speeded-up population growth, the annual average growth rate of 1.24 per cent was not that fast by comparison with the population explosion in Ireland of the early nineteenth century (from which the cataclysm of the Great Famine emerged) or in many parts of the world in the past two centuries. It is also notable that the five million population threshold reached in 2021 merely brought Ireland back to a level previously reached in the 1850s: the 6.5 million recorded in 1841 for the

26 counties that make up today's Republic is far from being reached again. But in an era of demographic slow-down in the rest of Europe, the second surge we look at here is exceptional and amounts to a key part of Ireland's recent socio-economic development. Only the micro-states of Luxembourg, Cyprus and Malta have been in the same growth range in Europe in this period. The total EU population expanded by a mere 5 per cent since 1995, an eighth of the growth in Ireland.

Figure 2 shows the two drivers of Ireland's population growth since 1960 – net migration and natural change (the gap between births and deaths). A large wave of inward migration which took off from the early 1990s and peaked in the years 2005-2007 was the great novelty of the second surge: it was of a scale and duration not previously seen in Ireland. The financial crisis which arrived in 2009 caused that wave to stall and saw a return of net emigration. But that interruption was for a shorter period and at a lesser scale than the emigration of the 1980s (the net outward flow peaked at 27,000 in 2011 compared to 43,000 in 1988). The post-recession revival of inward migration in the years 2015-19 is also notable but it too slowed down with the advent of the Covid pandemic in 2020.

