

2020/17/47

S24532B

Northern Ireland -  
Irish Language in

JANUARY 1990

S4532B

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THE STATE AND STATUS OF IRISH

(A report of a National Survey  
on the Irish language carried  
out in 1988-89).

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An tAonad Suirbhé agus Taighde,  
Roinn na Staidéar Sóisialta,  
Coláiste Phádraig,  
Má Nuad,  
Co. Chill Dara.

THE STATE AND STATUS OF IRISH

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## RÉAMHFHOCAL/FOREWORD

This report is relatively brief and is primarily concerned with the publication of the findings of a national survey of attitudes towards the Irish language and some related issues. It is intended to analyse these findings further in a later publication when the relation between attitudes towards Irish and intergroup dispositions will be examined. The main value of this publication is the fact that it gives the Irish public a profile of their current relationship to their native language.

I wish to acknowledge all who have helped in the preparation of this report and in the primary survey research of the data. The fieldwork was efficiently carried out by the Survey Unit of the Economic and Social Research Institute on commission from the Survey and Research Unit, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. Gratitude is due especially to Ms. Nessa Winston for processing the data and assisting at all stages of the research. The cooperation of the Computer Centre, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, merits gratitude, as do Ms. Maureen Redmond, Secretary of the Department of Social Studies, and Mrs. Mary Clougher, Executive Assistant, the New Arts Block, Maynooth. Final gratitude is due to the 1,005 respondents who provided the necessary information.

Tá súil agam go mbeidh toradh maith ar an saothar seo d'ainneoin na laigí atá air.

Mícheál Mac Gréil

25ú Eanáir 1990

## TUARASCÁIL/REPORT

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### INTRODUCTION

The following report examines the findings of a survey of attitudes towards, competence in, and use of the Irish language, of a representative sample of the adult population of the Republic of Ireland. The survey was carried out during the period from November 1988 until April 1989. The 1988/89 findings are compared with a similar survey carried out in Dublin in 1972/3.

Over one thousand people (1,005) were interviewed out of a sample of 1,374, i.e., a response rate of 73.14%. The questions relating to the Irish language were part of an extended interview - averaging one and a half hours. The maximum margin of error in the findings is  $\pm 3\%$ .

### ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RESTORATION OF IRISH.

Four measures were used to gauge the attitudes of the people toward the national language. In the first place, a special scale used in 1972/73 was repeated in the 1988/89 survey. Secondly, the respondents were asked to give their views on the potential of "a return to the Irish language and culture as a good basis for Irish unity in the long-term." This view was also measured in the 1972/73 Dublin survey. Thirdly, respondents were asked to indicate how their "feelings towards Irish" had changed since the time they left school. Fourthly, attitudes towards 'Irish speakers' were measured. Findings in relation to these four questions give a valuable measure of the present general public status of Irish in the Republic at the end of the 1980s.

The respondents were asked to select one of six possible choices in regard to the future of the Irish Language in the Republic. The options ranged from abandonment of Irish to it replacing of English. Table No. 1 gives the response for three samples, i.e., the total sample of 1988/9; the Dublin sub-sample of 1988/9 and the total Dublin sample of 1972/3.

TABLE NO. 1: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RESTORATION OF IRISH  
1988/9 AND 1972/3.

"With regard to the future of the Irish language, which of the following would you like to see happen?"

OPTIONS CHOSEN	1988/9 National Sample	1988/9 Dublin Sub-sample	1972/3 Dublin Sample	Percentage Change
1. "The Irish language should be discarded and forgotten."	6%	4%	15%	-11%
2. "It should be preserved for its cultural value as in music and arts."	43%	52%	} 34%	+27%
3. "Spoken Irish should be preserved only in the Gaeltacht."	9%	9%		
4. "Ireland should be bilingual, with English as the principal language."	34%	31%	33%	-2%
5. "Ireland should be bilingual with Irish as the principal language."	5%	3%	10%	-7%
6. "Irish should be the principal language of use (like English is now)."	4%	3%	8%	-5%
	N=1,000	N=274	N=2,282	

Note: Deviations from total of 100% due to rounding.

