

Study shows emigration of adult children during recession negatively affected mental health of mothers

7 November 2014, by Yolanda Kennedy

A new report by [The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing \(TILDA\)](#), led by Trinity College Dublin, has shown that the mental health of mothers suffered as a consequence of the emigration of their children during the recession. The study showed that mothers experienced increased depressive symptoms and greater loneliness than mothers whose children did not emigrate. The researchers found, however, that with the exception of fathers aged over 65, fathers did not suffer an equivalent decline in mental health following the emigration of one or more of their children.

In the year ending April 2006, 36,000 people emigrated from Ireland. By 2009, when data collection for TILDA began, this number had doubled to 72,000 with numbers peaking at 89,000 in 2013. These high rates of outflow meant that a large number of TILDA respondents saw their [children](#) emigrate.

The study's authors Dr Irene Mosca, TILDA Research Fellow in Economics at Trinity and Professor Alan Barrett, Research Professor at the ESRI and TILDA, used three kinds of mental health measurements including a measurement of [depressive symptoms](#), self-rated emotional/mental health and loneliness feelings and compared the results for [mothers](#) and fathers whose children had emigrated during this period with parents whose children had not emigrated. They also controlled for other events which may have impacted on the mental health of the study's participants such as widowhood, loss of close friends and relatives, retirement, unemployment, illness and disability.

In addition to clear findings on the negative impact of [emigration](#) on the mental health of mothers whose children emigrated during the [recession](#), the authors also found that the parents of those children who emigrated were on average younger,

more highly educated and had better mental and physical health at Wave 1 of the TILDA study than the parents of children who remained in Ireland.

Speaking about the significance of these findings, Dr Mosca said: "Earlier studies on the impact of the recession in Ireland suggested that older people had been relatively insulated from many of the negative effects of the recession. Our report, however, shows a channel through which the recession has significantly affected the mental health and well-being of mothers in particular. Emigration is often discussed in terms of the people who leave, but our study shows that there are also real impacts on the people left behind."

She continued: "It is particularly striking that our research did not find evidence that other major events affecting the adult children of these parents such as the child becoming unemployed, divorced, separated or widowed had an impact on the mental health of the parent, whereas emigration negatively affected mothers as measured by symptoms of depression, loneliness and self-reported emotional/mental health. This gives some indication as to the extent of that negative mental health impact on mothers relative to other major life changes for their adult children."

Speaking about the broader implications resulting from this study, Professor Barrett said: "To the extent that mental health difficulties can lead to subsequent physical health difficulties, there are public health implications from the large-scale exodus from Ireland in recent years. The recession has impacted directly on the younger generation in terms of unemployment and mortgage default and so much of the discussion of recession-related health impacts have focussed on younger people. Our study suggests that we need to be more aware of the pressures which older people have faced

through emigration."

"We must also consider that this study strengthens the view that emigration can be a family-level decision process as opposed to a purely individual-level choice, as if people anticipate that their emigration could have a negative effect on the [mental health](#) of their parents, they may decide against going," concluded Professor Barrett.

Principal Investigator of TILDA, Professor Rose Anne Kenny said: "This study demonstrates the range, depth and quality of data we are collecting in TILDA which allows us to analyse from multiple angles the impact of the recession, of policy changes, life events and a host of other influences on the health and well-being of older adults in Ireland."

More information: The full report is available from tilda.tcd.ie/

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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