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Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Older People in Ireland

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Key findings

- In the population aged 50 and over, 48% are men and 52% are women.
- Most of the people aged 50 and over (58%) are in the 50-64 age group.
- Almost 10% of older people have never been married. Men are more likely to have never married than women (13% men, 7% women).
- Most (73%) older adults live with their spouse or with a spouse and children. This proportion decreases by age and the proportion of individuals living alone increases by age.
- Older people have an average of three living children. There are differences in the mean number of living children by age cohort, education and religion.
- Most older adults (62%) in Ireland have achieved at least secondary education.
- Nearly one-quarter (22%) of older people had lived abroad for more than six months. Those with only primary education and those with a tertiary degree are more likely to have emigrated for a period of time than those with a secondary level education.

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a profile of older people in Ireland, in terms of age, sex, marital status, living arrangements, migration, education, and occupation. The findings that are presented are of interest partly because they reflect many of the economic and social conditions and changes that have been features of Ireland's development over the latter part of the last century. The results are presented at the individual level and attention is drawn to cohort and sex differences with regard to marital status, living arrangements, education and employment status.

The socio-demographic profile of older people in Ireland is the result of trends in marriage, mortality and emigration. Demographic trends in Ireland differed from those of the rest of Europe as Ireland did not experience the demographic transition¹ typical of most Western European countries (1). Historically, Ireland had a remarkable combination of high emigration, high marital fertility, low nuptiality and low non-marital fertility. For many decades, high marital fertility compensated for low marriage rates and Ireland had the highest crude birth rate (i.e., childbirths per 1,000 people per year) in Europe (2). However, the adoption at the end of the 1950s of new economic policies based on the encouragement of foreign direct investment

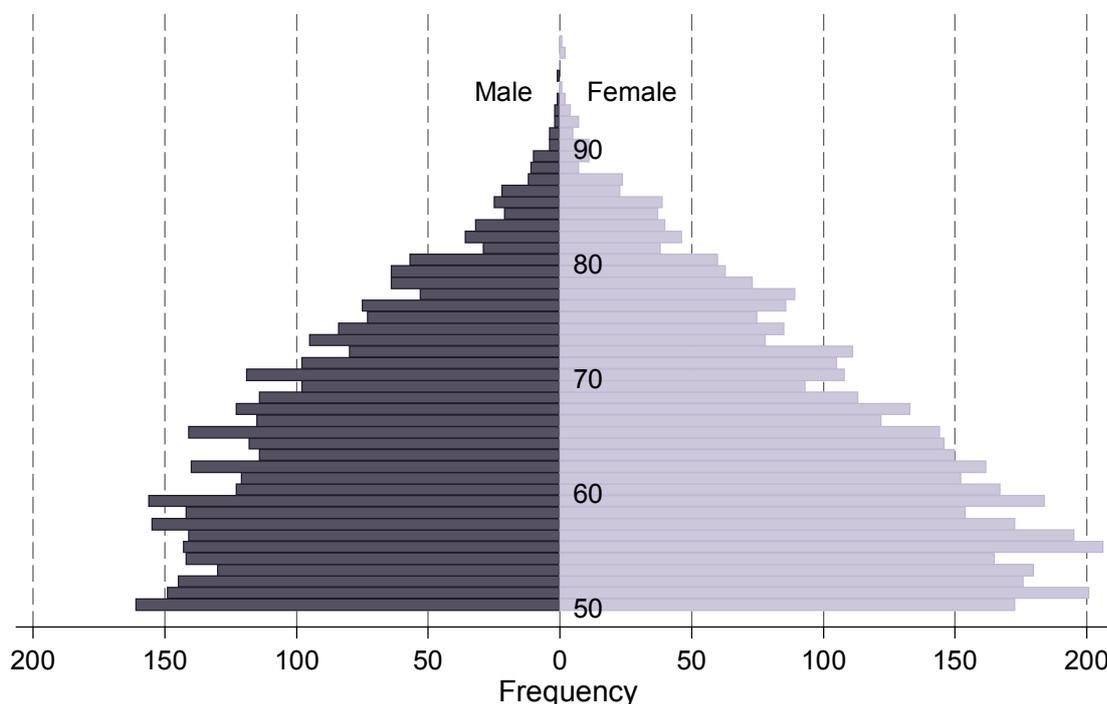
¹ The demographic transition is a model used to represent the transition from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates.

from the multinational corporate sector led to economic growth during the 1960s, with increased job creation, a drop in outward migration and a consequent rise in the marriage rate. However, the improved economic conditions of the 1960s did not last. In the 1980s, high unemployment caused massive net emigration of over 20,000 persons (or approximately 5% of the population) (3). In the 1990s, Ireland emerged as the Celtic Tiger with real GDP growth rates of over 8% and this generated a high level of net inward migration. In the mid-1990s, the great majority of immigrants were returning Irish migrants but from 2004, there was a large inflow from the EU's accession states. (3). Additional inward migration from non-EEA countries has occurred (4).

