

Problems of Prosperity: A Comparative Study of the Social Consequences of Economic Growth in Ireland

Ellen K. Meeker
Political Science

Introduction

In the last fifteen years, Ireland has undergone a variety of economic changes that has transformed it from one of the poorest countries in Western Europe to one of the wealthiest.¹ Historically poverty-stricken and underdeveloped, Ireland's dramatic economic growth, labeled by many as the "Celtic Tiger," is one of the major success stories of developing nations. Throughout the 1990s, Ireland's economy grew by about 6% annually, and by 2004, its Gross Domestic Product per capita was \$44,644.² Compared to Ireland's GDP per capita in 1980, \$6,185, this growth is truly astonishing.³ A decline in unemployment rates also indicates an economic upswing. In 1985, unemployment in Ireland was about 16%; by 2001, unemployment was about 4%.⁴ A nation once composed of émigrés now has positive immigration rates for the first time since the Great Famine in the mid-nineteenth century. All economic indicators of growth and prosperity illustrate what has been an astounding success story in Ireland.

Recent social science literature examines Ireland's economic development, particularly the ways in which Ireland was able to grow so exponentially in such a short period. While more people in Ireland work and have more money than ever before, has the quality of life truly improved? For generations, tourists, particularly Americans, have romanticized the hospitality and generosity of the Irish. But has growth negatively affected the social character of the Irish? Indeed, an *Irish Times*

¹ Editor's note: The following article is an expanded version of the article that appears in the print version of CONCEPT 2008. Additional tables have been added, and some of these tables are in color in the original.

² World Health Organization Statistical Information System, "Ireland Health Statistics and Health System Information," <http://data.euro.who.int/hfad/>, (accessed 2007).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Elizabeth Cullen, "Unprecedented Growth – But for Whose Benefit?" in *Growth: the Celtic Cancer*, ed. Richard Douthwaite and John Jopling (Dublin: Foundation for the Economics of Stability, 2004).

article published in 2006 illustrates the growing consequences of increased wealth, such as rising costs and an increase in suicide rates, alcohol abuse, and stress.⁵ By synthesizing scholarly literature on the negative consequences of economic prosperity and examining specific measures of relative well-being in Irish society, this paper seeks to compare Ireland in two distinct but recent times, 1980 and 2005, to determine if economic prosperity has negatively impacted its society.

The benchmark years of 1980 and 2005 are useful in two ways. First, they are far enough apart and located at different stages of economic development to allow for a recognizable and quantifiable change. Secondly, 1980 is clear of the 1970s and what is known as the “Troubles” in Ireland, and 2005 is far enough from the “dot-com” crash in 2000. The Troubles could have had an impact on several of the measures of the negative consequences of economic growth, as the conflict may have increased stress, anxiety, or crime rates. Likewise, the dot-com crash could also have contributed to the negative consequences of economic growth, as it could have temporarily boosted unemployment rates or negatively impacted per capita GDP. Steering clear of these confounding variables allows for a more clear assessment of the figures associated with the negative consequences of economic growth in Ireland.

Therefore, this paper establishes a framework for understanding the differences between 1980 and 2005 by illustrating Ireland’s recent economic and political history and providing a conceptual background of the literature that discusses the negative consequences of economic growth. Most of the literature focuses on this phenomenon in America, and this paper aims to apply the theoretical conclusions of that literature to a newly wealthy Ireland. By measuring negative factors of growth in Ireland, this paper seeks to illustrate any similarities or differences in the two case studies of 1980 and 2005. An analysis of this data could be quite useful in understanding broader social issues affected by economic prosperity and may be helpful in analyzing similar burgeoning, developing states.

A Short Political and Economic History

Like most former colonies, Ireland has a complicated political and economic history. It became an English colony in the seventeenth century, forming a relationship that has affected Irish political and economic developments since. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, England asserted its colonial power by establishing various plantations and installing Protestantism as the

⁵ Michael O’Sullivan, “Increasing Wealth is Not Leading to Greater Happiness,” *The Irish Times*, October 18, 2006.

official religion. In 1800, Britain, faced with the economic threat that Ireland imposed, passed the Act of Union, which placed Ireland directly under British rule. By digesting the country into the British economy, the Act robbed Ireland of the chance to industrialize during the Industrial Revolution. Another significant event in Irish history, the Great Famine of the 1840s, fueled the Irish desire for freedom. Many Irish blamed the British for the deaths of millions of their compatriots; some even labeled it genocide.⁶ The British policies during the famine exacerbated the situation; for instance, while the Irish population was starving, it continued to pump grain out of Ireland and into England for consumption. England remained committed to laissez-faire policies and pursued a “hands-off” approach to the crisis. As McCaffrey illustrates, “They [the British government] argued that Famine relief should not interfere with normal commercial activity, compete with private business, discourage personal initiative, make the Irish psychologically dependent on government charity, or interfere with private property or individual responsibility.”⁷ Although England was the richest nation in the world at the time, it took a minimalist approach to the Famine, and its policies undoubtedly contributed to more deaths. As a result, the Famine started a process of emigration that exceeded immigration levels until the 1990s. People essentially had to emigrate if they wished to have meaningful work and enough money to support a family. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Ireland continually vied for its independence. Following a chain of events initiated by the 1916 Easter Rising, Great Britain granted Ireland home rule in 1921, and in 1948, Ireland declared itself a republic excluding the six counties in Northern Ireland that remained loyal to the British crown.

This short history provides the basis for Ireland’s historic economic problems. As an English colony, it was largely agrarian and had almost no industrialization. As Fitzgerald illustrates,

...For a number of historical reasons, including a heritage of English colonial exploitation from the eighteenth century as well as neglect of economic development in the nineteenth century, there had been little industrialization in the island of Ireland in the pre-independence period, and what there was had been concentrated in the north-east, which opted out of the new Irish state.⁸

⁶ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question: Two Centuries of Conflict*. (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 56.

⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁸ Gerald Fitzgerald, *Reflections on the Irish State* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003), 23.

