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**Internet access and use among
adults aged 50 and over in Ireland:
Results from Wave 5 of The Irish
Longitudinal Study on Ageing**

tilda

Staidéar Fadaimseartha na
hÉireann um Dhul in Aois

The Irish Longitudinal
Study on Ageing



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Internet access and use among adults aged 50 and over in Ireland: Results from Wave 5 of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing

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The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing

On behalf of the TILDA team

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Internet access and use among adults aged 50+ in Ireland

Common Purposes of Internet Use*

Searching for Information
810,000



79%

Sending & Receiving Emails
740,000



72%

Financial Payments
600,000



58%

Accessing News
585,000



57%

Audio & Video Calls
440,000



43%

Social Media
410,000



40%

Gaming Apps
175,000



17%

*data for those with home internet access

1,000,000

71%

adults aged 50+ have access to the internet in their homes.



900,000

64%

adults aged 50+ have access to smartphones/tablets (and so to apps).



870,000

85%

adults with home internet access use the internet weekly.



700,000

68%

adults with home internet access use the internet daily.

Home internet access *decreases with age:*



86% aged 50-69 years;
66% aged 70-79 years;
38% aged 80+ years.



3% OF ADULTS AGED 50+ RELY ON ACCESSING INTERNET THROUGH FRIENDS, RELATIVES, HOME, LIBRARY, COMMUNITY CENTRES AND PUBLIC WI-FI NETWORKS.

40,000



30% OF ADULTS AGED 50+, AND WHO ARE LIVING ALONE, DO NOT HAVE INTERNET ACCESS IN THEIR HOMES.



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Key Findings

- **71% of adults aged 50+ have access to the internet in their homes** (approximately 1 million adults).
- **Internet access decreases with age. Only 38% aged 80+ have home internet access**, compared to 86% aged 50-69 years, and 66% aged 70-79 years.
- **74% aged 50+ in urban areas have home internet access; 67% in rural areas.**
- **64% of adults aged 50+ have access to a smartphone/tablet (and therefore to apps)** (approximately 900,000).
- **Access to smartphones/tablets similarly decreases with age. Only 30% aged 80+ have access to a smartphone/tablet**, compared to 80% aged 50-69 years, and 60% aged 70-79 years.
- **Common internet uses among those aged 50+ include:**
 - Searching for information: 79% (810,000)
 - Sending and receiving emails: 72% (740,000)
 - Financial transactions: 58% (600,000)
 - News: 57% (585,000)
 - Audio/video calls: 43% (440,000)
 - Social media: 40% (410,000)
 - Gaming/apps: 17% (175,000)
- **Internet use for any purpose declines with increased age**, with social media use experiencing the largest of these age-associated declines from 47% in those aged 50-69 years, 30% aged 70-79 years, to only 20% aged 80+.
- **Women use social media more than men**, with 46% of women aged 50+ using the internet for this purpose, compared to 33% of men.
- **68% of adults aged 50+ use the internet daily** (approximately 700,000); **85% weekly** (approximately 870,000).
- **3% of adults aged 50+ use the internet but are solely reliant on internet access external to their homes** (approximately 40,000) e.g. friends'/relatives' home, library, community centre and public Wi-Fi networks.
- **Of adults aged 50+ living alone, 30% do not have internet access in their homes.**

1. Introduction

This report will outline internet access and use among adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland. These analyses are based on data from wave 5 of the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), collected in 2018. These analyses have been conducted presently in the context of the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, when access to the internet has become increasingly important to many people in their working and personal lives. It is the latest in a series of reports produced by TILDA, aimed at helping the response to, and understanding of the pandemic in Ireland (1-6).