2.2 Age and sex composition

Based on the TILDA sample and applying weights (as discussed in Chapter 11), 47.9 per cent of Ireland's population aged 50 years and over are men and 52.1% are women (See Figure 2.1). The largest proportion of the population is in the younger 50-64 age group representing 58.3% of the total population (60.9% of men and 56% of women).

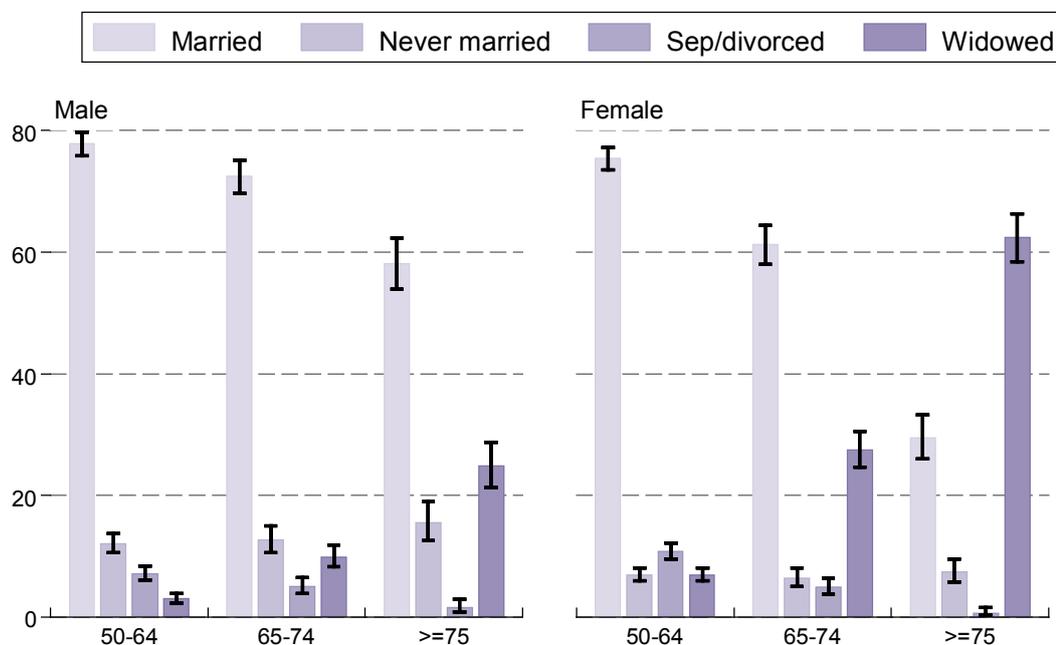
Figure 2.1. Age and sex composition of the TILDA sample



The median age is defined as that age which divides the population into two equal parts i.e., half with ages below the median age and the other half with ages above the median. The median age of the over-50s is 63.2 for men and 64.6 for women. There are approximately equal numbers of men and women between the ages of 50

and 74, but owing to the higher mortality rate in men the majority of the oldest old are women. In the oldest age group, women outnumber men by a factor of 1.5, i.e., there are 100 men per 150 women among those aged 75 and over.

Figure 2.2: Distribution of marital status by age and sex



Note. N = 8178; Missing obs = 0; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