Indeed, as illustrated above, during the Great Famine, when half of Ireland's population either died or emigrated, Irish farmers were still exporting grain to England although the majority of its own population was starving. Even after independence, Ireland established a special agreement with England in 1938 to create a free trade agreement between the two islands. Ireland remained largely agrarian until the latter part of the twentieth century, and British farm subsidies did nothing to force a transition away from this way of life. By 1950, more than half of the working Irish population was still agrarian, and 30% of its economic output was derived from farming compared to the European average of 10%.⁹ By 1970, these figures had barely improved – 25% of the working population was still agrarian, compared to Europe's eight percent.¹⁰ As Fitzgerald notes, "Ireland's institutional, social, and economic heritage from the past, including its institutional structure and common law legal system, has been markedly different from that of any part of Continental Europe."¹¹ Ireland's history as a colony, lack of proper industrialization, and a frail political system immensely contributed to its dismal economic performance prior to the 1990s. Government policies during the 1970s and 1980s had created large fiscal deficits and exacerbated the national debt, and this occurred during an international recession.¹² In addition, creating a meaningful majority in Irish Parliament was difficult, given that the political parties had difficulty finding common ground on which to establish a coalition, and thus policies lacked any clear coherency, thereby furthering the dismal economic performance of Ireland.

Ireland's shift towards economic prosperity began in the 1970s after it was admitted to the European Union. Membership in the EU provided Ireland with a new market to sell its goods as opposed to the single British market it had dealt with for the past several centuries. The EU shifted structural and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds to Ireland, allowing it to build the necessary infrastructure to compete internationally, that British colonial rule had long denied. The EU had created these funds, as Özenen notes, to "reduce the differences and create a better economic and social balance within and between member States."¹³

⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

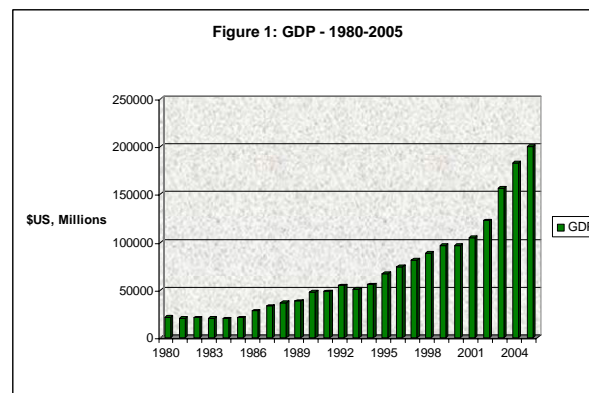
¹² Niamh Hardiman (2003). "Politics and Markets in the Irish "Celtic Tiger" Experience: Choice, Chance or Coincidence?" in *Institute for the Study of Social Change Discussion Paper Series*, <http://www.ucd.ie/geary/publications/2003/wp14.pdf> (accessed 2007).

¹³ Cem Galip Özenen, General Directorate of Economic Sectors and Coordination in the Department of Infrastructure and Services, Turkey's State Planning Organization, "The Effect of Structural Funds on Ireland's Development and Lessons for Turkey," <http://ekutup.dpt.gov.tr/ab/ozenencg/irlanda.pdf> (accessed 2007).

Therefore, the transfer of capital into Ireland from the EU, in the form of structural and agricultural subsidies, allowed it the necessary capital to augment its infrastructure and deliver needed subsidies to its agrarian population. Before membership in the EU, Irish exports to countries other than England constituted 40% of its total exports. By the late 1990s, this figure was upwards of 77%.¹⁴

Though the EU established the infrastructure to facilitate Ireland's immense economic boom, it was internal Irish politics that created favorable circumstances for foreign and multinational corporations to establish business there. The Irish economy and regulations were attractive to many foreign investors because they had an educated population and low corporate taxes. In the 1960s, Ireland eliminated its secondary school taxes, enabling more people to attain higher levels of education. O'Donnell asserts that this educated population played a significant role in the booming "Celtic Tiger" and explains that, "High quality labor (that is, appropriately and well-educated workers from the perspective of the employers) is more flexible and adaptive and can facilitate the introduction of new technologies."¹⁵ In addition, government policies, such as an attractive 10% corporate tax rate and union wage moderation, attracted foreign investment and spurred economic growth. Other important developments included the stability created by the peace process that ensued after the 1970s "Troubles" with Northern Ireland and a dedicated and educated political class that realized the necessity for change before the IMF had to step in.¹⁶ These various factors established a ripe foundation for rapid economic change and explain the success and prosperity of the Irish economy since the early 1990s.

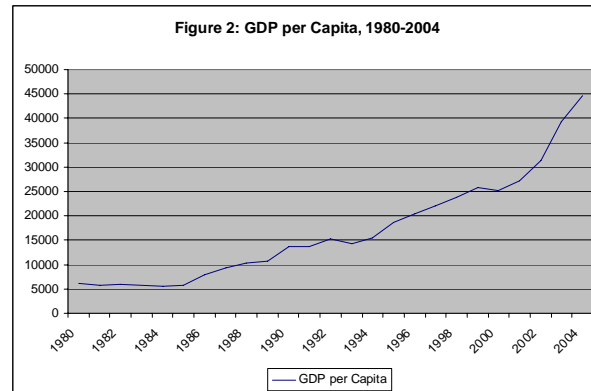
One can measure Ireland's current economic prosperity in several ways. As Figures 1 and 2 illustrate below, the rise of Ireland's GDP and most noticeably its GDP per capita is truly noteworthy.



¹⁴ Fitzgerald, 27.

¹⁵ Michael O'Donnell, *Changed Utterly: Ireland and the New Irish Psyche* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2001), 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., 34.