Figure 2. Annual net migration, natural change & population change, 1960-2020

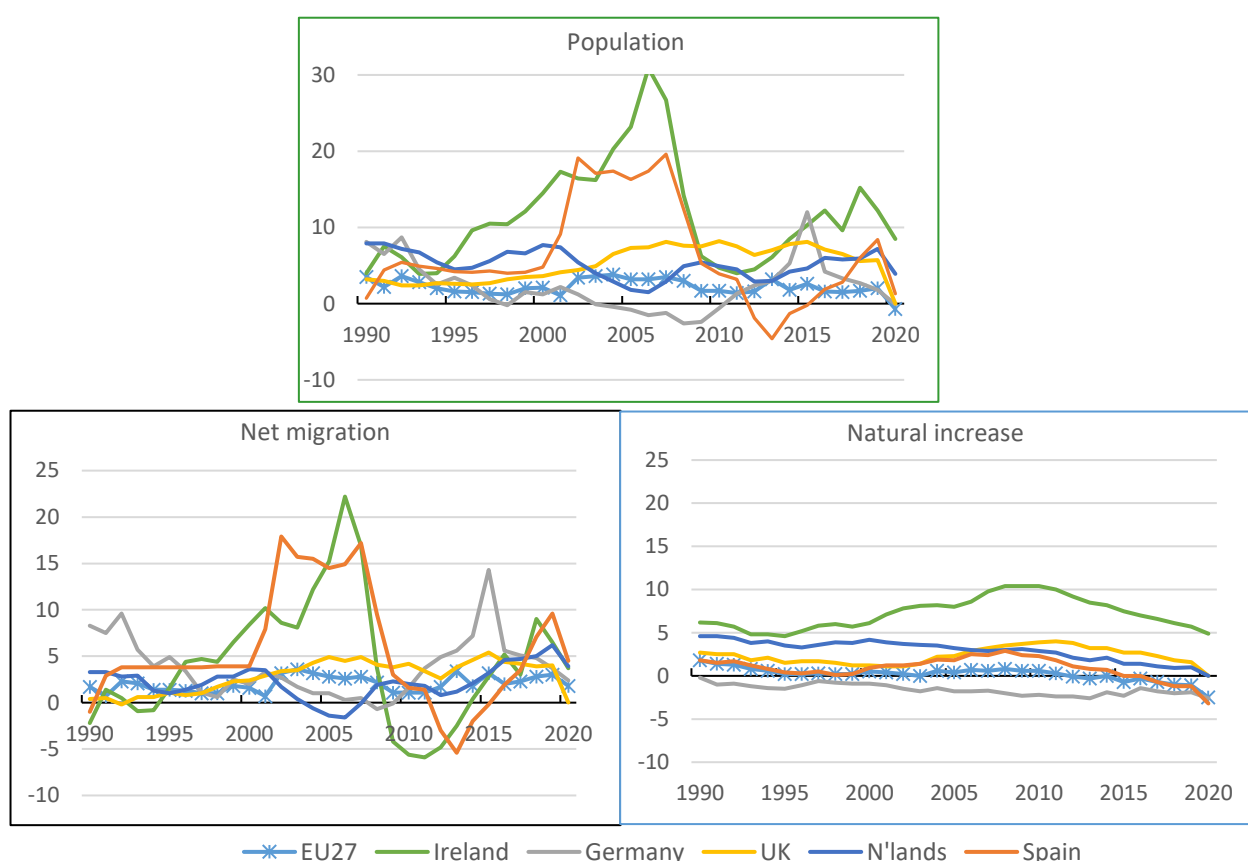


Source: Eurostat database [demo_gind]. Data on migration include a statistical adjustment to conform with estimates of population totals.

While the level of inward migration of the second surge was novel, it would seem on the face of it that the old reliable – natural change – was the more important contributor to demographic growth. Of the total population increase of 1.4 million since 1995, 60 per cent (851,000) was due to an excess of births over deaths and 40 per cent (558,000) to inward migration. This distinction, however, is to over-state the divide between migration and natural increase as strands of population change. Migrants tend to cluster in the young-adult ages, at the point in the life-cycle when child-bearing is about to begin, and their arrival or departure in large numbers can strongly affect local birth rates and natural increase after they move. Such an indirect effect of migration on population change has been important in Ireland and is a topic we return to below.

Figure 3 places the components of Ireland's second surge in comparative European context. The peaks and troughs of population change and of net migration in Ireland were extreme by European standards, though Spain was reasonably close to Ireland on these counts during the cycle of boom and bust of the early 2000s. However, Ireland's net migration was not a consistent outlier in Europe – it was sometimes below and sometimes above the experience of other countries.

Figure 3. European comparisons, 1990-2020 (annual rates of change per 1,000 population)



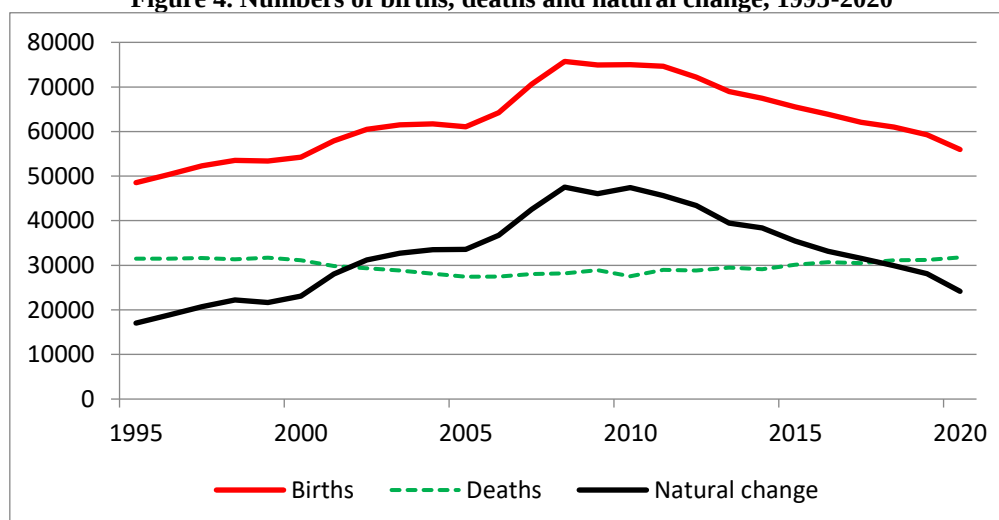
Source: As Figure 2.

The story for natural change shown in Figure 3 is different, and it is here that we find Ireland most clearly standing apart from the rest of Europe over recent decades. Its rate of natural increase was already at the top of the EU range in the mid-1990s. That rate then doubled in Ireland over the following 15 years, rising above 10 per 1,000 population for the years 2008-2011. It stagnated or fell in the EU in the same period, causing Ireland's outlier status to become more pronounced. By 2020, more people were dying each year in the EU than were being born: natural change had fallen well into negative territory, at -2.5 per 1,000 population per year. Ireland's rate of natural change had also fallen by then but at 4.9 per 1,000 population remained in positive territory and was still the highest in the EU.

