

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL MOBILITY OF ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This study aimed to address gaps in evidence on poverty across the different ethnic minority groups, sub-groups and generations in Northern Ireland following a period of unprecedented inward migration.

Key points

- Although poverty encompasses a range of factors, it is fundamentally driven by low income. Routes out of poverty are primarily based on participation and progression within the labour market.
- The ethnic minority population within Northern Ireland has increased substantially since 2011. The largest increase is among individuals from the 'A8' European nations. The 2011 Census indicates large differences in outcomes relating to poverty among various ethnic minority groups.
- There is a high degree of labour market segmentation by ethnic minority background in Northern Ireland. Recent Eastern European arrivals displayed high levels of economic activity and labour market participation, however this was predominantly in lower paying sectors of employment. The Indian and Filipino communities were mostly represented in higher paying professional sectors.
- The worst outcomes relating to economic activity, labour market participation, education and health were among the Irish Traveller community.
- Focus groups with individuals of various ethnic minority backgrounds highlighted a perception that 'ethnic markers', along with unfamiliarity with formal recruitment practices and a lack of networks, played a significant role in restricting access to the labour market. Ethnic minorities were at particular risk of in-work poverty.
- Ability in spoken English is perceived as a key factor in supporting promotion and progression in the labour market.
- There is a lack of data on the extent to which available government support is used by or successfully delivering outcomes for individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The research

By Jenny Irwin from RSM McClure Watters (Consulting) Ltd. and Dr. Ruth McAreavey from Queen's University Belfast.

BACKGROUND

Previous research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into evidence relating to poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland identified significant gaps in knowledge and data relating to the employment patterns and experiences of various ethnic minority communities, and the economic and social mobility of individuals within these communities.

This research set out to address these gaps through two stages. A desk review of existing published research on this area in Northern Ireland was conducted, including a review of recently published data from the 2011 Census. This was accompanied by fieldwork involving focus groups with individuals of various ethnic minority backgrounds, interviews with employers in sectors traditionally employing higher numbers of ethnic minorities and consultation with representatives of government agencies which provide advocacy and support to ethnic minority communities.

Definitions concerning ethnicity can be confused and used inconsistently among agencies across Northern Ireland. In this study, ethnicity is defined mainly according to an individual's nationality or country of origin, with acknowledgement of other markers defining ethnic identity – language, culture, traditions and religion.

Changes in ethnic minority groups in Northern Ireland: the statistical picture

Poverty is a relative measure capturing the ability of an individual to fully participate in society. Though much debated and contested, poverty is fundamentally related to low income and results in low standards of living. In Northern Ireland, a higher proportion of the population experience poverty relative to the rest of Great Britain.

Census 2011

There was significant inward migration to Northern Ireland over the decade previous to the 2011 Census. The majority of these new arrivals originate from the post-2004 EU accession States. However during this decade and since the 1990s, there was an increase in more established ethnic minority groups, specifically Indian and Chinese.

Economic activity is highest among the more recently arrived ethnic minority communities. However, there is a greater tendency for arrivals from Eastern Europe to work in lower paid, elementary job roles, despite relatively high levels of education. Individuals from the various Asian communities tend to be employed in professional or skilled roles.

Educational attainment is low among the different 'Black' ethnic minority groups, and these communities also experience poor outcomes relating to health. Educational and health outcomes are especially low among the Irish Traveller community. Census 2011 data showed that 67.8 per cent of Travellers did not have any qualifications.

Census 2011 revealed an increase in the Portuguese community in Northern Ireland, a pattern that emerged during the 1990s. Around a quarter of those whose first language is Portuguese have no qualifications. This presents a significant barrier to their participation and progression in the labour market.

Government policy and strategy

Government policy and actions relating to employment, education and health have the potential to significantly influence the effects of poverty. For instance they can help individuals to access the labour market through employability measures or they can stimulate entrepreneurship through supports to small businesses. Government has the potential to ensure equality within the labour market and so

affording protection to vulnerable groups. However, there is an overall lack of data relating to the extent to which various government supports are utilised by individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The Racial Equality Strategy should consider the extent to which the various government supports, especially in regard to access to employment, meet the needs of different ethnic minority communities. There is a need to agree and set targets, with the relevant departments, for the employment and skills development of ethnic minority groups in Northern Ireland.

