

**Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Irish Society:  
Public Perception Survey**

**Report for the  
Spiritan Asylum Services Initiative (SPIRASI)**

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## Introduction

Ireland is a changing society that, over the past 15 years, has transitioned from being a land of emigration to a land of immigration. As people from around the globe enter what was traditionally a generally homogeneous white Catholic population, issues of race and culture are obviously raised. Not only are immigrants coming from all over the world, but for a variety of different reasons, which creates confusion and misunderstanding. Some people travel to Ireland seeking work, many coming from within the recent European Union accession states. On the other hand, fewer numbers of immigrants are either refugees or asylum seekers fleeing persecution in their home country. A refugee has “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion,” and an asylum seeker is a person seeking to be recognized as a refugee, according to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol.<sup>1</sup> The range of justifications for immigration is, therefore, quite large and complex, but many Irish people tend to group all foreigners into one nebulous category. Increased education and awareness are needed to dispel the negative myths surrounding immigration. Both government agencies and other organizations must strive for greater understanding of diversity and promote a more integrated Ireland.

The aim of this report is to present the findings of a public perception survey we undertook this summer as part of an internship with SPIRASI, specifically within the Strategy and Development Unit. SPIRASI is one of the non-governmental organizations that aid the immigrant population in Ireland, specifically refugees, asylum seekers, and disadvantaged migrant groups. They provide health and education services, as well as specialized medical care for survivors of torture. Three main objectives can be identified for this project, starting with determining the magnitude of public awareness of SPIRASI. Since it was clear from the beginning that SPIRASI is not well-known within the general public, the goal then diverged into determining the magnitude of public awareness of the presence of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland, as well as assessing public willingness to allocate resources towards asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland. The latter two measurements help gauge the possibility of private-sector support in the future, which couples well with the already identified need of increased public awareness. SPIRASI is looking toward a future of broader public awareness, coupled with funding from a larger base. In the Strategic Plan of 2007-2009, they outlined the value of “research and publications to provide a sound foundation for evidence-based advocacy.”<sup>2</sup> Through this project we have identified trends in those who might be encouraged to support SPIRASI financially or otherwise, based on their knowledge and sympathy towards refugees and asylum seekers in the Republic of Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> Reception and Integration Agency (2003)

<sup>2</sup> SPIRASI Strategic Plan 2007-2009

## Methods

The public perception survey consisted of eighteen multiple choice questions that took on average five minutes to complete. Part of the challenge was finding a representative Irish population, but also people who were willing to spend a few minutes on a survey. We decided, therefore, to poll at public transportation stations and public parks, where there would be plenty of local Irish people who would either be waiting for a train or relaxing in the park. This population was in no hurry, and therefore more likely to assist us. After disappointing results in some areas of the city, three primary locations were established. Survey responses were gathered at Heuston Train Station, Connolly Train Station, and St. Stephen's Green. 225 surveys were collected in a span of ten days, not including weekends.

The results adequately portray public opinion without a great deal of bias by survey methodology. One of the most important factors of that methodology was to explain that we were not advocating for SPIRASI, but merely university students conducting research for SPIRASI. Respondents were then more willing to be open and honest. The selection and phrasing of questions affected the type of information received, as well as bias in answers. After basic demographic questions such as age, gender, and nationality, the survey consisted first of knowledge-based questions and then attitudinal questions. We asked as simply as possible whether people had heard of Spirasi, were involved with other charities, or knew some basic information about refugees and asylum seekers. The other questions gauged feelings about immigration issues in Ireland. In some instances we asked for degree of agreement with certain statements. At other times, the answer choices were actually assumptions that we wanted to test, such as reasons why people would or would not contribute to refugee/asylum seeker causes or how people would react to immigrants in their community. Some of the most salient responses came, however, from other comments people either wrote or discussed with us. The opinions behind people's initial reactions to the questions were very telling.

## Data

The following section is an analysis of the data. It begins with a tabulation of the responses to the questions, followed by analyses of the tables broken down by category of question, and ends with an analysis of the relationships among some of the variables.

### *Tables*

The following is a breakdown of the way respondents answered each question on the survey. Questions 1-8 measure demographic variables and questions 9-14 measure attitudinal variables.