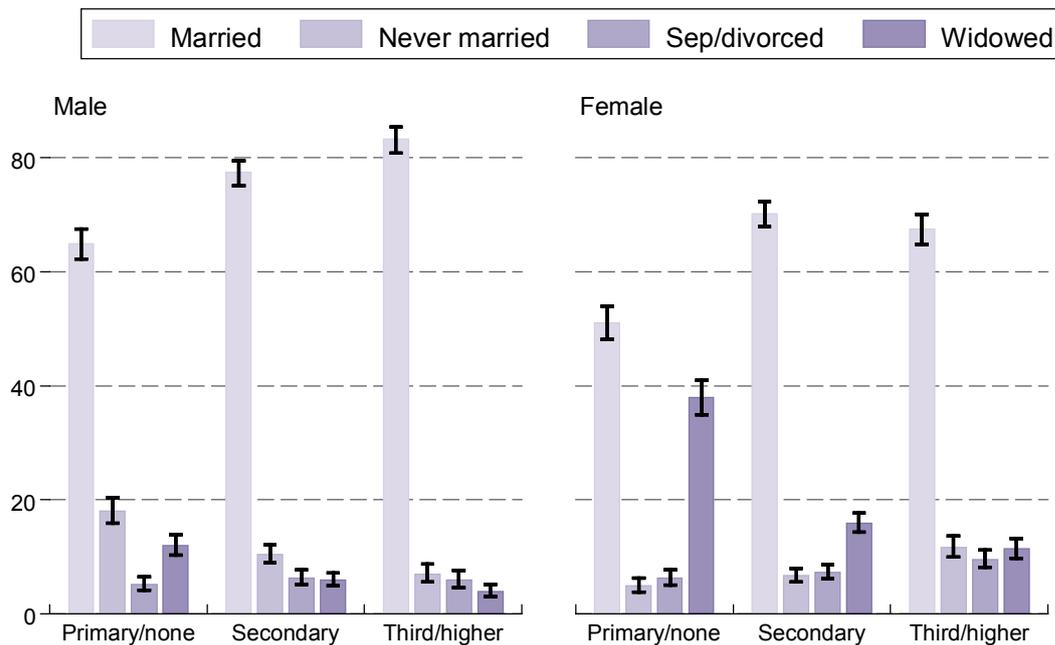
2.3 Marital status

Owing to historical inheritance patterns, Ireland has had a unique pattern of marital status, having the highest proportion of individuals in Western Europe who never married, or married very late in life. By custom, only the heir was allowed to marry and to remain in the home; other siblings were required to remain single (5, 6) or to emigrate (6). This trend changed in the 1960s and 1970s when Ireland experienced a marriage boom. Those who married at that time are now entering old age, increasing the proportion of married people in the older population (7).

The distribution of marital status presented in Figure 2.2 reflects this historical shift in the marriage pattern. Men are more likely to have never married than women (13% men, 7% women). Among men, 15% of those now aged 75 and older never married compared to 13% of those aged 65-74 and 12% of those aged 50-64. In the oldest age group, most men are married (58%), while the majority of women are widowed (63%) as a result of men tending to marry a younger woman and the higher life expectancy of women. Figure 2.3 shows that for both sexes, but in particular for men,

higher levels of education are associated with greater likelihoods of having married and lower likelihoods of being widowed. The proportion of men who did not marry decreases with increasing educational attainment but more highly educated women are less likely to have married, relative to those with second level schooling. Of men, 17% with primary education did not marry compared to 7% of men with tertiary education while 4% of women with primary education did not marry compared to 12% of those with tertiary degree. Divorce rates are low in this cohort but increase with educational attainment especially for women, as 2% of women with primary education are divorced in contrast with 5% of those with a tertiary degree.

Figure 2.3: Distribution of marital status by education and sex



Note. N = 8174; Missing obs = 4; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

2.4 Living arrangements

One of the main policy issues arising from population ageing is how countries will allocate resources across competing claims as age-related spending on pensions, long-term care and healthcare rise. Many governments are promoting more self-reliance in respect of pension income and greater family responsibility for providing care (8). Consequently, patterns of caregiving and living arrangements become key components of the well-being of older people.

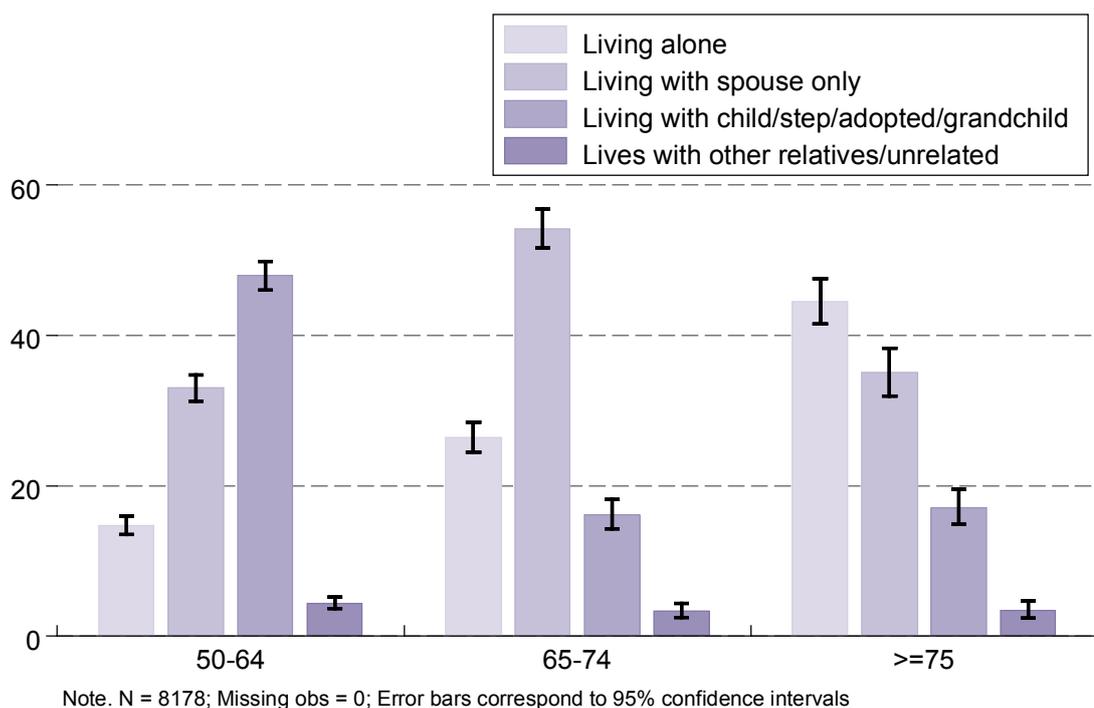
Figure 2.4 shows the living arrangements of older adults by age and sex. The proportion of individuals living alone increases with age as the proportion living