The 1988/9 findings for the National sample show that 94% of the respondents are positively disposed towards Irish and wish to have it revived or preserved. Some 52% wished to see it preserved for its cultural value as in music or art or as the spoken language in the Gaeltacht. Some 43% would like to see it in daily use again - mainly as the second language of a bilingual society.

These findings points to the practically universal attachment to Irish among the population. The change in attitudes since 1972/3 shows a very significant drop (from 15% to 4%) in the percentage wishing to "discard and forget" Irish. Despite this widespread attachment to the language, there has been a lowering of idealism over the 15 years in relation to the extent to which the people wish to restore the language to daily use. This may be due to any of a number of developments, such as the lowering of the status of Irish in the public services, the lack of Irish on a more widespread media and so forth.

Only three personal variables, i.e., education, county of residence, and occupational status, have shown significant variations in regard to respondents' choices. The higher the respondents' education and occupation, the more positive were their attitudes and expectations in relation to the Irish language. Respondents from Connaught/Ulster had the highest expectations in relation to the future of Irish, while Dublin respondents were those with the lowest expectations. In the case of occupational status, those with higher status jobs were more favourably disposed. The improvement in the standing of Irish among the more highly statused in society indicates that Irish is becoming 'fashionable'. (See Appendix A)

Attitudes towards Irish by Party Political Preferences:

While the variations between the supporters of the political parties is not appreciable, there are some interesting differences as shown in Table No. 2.

TABLE NO. 2: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RESTORATION OF IRISH BY PARTY\* POLITICAL PREFERENCE.

Choice	SUB-SAMPLE					TOTAL
	FF	FG	LAB	PD	WF	
1. That Irish should be discarded and forgotten	4%	9%	8%	0%	0%	6%
2. That Irish be preserved for its cultural value as in music and art/ in Gaeltacht	52%	56%	46%	56%	29%	52%
3. Ireland should be bilingual with English as the principal language	35%	30%	35%	37%	54%	34%
4. Bilingual with Irish as principal language /or/ Irish to become spoken language as English is now	9%	5%	11%	7%	17%	8%
	N=447	N=250	N=65	N=41	N=24**	N=827

Chi-square  $p < .05$

\* Other Parties and Non-Party not included due to size of sub-samples.

\*\* Because of the size of this total, the distributions are less reliable.

Fianna Fail supporters are not significantly different from the national average. Fine Gael and Labour supporters are significantly higher than the average in the case of those who would discard the language and Fine Gael is lower in relation to revival options. Both Progressive Democrats and Workers Party supporters had nobody wishing to discard Irish. Workers Party respondents were those most in favour of revival of the language and of supporting the primary role of Irish in a bilingual situation.

Change of Attitudes to Irish since at School:

Respondents were asked if their attitudes towards Irish had changed since they were at school. Table No. 3 gives a breakdown of the direction of change of feeling towards Irish for the sample. The respondents were asked: "Which of the following best describe the way you feel now?"

TABLE NO. 3: 'FEELINGS' TOWARDS IRISH WHEN IN SCHOOL AND NOW?  
(TOTAL SAMPLE)

'Feeling'	When in School	Now	Percentage Change since leaving school
1. Strongly in favour	18%	19%	+1%
2. Somewhat in favour	26%	38%	+12%
	} 44%	} 57%	} +13%
3. No particular feelings	33%	29%	-4%
4. Somewhat opposed	13%	9%	-4%
5. Strongly opposed	10%	6%	-4%
	} 23%	} 15%	} -8%
	N=973	N=973	

Note: Deviations from total of 100% due to rounding.

It is clear from the above table that Respondents' feelings towards Irish have significantly changed in the intervening years since leaving school. The percentage in favour has gone from 44% to 57%, while those opposed to Irish have dropped from 23% to 15%. This is a net change of 21% in favour of the language, i.e., the margin between those in favour and those opposed has changed from 21% 'when in school' to 42% "now".

Table No. 4 gives the principal reasons given by 251 of those who had changed their feeling since being at school.