In 1980, Ireland's GDP was \$21 billion dollars and its per capita GDP was \$6185¹⁷. As both charts indicate, GDP and GDP per capita remained fairly stagnant during the 1980s, but began to grow in the early 1990s and was truly booming by the late 1990s and early 2000s. As of 2005, GDP was over \$200 billion dollars, and GDP per capita was over \$44,000, demonstrating a clear economic transformation.¹⁸

Concurrent with the rise in GDP and GDP per capita, the unemployment rates in Ireland dropped dramatically while the amount of working hours also declined. In 1980, Ireland's unemployment rate was around 16%, and by 2005 this figure was 4.3%; the EU average in 2005 was 7.9%.¹⁹ Average working hours in 1983, the closest year to 1980 for which data is available, were 1,910 hours per year, and in 2004 were 1,642 per year. Thus, while Ireland was achieving unprecedented economic wealth and prosperity and dramatically decreasing the unemployment rate, it was also able to significantly lower the average working hours per year.

The Problems of Prosperity

The above statistics and figures propose that the Irish have finally transcended their times of strife and have emerged as a serious contender in the international economy. However, accompanying these impressive changes in wealth are significant and often negative issues: rising suicide rates, crime, and alcohol

¹⁷ GDP Chart: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "GDP Datasets: http://stats.oecd.org/wbos/default.aspx?datasetcode=SNA_TABLE1 (accessed March 24, 2007); GDP per Capita Chart: World Health Organization Statistical Information System, <http://data.euro.who.int/hfad/> (accessed 2007).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ OECD (2007) "Standardized Unemployment Rates." *OECD.Stat.* Accessed 10 March 2007. <<http://stats.oecd.org/WBOS/Default.aspx?QueryName=251&QueryType=View&Lang=en>>

consumption, among a myriad of others. Prior to this economic growth, the Irish had never experienced these issues on such large scale. An understanding of the discourse of the negative effects of prosperity creates a better appreciation of the concrete indicators of these issues in Ireland today.

There are two primary lenses through which to examine how prosperity can affect a society. O'Donnell describes these two camps as Positivist and Negativist. Maslow's construction of a human's hierarchy of needs best illustrates the Positivist view.²⁰ Maslow "...suggests that economic prosperity has general and genuine benefits for a society, beyond simply the acquisition of more goods and services."²¹ Essentially, humans must satisfy their most basic needs first, such as food, clothing, and shelter, and after that, humans pursue basic security, love, self-respect, and finally self-actualization.²² A wealthy and well-functioning state and society provides the basis for individuals to pursue these broader human goals; it enables the human being to achieve self-actualization. Inglehart added to Maslow's argument that when a society secures its population's basic needs and its security, their priorities turn towards freedom, expression, and beauty.²³ Inglehart suggests,

...in the post-Second World War era, the majority of citizens in Western industrialized countries were presented for the first time with the luxury of preoccupation with post-materialist concerns – no longer worrying about jobs, the threat of war, or the roof over their heads, but of the kind of environments they lived in, of the rights of expression, of the importance of abstract ideas like equality, justice, and minority rights.²⁴

Thus, Inglehart argues beyond Maslow's idea that prosperity increases the propensity for humans to achieve personal actualization in his allusion to the broader societal implications of such wealth.

The Negativist camp, in contrast, has a pessimistic analysis of the effects of wealth on a society and is critical of the Positivist view. As O'Donnell explains, "The civil progress of early capitalism gave way to the horror in the last century of fascism and concentration camps, but standards of living surely improved."²⁵ He also criticizes Inglehart's claim that such a high level of development and security enables expression and beauty by illustrating that the artists of the poor and more troubled first half of the twentieth century, such as Eliot, Joyce, and Picasso, were

²⁰ O'Donnell, 45.

²¹ Ibid., 44.

²² Ibid., 47.

²³ Ibid., 48.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 51.

much more heralded than those of the second, much wealthier half of that century.²⁶ Many in the Negativist group recognize the dark side of an affluent society: consumption. Galbraith in particular illustrates that "...the troubling characteristic of the affluent society is that, by its very nature, production cannot lead to a reduction in people's wants. The reason is that one of the main goals is to keep at least abreast but preferably ahead of one's neighbors."²⁷ Indeed, the wealth and security that the Positivist camp views as a path to freedom, creativity, and beauty in fact creates a society that suffers in the unending cycle of production and consumption.

Many authors have adopted the Negativist view. Most highlight the inadequacies of the free market or the woes of a society based on consumption. Schwartz writes,

The market does nothing to encourage protection and everything to encourage predation. The pursuit and exploitation of individual advantage in the service of those who profit is built into the ideology of the market. Those who fail to capitalize on their advantages will earn less money, or be fired by their bosses, or be driven out of business by their competition.²⁸

This critique is helpful in explaining why a society like Ireland, which recently experienced wealth and prosperity, consistently reports higher levels of stress, as will be discussed later. Lane argues that the market encourages people to link wealth with happiness. He writes, "People believe that a little more money would make them happier, and, lacking privileged knowledge of the causes of their feelings, people accept conventional answers. In spite of Kant and Mill, people's basic premise is that they are much like others – they have no great desire to be unique. The market culture teaches us that money is the source of well-being."²⁹ The market can also warp one's sense of being: "Who we are (the very core 'self' of being) has come to be determined by what we can buy and own...The overwhelming message being broadcast is that you are only as good as what you can buy, as our traditional cultural icons are being eroded and replaced by McDonald's, Nike, BMW, and the like."³⁰

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ O'Donnell, 54.

²⁸ Barry Schwartz, *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994), 40.

²⁹ Robert E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 72.

³⁰ Caroline Smyth, Malcolm MacLachlan, and Anthony Clare, *Cultivating Suicide? Destruction of Self in a Changing Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), 59.

