

Introduction: 50 Years of Social Research at the ESRI

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In 1966, the Economic Research Institute became the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The then Minister for Education, George Colley, framed this decision ‘as a most important initial step in providing for our society a scientific knowledge of ourselves’. In the 50 years that followed, social research in the ESRI has led new thinking on critical social issues in Ireland, developing new ways of measuring poverty, deprivation and quality of life, establishing a model to assess the distributional impact of tax and welfare policies, and tracking the experiences and outcomes of young people as they move through the educational system. ESRI research has played a critical role in understanding the persistence of inequalities on the basis of social background and gender while highlighting the situation of groups often previously neglected in Irish social research, including children and adults with disabilities and Travellers. For most of this period, social research at the ESRI was underpinned by a dedicated survey unit, which used cutting-edge techniques in sampling and questionnaire design to provide a high quality evidence base to inform policy. Social research at the ESRI played an important role not only in the Irish policy arena but on the European stage, with ESRI researchers contributing to a number of large-scale European projects and the collection of data such as the European Social Survey and the European Union Survey of Income and Living Conditions.

In November 2016, the ESRI held a conference to mark the 50th year of social research at the institute. The conference speakers included former and current researchers and the conference covered a range of topics, including gender equality, educational transitions, income inequality, healthcare and poverty. This special issue

includes four of the papers presented at the conference, two of which provide critical overviews of ESRI research over time and two of which focus on dimensions of inequality which have until recently been neglected in Irish social research.

ESRI research on poverty over the past 30 years changed the focus from low incomes to a wider concern with multidimensional deprivation, a shift outlined in the article by Watson, Whelan, Maître and Williams. They trace the way in which ESRI research has focused on understanding the underlying processes of poverty and deprivation and how they respond to changing economic circumstances and policy interventions, and has also utilised longitudinal and European data to analyse the dynamics of poverty in Ireland and place it in comparative context. Work in this area has contributed significantly to assessing the impact of economic change, including the Great Recession, challenging widely held beliefs and enhancing understanding of the distributional consequences of the recovery. Recently, researchers developed an index of 11 indicators to form a new way to measure quality of life in Ireland that accounts for the impact of non-monetary factors, including mental distress, housing problems and institutional mistrust. Applying this method of measurement has generated new insights into the coordinated response across policy areas required to support vulnerable groups in Ireland.

Women's issues were largely absent from the policy discourse of 1960s Ireland. However, since an early survey of women in the labour market carried out in 1973, ESRI research has regularly revisited the causes and consequences of gender inequality in the labour market. The article by Russell, McGinnity and O'Connell documents a picture of both continuity and change since the 1970s. Many of the normative, legislative and institutional constraints to women's employment were removed during the following decades and key educational and fertility trends also influenced the growth in labour force participation among women. In spite of a major upward shift in the scale of female employment, and a decline in gender segregation, the nature of women's and men's paid and unpaid work remains strongly gendered.

Since the 1980s, researchers at the ESRI have conducted a number of large-scale studies on young people's experiences within and outside the school system. Professor Damian Hannan pioneered the collection of new information through the regular School Leavers' Survey as well as bespoke surveys on the factors shaping young people's subject choices, their post-school pathways and their decision to remain in or leave Ireland, among other topics, and had a hugely important impact on the nature of later research at the ESRI. In recent decades, studies have identified the individual and school factors influencing disengagement from school, early leaving and exam performance, highlighting the way in which school experiences can shape inequalities in outcomes. Related research on post-school transitions has unpacked the influences on young people's decision-making about going on to further or higher education and has identified the factors shaping employment

chances and the quality of initial employment. Two of the articles presented in this special issue seek to build upon this legacy.

For many decades, the experience of children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN) was largely absent from policy discourse. Recent years have seen an increasing policy focus on this group of young people and new insights have been gleaned from bespoke research and from large-scale studies like the *Growing Up in Ireland* survey. Banks and McCoy examine the ongoing expansion of special classes in Irish primary and second-level schools, using data from a mixed-methods longitudinal study. Their paper analyses the extent to which this model serves to promote the inclusion of children with SEN as intended. Their findings highlight the heterogeneous nature of this group of young people.

ESRI research has sought to keep pace with changes in Irish society, conducting research on newly emerging issues. The pace and scale of inward migration in the Celtic Tiger years resulted in a transformation of Irish society to a more diverse one - socially, culturally and linguistically. From early on in this process, ESRI research highlighted potential challenges in skill underutilisation among highly qualified migrant workers and since then has monitored the extent of inclusion on a regular basis. The article by Darmody and Smyth draws on the large-scale *Growing Up in Ireland* study to explore the extent to which the children of immigrants have become integrated into Irish society through participation in sports and cultural pursuits. Their analyses point to challenges in ensuring full integration, especially for those young people from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

In conclusion, the articles in this special issue give only a flavour of the papers presented at the 50 year anniversary conference and indeed of ESRI social research in recent years. The papers build upon the work of colleagues past and present and we gratefully acknowledge their contributions.