TABLE NO. 4: REASONS FOR CHANGES IN FEELINGS TOWARDS IRISH SINCE LEAVING SCHOOL

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Percent</u>	
<u>(a) Positive Changes(83%)</u>		
1.Greater Cultural Appreciation	22%	} 83%
2.Reaching Personal Maturity	14%	
3.Removal of Compulsory Irish	12%	
4.Irish a National Symbol	10%	
5.Other Positive Reasons	25%	
<u>(b) Negative Changes(18%)</u>		
1.Of Little Use/Waste of Time	11%	} 18%
2.Other Negative Reasons	7%	
<u>N=251</u>		

### Irish as a Good Basis for Irish Unity:

Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the view that: "A return to the Irish Language and culture could provide a good basis for Irish unity in the long term, even though it might provide difficulties in the short term." This question formed part of a list of eleven questions relating to Northern Ireland.

The purpose of the question was to measure the perceived importance of the language as a basis of ethnic unity or identity. The same question was included in the 1972-73 survey. Table No. 5 gives a breakdown of replies of the total sample and of the 1972-73 Dublin sample.

TABLE NO. 5: "A RETURN TO THE IRISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE COULD PROVIDE A GOOD BASIS FOR IRISH UNITY IN THE LONG TERM."

Response	National Sample (1988-89)	Dublin Sub-Sample (1988-89)	Dublin Sample (1972-73)	Change in Dublin Responses
1. Agree	24%	20%	18%	+2%
2. Don't Know	19%	22%	4%	+18%
3. Disagree	57%	58%	79%	-21%
	N=1,000	N=274	N=2,279	

Support for the view expressed in the statement is clearly a minority opinion. Almost one quarter of the National sample agreed that the Irish language would provide a good basis for Irish unity while more than half of the sample disagreed. The shift of opinion since 1972-73, however, has been a significant reduction of 21% in the proportion disagreeing with the view expressed in the statement. This may indicate the beginning of a growth in the perceived importance of the language as a common unifying symbol of national identity.

The response to the value of Irish as a basis of unity elicited significant differences by age, county of residence, education and party political preferences. Table No. 6 gives a breakdown of these differences.

TABLE NO. 6: "A RETURN TO THE IRISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE COULD PROVIDE A GOOD BASIS FOR IRISH UNITY IN THE LONG TERM" (BY AGE, RESIDENCE, EDUCATION AND POLITICAL PREFERENCE)

PERSONAL VARIABLE:	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	N
<u>A. Age (p&lt;.001)</u>				
1. 18-20 years	30%	23%	46%	53
2. 21-35 years	22%	22%	55%	325
3. 36-50 years	18%	13%	70%	253
4. 51 years and older	29%	20%	51%	309
<u>B. County of Residence (p&lt;.05)</u>				
1. Connaught/Ulster	35%	13%	53%	162
2. Dublin	20%	22%	58%	264
3. Rest of Leinster	20%	19%	61%	230
4. Munster	25%	20%	55%	284
<u>C. Education (p&lt;.05)</u>				
1. Primary Only	28%	22%	51%	248
2. Incomplete 2nd Level	27%	18%	55%	329
3. Complete 2nd Level	19%	21%	60%	224
4. Third Level	17%	14%	69%	137
<u>D. Party Political Preference (p&lt;.001)</u>				
1. Fianna Fail	28%	21%	52%	447
2. Fine Gael	21%	14%	65%	252
3. Labour	29%	14%	58%	66
4. Progressive Democrats	12%	14%	74%	42
5. Workers Party	46%	8%	46%	24*
<b>TOTAL NATIONAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>1,000</b>

\* Because of the size of this total, the distributions are less reliable.

Respondents under 21 years of age were the only respondents to record a disagreement answer of under 50%. Also, they had the highest agreement score at 30%. The age group showing least support for the view were the 36-50 years sub-sample. The strength of young respondents' scores may point to growing support for the view expressed in the statement.

In the case of 'county of residence', Connaught/Ulster was the most supportive sub-sample, while Dublin and 'the Rest of Leinster' were least supportive. There was a negative correlation between education and support for the importance of Irish as a basis for unity. In the case of Party Political Preferences, The Workers Party had the most positive overall score, with Progressive Democrats' supporters least supportive of the view expressed in the statement.