Consumption is central to the discourse on the problems associated with affluence. A material culture creates a cycle of consumption that is reinforced daily, and this can have serious consequences. People adapt to their material acquisitions; a person may be happy with his new good, such as a car, for a limited amount of time before the initial euphoria wears off and he begins again to desire more material things.³¹ In an argument that is particularly relevant to Ireland today, Schwartz also points out the relativity of increased wealth:

It could be that material well-being is relevant to happiness only when it is evaluated relative to the material well-being of everybody else. It is possible that, for example, a 50 percent increase in real income will make someone happy only if not everyone else is getting richer by 50 percent. If everyone is getting richer, then an individual's own gains are seen as only fair – as entitlements.³²

Schor builds upon this idea with her assertion that those to whom people compare themselves have changed with the advent of mass communications and globalization. People no longer compare themselves to their neighbor up the street; television and mass media have enabled people to compare themselves to the rich and famous, and the media portrays their lifestyles as the desired standard. People are left feeling poor and worthless, as they cannot easily achieve that level of wealth. In this way, status and consumption are intertwined. Schwartz illustrates:

The importance to us of status helps explain why we are always looking over our shoulders to see how our neighbors are doing. It helps explain why we can never be sure that what we have is enough. It helps explain why we are never satisfied with what we have. Together with the processes of adaptation and addiction, it makes the never ending quest for consumption seem not only plausible but inevitable.”³³

Therefore, it makes sense that as a culture gains wealth and prosperity, modernizes its economy, and interconnects with other countries, its citizens' perceptions of status and standard of living become skewed.

³¹ Schwartz, 155-56.

³² Ibid., 163.

³³ Ibid., 166.

Measures of Happiness

With an understanding of the literature on the negative aspects of wealth on society, this paper seeks to employ several relative measures of happiness to gauge this phenomenon in Ireland. These various measurements were established through a broad reading of literature associated with happiness and prosperity and reflect the most recent and available information. Unfortunately, Ireland has not always kept the best statistics or health records, so some desirable measures are incomplete or non-existent. As Carrie illustrates, “A fundamental problem with Irish historical data is its lack of continuity. Where statistics are available, they generally have not been gathered in a consistent manner over the time period in question.”³⁴ Thus, although this paper seeks to employ as much data as is available, at times there are minor discrepancies. However, the indicators point to a common theme: the social effects of prosperity in Ireland have been generally negative. Increased wealth has had some serious social repercussions in Ireland, indicated in particular by rising suicide, depression, and stress rates; increased alcohol consumption; a rise in crime; and increased obesity. Comparing quantitative figures from the two case studies of 1980 and 2005 best illustrates these changing social factors.

Suicide, Depression, and Stress

Suicide, depression, and stress are on the rise, according to various sources and actual recorded figures. Suicide is the most reliable quantifiable measurement of these three interconnected disorders. It is defined and distinguished by its intent: “...it reflects the psychological experience of the suicidal – it is the perceptions and phenomenological experience of the individual, their assessment of the situation, their desire to escape from what (to them) is an unbearable situation...”³⁵ It has a particularly interesting history in Ireland, where until 1993, suicide was considered a criminal offense and as such, had a further social stigma. As Smyth illustrates, “For as long as suicide remained a criminal offence, passing the judgment of death by suicide had many unwanted consequences, not the least of which was that the deceased individual would have the element of criminality attached to their final living act and their family would suffer additional and unnecessary shame and stigma.”³⁶ Suicide was also viewed historically as an

³⁴ Ana Carrie, “Lack of Long-Run Data Prevents Us Tracking Ireland’s Social Health,” in *Growth: the Celtic Cancer*, ed. Richard Douthwaite and John Jopling (Dublin: Foundation for the Economics of Stability, 2004).

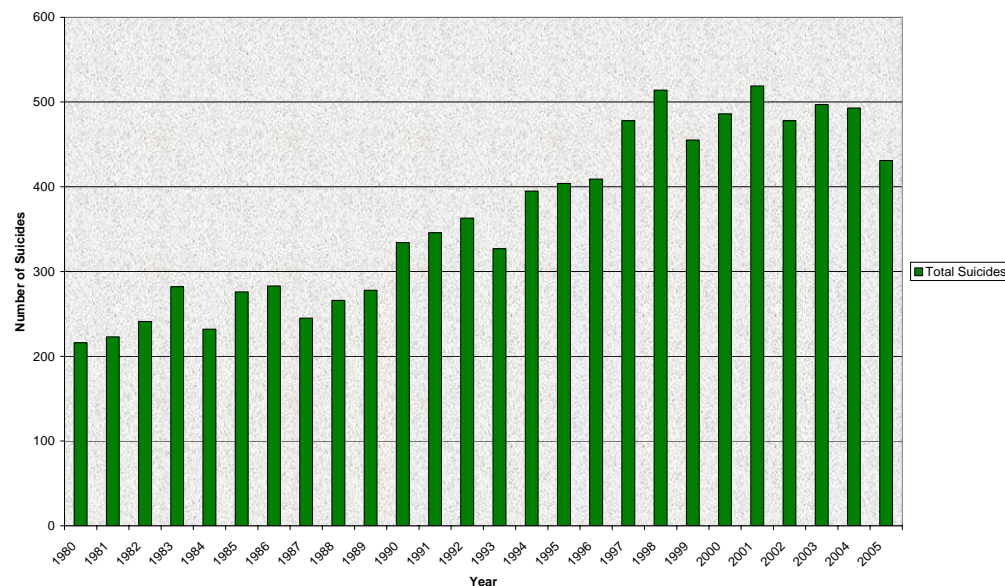
³⁵ Smyth et al., 11.

³⁶ Ibid., 16.

individual, isolated event. Many sociologists would disagree with this perspective, looking instead towards the ‘broader socio-cultural world for explanation and understanding.’³⁷ This perspective is particularly relevant to explaining suicide in a newly prosperous Ireland. Culture is paramount for Smyth: “We argue that culture – that which organizes and shapes our understanding of reality, the way we interact with the world and those in it, and that which gives meaning to our lives – is a central facet of suicide.”³⁸ Examining the quantity and demographics of suicide in Ireland creates a more complete and accurate representation of the effects of culture on suicide.