with their children decreases. The proportion of older people living with their spouse only has an inverted U-shape, as the 50-64 years-old cohort often have co-resident children, while the 65-74 years-old cohort experience nest-leaving and the 75 and over cohort are more likely to experience widowhood.

The proportion of those living with related and non-related co-residents other than their spouses or children is small (0.6%) and remains almost constant with age. Overall, living alone or as a couple is the dominant living arrangement among older people in Ireland.

Those living alone are thought more likely to need outside assistance in the case of illness or disability, and are at greater risk of social isolation (see Chapter 4). Older women are more likely than older men to be living alone, partly because of the age differentials in mortality and marriage between men and women. The consequences of widowhood and living alone will be the subject of future TILDA analyses.

Figure 2.4: Distribution of the living arrangements by age and sex

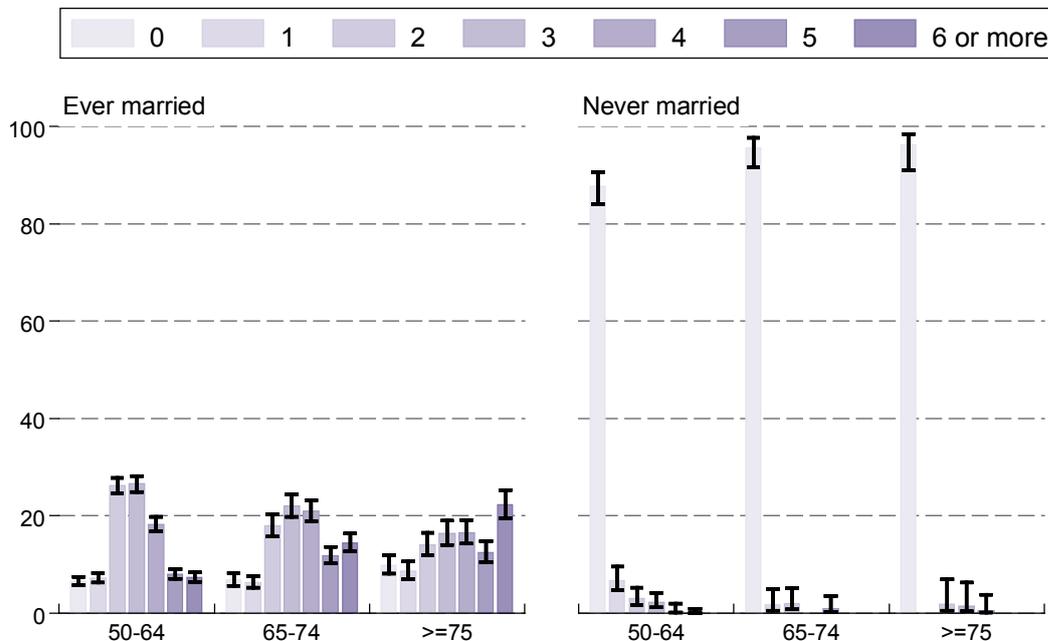


2.5 Number of living children

As discussed above, since the late nineteenth century a combination of a low marriage rate but with large families has led to a unique childbearing pattern in Ireland (9, 10). In the 1960s, one-third of births in Ireland were in families with five births or more but by the 1980s this number had declined to 15%. By the late 1990s birth rates had converged towards international norms (11). The overall decline in the total fertility rate, from 4.03 in 1965 to 1.84 in 1995, resulted from a fall in the fertility rate across all age groups. This decline reflected both cultural changes and the change in regulatory framework governing the availability of contraceptives. Until 1973 the use of artificial contraceptive methods was illegal in Ireland (12). The continuing liberalisation of contraceptive laws in the 1980s and 1990s has allowed fertility to be further controlled.