## Q1 Age

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Less than 18</b>	22	9.87
<b>18-25</b>	75	33.63
<b>26-35</b>	48	21.52
<b>36-45</b>	22	9.87
<b>46-55</b>	16	7.17
<b>Over 55</b>	40	17.94
<b>Total</b>	223	100

## Q2 Gender

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Male</b>	83	38.97
<b>Female</b>	130	61.03
<b>Total</b>	223	100

## Q3 Nationality

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Irish</b>	195	86.67
<b>Non-Irish</b>	30	13.33
<b>Total</b>	225	100

## Q4 Have you heard of SPIRASI?

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Yes</b>	8	3.6
<b>No</b>	214	96.4
<b>Total</b>	222	100

Q5 Are you involved in any way, either through contributions or volunteerism, with other not-for-profit or charity organizations in Ireland, such as Trocaire, Concern, Goal, etc?

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>No</b>	152	69.09
<b>Yes</b>	68	30.91
<b>Total</b>	200	100

Q6 Knowledge of the factual difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Incorrect</b>	174	80.18
<b>Correct</b>	43	19.82
<b>Total</b>	217	100

Q7 Knowledge of the correct number of individuals who have been granted refugee status in Ireland in the past 6 years.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Incorrect</b>	154	77.39
<b>Correct</b>	45	22.61
<b>Total</b>	199	100

Q8 How much social contact or interaction do you have with people of African, Eastern European, or Asian descent?

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>None</b>	37	16.82
<b>Public Settings</b>	49	22.27
<b>Workplace</b>	65	29.55
<b>Friends</b>	62	28.18
<b>Family</b>	6	2.73
<b>Total</b>	219	100

Q9 How do you feel about voluntary immigrants who are here to work as compared to refugees and asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution? \*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Low</b>	10	5.65
<b>Low-Moderate</b>	32	18.08
<b>Moderate</b>	21	11.86
<b>High</b>	114	64.41
<b>Total</b>	177	100

\*Low = little tolerance for both voluntary immigrants and refugees/asylum seekers

High = high tolerance for both voluntary immigrants and refugees/asylum seekers

Q10 Refugees and asylum seekers face many difficulties upon coming to Ireland.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	9	4.09
<b>Disagree</b>	12	5.45
<b>Neutral</b>	33	15
<b>Agree</b>	84	38.18
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	62	28.18
<b>Do Not Know</b>	12	9.09
<b>Total</b>	220	100

Q11 The government adequately addresses the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	25	11.42
<b>Disagree</b>	57	26.03
<b>Neutral</b>	50	22.83
<b>Agree</b>	37	16.89
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	20	9.13
<b>Do Not Know</b>	30	13.7
<b>Total</b>	219	100

Q12 I would be willing to contribute time or money to organizations that provide aid to refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	16	7.37
<b>Disagree</b>	31	14.29
<b>Neutral</b>	78	35.94
<b>Agree</b>	51	23.5
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	12	5.53
<b>Do Not Know</b>	29	13.36
<b>Total</b>	217	100

Q13 How would you react to refugees and asylum seekers in your community?

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Not be welcoming</b>	10	4.57
<b>Take no interest</b>	26	11.87
<b>Learn more about them</b>	44	20.09
<b>Be welcoming</b>	94	42.92
<b>Make friends</b>	36	16.44
<b>Campaign on their behalf</b>	9	4.11
<b>Total</b>	219	100

Q14 Asylum seekers are currently placed in direct provision centers and are not allowed to work until they receive refugee status. Do you think they should be allowed to work while their cases are considered?

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Yes</b>	133	61.29
<b>No</b>	44	20.28
<b>Do not know</b>	40	18.43
<b>Total</b>	217	100

### *Analysis of Demographic Variables*

The demographic variables we included in the study were chosen in the hopes that a few would emerge as significant predictors of certain attitudinal variables, while others would be important indicators of the extent to which the Irish population is knowledgeable about refugees and asylum seekers.

The breakdown of demographic variables reveals a couple of important caveats in our research. First, the sample is skewed towards younger individuals, with the majority of our sample being under the age of 35. Second, women are overrepresented by a ratio of about 3:2 women to men. It is unclear how our results might differ had we sampled more representatively.

We see that very few respondents have heard of SPIRASI, and in fact, many had absolutely no connotative associations to the name at all. Those who were puzzled about the question would inquire whether it was a vegetable or a disease. Only 19.82 percent of people answered correctly when asked about the difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker. Being that there were six answer choices (including 'do not know'), one had a 16.66 percent chance of answering correctly just on luck, so the actual percentage of people who knew the correct answer was quite small. We did find, however, that only 1.38 percent of respondents believed that the difference between refugees and asylum seekers are that they come from

different parts of the world. 26.73 percent of respondents admitted that they did not know what the difference was.