#### Attitudes towards Irish Speakers:

In the 1988-89 survey, 'Irish Speakers' were included as a category in the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, which measured how close respondents' were willing to admit them into their lives. Table No. 7 gives the social distance scores of 'Irish Speakers' in the case of the National Sample.

TABLE NO. 7: SOCIAL DISTANCE RATINGS OF 'IRISH SPEAKERS'

Question: "I would like you to tell me how close you would be willing to allow Irish Speakers?"

Degree of Closeness	Actual Percent	Cumulative Percent	N
1. Would marry or welcome as member of family.	84.4%	—	847
2. Would have as a close friend.	8.1%	(92.5%)	81
3. Would have as next-door neighbour.	4.1%	(96.6%)	41
4. Would work in same workplace.	1.8%	(98.4%)	18
5. Would welcome as an Irish citizen.	1.4%	(99.8%)	14
6. Have as visitors only to Ireland.	0.3%	(100.1%)	3
			1,004

Mean Social Distance=1.287 on a scale of 1-7)

It is clear from the social distance ratings of 'Irish speakers' that this category is very much an 'in group' in Irish society. They were ranked fourth in a scale of fifty-nine categories. The findings show practically total acceptance of 'Irish speakers'. This belies any negative stereotype of the 'Gaeilgeoir'. The recent fourfold increase in demand for the gold Fainne (from 1,639 in 1988 to 6,632 in 1989)\* would reinforce the growing positive image of 'Irish speakers'.

Because of the very high ratings there is hardly sufficient latitude in the scores to have sub-variable variations. The positive attitude is practically a consensus rating.

#### PERCEIVED COMPETENCE IN IRISH:

Respondents were asked in the 1988-89 survey and the 1972-73 Dublin survey to state their level of competence in Irish on a pre-coded ordinal scale:

- (1) Very Fluent, i.e., "totally at ease in the language";
- (2) Fluent, i.e., "articulate but more conscious of the effort";
- (3) Middling, i.e., "can communicate with some difficulty";
- (4) Not so fluent, i.e., "can pick up the gist of conversation and could get by";
- (5) Only a little, i.e., "elementary vocabulary and understanding but unable to have a complete conversation".
- (6) None.

Table No. 7 gives a breakdown of the findings and measures the changes which have taken place since 1972-73.

\* Figures for the distribution of Fáinní in 1988 and 1989;

	<u>Enamel</u>	<u>Silver</u>	<u>Gold</u>	<u>Total</u>
1988	222	2,852	1,639	4,713
1989	1,611	6,792	6,632	15,035

(Figures from Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge)

TABLE NO. 7: SELF-PERCEIVED COMPETENCE IN IRISH

"What would you say your standard is in the Irish language?"

LEVEL OF COMPETENCE	National Sample (1988-89)		Dublin Sub-Sample (1988-89)	Dublin Sample (1972-73)	Change	
	actual	cumulative				
1. Very Fluent	3%	(3%)	3%	} 11%	} 7%	+4%
2. Fluent	5%	(8%)	8%			
3. Middling	19%	(27%)	22%	} 39%	} 18%	+21%
4. Not so fluent	14%	(41%)	16%			
5. Only a little	40%		32%		50%	-18%
6. None	19%		20%		25%	-5%
Total	N=920	N=274	N=274		N=2,282	

The findings of Table No. 7 indicate the level of self-perceived competence in the sample in 1988/89. If the changes in the case of the Dublin sub-sample when compared with the 1972/73 survey are a representation of the national population, the level of overall competence seems to be increasing significantly at the 'middling' and 'not so fluent' levels. The decline in the percentage stating they had 'no Irish' or had 'only a little' is also significant. The low scores in the case of 'fluent' and 'very fluent' probably reflect the limited opportunities for speaking the language after school. Nevertheless, some 41% of the national sample can now speak more than the 'cupla focal'.

When levels of competence were measured by personal variables, the most significant results were found in the case of age, education and place of residence. Table No. 8 gives the breakdown.

TABLE NO. 8: SELF-PERCEIVED COMPETENCE IN IRISH BY AGE, EDUCATION AND PLACE OF RESIDENCE.