The suicide rates of 1980 and 2005 are represented in various figures below. In 1980, the total amount of suicides was 216. By 2005, that number had essentially doubled to 431 suicides.³⁹

Figure 3 : Total Suicides 1980-2005



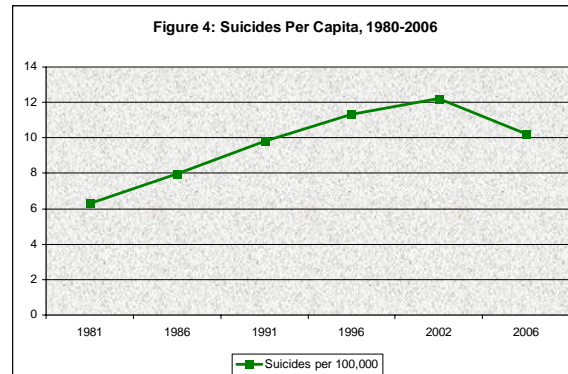
By examining Figure 3, suicide trends since 1980, a distinct increase in suicides occurs in the early 1990s, corresponding to the beginning stages of economic prosperity in Ireland. For example, the number of suicides did not breach 300 a year and had remained previously stable around 250 a year during the 1980s, an economically depressed era. Yet from 1990 on, a distinct and steady rise in suicides emerged, culminating in 2001 with Ireland’s highest amount to date: 519. Although suicides have decreased a small amount since 2001, the figures remain

³⁷ Ibid., 30.

³⁸ Ibid.

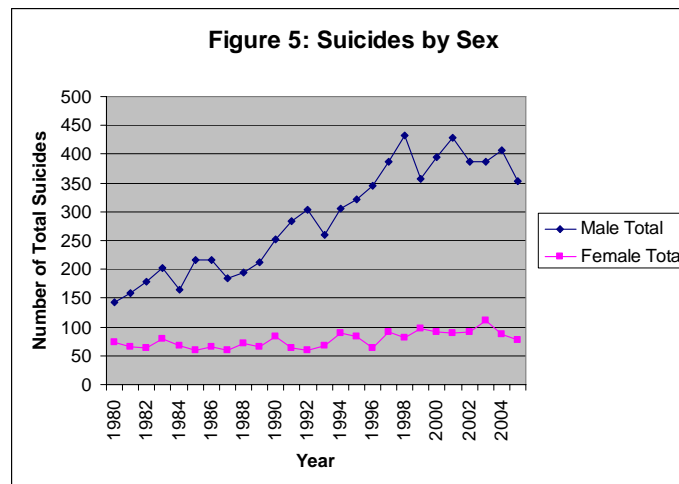
³⁹ Central Statistics Office of Ireland, <http://www.cso.ie/default.html> (accessed 2007).

well above 400. Another measure also reflecting the increases of suicide, perhaps more telling, are per capita suicide rates, exemplified in Figure 4.

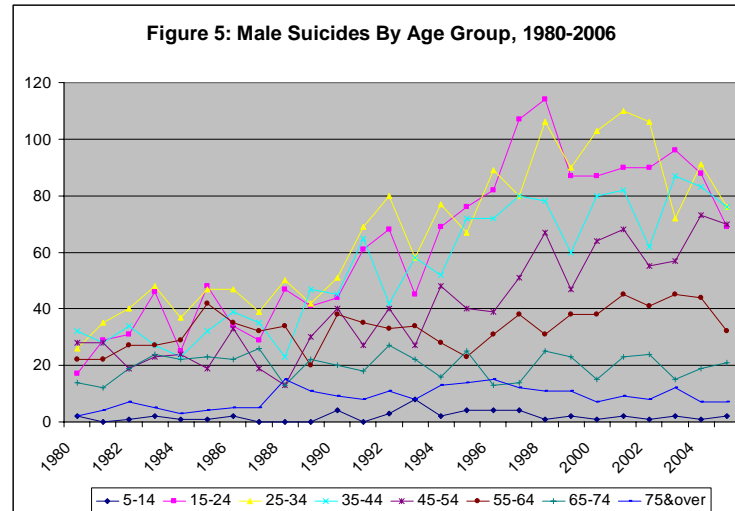


In many ways, per capita suicide rates from 1981 until 2006 correspond directly to the increase in the total number of suicides. In 1981⁴⁰, per capita suicide rates were about six deaths per 100,000 people; by 2002, this had doubled to 12 deaths per 100,000 people. Between 1981 and 2006, the number of per capita suicides steadily climbed, and the sharpest increases occurred during the 1990s, as Ireland's economy began to really boom.

Two overwhelming features that mark the suicide rates of a newly independent Ireland are the age and gender of the suicidal person. As Figures 5 and 6 below illustrate, female suicide rates have remained relatively the same over the 25-year period between 1980 and 2005. Male suicide rates, however, rose sharply in the 1990s, again demonstrating a correlation with a rise in Ireland's GDP and per capital GDP, and male suicide continues to account for over 75% of the suicides in Ireland.



⁴⁰ Although this paper seeks to establish comparisons between 1980 and 2005, for this particular instance, data was not available for 1980. Thus, the most proximate figure, 1981, will serve as its substitute.



In 2005, male suicide accounted for over 80% of all suicides. The male age groups most affected by the rising trend of suicide are 15-24 and 25-34. Interestingly, there is not a similar trend for females; among women, no one age group is visibly affected. The available data clearly shows that suicide is on the rise in Ireland and that it mostly affects young males.

If suicide affects young males in particular in Ireland, what specific factors contribute to their deaths? One explanation is Barber's "relative misery hypothesis," which claims that "...the relative misery of young men especially, who in the presence of societal development and increased prosperity and/or success, make upward social comparisons (e.g. 'look what they have that I do not') with their counterparts, thus magnifying their relative unhappiness and making an already vulnerable group more susceptible to suicidal behaviors."⁴¹ Tied to this new level of social comparisons and societal pressures are the normal challenges of adolescent life, often a time of change, angst, and self-realization. Additionally the adolescent stage is being lengthened: "...tasks which in the past were symbolic of adulthood – such as getting one's first job, moving out of the parental home, making a home for oneself, marriage, and having children – are now taking place at a later stage (if at all)."⁴² Because inflation accompanied the vast economic growth in Ireland, it is increasingly more difficult for young people to accrue enough wealth to purchase a home of their own, even with substantial increases in

⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

⁴² Ibid., 58.