Figure 2.5 shows the number of living children by marital status. Among those who married, those in older age groups are more likely to have living children. This reflects the high fertility rate of older generations. The mean number of living children for the youngest cohort is 2.84, while for the oldest cohort it is 3.3. Religion and education also affected the fertility of those now aged 50 and over. Older women who are Catholic have more living children (mean 3.1) than those who are Protestant (mean 2.3). The mean number of living children for women with primary education is 3.27, for secondary education is 2.9 and for tertiary education is 2.6

Figure 2.5: Number of living children by marital status



Note. N = 8178; Missing obs = 0; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

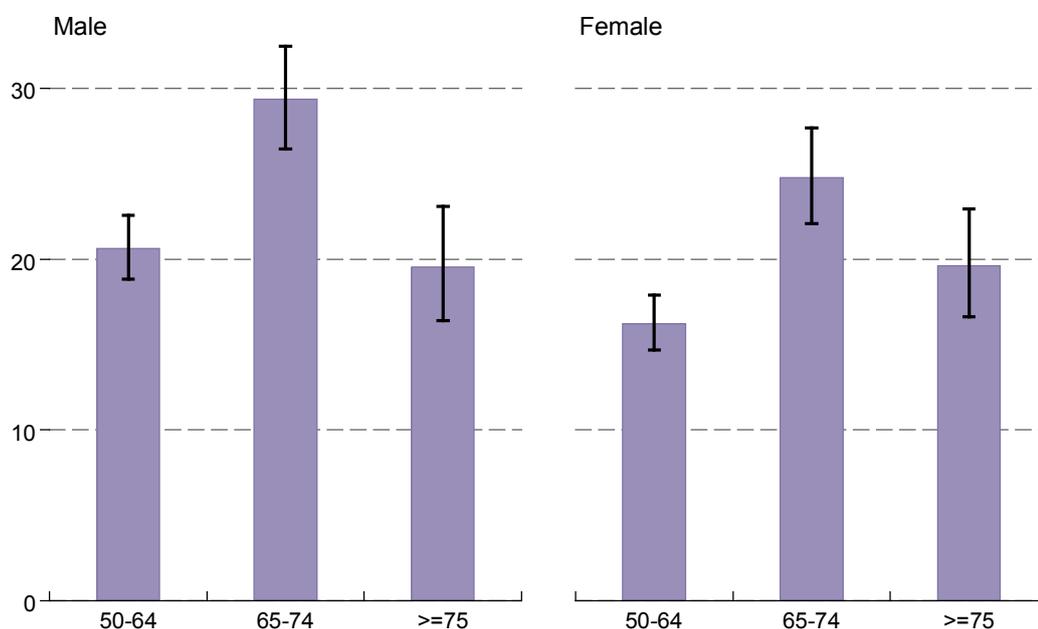
2.6 Migration

Between 1871 and 1961, the average annual net emigration from Ireland consistently exceeded the natural increase in the Irish population, which shrank from about 4.4 to 2.8 million during that time. Today, an estimated 3 million Irish citizens live abroad, of whom 1.2 million were born in Ireland. The majority of these live in the US and the UK (13).

For much of the last century Ireland's economic growth was weak, with the exception of periods such as the late 1970s and the mid to late 1990s. This led to a significant emigration of younger people, particularly males, between 1960 and 1995 (12). However, the booming economy of the late 1990s led to an increase in net immigration, largely because of the return of Irish workers and their families as well as new immigrants.

Figure 2.6 shows that 23% of older men and 19% of older women currently living in Ireland have lived abroad for more than six months at some point in the past, with those aged between 65 and 74 most likely to be returning migrants. Examining by educational attainment (see Figure 2.7), the returnees are more likely to have either primary education or tertiary education.