Along the same lines, the percentage of respondents who answered correctly the question “how many people have been granted refugee status in the Republic of Ireland in the past six years?” was 22.61 percent. This figure is not encouraging, since there were five answer choices and the respondent had a 20 percent chance of guessing correctly. On the other hand, very few respondents (7.04 percent) believed the number of refugees to be 100,000, which was by far the most inaccurate figure. Each of the other answer choices received comparable percentages of tallies. These two questions reveal a disturbing amount of ignorance about refugees and asylum seekers.

The amount of social contact with immigrant populations was quite variable. Only 2.73 percent of respondents included people of African, Eastern European, or Asian descent in their family, but the spread from no social contact up to friendship was fairly even. The largest proportion, at 29.55 percent, said that they had contact with non-Irish in the workplace. Ireland is adapting to new populations entering society in some ways, but the attitudinal variables will give more insight into how they are actually perceived.

#### *Analysis of Attitudinal Variables*

We asked five questions gauging the attitudes of respondents toward immigrants, and refugees and asylum seekers in particular. These are questions 9, 10, 11, 13, and 14. For tables of the percentages of responses to each question, please see above. The data reveals that the majority of respondents held positive sentiments about refugees and asylum seekers on the whole. When asked about their tolerance level for immigrants/refugee and asylum seekers, 76.27 percent responded that they have moderate or high levels of tolerance. Similarly, when asked how they would respond to refugees and asylum seekers in their community, 89.56 percent of respondents said they would learn more about them, be welcoming, make friends, or campaign on their behalf.

For the question that gauged sympathy towards refugees and asylum seekers (“refugees and asylum seekers face many difficulties upon coming to Ireland”), 66.36 percent of respondents replied that they agree or strongly agree with this statement. For the question about whether the government adequately addresses the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, there was a wide distribution of responses, with the largest percentage being “neutral”. Lastly, 61.29 percent of respondents said they think asylum seekers should be allowed to seek work.

On a slightly different note, only 29.05 percent of respondents said they would be willing to contribute to organizations that provide aid to refugees and asylum seekers. Given the percentage of people who seem to hold positive perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers, it seems odd that so few are willing to contribute. This indicates that part of respondents’ unwillingness to contribute to organizations like SPIRASI must be explained by a reason other than that they do not support aid for refugees and asylum seekers. Many factors affect respondents’ motivation to contribute, as will be detailed in the following section.

### *Analysis of Common Assumptions*

One area we seek to address with this survey is to what extent certain assumptions about how Irish people perceive refugees and asylum seekers are true. Many know that there is a fair amount of discontent among Irish people about refugees and asylum seekers, but in the case of SPIRASI, no data is available to support the theories about such negativity. The answer choices for this section included comments that are part of the negative atmosphere surrounding refugees and asylum seekers, comments that explain a more tolerant attitude, and space for respondents to make their own comments about why they would or would not contribute to organizations that help refugees and asylum seekers.

Of the 225 respondents surveyed, 117 had reasons for why they would contribute to organizations that work with refugees and asylum seekers (52 percent), 72 respondents had reasons for why they would not contribute (32 percent), and 36 people did not respond (16 percent). Of the respondents who gave reasons for why they would not contribute to organizations that help refugees and asylum seekers, 50 percent said that refugees and asylum seekers “abuse the social welfare system”; 38 percent said they “make bogus claims to enter the country”; 22 percent said they “do more harm than good to the economy”; 17 percent said they “contribute to crime”; 14 percent said they “undermine the country’s cultural identity”; and 39 percent said “other reason”. These percentages do not add up to 100 because respondents could choose more than one reason. But clearly among people who held negative opinions of refugees and asylum seekers, the majority believed that they abuse the social welfare system.

Of the respondents who gave reasons for why they would contribute to organizations that help refugees and asylum seekers, 60 percent said they “support a minimum standard of living for all people”; 32 percent said because “the country’s cultural life is enriched”; 30 percent said because “they, or someone they know, can empathize with the circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers”; 15 percent said they “support such causes on the basis of their faith”; and 14 percent said “other reason”. Again, the percentages do not add up to 100 because respondents were allowed to indicate more than one reason. It is evident that the number one reason respondents gave for supporting organizations like SPIRASI is that they support a minimum standard of living for all people. The 32 percent supporting an enriched cultural life is also hopeful when compared to the 14 percent saying cultural identity is undermined.