per capita GDP. In addition, people are seeking higher education and therefore rely on the financial assistance of their parents for longer periods of time. Smyth et al. point to the gendering of suicide and parasuicide, or attempted suicide, as contributing to the higher proportion of male suicides. Attempted suicide is inherently feminine:

Non-fatal suicide behaviors are, it would seem, generally seen as violations of the stereotypical 'male' role expectations that include the attributes of strength, decisiveness, success, and inexpressiveness. Not only may such expectations impede men from openly expressing hopelessness, despair, depression, and isolation (a problem in itself) but when behaving to alleviate these experiences, the selection of method is also affected.⁴³

Parasuicide is simply not an option for many men, who fear the effect on their character, even in the face of death, if they did not succeed. Already in an unstable emotional and mental state, the price of not succeeding in suicide, that is of being labeled weak or seen as feminine, further drives them to fully complete the job. This is why men generally use decidedly lethal means of killing themselves, such as hanging or firearms, whereas women are more likely to ingest poison or attempt to drown themselves. In the case of the female, the chance that her efforts may result in an intervention is more likely; men seem to favor the most lethal means when committing suicide. The gender biases of suicide in Ireland contribute to an understanding of why males are more apt to take their own lives. These factors, combined with increased societal pressures and a lengthened process of emotional and physical change, creates a powerful dynamic afflicting the young Irish male population.

The related issues of depression and stress have also seen sharp rises in the last fifteen years. However, unlike suicide rates, depression and stress levels have not been well recorded. Nevertheless, reviewing the available figures and salient literature allows for a broader understanding of these particular societal implications of increased wealth and prosperity. Many people report increased stress over the past decade. A 2001 Mental Health Association of Ireland Study reported that 73% of respondents found life more stressful than the five previous years. As a result of this stress, the respondents stated they were drinking and smoking more.⁴⁴ Concurrently, an Irish government study states, "At any given

⁴³ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁴ Cullen, 10.

time, 300,000 people in Ireland suffer from depression.”⁴⁵ The study also links depression to increased prosperity: “The tumultuous changes in Irish society over the last fifteen years have made young adult life more pressured while, at the same time, traditional environmental and social sources of support have been weakened. As a result, the depressive episodes are more likely to be triggered.”⁴⁶ The pressures people face today in Ireland include increased daily commutes and a search for affordable housing; this places strain on traditionally strong relationships between family members and friends.⁴⁷ Others point out that the 300,000 who are medicated for depression represent an underdiagnosed condition: “...according to current Irish estimates as many as one in four Irish men and one in three Irish women suffer some form of depression at some point in their lives.”⁴⁸ Depression is a serious issue in Ireland right now, one that evidently affects 25-30% of the Irish population at some point in their lives.

Alcohol Consumption

Another rising trend in Irish society is alcohol consumption. The Irish have always been romanticized as heavy drinkers, a label with some truth to it. Yet as recorded consumption rates reveal, drinking in Ireland is increasing at a time when the European Union rate is going down. Again, the climb began in the 1990s, yet the sharpest increase occurred in the early 2000s. Figure 7 illustrates the liters per capita consumed from 1980 to 2005, and Figure 8 illustrates comparative trends in Switzerland, France, and Germany, all countries in which consumption rates have decreased in the past fifteen years.

⁴⁵ The Ireland Funds, “Mental Health: Healing the Hurt,” <http://www.irlfunds.org/> (accessed 2007).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Eoin Hahessy, “Suicide is a Bigger Killer than Roads, But Fought in the Dark,” *The Sunday Independent*, January 7, 2007.

⁴⁸ Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling, “The Happiest Country in the World?” in *Uncertain Ireland: A Sociological Chronicle, 2003-2004*, ed. Mary P. Corcoran and Michel Peillon (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2006), 29.

Figure 7: Alcohol Consumption 1980-2004

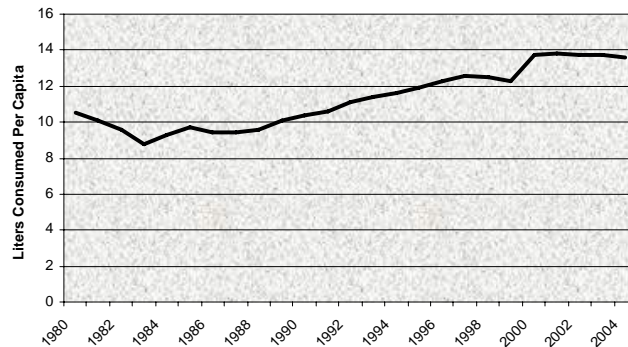
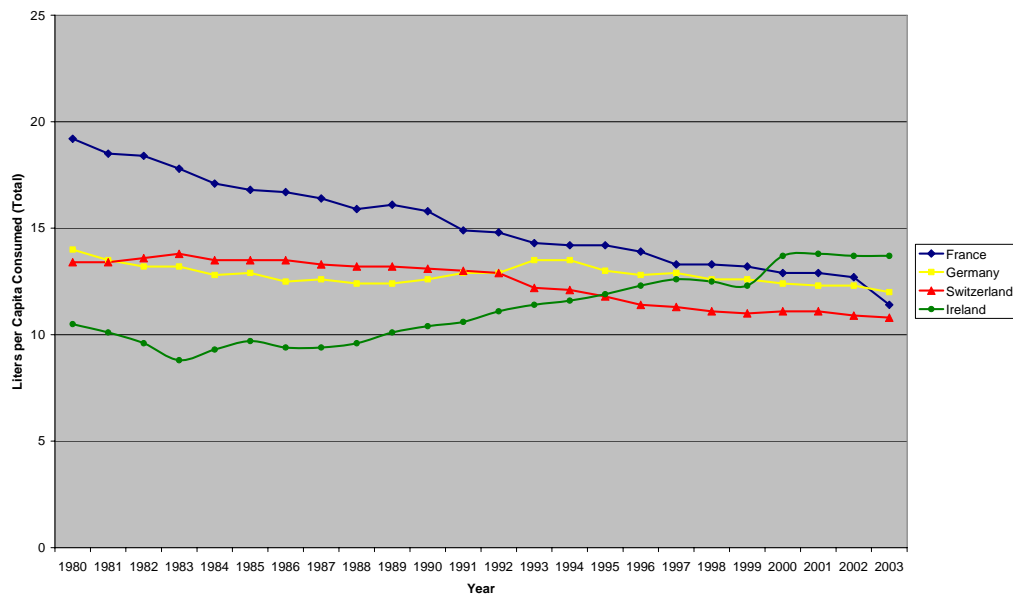