Natural change is itself the product of two components – births and deaths, as shown in Figure 4. The trend for deaths in Ireland in this picture is nearly flat. Yet that flat trend reflects significant change since it occurs against a backdrop of an ageing population: the numbers aged 65+ increased by 74 per cent since 1995, more than double the growth in the number of under-65s. Given this ageing, the flat line for deaths indicates a fall in death *rates*, especially among high-risk older people, and thus signifies a substantial improvement in population health.

Nevertheless, the striking feature of Figure 4 is the up-and-down movement of births since 1995 and particularly the 15-year baby boom of the years 1995-2010. In accounting for this development, we have to take note of two influences – how many women of child-bearing age there are in the population, especially in the peak child-bearing ages of mid-20s to mid-30s, and how many births those women tend to have. In Ireland, both of these influences worked in a pro-fertility direction up to around 2010: there were more women of the right age and they tended to have more children per woman on average than elsewhere. Both have turned downwards since then.

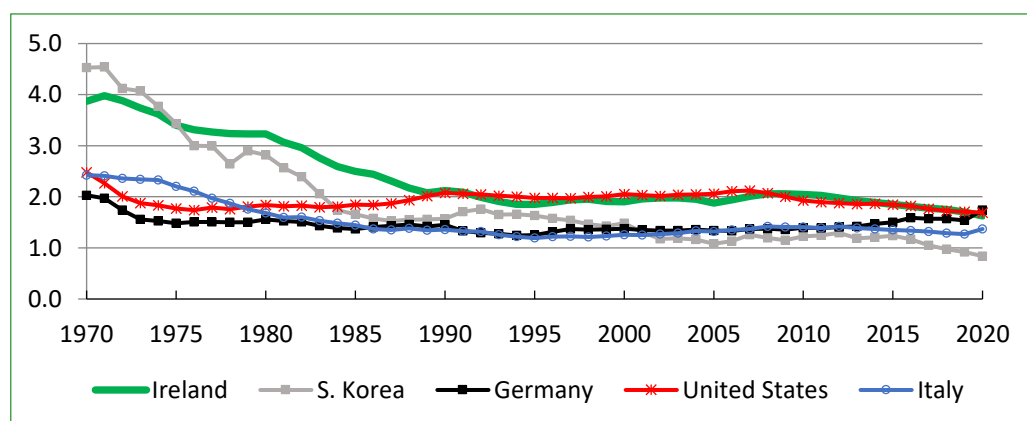
Figure 4. Numbers of births, deaths and natural change, 1995-2020



Source: CSO PxStat (VSA03, PEA15)

First, let us consider the propensity of women to have children, a factor often measured by reference to the ‘total fertility rate’ (TFR).¹ Figure 5 shows the evolution of Ireland’s TFR since 1970 by placing it alongside that of a selection of comparator countries. Ireland’s traditionally high TFR had fallen during the 1970s and 1980s and had plateaued at around 2 births per woman by the early 1990s. This was a low level by Irish historical standards but was at the upper edge of the range among late-20th century rich nations, a fertility level represented also by the United States in Figure 5. The trend line for Italy represents what, outside of Ireland, was typical of traditionally Catholic western countries in the late 20th century: fertility was already reasonably low by the 1970s and dropped to the very low range of 1.2-1.4 by the mid-1980s. Ireland was exceptional among Catholic-background countries in the western world in entering the present century without having experienced a drop in fertility to such super-low levels as this. In Europe, Germany has had the longest experience of sub-1.5 fertility, a position it occupied for four decades before an uptick raised it above that threshold in 2015 and 2016 and boosted it further in 2020. South Korea is included in Figure 5 as an instance of those Asian societies within the Confucian cultural tradition which experienced a sharp decline in birth rates in the 1970s and 1980s and now, like many Catholic background countries, are at the bottom edge of the international fertility range. Having hovered close the replacement rate of 2.1 for the first decade of this century, Ireland’s TFR, like that of the United States, has since entered a steady decline: at 1.62 in 2020, it was well below previous troughs. It remains to be seen when and at what level that decline will bottom out.