The added comments by individuals are valuable for a holistic view of public perception. On the negative side, for example, 10 out of 25 “other” comments were that respondents simply did not have the money to give to such causes. Several respondents prioritized personal interests such as family over giving to charity, or would rather give to Irish organizations because the Irish have had such hardships, and “charity should first of all start at home.” While these statements are not encouraging, they do not negatively target refugees and asylum seekers as a group. Other respondents felt that it was the government’s responsibility to care for refugees and asylum seekers, an interesting parallel to the figure from Q11, where a majority of respondents were not pleased with government response. To add to the 50 percent who said that refugees and asylum seekers “abuse the social welfare system,” one respondent detailed that, “the downturn in

the economy means extra strain is on the country and providing for other nationalities doesn't help us," and several others complained that refugees and asylum seekers "get quicker paths to social benefits, but still claim victimization." The strongest negative sentiments were clearly economically related.

On a more positive note, some respondents did have uplifting comments about the need to aid refugees and asylum seekers. For some, it was a matter of human rights, or the fact that people "share the same humanity," and "deserve to be treated equally." One remark was that "care for the stranger is a mark of civilized society" and another felt that a community is happier and functions better when everyone's needs are met. A final comment, that has been documented before and perhaps should have been included in our answer choices, is that Irish people have been in similar circumstances in the past and had to flee to the United Kingdom, United States, and beyond. On the whole, a majority (52 percent) of respondents had reasons why they would be willing to contribute to organizations that provide aid to refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland. When asked directly if they would or would not contribute, however, the greatest proportion was neutral. It is interesting to note that many of the reasons respondents gave for why they would contribute are stated in broad and abstract terms, while the reasons given for why respondents would not contribute are stated in concrete, specific terms. Concrete motivations are more salient than abstract ones and are more likely to compel action. Many may on the surface think that they are accepting of others, or that it is the right thing to do to support such a cause. When probed further about their opinions, it is the economic problems facing individuals and Irish society that render the greatest antagonism.

### *Models and Relationships*

The following is a discussion of the relevant models that can be generated with this data. It consists of comparing the correlation coefficients of different independent variables with a dependent variable to show the magnitude of differences in relationship and impact.

Our original assumptions were that age, gender, and amount of social contact with immigrants would be the best and easiest predictors of willingness to contribute to organizations providing aid to refugees and asylum seekers. Age and gender, as stated above, were overall not key factors. Controlling for nationality, the amount of contact an individual has with immigrants is also not a predictor of their willingness to contribute to organizations that aid refugees and asylum seekers. Indeed, the two best predictors of one's willingness to contribute to organizations like SPIRASI are 1) one's involvement with other NGOs and Not-for-Profits and 2) the extent to which one believes refugees and asylum seekers face many difficulties upon coming to Ireland.

Figure 1.1 shows that among the demographic variables, whether one is involved with other NGOs is predictive of one's willingness to contribute by a correlation coefficient of 0.22567, as compared to coefficients of -0.0497, -0.0725, and 0.0612 for age, gender, and amount of contact with immigrants, respectively. It also shows that the greatest predictor of one's willingness to contribute is the extent to which one believes that refugees and asylum

seekers face many difficulties upon coming to Ireland, by a coefficient of 0.4054, and the extent to which one has positive views of immigrants as the third best predictor, with a coefficient of 0.1723.

#### Predictors of Willingness to Contribute

	Correlation Coefficient
Age	-0.049675
Gender	-0.072545
Contact	0.061169
NGO	0.22567
Refugee Difficulties	0.405425
Attitude towards immigrants	0.172333

Figure 1.1

It is also evidenced in the data that controlling for nationality, factoring in the extent to which one believes that asylum seekers face difficulties upon coming to Ireland enhances the predictive power of being involved in another NGO. Figure 1.2 shows that when willingness to contribute is regressed with both one's attitudes towards immigrants and one's involvement in NGOs, the predictive power of the latter jumps up to 0.5569 as compared to only 0.2257 when regressed alone. The fact that the coefficient is positive indicates that being involved in an NGO is correlated with one being more likely to contribute time or resources to organizations like SPIRASI, and that those individuals who are both welcoming towards immigrants and are involved in NGOs are more likely than anyone else to contribute.

