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# AN GARDA SÍOCHÁNA AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Personal Accounts from Dublin, Ireland

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This paper discusses the relationship between the police and asylum seekers in Dublin, Ireland using a personal narrative approach. It includes recommendations for strengthening the relationship.

## Literature Review

Most of the literature on asylum seekers in Ireland focuses on health, education, and children (Christie, 2002; Luibheid, 2004; Kennedy & Murphy-Lawless, 2003). The one study on traveler/ethnic minority communities' attitudes to the Garda Síochána found that satisfaction with overall Garda service to the community was 79 percent, with travelers being the least satisfied at 52 percent, refugees being the most satisfied at 92 percent, and migrants just below refugees at 91 percent. The data were based on 600 written questionnaires, which were administered both in person and through mailings, of which 200 were completed by travelers, migrants, and refugees. Refugees included both those still seeking asylum and those granted asylum. Interestingly, the study found that although satisfaction with overall Gardaí contact was 76 percent, 79 percent of respondents felt that the Garda service needed to be improved, with suggestions that Gardaí be more respectful and friendlier, and that the organization overall be better staffed and have more contact with the community. These seemingly contradictory findings are not explained. As regards cultural sensitivity, 43 percent of respondents felt that Gardaí were not sensitive (Walker, 2007).

While this study offers a comprehensive view of minority attitudes toward the Garda Síochána, further research is needed because the groups measured (travelers, migrants, and refugees) are very different from one another and may have different needs with regard to the Garda, and they merit further inquiry as separate from the other groups. For instance, travelers have a specific negative view of the Garda that has persisted for years throughout Europe, not just in Ireland, whereas other migrants may not necessarily have this issue. Refugees are different from migrants and travelers because they do not work or pay taxes while their asylum cases are processed, though they have legal residence in Ireland for the duration of their cases. Migrants, on the other hand, work and pay taxes; and travelers are not necessarily legal. A further distinction that may be drawn is between asylum seekers and those who have been granted asylum. The former reside in direct accommodation centers and rely entirely on the state, having a fraction of the rights of citizens, while the latter have been granted asylum and therefore have most of the rights of citizens. Thus, there is room for further inquiry on the individual groups to develop a more nuanced and complete picture of minority attitudes toward the Garda Síochána.

## Introduction

This project aimed to study the relationship between asylum seekers and An Garda Síochána in Dublin, Ireland. The impetus for this report was the observation that there was some disconnect between the Garda Síochána and the immigrant community in Dublin, which led to questions about whether there are areas that can be improved in the interaction between the Garda Síochána and asylum seekers, as they occupy a unique position in Dublin society, being entirely in under the care and direction of the Department of Justice. Everything pertaining to their daily living, including accommodation and basic services, are overseen by the Reception and Integration Agency. Their asylum cases are heard and decided by the Department of Justice. Upon entering the country, they are assigned to one of 52 direct provision centers. There they receive everything needed for everyday life, including meals and a room, usually shared. They are prohibited from working, but receive €9.10 a week. Most remain in the system for at least two years while their asylum cases are processed (Direct Provision Accommodation for Asylum Seekers, 2007-2010).

The major questions this project sought to address were: 1) What are asylum seekers' opinions of An Garda Síochána? 2) How do members of the Garda Síochána feel about the asylum seekers with whom they interact? 3) Are there any pervasive or salient issues from either side, and if so, what are they and what are their underlying causes? 4) How might these issues be addressed? 5) What are the difficulties in conducting this kind of research and how might they be resolved in future projects? It should be noted that this project aimed at depth rather than breadth, focusing on capturing subtle nuances in opinion and attempting to map the individual: what may have shaped a participant's perceptions? Are there any inconsistencies? Can participants adequately support their opinions?

The objective was therefore to explore not only what participants' opinions were, but also how they might have arrived at them and what were the influencing factors.