The experience of ethnic minority workers and their employers

Ethnic minority workers

The focus groups with individuals of Polish/Bulgarian, Nigerian, Mixed Asian and Mixed African backgrounds highlighted that the experiences among individuals of different ethnic minority communities are uneven and cannot be generalised. However several key themes did emerge.

Informal employment practices among employers were felt to be the biggest influence on economic mobility among ethnic minority groups. Visible ethnic markers such as skin colour, dress and language were perceived to result in differential treatment among the ethnic minority population as compared to the majority communities, with inadequate attention paid to other aspects of identity including skills, experience and qualifications. Insufficient language skills are perceived to be important for accessing and progressing in the labour market.

Noticeable labour market segmentation has occurred with intra-ethnic networks encouraging individuals to gain employment in certain sectors. Employability schemes were also seen to be directing individuals to specific sectors of the labour market.

In-work poverty is increasingly problematic across society. However, ethnic minority communities are particularly at risk due to factors including lack of awareness of employment regulations, accommodation tied to employment and limited security due to fewer social networks and family support.. Additionally, agency workers from ethnic minority communities were often found to have particular problems accessing regular suitable employment and receiving minimum employment rights.

Employers

Interviews with employers emphasised the segmentation of the labour market among the different ethnic minority groups, as highlighted through the focus groups. Workforces in the lower skilled employment sectors included high numbers of Eastern European, Portuguese and East Timorese people. Higher skilled/paid roles showed higher rates of employment of Indian and Filipino workers.

Ethnic minority workers can find themselves 'shoe-horned' into more menial sectors of employment largely as a result of a lack of transferability or equivalency of qualifications gained overseas and a lack of willingness on the part of many employers to investigate the level of qualifications held by current and prospective ethnic minority workers.

Ethnic minority workers in lower skilled jobs are seeking to progress but find the scope for progression more limited than those employed in skilled or professional roles. While organisations generally provide opportunities for progression and training that are open to all employees, there is little attention paid to addressing specific barriers faced by ethnic minority individuals in taking advantage of these opportunities.

Conclusions

Other research has demonstrated the importance of employment in providing a route for individuals out of poverty. However this pathway is not guaranteed and this research suggests that there are particularly high barriers for many ethnic minority workers in finding ways out of poverty.

There is a lack of local level data as to how individuals from different ethnic minority communities are living, the employment sectors they work in and their levels of employment and training. Based on the

available data, the poorest outcomes relating to poverty are faced by the Irish Traveller community, with a high proportion of Travellers having no qualifications. It is imperative this is addressed if employment levels and labour market participation are to increase among this community.

However, while education is important, our research has also shown that many workers are highly skilled and underemployed. Specific barriers for ethnic minority groups include language proficiency, lack of networks, recognition of qualifications, stereotyping and different, often more subtle forms of discrimination among employers and wider society. While employers are central to enabling the reduction of poverty across all ethnicities, government also plays a key role in the provision of the necessary supports to enable ethnic minority communities to participate and progress in the labour market.

Key recommendations

Government

- Government departments must measure existing uptake of services by ethnic minority communities, whether these meet the needs of the communities and make changes to improve uptake.
- Government departments advising people from ethnic minority groups must have knowledge of the issues facing these groups, including guidance on best practice in developing services.
- The Qualification Equivalency service available to employers through the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) should be more widely promoted and monitored.

Employers

- Employers should be encouraged and supported to take active steps to improve the mobility of ethnic minority workers, including:
 - providing language training support as part of an overall company training plan;
 - encouraging ethnic minority employees to avail of opportunities for progression;
 - nurturing a fair and supportive work environment where discrimination is not tolerated;
 - ensuring agency workers are fully aware of their rights and know how to seek support.

Research

- Future actions need to pay particular attention to the Irish Traveller community as an ethnic minority group experiencing particularly poor economic and social mobility outcomes.

About this project

The research was carried out between April 2013 and February 2014. It involved analysis of large data sets (including the 2011 Census), qualitative research with service providers, employers and ethnic minority workers in different sectors and a review of policy documents.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of JRF.

The main report, **The economic and social mobility of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland**, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 615905

email: publications@jrf.org.uk
www.jrf.org.uk
Ref: 3000

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