contrib	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]
nationality	-.4151565	.3295258	-1.26	0.209	-1.065787 .2354741
immvref	.1327871	.1104042	1.20	0.231	-.0852 .3507742
NGO	.5568948	.2386147	2.33	0.021	.0857631 1.028027
_cons	3.283958	.4721967	6.95	0.000	2.351631 4.216285

Figure 1.2

While social contact may not translate into willingness to contribute, it is a much better predictor of sympathy towards immigrants than either age or gender. Figure 2.1 shows that the correlation coefficient of contact is 0.1629, whereas gender and age are correlated with meager coefficients of -0.0954 and -0.0283, respectively. The fact that the correlation coefficient of contact and sympathy towards refugees is positive indicates that as one has more contact with immigrants, the more likely one is to sympathize with refugees.

refdiff	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
nationality	-.1344736	.2326263	-0.58	0.564	-.5931746	.3242274
age	-.0282625	.0525309	-0.54	0.591	-.1318448	.0753199
gender	-.0954429	.1612143	-0.59	0.554	-.4133312	.2224454
contact	.1628803	.0751378	2.17	0.031	.0147208	.3110398
_cons	3.930385	.4064844	9.67	0.000	3.128864	4.731905

Figure 2.1

We asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they agree with the assertion “the government adequately addresses the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland”, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. We found that the two greatest predictors of one’s views on government treatment of refugees and asylum seekers is their involvement in other NGOs and Not-for-Profits and the number of media sources they pay attention to on a regular basis.

Figure 3.1 shows that the correlation coefficient of NGO is -0.4727, media is correlated with -0.2235, and gender is correlated with 0.1461. This means that the greatest predictor is involvement in NGOs, followed by media, followed by gender. Age seems to have no predictive power on views towards government treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. The fact that the coefficient is negative for NGO means that being involved in an NGO foretells the opinion that the government does not adequately address the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Likewise, the negative correlation between media and views on government indicates that paying attention to more sources of media is predictive of having more negative views on how the government provides for refugees. And in general, women are more likely than men to agree that the government takes adequate care of refugees.

govt	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
nationality	-1.410797	.2926884	-4.82	0.000	-1.988038	-.8335555
age	.0922918	.0631919	1.46	0.146	-.0323356	.2169192
gender	.1461162	.2065225	0.71	0.480	-.2611884	.5534208
NGO	-.4726648	.2203733	-2.14	0.033	-.9072859	-.0380437
nummedia	-.2234961	.0720811	-3.10	0.002	-.3656548	-.0813375
_cons	4.8091	.3993928	12.04	0.000	4.021416	5.596784

Figure 3.1

## Limitations

Our survey is limited by a number of factors, including non-representative sampling, ignorance problems, and the uncertainty that is inherent in all surveys that measure attitudes on sensitive issues. As stated in the section on demographic variables, our sample was skewed towards women and young people. The ratio of women to men in our sample is 3:2, rather than

the 1:1 that is ideal. We also over-sampled young people (those younger than 35). We can only speculate as to how this non-representative sampling has affected our results.

Another limitation in our research stems from the fact that most people we surveyed demonstrated ignorance about refugees and asylum seekers. The fundamental question is to what extent can we be confident that respondents' reported attitudes are accurate when they seem to know so little about the topic? It is unclear how respondents' reported attitudes would change if they were better-informed. There are two possibilities that, though contrary, are both valid in this circumstance.

The first is that people might actually feel negatively about refugees and asylum seekers because they do not distinguish that category of immigrants from immigrants who are here on a voluntary, work basis. In that case, being better informed might cause those people to have a more positive attitude towards refugees and asylum seekers. On the other hand, ignorance might be a cause for people to report having positive attitudes toward refugees and asylum seekers because given the lack of any information whatsoever, respondents' default sentiment might be positive. In that case, being better informed might change respondents' attitudes in either direction, positive or negative. Either way, the high level of ignorance shown in the data is disconcerting because the less people know about a particular subject, the less they care, regardless of their attitudes.