Figure 5. Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Ireland and Selected Comparator Countries, 1970-2020

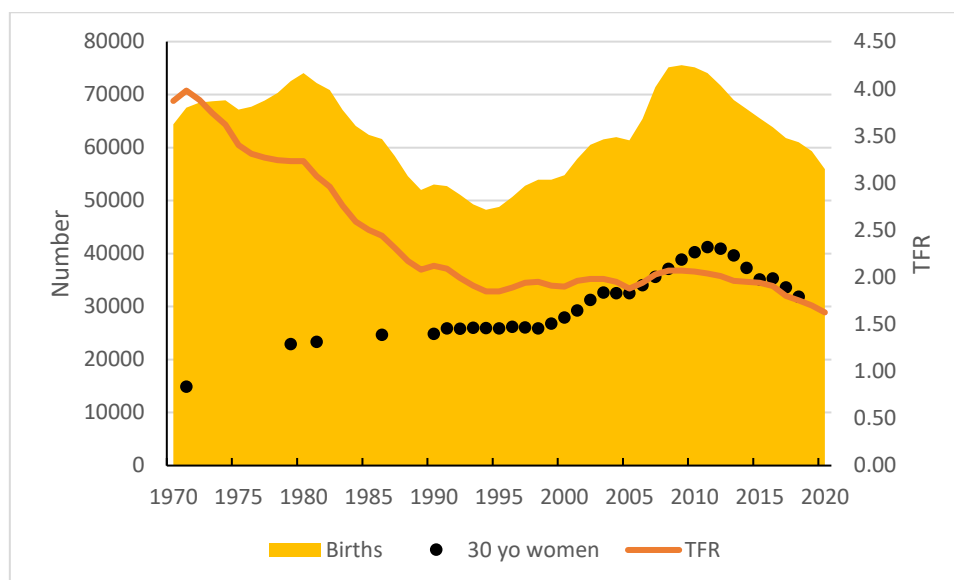


Source: OECD Family Database

¹ The total fertility rate (TFR) is an annualised measure of birth rates that indicates the number of children the average woman would have if she were to replicate across her reproductive life span the level of births found among women across age-groups in a particular year.

The trend in Ireland's TFR shown in Figure 5 would not lead us to expect the baby boom of the 1995-2010 period, given that the TFR showed at most only a small upturn in those years. A rise in total births becomes more understandable, though, if we turn to the second major influence on birth rates, the number of women who are at the peak child-bearing ages. Looking back to 1970, Figure 6 shows the outcome of both these parts of the story working together. It sets Ireland's TFR against the annual total births and also presents the trend in the number of 30-year old women in the country as an index of change in the size of the population at peak child-bearing ages.

Figure 6. Total fertility rate (right scale), number of births and number of 30-year old women in Ireland, 1970-2020



Source: CSO Vital Statistics, Census of Population and Annual Population Estimates

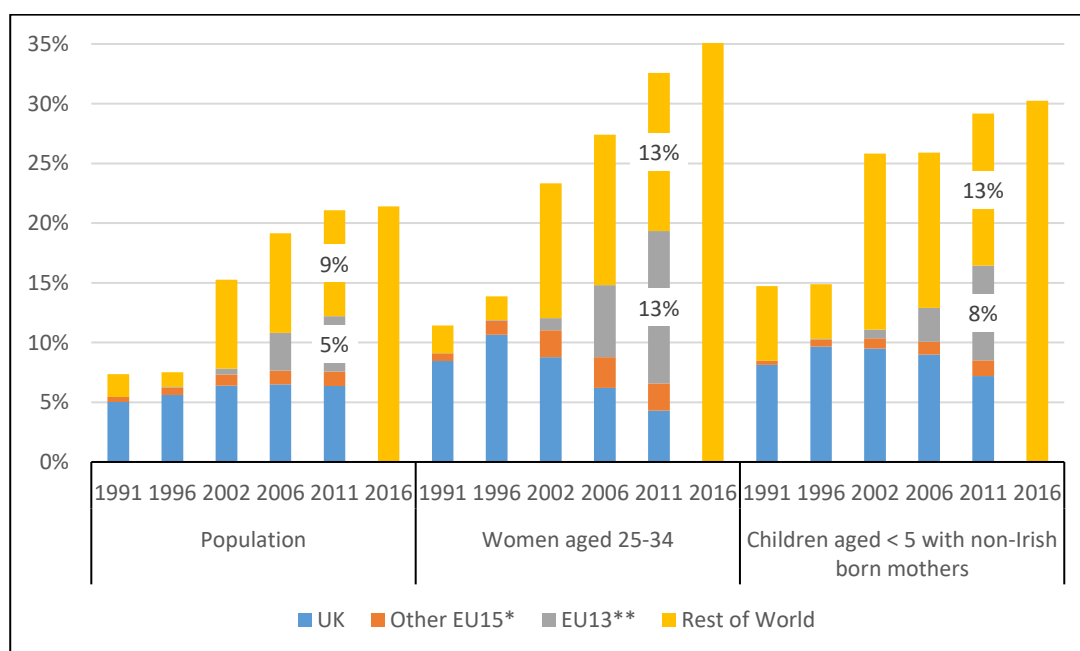
This graph shows a roller-coaster trend in total births since 1970 in the form of twin peaks with a deep trough in between. The first peak came in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the summit reached in 1980 at 74,000 births. This was the highest yearly total of births recorded to that point in the twentieth century and occurred in spite of steady downward movement in the TFR. This was a period when the large family was in rapid decline but a rise in the number of women of child-bearing age and a fall in the share who remained childless was enough to push birth totals upwards. After 1980, that counter-balancing pattern ceased as the number of women more-or-less flatlined and the TFR tumbled. The result was that the twentieth century high for births of 1980 turned rapidly into a twentieth century low in 1994, a mere 14 years later. Births in that year totalled 48,000, the lowest in Ireland since birth records began in 1864. The decline was short-lived, however. A new ascent began in 1995 and contributed to the second surge we are dealing with here. In remarkable counterpoint to the 14-year collapse in births which preceded it, this steep ascent took 14 years from the trough of 1994 to reach a new high, rising to 75,500 births in 2008 and staying above 75,000 in 2009 and 2010. The 2008 total was marginally above the 20th century peak of 1980 and the highest on record since the late 19th century. It amounted to a remarkable 57 per cent increase in annual births since the mid-1990s.