Figure 2.6: Percentage of older people in Ireland who have lived abroad for more than six months



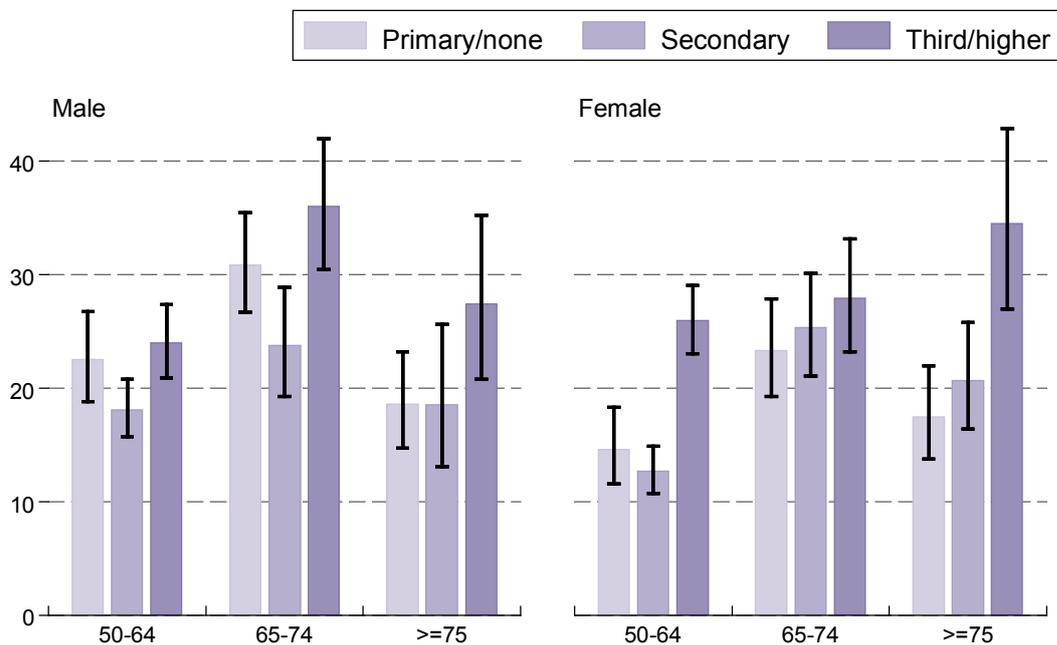
Note. N = 8178; Missing obs = 0; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

2.7 Socio-economic position

Socio-economic status (SES) or position is a powerful predictor of health inequalities and death in older people. In general, indicators of SES are meant to provide information about an individual's access to social and economic resources (14). The common socio-economic status indices employed in the literature are based on education, occupation, household income, and wealth (15). This section describes two of the main socio-economic variables used in the literature, namely, education and occupation. Income and wealth will be explored in Chapter 9 and the association with socio-economic status and health outcomes will be explored in Chapters 5 and 6.

As education is usually acquired early in life and then remains fixed, there is generally less problem when making causal inferences between education and outcome variables (15). Education has been associated with cognitive reserve, better health behaviours and access to preventive health services. A person's occupation represents exposure to psychosocial and physical strains in the work environment and has been found to predict a wide range of health outcomes.

Figure 2.7: Irish older people who have lived abroad for more than six months, by education

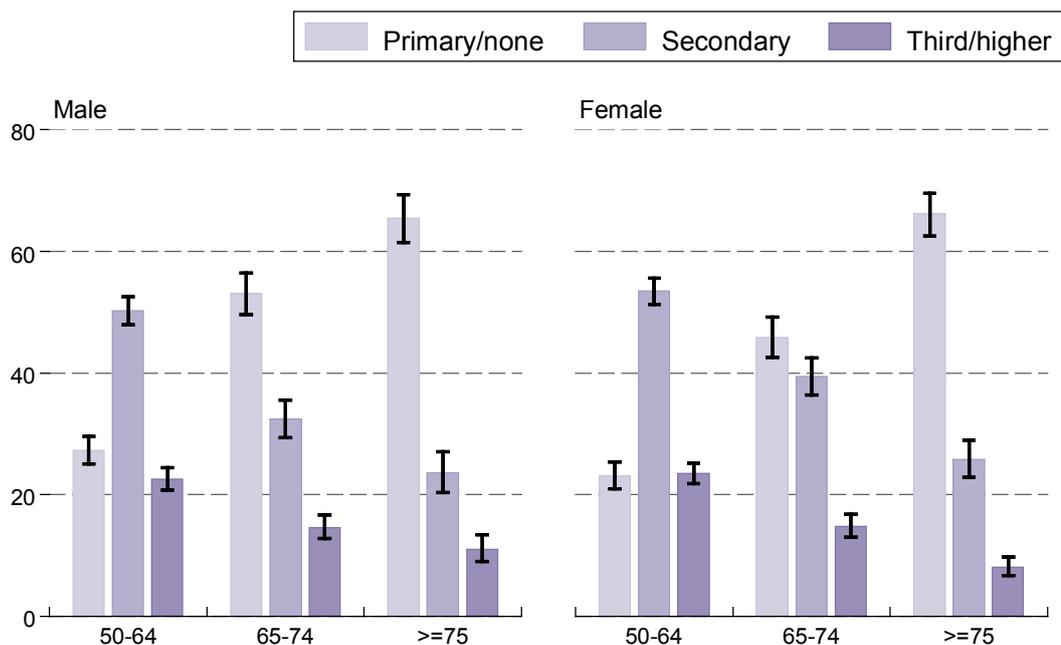


Note. N = 8174; Missing obs = 4; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