In addition, it is unclear to what extent respondents answered honestly versus to what extent they answered the questions based on how they think they *should* answer them. In other words, what is the balance between honesty and social pressures? One thing we were told during our first week here is that Irish people want to seem welcoming and cosmopolitan, but that under that surface is a puzzling mix of emotions. Even on a survey that is anonymous and self-reported, respondents might still feel like they would be judged if they were to indicate their true sentiments.

For instance, towards the beginning of the survey period, we approached an elderly woman who wanted to voice her answers out loud rather than write them down. Initially, she said she had very positive views on refugees and asylum seekers, but as she talked more and more, she began saying things that contradicted her initial sentiments. She said she was "very welcoming of them" but that it angered her when she saw "pregnant foreign women ready to pop" outside of churches when there are unemployed Irish people on the streets. She believed that they abused the social welfare system and that given how many Irish people are on welfare and can barely support themselves, it was unfair of the government to support foreign nationals. But after a string of negative comments about refugees and asylum seekers, she would catch herself and say that she is still "very welcoming" of them. It is this sort of dissonance that could be problematic to our conclusions.

Furthermore, the question about whether asylum seekers should be allowed to work might have received inaccurate responses because the question could have been interpreted two different ways. On the one hand, respondents may have thought that the question meant whether asylum seekers should "work to earn their keep" rather than the right to work as a human rights issue. In this case, respondents may have answered "yes" to the question on the basis of not

wanting asylum seekers to “feed off of the system”, or that asylum seekers should contribute to the state if they are to take from it. On the other hand, respondents may have thought that the question meant whether asylum seekers should be allowed to work because work is an integral part of life, provides a sense of purpose, and is a step toward economic self-improvement. This interpretation is what we intended when we created the question, but in retrospect, we see how one might interpret it the first way.

Lastly, our conclusions are limited by the fact that we only surveyed in train stations and in St. Stephen’s Green, plus the fact that we did not ask for occupational category or income level. This means that, for the most part, we targeted the commuter class, those who work around South-Side City Center, are on holiday, retired, unemployed or underemployed. We intentionally chose not to ask for occupational category because we felt that this might dissuade some people from taking the survey, but this lack of information is significant because income level is an important demographic factor. Perhaps in future studies the relationship between income level and perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers may be explored.

## **Looking Towards the Future**

SPIRASI is now in its ninth year of existence and has been providing valuable services to refugees and asylum seekers throughout that time. Within the refugee and asylum seeker communities, SPIRASI is relatively well known. English and IT classes through the Centre for the Education and the Integration of Migrants (CEIM) are in high demand, accommodating 60 students per semester, three times a year, with an ongoing waiting list.<sup>3</sup> The Centre for the Care of Survivors of Torture provided care for 892 clients in 2007, with a total of 2,366 since they began rehabilitative services in 2001.<sup>4</sup> By working in the reception centers and direct provision centers, the Centre for Health Information and Promotion greatly increases awareness in the asylum seeking population. SPIRASI is also on the radar for others that are associated with their line of work. Non-governmental organizations are familiar with SPIRASI, as well as some medical and legal professionals who are dealing with the immigration issues.

Working as a niche group organization, it is of course important that the right groups know of SPIRASI – general practitioners and solicitors need to be able to recommend torture survivors to CCST, other NGOs need to know that they can link up with SPIRASI when working toward the same goals, etc. It is in the interest of any organization, however, to have a good presence within the general public. Increased awareness will help educate the public about the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland. The more informed society is as a whole, the greater impact SPIRASI will be able to have. SPIRASI will gain a broader base of both voluntary and financial support.

The funding for SPIRASI is almost entirely from governmental and multinational agencies, with the Health Service Executive, European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, and

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<sup>3</sup> SPIRASI Strategic Plan 2007-2009

<sup>4</sup> CCST Factsheet

European Refugee Fund being the three largest sources. Events and donations provided a mere 3% of funding in 2006.<sup>5</sup> There is a definite need to expand fundraising to the public and business sectors in order to further stabilize the organization and provide more flexibility for future plans. A joint scheme to increase public awareness and fundraise within the general public should be the goal for SPIRASI. The findings from our study should help direct such campaign strategies.