The key factor in this baby boom was a surge in the number of women of child-bearing age, as reflected in Figure 6 by the increase in the number of 30-year old women: their numbers rose from 25,800 in 1995 to 41,000 in 2011, a jump of 59 per cent. This jump was in part a lagged effect of the previous peak in births: much of it was due to the maturing of the large cohort of infants born in the early 1980s, 30 years earlier. But migration also played a role. Figures from Census 2011 show that substantial outward migration occurred in this age-group: if we look at *Irish-born* women only, the number aged 30 in 2011 was 18 per cent down on the number of females born in Ireland thirty years earlier. But there was also a large counter-balancing inward migration effect. The total number of 30-year old women in 2011 was up by 14 per cent on the number born 30 years earlier: the arrival of non-Irish born women more than compensated for the natives who left to the extent that 28 per cent of the 30-year old women resident in Ireland in 2011 were foreign born.

This brings us to the interplay between migration and birth rates which has strongly affected Irish population trends in the second surge. Here we look at this issue in conjunction with a breakdown of the world regions from which inward migration to Ireland originated, using census data on the birthplaces of the population over time for this purpose. Part of the intention in looking at region of origin of immigrants is to distinguish between the ‘old’ immigration represented by movement from the UK and the ‘new’ immigration originating from parts of the world with little or no historic connection to Ireland. UK-origin migration reflects the longstanding contribution to Irish population made by returnees from the Irish diaspora (and quite often, their non-Irish spouses), as well as movers from Northern Ireland. It is less novel or ‘foreign’ than other immigrant flows, as reflected in the high proportion of UK-origin immigrants who report their nationality as Irish or have an Irish-born spouse.² In the categorisation of non-Irish birthplaces used here, the UK is treated as a category in its own right and all other countries of origin are grouped into three categories: the ‘other EU15’, which consists of member states of the EU prior to 2004 other than Ireland and the UK; the ‘EU13’, which refers to the 13 member states which joined the EU since 2004, all of which bar Cyprus and Malta are former communist countries of eastern Europe (of which Poland was the most important contributor to migration into Ireland); and the ‘rest of world’, which includes all other countries, of which the more important as migrant-origin countries for Ireland are Nigeria, the Philippines, India and the United States. In the 10% census sample we draw on, these regional breakdowns are not available for 2016: the ‘country of birth’ variable for that year is reported as a simple dichotomy – Ireland and not-Ireland – and the ‘not-Ireland’ half of that dichotomy is presented here under the ‘rest of world’ heading.