PERSONAL VARIABLE	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE			
	VERY FLUENT/ FLUENT	MIDDLING/ NOT SO FLUENT	ONLY A LITTLE	NONE
<u>A. Age (p &lt; .001)</u>	(cumulative)			
1. Under 21 years	11%	45% (56%)	34%	9%
2. 21-35 years	6%	43% (48%)	41%	10%
3. 36-50 years	11%	30% (41%)	40%	18%
4. 50 years and older	7%	23% (30%)	40%	30%
<u>B. Education (p &lt; .001)</u>				
1. Primary only	4%	15% (19%)	43%	37%
2. Incomplete second level	3%	28% (31%)	52%	17%
3. Complete second level	9%	48% (57%)	35%	8%
4. Third level	26%	53% (79%)	15%	5%
<u>C. Place of Residence (p &lt; .001)</u>				
1. Large city	12%	39% (51%)	31%	18%
2. Small city	5%	33% (38%)	51%	11%
3. Town	6%	35% (41%)	37%	22%
4. Rural	7%	29% (36%)	45%	19%
Total Sample	8%	33% (41%)	40%	18%

The negative correlation between age and competence in Irish is clear from the findings of Table No. 8. Only those over 50 years of age score below the national average. The positive link between education and competence is also very clearly borne out by the findings. Probably the place of residence variable is the most interesting in that it would seem to indicate that the level of competence among 'large city' residents is considerably higher than that among 'rural' and 'small city' residents. The 'town' residents are in between. These findings should challenge the popular image that Irish is a rural, rustic phenomenon.

DECLARED USE OF IRISH:

Respondents were asked: "how frequently would you say you use Irish, i.e., read, listen to or speak?" Their replies are given in Table No. 9.

TABLE NO. 9: DECLARED FREQUENCY OF USE OF IRISH.

DECLARED FREQUENCY	TOTAL NATIONAL SAMPLE 1988-89		DUBLIN SUB-SAMPLE 1988-89		DUBLIN SURVEY 1972-73		CHANGE PERCENT
	Actual	Cum.	Actual	Cum.	Actual	Cum.	
1. Daily	7.2%	(7.2%)	4.5%	(4.5%)	7.0%	(7.0%)	-2.5%
2. Weekly	2.9%	(10.1%)	1.1%	(5.6%)	9.1%	(16.1%)	-8.0%
3. Occasionally	17.7%	(27.8%)	19.5%	(25.2%)	8.6%	(24.7%)	+10.9%
4. Rarely	22.5%		22.6%		23.4%		-0.8%
5. Never	49.7%		52.3%		52.0%		+0.3%
	N=975		N=274		N=2,282		

It is quite clear that the level of use of Irish is much lower than the level of perceived competence. With 41% able to converse in the language (at different degrees of ability) it is surprising to find the number who use Irish 'weekly or more often' at 10.1% and 'on occasion or more often' at 27.8%. The absence of opportunities to use Irish must result in a high proportion of people losing their ability to speak it with ease. The change in the 'weekly or more frequent' use of Irish in Dublin is very significant, i.e., dropping from 16.1% to 6%. The 'occasionally' percentage increased by 11% which balanced the decline at the more frequent usage. Nevertheless, the overall level of use of Irish in Dublin has decreased since 1972-73 despite the significant increase in competence.

The findings on Table No. 10 present the profile of the use of Irish. The pattern of use by age is not that varied and would indicate that the younger categories are not using the language proportionate to their competence. Females' use of Irish is significantly more frequent than that of males.

County of Residence clearly shows the influence of the two Gaeltacht areas in Connaught/Ulster. In the case of this sub-sample the use of Irish is very much more frequent than it is in other territorial categories.

Education and occupational status indicate very clearly that Irish is more widely used by third level graduates and those at the top of the occupational scale. Practically half of the respondents from these two sub-samples use Irish occasionally or more often, while almost a quarter of them use it weekly or more frequently. This fact could well add to the 'social status' of Irish in modern Ireland. Put another way, speaking Irish could become a sign of higher social status. Because of the close correlation between education and occupational status, the increase in participation in third level could result in the greater use of the Irish language in the future.

TABLE NO. 10: DECLARED FREQUENCY OF USE OF IRISH BY PERSONAL VARIABLES.