Figure 8: Cross-Country Alcohol Comparison, 1980-2005



Many associate a rise in alcohol consumption with greater societal pressures due to increasing prosperity. Smyth directly ties alcohol use to wealth: “Now, as wealthy as we are, we are all the better positioned to do to excess just about everything. With increasing liberalism, government reluctance to restrict alcohol use, and corporate delight at its magnitude, Irish alcohol consumption has rocketed.”⁴⁹ Additionally, alcohol is a factor in the increased suicide rates: “In short, alcohol does not cause people to have suicidal thoughts or behave in a suicidal manner, but for those who already hold such thoughts, the consumption of alcohol may make

⁴⁹ Smyth et al., 113.

them more likely to act (that is, it may reduce inhibition for suicide).”⁵⁰ Thus, although alcohol does not directly influence suicide, it can be a factor in those already entertaining the idea. In fact, alcohol is involved in over 45% of suicides.⁵¹ As a depressant, alcohol use can reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and despair in an already depressed and self-loathing individual, perhaps tipping many over the edge.

Although alcohol has always been a part of Irish culture, the rising consumption rates illustrate some other disturbing issues. The Irish had traditionally been largely beer drinkers, but more and more people, particularly young adults, are engaging in binge drinking and shot-taking. Indeed, experimentation with alcohol is a normal part of adolescence, but recent figures illustrate a disconcerting reality: “...by the time Ireland’s teenagers reach the age of 15, half the girls and nearly two-thirds of the boys may be classed as ‘current’ drinkers with one-third being classified as ‘binge drinking’ (defined as having five or more drinks in a row) three or more times in the last month.”⁵² This alarming trend challenges the traditional role of pubs and drinking in Irish culture, particularly for men. Previously, in a society deeply engrained with Catholic values, the pub “...became a haven for bachelor men in a cold, sexless world. It was a place of small comforts and pleasure, a sanctuary from women and priests.”⁵³ Additionally, the pub was a place of socialization, where individuals were not allowed to get above their station in life and where bonding occurred through two ways: “jibing, teasing, and belittling those who got too full of themselves; and the rounds system where group solidarity was taken to be dependent on each member taking his turn to buy a round of drinks for everyone.”⁵⁴ Although the pub remains a social phenomenon, many individuals are beginning to use alcohol as a means to escape the pressures of a material society. Consumption of alcohol has already been illustrated as a key component in suicide, but there is also evidence of alcohol being involved in violent crime, particularly murder. Inglis references a study in which either the victim or perpetrator of a murder were intoxicated at least half of the time.⁵⁵ It is not a coincidence that with increased alcohol consumption, crime rates have also risen.

⁵⁰ Smyth et al., 34.

⁵¹ Hahessy, n.pag.

⁵² Smyth et al., 95.

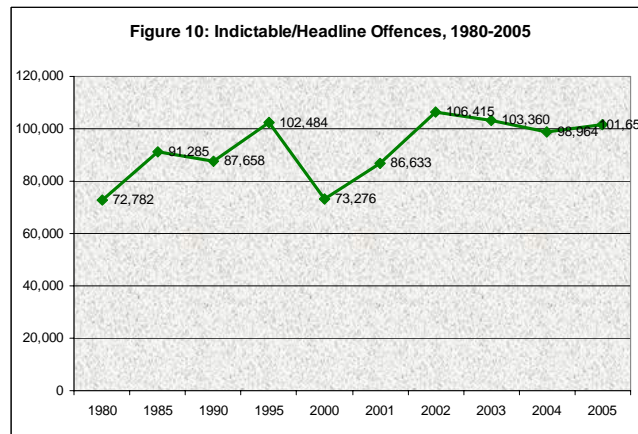
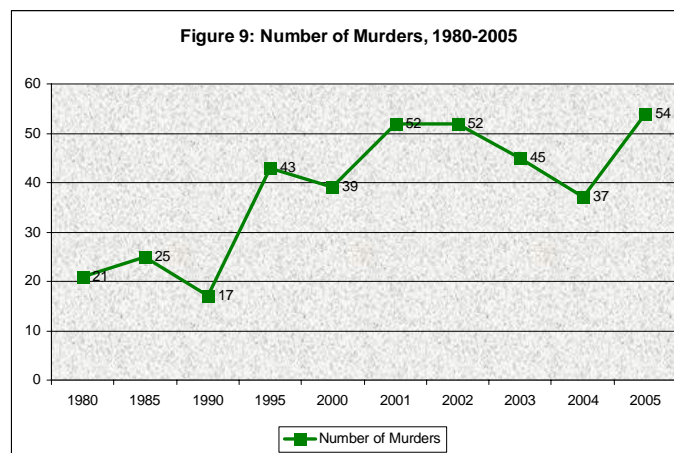
⁵³ Tom Inglis, “Club Anabel” in *Uncertain Ireland: A Sociological Chronicle, 2003-2004*, ed. Mary P. Corcoran and Michel Peillon (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2006), 20.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 24.

Crime and Irish Society

A recent newspaper article illuminates another menacing trend in Ireland: crime. It states, “The EU International Crime Survey reveals people in Ireland are more likely to be the victims of crime, while women here experienced sexual violence more than any other of the 18 countries examined.”⁵⁶ The article also cites that at least 22% of the Irish were victims of a crime in 2004, compared to the EU average of 15%. Indeed, crime in general and murders in particular have risen steadily in Ireland over the past fifteen years, as illustrated in Figures 9 and 10.