2.7.1 Education

Most older people in Ireland have achieved at least secondary education (62%). Examining education across age group for both sexes reveals that the younger cohort have higher educational attainment (Figure 2.8). For example, 23% of men aged between 50-64 have a tertiary degree compared to 15% of men aged between 65-74 and 11% of men aged 75 or over. Similarly, the proportion of those with only primary education increases with age. This is due to a major expansion in education attendance which occurred in the late 1960s with the introduction of free secondary schooling in 1968. The effect of this policy is observed for the 50-64 age group with higher attendance in secondary school than in older groups. Some sex differences can be seen, as more women than men achieved at least secondary education in the 50-64 and 65-74 age group. The gradient of increasing proportions of primary/none education with increasing age is steeper for women than men. This trend will be explored in the further studies.

Figure 2.8: Educational attainment by age and sex

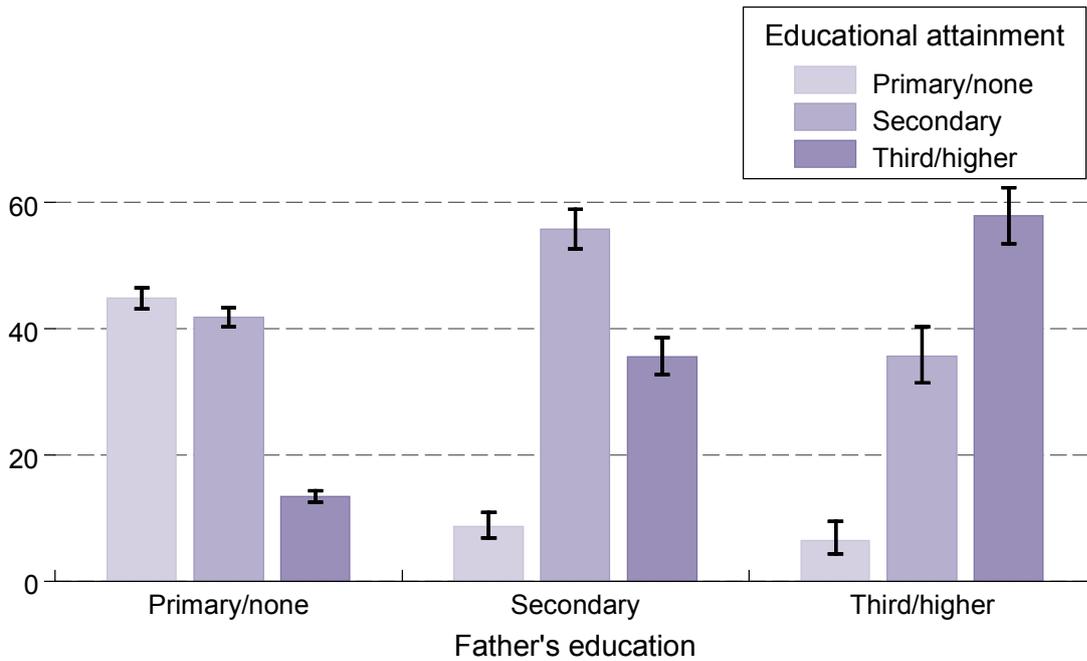


Note. N = 8174; Missing obs = 4; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

Patterns of intergenerational transmission of socio-economic position mean that education levels are likely to be passed from one generation of families to the next. Figure 2.9 shows there is a strong relationship between father's education and respondent's education, that is, 45% of those whose father was educated to primary level were educated to primary level themselves, while 58% of those whose father completed third level education also completed third level education. Across the age

cohorts, parental education also decreases markedly, as 78.7% of the parents of age-group 50-64 years-old had completed only primary education, compared with 82.0% and 87.0% of the age group 65-74 and 75 and over, respectively. This pattern could reflect in part differential mortality rates by parental education level, along with the intergenerational transmission of education.