Public health measures introduced by the Irish government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have included social distancing, and encouragement of older adults and those with underlying health conditions to stay at home and abstain from contact with others, except in exceptional circumstances (7,8). A recently published TILDA report outlining the incidence of loneliness among those aged 50 years and over in Ireland, shows 7% experience emotional loneliness on a frequent basis, and almost one in three experience emotional loneliness at least some of the time (9). It is likely the introduction of social distancing and self-isolation measures will exacerbate loneliness, given that one of the commonest causes of loneliness is social isolation. Internet use offers an effective method of alleviating some of the negative consequences of these measures by enabling virtual interactions (10). Moreover, the use of internet by institutions and organisations as a platform for information distribution, access to support services and the continuation of commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased substantially (11-14).

In this context, this report will outline internet access and use among adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland, using population estimates derived from data collected during Wave 5 of TILDA in 2018, in conjunction with the most recent 2016 Census data. Specifically, information will be provided regarding home access to the internet; access to smartphones/tablets (ergo access to apps); and the frequency and purpose of internet use. This report will also provide information regarding those who are solely reliant on internet access external to their own homes, as well as the lack of internet access among those living alone.

2. Methodology

2.1 Statistical methods and weighting

All estimates are based on data from the most recent wave of TILDA in 2018 (Wave 5), which included data from 5,206 participants. All prevalence estimates are weighted to account for age, sex, educational attainment, and urban/rural residence in the 2016 Census, as well as the probability that participants returned a completed Self-Completion Questionnaire (SCQ) during Wave 5 of TILDA. This ensures that estimates are closely representative of the entire population aged 50 years and over in Ireland. Population estimates are based on information from the most recent Census data (2016), which reported a total of 1,446,460 people aged 50 years and over living in Ireland.

2.2 Limitations

Differences in the age group and sex distribution between participants in Wave 5 of TILDA and the 2016 Census (Table 1) mean there will be minor rounding errors with regard to the estimated age group and sex breakdowns throughout the report. This is due to applying the weighted prevalence to the overall population and further stratifying by age group and sex. As a result, in some cases these numbers will not match precisely those derived for the total population estimate. Furthermore, as the TILDA cohort was initially recruited from, and still comprises predominantly of, community-dwelling older adults, there are limitations to the external validity of these findings regarding extrapolation of weighted prevalence to the entire population ages 50+ to derive overall population estimates.

Table 1. Sex and age group distribution of Wave 5 of TILDA, and the 2016 Irish Census

Age group / Sex	TILDA participants (%)	2016 Census (%)
50-69 years	2,648 (52)	1,020,129 (71)
Male	1,109 (22)	505,729 (35)
Female	1,539 (30)	514,440 (36)
70-79 years	1,614 (32)	277,739 (19)
Male	747 (15)	133,618 (9)
Female	867 (17)	144,121 (10)
80+ years	825 (16)	148,592 (10)
Male	366 (7)	58,258 (4)
Female	459 (9)	90,334 (6)

3. Results

3.1 Home access to the internet

Approximately 1 million adults aged 50+ in Ireland (71%) have access to the internet in their homes. The prevalence of home internet access decreases with age, from 86% aged 50-69 years, to 66% aged 70-79 years, and 38% aged 80+.

The overall prevalence of home internet access is relatively evenly distributed when stratified by sex, with just over 70% of men and women having access to the internet in their homes. However, the relative prevalence of home internet access when stratified by sex changes with age; approximately 10% more women aged 50-69 years have home access to the internet compared to men, while among those aged 80+ this sex difference is reversed, with approximately 25% more men having home access to the internet compared to women (Table 2). Additionally, there is a minor urban/rural divide, with 74% aged 50+ living in urban areas having home access to the internet, compared to 67% in rural areas.

Table 2. Home access to the internet, stratified by age group and sex, amongst adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland

Age group / Sex	Total population (n)	Home access to the internet* (%)	Home access to the internet (n)
Total (50+ years)	1,446,460	71.1	1,028,374
Male	697,605	71.5	498,617
Female	748,855	70.7	529,707
50-69 years	1,020,129	86.0	876,920
Male	505,729	82.6	417,509
Female	514,400	89.5	460,244
70-79 years	277,739	66.3	184,131
Male	133,618	66.7	89,186
Female	144,121	65.9	94,923
80+ years	148,592	37.8	56,237
Male	58,258	43.9	25,581
Female	90,334	33.4	30,153

3.2 Smartphone/tablet access, and access to apps

Over 900,000 adults aged 50+ in Ireland (64%) have access to a smartphone/tablet, and ergo access to apps. The prevalence of access to these devices decreases with age, from almost 80% of those aged 50-69 years, 59% aged 70-79, and falling to 30% aged 80+.