For example, in 1980, the number of murders was 21, and by 2005 the number had doubled to 54. To put these figures into perspective, the average number of

⁵⁶ Sandra Murphy, “Ireland Leads EU...in Theft, Assault, and Sexual Attack Rates,” Daily Mail, February 5, 2007.

murders from 1950-1975 was only 9.5.⁵⁷ The headline/indictable offenses, which include crimes ranging from larceny to sexual assault to attempted murder, have also seen a steady increase since 1980. Both the numbers of murders and headline offenses saw a small decrease around the latter half of the 1990s, but it did not endure, and the numbers soon increased. Cullen accounts for this by stating, “This could have been because it became easier for potential offenders to fulfill their economic aspirations by getting a job in the legitimate economy.”⁵⁸ Indeed, perhaps after the ‘dot-com’ crash, those potential offenders returned to a life of crime, evidenced by the large increase in crime rates during 2000-2001.

This upward trend, occurring since Ireland’s economic boom, seems to counter popular conceptions of the relationship between wealth and crime. A sociologist from the University of San Diego stated recently, “Whenever you have a economic prosperity in an area, you tend to have lower crime rates.”⁵⁹ What, then, explains this odd Irish case? As Kline illustrates,

The reasons for the growth in violence and sex crimes in Irish society were complex and varied. However, while part of it was undoubtedly due to the absolute growth in the consumption of alcohol, another reason was certainly demographic. Ireland's population had increased by 8 percent since 1996, and much of this was inward migration, both of returning Irish emigrants and other immigrants.⁶⁰

Obviously, an increasing population will increase crime, but it is integral to note that the increase in the Irish population is directly due to its economic prosperity; it attracted Irish expatriates and immigrants from the EU and beyond. As Ireland became incorporated into the EU and global economy, transnational issues, such as drug trafficking, became another aspect contributing to crime rates.⁶¹ Thus, when Ireland was relatively isolated from the world during the 1980s, crime remained low and stable. Yet when Ireland prospered, it became an attractive destination for returning citizens, immigrants, and tourists, thus increasing its overall population and increasing the likelihood of crime.

⁵⁷ Central Statistics Office Ireland, http://www.cso.ie/statistics/headline_offences.htm (accessed March 21, 2007).

⁵⁸ Cullen, 30.

⁵⁹ Tony Manolatos and Kristina Davis, “County Crows at Glowing Crime Report; Police Teamwork, Region’s Prosperity Push Down Rates,” *The San Diego Tribune*, April 12, 2007.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Kline, “The Changing Social Environment of Modern Ireland: Immigration and the Issues of Politics, Economics, and Security,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 199.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

Obesity

Obesity is an interesting issue to consider when measuring the negative aspects of growth. Wealth leads to increased consumption, literally. Obesity in Ireland is at record levels. Although concrete statistics cannot be found before 1990, it still is helpful in understanding the broader effects of prosperity by considering the rising obesity rates of the last fifteen years. The statistics point out that one in every eight Irish person is now obese, and every second Irish person is overweight.⁶² Since 1990, obesity among men has increased over 250% and over 125% for women.⁶³ In addition, obesity accounts for over 2,500 deaths each year in Ireland.⁶⁴ Obesity is directly related to consumption and exercise levels. De Graaf points out that most of the food people put into their bodies today are processed foods derived from things such as sugars and grain. Yet forty years ago, people ate sugars and grain in their original, non-processed form. The Irish are also consuming more, while their EU counterparts are consuming less:

Quantity and quality of diet invariably reflect the purchasing power of the public. An examination of the changing consumption levels of meat in eight EU countries for which data are available up to 1997 (with the 1990 level standardized at 100) showed that it increased by 12 percent in Ireland in that period while it declined in Belgium, France, Greece, Austria, and Italy, stayed constant in Finland, and increased in Holland by 6 percent.⁶⁵

Ireland essentially outranks its EU counterparts on all levels of foodstuffs consumption.⁶⁶ Although figures cannot be found for the 1980s, since the literature emphasizes that consumption levels are tied to purchasing power, it is also reasonable to assume that the Irish were not obese nor outpurchasing other EU countries. Furthermore, considering that Ireland did not really shift from its agrarian based economy until the late 1970s and into the 1980s, it is reasonable to assume that the Irish may have been quite physically active and presumably healthier. Therefore, associated with increases in consumption due to higher purchasing power abilities, obesity is yet another negative consequence of economic prosperity.

⁶² Cullen, 26.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Health Promotion Unit, "Ireland and Obesity," http://www.healthpromotion.ie/about_us/ (accessed 2007).

⁶⁵ O'Donnell, 133.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 133-34.

Conclusion

The figures illustrated above present a biting critique of happiness associated with wealth and prosperity. As a result of a wildly successful economy, the Irish are now faced with ever increasing numbers of suicides, murders, obese people, amount of alcohol consumed, and depressed and stressed individuals. Increased wealth means an increased pressure to perform, shifting a once laidback and agrarian society to a fast-paced, technocratic, and globalized one, and people are still adapting to the changes. Perhaps over time, these rates will stabilize, or perhaps these phenomena will become so integrated in Irish culture that they will be no longer appear novel. Regardless, it is interesting to analyze the true costs of success in today's global economy, a lesson for those states on the brink of success in the world. Smyth best summarizes the Irish experience:

We find ourselves suspended in stasis betwixt and between political stability that is also corrupt and precarious; wealth that creates growing inequality; urban growth that is squalid and blighted; a liberal, affluent culture that is shallow and vulgar; a new emancipated subjectivity that is aimless and listless; a promiscuous and indiscriminate 'openness' to the new; a frailty and readiness to embrace the fashion, whatever it may turn out to be; an acceleration and intensification of all things and experiences, but yet stasis, inertia, and *ennui*; a derision of past beliefs and ideals, softened by a note of nostalgia and a wistful romance for their passing, and reassuring platitudes that the 'spirit of the community' is still alive and well. Is this a description of true happiness? Or is it the kind of feigned happiness that accompanies tragedy?⁶⁷

Perhaps a booming economy and unprecedented wealth are a deal with the devil, and the price is relative happiness.

⁶⁷ Smyth et al., 40.

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