Using these groupings, Figure 7 shows developments since 1991 on three aspects of inward migration which are relevant both for direct effects on population totals and indirect effects on birth rates. These are: the share of total population born outside of Ireland, with a breakdown across the world regions; the same indicator applied to women of peak child-bearing age, which here is defined as women aged 25-34; and the share of the infant population (those aged less than five years) whose mothers were born outside of Ireland.

Figure 7. Non-Irish population by place of birth, 1991-2016



*EU member states prior to 2004 enlargement, excluding Ireland and UK **EU member states that have joined since 2004. See text for classification used for 2016.

Source: CSO Censuses of Population 10% Sample (Minnesota Population Center 2020)

² In Census 2011, of the 288,627 residents in Ireland who reported their place of birth as the UK (including Northern Ireland), 178,945 (62%) reported their nationality as Irish (CSO.). In addition, detailed data from the Census 2011 10% sample show that of the UK-born adults in Ireland who identified as UK citizens in 2011, over half had an Irish-born spouse. The ‘new’ immigrants from most other regions, by contrast, universally identified their nationality with their country of birth and rarely had an Irish spouse (see also McGinnity 2022 for a similar situation in 2016).

A number of features of the ‘new’ immigration emerge from these data. One is the large and early role played by movement from the ‘rest of world’. Between 1996 and 2002, migrants from that diverse group of countries were responsible for virtually all of the increase in the foreign population in Ireland. They caused the foreign-born to double as a share of the total population in that six-year period and over the following decade remained the largest category among foreign-born residents. A second feature is the arrival of east Europeans (EU13) from 2002 onwards (and here the significant influence was the eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004, which opened up free movement of population from the new member states into Ireland). By 2011, at 5 per cent of the total population, arrivals from eastern Europe numbered considerably less than rest of world immigrants but they were heavily concentrated in the young adult population, including in the sub-population that was especially relevant for birth-rates, namely, women aged 25-34. Here they were just as significant as rest of world immigrants, at 13 per cent each. When we add in the 2 per cent who were born in the ‘other EU15’, we have a total of 28 per cent of that age-category of women who were the outcome of the new immigration. As this group formed their families and had children, a large impact on numbers in the child population could be expected. The third feature is the working out of that impact. By 2011, 22 per cent of the infant population (those aged 0-4 years) had foreign-born mothers: 13 per cent from rest of world, 8 per cent from eastern Europe and 1 per cent from the ‘other EU15’. Thus while the direct effect of the new immigration on population numbers was substantial, at 15 per cent of total population in 2011, its indirect effect on the child population, in relative terms, was greater and represented a demographic contribution with a potentially longer-term effect.

It is notable that the new immigrants, especially east Europeans, had below-average fertility by Irish standards: their children had a smaller share in the child population than they had in the relevant adult population (see also McGinnity et al. 2022). It was the sheer weight of their numbers in the family-formation stages of the life cycle that made them so significant in demographic terms. Annual birth registration data shows that this significance continues: in the context of the falling birth numbers of recent years, the share of births occurring to women who are non-nationals has remained constant at around 22-23 per cent of all births (CSO 2019).

One has to go back two hundred years, to the decades of population explosion in pre-Famine Ireland, to find a demographic surge in excess of what has occurred in the past 26 years. One has to look outside Europe today to find a similarly expansive population regime. A large wave of ‘new’ inward migration – this is, immigration which is from world regions with no historic connection to Ireland – has been a major driver of this trend, though a propensity among native Irish women to have more children than the norm for Europe has also played a role. The new immigrants have had the double effect of adding directly to population numbers by their presence and adding indirectly by forming families and giving birth after they arrived. By 2011, that direct effect was indicated by the 15 per cent of total population who were born outside Ireland or the UK, while the indirect effect was indicated by the 22 per cent of the infant population whose mothers were from those regions. Arrivals from the UK have added to these effects but here we treat UK-origin migration as part of a longstanding circular movement in population associated with the Irish diaspora in Britain rather than as a novel contributor to recent demographic dynamism.

The second surge has been losing pace in the past ten years but in contrast to much of Europe is still active enough to keep Irish population numbers on a growth path. The baby boom of the first decade of this century has left Ireland with a large child population – those born in the peak years of the boom (2008-2010) are now in early adolescence and in other decade will be on the brink of adulthood. A recurrence of outward migration or a further decline in the TFR could weaken their demographic impact but if the net migrant flow is inwards or the TFR either stabilises or revives, population growth could continue at a steady pace for some time to come.

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