The overall prevalence of smartphone/tablet access is relatively evenly distributed when stratified by sex, with slightly under 66% of men and women aged 50+ having access to these devices (Table 3).

Table 3. Access to smartphones/tablets, stratified by age group and sex, amongst adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland.

Age group / Sex	Total population (n)	Access to smartphones/tablets (%)	Access to smartphone/tablets (n)
Total (50+ years)	1,446,460	64.2	928,910
Male	697,605	62.8	438,247
Female	748,855	65.5	490,848
50-69 years	1,020,129	79.7	813,309
Male	505,729	75.2	380,431
Female	514,400	84.4	433,978
70-79 years	277,739	58.9	163,677
Male	133,618	56.9	76,029
Female	144,121	60.9	87,746
80+ years	148,592	30.0	44,627
Male	58,258	33.2	19,370
Female	90,334	27.7	24,991

3.3 Purposes of internet use

Participants were asked to report the type of activities they use the internet for (Table 4). The list of activities shows among adults aged 50+ who have access to the internet in their homes, searching for information (79%) and sending/receiving e-mails (72%) are the most common activities, while just 17% use the internet for gaming/apps.

Common internet uses among those aged 50+ with home internet access include:

- Searching for information: 79% (810,000)
- Sending and receiving emails: 72% (740,000)
- Financial transactions: 58% (600,000)
- News: 57% (585,000)
- Audio/video calls: 43% (440,000)
- Social media: 40% (410,000)
- Gaming/apps: 17% (175,000)

Women report higher internet use for sending/receiving emails, participating in audio/video calls, accessing social media, and gaming/apps than men. Men report higher internet use for information searching, conducting financial transactions, and accessing news sites.

While there are relatively minor differences between sexes in most of these categories, women report much higher use of social media, with 46% of women aged 50+ accessing social media compared to 33% of men.

Internet use for all purposes decline with increased age, with the largest of these age-associated declines observed in the use of social media, and online financial transactions, both of which decline by more than half in those aged 50-69 years, compared to those aged 80+, from 47% to 20%, and 66% to 31% respectively.

Table 4. The purpose of home internet use, stratified by age group and sex, amongst adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland.

Age group / Sex	Home access to the internet (n)	Purpose of internet usage (%)						
		Email (%)	Audio / video calls (%)	Searching for information (%)	Financial transaction (%)	Social media (%)	News (%)	Gaming / Apps (%)
Total (50+ years)	1,028,374	71.7	43.2	79.2	58.1	39.5	57.0	16.8
Male	498,617	69.7	40.0	80.2	59.3	32.6	59.2	13.5
Female	529,707	73.6	46.3	78.3	57.0	46.1	55.0	20.1
50-69 years	876,920	76.3	47.2	83.7	65.6	47.1	63.8	18.6
Male	417,509	72.6	42.2	83.9	64.8	39.1	64.8	15.5
Female	460,244	79.8	52.0	83.6	66.3	54.7	62.8	21.5
70-79 years	184,131	67.7	39.7	73.6	51.5	30.3	49.8	14.5
Male	89,186	67.8	38.9	76.1	55.3	23.3	54.6	10.4
Female	94,923	67.5	40.5	71.2	47.9	37.0	45.1	18.5
80+ years	56,237	55.0	28.8	67.6	31.3	19.6	36.5	12.8
Male	25,581	57.5	30.1	68.9	37.4	20.7	37.8	9.9
Female	30,153	52.5	27.5	66.3	25.3	18.6	35.2	15.5

3.4 Frequency of internet use

Of the over 1 million adults aged 50+ who have home internet access, approximately 700,000 (68%) use the internet every day or almost every day, while approximately 870,000 (85%) use the internet at least once per week. The frequency of internet use declines with age, with over 75% aged 50-69 years using the internet daily, compared to 59% aged 70-79 years, and 44% aged 80+. This difference is reduced in figures for weekly use, with approximately 90% aged 50-69 years, 80% aged 70-79 years, and 70% aged 80+ using the internet at least once a week (Table 5).