Figure 2.9: Father's education and respondent's education outcome



Note. N = 7459; Missing obs = 719; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

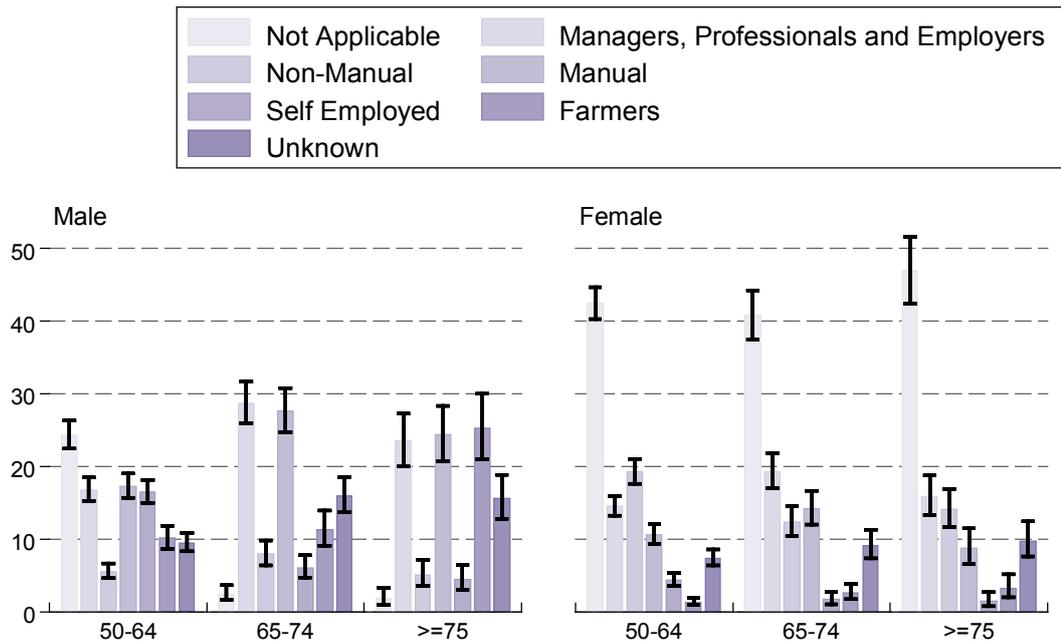
2.7.2 Occupation

In this sub-section, occupations for those who are currently employed or retired are reported. TILDA did not record previous occupations for individuals who are unemployed, permanently sick or disabled, or who are looking after family/home. Chapter 8 presents a detailed discussion of the of the labour force participation of the older population.

Figure 2.10 illustrates age and sex differences by occupation. Those currently unemployed, out of work through long-term illness or who are occupied by looking after a home or family are classified as 'not applicable'. In the 50-64 age group, 17% of men and 14% of women are in managerial and higher and lower professional positions, 5% of men and 20% of women are in other non-manual occupations, 17% of men and 11% of women are in manual occupations, and 16% of men and 4% of women are self-employed. The largest sex differences are found in the oldest

age groups reflecting changes that have occurred in employment, with women in younger cohorts entering more into professions which used to be almost exclusively male.

Figure 2.10: Distribution of current or former (in the case of those retired) occupation by age and sex. Those currently unemployed, out of work through long-term illness or who are occupied by looking after a home or family are classified as 'Not applicable'.



Note. N = 8178; Missing obs = 0; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals

2.7 Conclusions

This chapter provides demographic data and information on the context of the lives of older people, namely, marital status, living arrangements, number of living children, migration, education and occupation.

The proportion of people who are married is high, although this proportion decreases with increasing age as widowhood becomes more prevalent. More highly educated people were more likely to be currently married and less likely to be widowed, although more educated women are less likely to have ever married.

Living arrangements differ among age groups and between sexes. Those aged 50-64 are most likely to live with a spouse and children. This proportion declines with age, with older adults especially women living alone. Living arrangements also differed

by educational attainment. People with higher educational attainment are less likely to live alone or with children even at the oldest ages and are more likely to live with a partner. Older people in Ireland have on average three living children. The mean number of living children differs by both age group and education, with the oldest cohort having more children than the youngest and more educated women having had fewer children.

Twenty two per cent of people aged 50 and over have lived abroad. Those who only completed primary education and those with a tertiary degree are more likely to have emigrated than those with secondary schooling. Many differences between sex and age groups in education and current and former occupation are evident.

In conclusion, the socio-demographic picture that has emerged of Ireland's older people reflects many of the social and economic circumstances that were present at various stages of their lives. Major social changes such as the introduction of free secondary schooling and the liberalisation of the contraceptives laws are evident in educational attainment and fertility differences by age. Social processes such as the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment are also evident. Low levels of economic growth which resulted in large-scale out-migration are reflected in the remarkably high proportion of former emigrants in the data. To the extent that socio-environmental circumstances at various stages of life affect the process of ageing at an individual level, these social circumstances and processes will provide an important context for much of the work that will emerge from TILDA.

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