Personal Variables	Declared frequency of use				Number
	Weekly or often	Occasionally act. (cum.)	Rarely	Never	
<u>A. Age (p &lt; .05)</u>					
1. 18-20 years	6%	27% (33%)	13%	54%	54
2. 21-25 years	11%	17% (28%)	30%	42%	329
3. 36-50 years	11%	20% (31%)	19%	51%	266
4. 51 years plus	10%	15% (25%)	20%	56%	326
<u>B. Gender (p &lt; .05)</u>					
1. Male	9%	14% (23%)	23%	55%	447
2. Female	11%	21% (32%)	23%	45%	528
<u>C. County of Residence (p &lt; .05)</u>					
1. Connaught/Ulster	19%	18% (37%)	22%	42%	166
2. Dublin	6%	20% (26%)	23%	52%	266
3. Rest of Leinster	10%	16% (26%)	21%	53%	250
4. Munster	10%	18% (28%)	24%	49%	250
<u>D. Education (p &lt; .001)</u>					
1. Primary only	9%	10% (19%)	15%	66%	273
2. Incomplete second level	7%	15% (22%)	24%	54%	238
3. Complete second level	9%	24% (23%)	27%	39%	226
4. Third level	22%	30% (52%)	24%	24%	136
<u>E. Occupation (p &lt; .001)</u>					
1. Unskilled/Semi skilled	8%	12% (20%)	16%	64%	154
2. Skilled/Routine Non-Manual	7%	14% (22%)	23%	57%	271
3. Inspectional/Supervisory	9%	20% (29%)	25%	46%	292
4. Professional/high executive	23%	25% (48%)	21%	31%	152
<b>Total Sample</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>17% (28%)</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>975</b>

PLACE WHERE IRISH IS USED:

Respondents were asked where they used the Irish language. Table NO. 11 gives a breakdown of responses to seven pre-coded occasions. These are presented in rank-order of 'yes' responses.

TABLE NO. 11: WHERE OR WHEN IRISH IS USED BY RESPONDENTS  
(Excluding those who never use the language)

Where/When Irish is Used	Percent using Irish
1. Listening to programmes (TV/radio).	50%
2. At home.	45%
3. When meeting Irish-speaking friends.	39%
4. At work.	18%
5. Reading.	14%
6. All possible opportunities.	13%
7. Communicating with officials.	11%
8. Other.	11%
N=495	

Note: Some respondents have answered 'yes' to a number of the categories.

The use of Irish takes place in predominantly domestic environments. The fact that 50% of respondents use their knowledge of Irish when listening or viewing radio and television underlies the media's potential in the extension of language usage. The relatively low usage at work is noteworthy. The importance of meeting other Irish speakers is confirmed by the high percentage (39%) who use Irish on such occasions and, also, indicates that a significant number of respondents have Irish-speaking friends.

## APPENDIX A:

TABLE NO. 12: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE FUTURE OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE  
BY PERSONAL VARIABLES.

Personal Variable	Irish discarded and forgotten	Irish preserved for cultural value/Gaeltacht	Ireland bilingual English principal language	Irish to replace English/principal language	N
<u>(A) Education</u> <u>p &lt; .001</u>					
1. Primary	10%	50%	30%	9%	276
2. Incomplete Second level	6%	54%	31%	10%	348
3. Complete second level	3%	51%	37%	10%	230
4. Third level	2%	51%	44%	3%	140
<u>(B) County of Residence</u> <u>(p &lt; .05)</u>					
1. Connaught/ Ulster	5%	42%	39%	14%	162
2. Dublin	4%	60%	31%	5%	264
3. Rest of Leinster	9%	52%	31%	8%	230
4. Munster	5%	50%	37%	9%	284
<u>(C) Occupational Status</u> <u>(p &lt; .001)</u>					
1. Unskilled/ Semi-skilled	10%	51%	31%	8%	154
2. Skilled/Routine non-manual	6%	51%	29%	13%	277
3. Inspectional/ Supervisory	4%	52%	38%	6%	299
4. Professional/ high executive	3%	49%	43%	5%	157
Total Sample	6%	52%	34%	9%	1,005

***END of file***

Pages 15-16 not present.

11 December 2020

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