Table 5. The frequency of internet use, stratified by age group and sex, amongst adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland

Age group / Sex	Home access to the internet (n)	Frequency of internet usage					Never (%)	No answer (%)
		Every day, or almost every day (%)	At least once a week (but not every day) (%)	At least once a month (but not every day) (%)	At least once every three months (%)			
Total (50+ years)	1,028,374	67.9	16.7	5.4	3.0	3.9	3.2	
Male	498,617	67.4	16.9	5.8	3.5	4.1	2.3	
Female	529,707	68.4	16.4	5.0	2.5	3.6	4.2	
50-69 years	876,920	75.9	13.1	4.0	2.2	2.9	1.8	
Male	417,509	73.6	13.9	4.9	3.3	2.9	1.5	
Female	460,244	78.2	12.3	3.3	1.3	2.9	2.0	
70-79 years	184,131	59.0	21.3	6.3	3.5	4.5	5.4	
Male	89,186	60.9	21.0	5.5	3.5	5.7	3.3	
Female	94,923	57.1	21.5	7.1	3.5	3.4	7.4	
80+ years	56,237	44.1	25.3	11.0	6.0	7.8	5.9	
Male	25,581	48.6	23.2	12.6	4.9	6.9	3.9	
Female	30,153	39.8	27.3	9.4	6.9	8.6	7.9	

3.5 Reliance on internet access external to home

Over 40,000 adults aged 50+ in Ireland (3%) use the internet but have no access within their own homes. These individuals have indicated a sole reliance on external sources of internet access, e.g. friends'/relatives' home, library, community centre and public Wi-Fi networks. The present unavailability of many of these external sources of internet access, owing to the measures implemented to combat COVID-19, means these individuals may be particularly negatively impacted, with important resources for communication and commerce available to them only a number of weeks ago presently unavailable (Table 6). Furthermore, of those aged 50+ living alone in Ireland, 30% are without home access to the internet. These individuals also represent a relatively large cohort of the population who are potentially more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness during present restrictions.

Table 6. Reliance on external sources of internet access, stratified by age group and sex, amongst adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland

Age group / Sex	Total population (n)	Reliant on external internet access (%)	Reliant on external internet access (n)
Total (50+ years)	1,446,460	3.0	42,687
Male	697,605	3.2	22,481
Female	748,855	2.7	20,170
50–69 years	1,020,129	2.9	8,455
Male	505,729	3.2	5,045
Female	514,400	2.7	3,375
70–79 years	277,739	3.0	4,148
Male	133,618	3.8	1,276
Female	144,121	2.3	2,921
80+ years	148,592	2.8	8,455
Male	58,258	2.2	5,045
Female	90,334	3.2	3,375

4. Conclusions

Among adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland, there is a high access to the internet with frequent and varied use. The internet provides a valuable resource to maintain social interactions, obtain information, access support services and conduct everyday commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to apps via smartphone/tablets will be important in light of plans for optional contact tracing apps.

There is, however, a relatively large section of the population aged 50 years and over who do not have home internet access. This is particularly the case for older adults. This cohort of adults may be particularly at risk of loneliness as a result of restrictions and social isolation, and have a reduced capacity to access information, support services, and online commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic. For these individuals, and in particular those living alone and older age groups, more traditional forms of communication and information distribution, e.g. telephone, radio, television, and the national postal service, in combination with ongoing family and community support, are likely essential.

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