## **Strategy Recommendations**

The best predictor of willingness to contribute to organizations helping refugees and asylum seekers was involvement with other non-governmental or not-for-profit organizations. SPIRASI would gain a great deal from further association with other NGOs in Ireland, especially when they could be linked in to other volunteer networks. A good portion of NGO employees might already know of SPIRASI, but those who either support them financially or just volunteer in their free time should be targeted. Events like the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture co-sponsored with Amnesty International brought together supporters of both SPIRASI and Amnesty. If SPIRASI gets involved in more events where other volunteers are around, they will be able to raise awareness and perhaps receive new support. Those who contribute to one or more causes have a philanthropic spirit that makes them ideal targets for support.

Only 17 out of 225 respondents claimed willingness to contribute on the basis of their faith. Aid for the marginalized would certainly be a cause supported by most religious individuals, but the data most likely reflects the overall decrease in religious sentiment in Ireland in recent years. Especially when the overrepresentation of young people is considered, it is not surprising that faith was not a big motivator. Established religious groups may be sympathetic towards refugees and asylum seekers, but seeking support based on religion may not be very successful in Irish society today.

Based upon our finding that sympathy towards refugees and asylum seekers is a good predictor of one's willingness to contribute to organizations like SPIRASI, a strategy recommendation is that educating people about the hardships that they go through could serve as a good primer for asking for contributions in the future. For instance, SPIRASI could create more promotional material, such as a video highlighting the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in direct provision centers, featuring interviews with the residents. Such promotional materials paint vivid images in the minds of the viewers and are more likely to resonate with them. Whenever SPIRASI participates in an event, they should have plenty of materials prepared and could be playing a video if possible. The resources could be distributed to other NGOs, in schools, and at community events. There could even be an education campaign, where representatives hold sessions to explain the facts about refugees and asylum seekers and recount personal stories. Such a program would obviously require funding, but a plan should be in place and applying for funding prioritized.

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<sup>5</sup> SPIRASI Strategic Plan 2007-2009

SPIRASI should also develop more ways for Irish people and refugees and asylum seekers to come into contact. Though social contact had little relationship with respondents' willingness to contribute to organizations like SPIRASI, it did have a positive relationship with feelings of sympathy towards that population, and those feelings of sympathy are related to willingness to contribute. It is important that Irish people not only have more contact with immigrants, but that this contact is personal and framed in a positive light. For instance, many respondents said that they had regular contact with immigrants in public settings and workplaces, but these kinds of contact can be positive or negative, and there is no controlling which kind they have. SPIRASI might try facilitating integrated social events within the community.

Furthermore, we found that among respondents who answered "other" to the question about reasons why they would or would not contribute, most had concrete reasons for no and abstract reasons for yes. It is likely that concrete and personal reasons are more effective at influencing action than abstract ones, so perhaps SPIRASI could encourage people to contribute if they could make the issue of asylum seekers and refugees resonate personally with the Irish people. It would be helpful for people to see similarities between themselves and members of the refugee and asylum seeker populations. SPIRASI itself should define concrete reasons for supporting asylum seekers and refugees and include those reasons in any promotional materials or activities. Why do the people at SPIRASI feel passionately about this cause, and how can they relate that to others? Even the name SPIRASI does not invoke any emotive images about the purpose of the organization; it is therefore difficult to make a connection with the name and it is easily forgotten. At the very least, the name should give an indication of what the organization is about. Public awareness and support will come easier when the purposes of the organization are clearly defined and easily identifiable.

One of our most important and consistent findings is that negativity about immigration issues in Ireland most often stems from monetary concerns. A majority of people say they are comfortable with both immigrants and refugees/asylum seekers being here, but their sentiments are countered by concern over the economic effects. They see immigrants as abusing the social welfare system and being a burden to an already weakening Irish economy. Not only do they feel immigrants lower the overall standard of living for Irish citizens, but also relate the fact that they just do not have the money to contribute to charities themselves. Newcomers to a country become an easy scapegoat whenever the economy falls and there is apprehension about job availability. Greater public awareness about categories of immigrants and what refugees and asylum seekers must face will help create understanding and diminish the anxiety over economic issues.

In light of our findings on the common assumptions that are made about immigrants, there seems to be two logical messages SPIRASI should promote that would make the biggest difference in clearing up myths about refugees and asylum seekers. The first message is that refugees and asylum seekers do not in fact abuse the social welfare system. Of the people who held negative opinions of refugees and asylum seekers, most were for this reason. Therefore if SPIRASI were to use resources to dispel one specific myth, this one would have the biggest impact. The other most salient idea for SPIRASI to promote is that there should be a minimum standard of living for all people, regardless of race, nationality, or other superficial differences.

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