## **Participant Profile**

As of the end of June 2009, the month in which sampling began, 30.8 percent of the 1508 asylum seekers who had applied in 2009 were from Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zimbabwe (ORAC-monthly stats). There were 16.3 percent from Pakistan and China, and 52.9 percent were from other countries. Thus, there is not a clear majority for the country from where asylum seekers hail. And although there is no majority age group, the combined 18-25 and 26-35 age groups comprised 57.6 percent of asylum seekers who applied in 2008 (Annual Report for 2009 is not available). Also in 2008, 63.8 percent of applicants were male. Similar statistics apply for applicants in 2007 and 2006. This is significant because all the participants had been in Ireland for at least a year, so they would have been represented in the 2008, 2007, and 2006 statistics. Unfortunately, statistics could not be found for Dublin alone or for all asylum seekers awaiting decisions in 2009 regardless of year of application.

There were 38 asylum seekers and 4 Gardaí who participated in the project. In comparison to the statistics of asylum seekers as a whole, the sample of participants is somewhat representative in the areas of country of origin and age, but not representative for gender. The combined age groups 25-30 and 31-45 together represent 71 percent of the sample and 89.4 percent came from African countries. There was 71 percent of female participants as opposed to the majority of male applicants in 2008 (63.8 percent).

There are two reasons for these disparities in demographics, the first having to do with the sampling methodology and the second with the nature of this kind of research. The disparity in gender arises from the fact that the initial participants were taken from women's groups before access to direct provision centers was granted. The disparity in country of origin, with the heavy sampling of asylum seekers from African countries, is due to the fact that most asylum seekers from Africa have at least a basic understanding and ability to communicate in English, while the same is not true of asylum seekers from the countries in the Middle East or Asia. As I speak only English, proficiency in it was a requisite for participation in the project. This is a sampling problem that any researcher versed only in English would encounter without interpreters, and it poses a concern for the reliability of the results, as the experiences of asylum seekers who can speak English may very well be completely different from those who cannot. Without interpreters this is impossible to gauge with any degree of certainty.

Among the participants, 79 percent were from direct provision centers in Dublin 22. The other 21 percent were from Dublin 1 and 2 or the surrounding counties of Kildare and Fingal. I also interviewed four Gardaí, three male and one female, whose jurisdictions included areas where there were asylum seekers.

## **Methodology**

Data for this project came from two different sources: a written questionnaire and a face-to-face interview/focus group. The questionnaire and interview were administered to the same pool of participants. The questionnaire consisted of nine questions that mostly measured demographic variables: the first two recorded age group and gender; the third recorded nationality; the fourth measured the length of time they had spent in Ireland, which was important for gauging how long they had had contact with Gardaí; the fifth recorded their district or neighborhood of residence in Dublin or outside; and the sixth recorded the number of interactions they had had with Gardaí. The last three questions gauged their attitude toward, and relationship with, the Gardaí. They inquired about the quality of service that Gardaí provide to their neighborhood, the positivity or negativity of Gardaí presence in their neighborhood, and whether they thought Gardaí were sensitive to their cultural practices. This questionnaire was administered at the start of every interview.

Participants were sampled first from members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide services to asylum seekers and later from direct provision centers themselves. They were asked to sit down for a 30-minute to 1-hour recorded interview in which I asked them about their experiences with the Garda Síochána. There was a guideline of questions for the interviews, but each flowed in a unique way. Some questions were asked, and others not, based on what the participant wanted to talk about. The interviews were designed to be a conversation rather than just a verbal form of the questionnaire, which added to their value as true indicators of attitudes. Sometimes written surveys can be misleading because of question choice, reporting, or comprehension errors. Interviews have the advantage of being able to capture nuances in an individual's attitudes that most surveys, unless they are extremely exhaustive, cannot. Furthermore, interviews can reveal themes that the researcher may not have even considered as a possibility.

Some participants had one-on-one interviews, while others participated through the focus group style. The style that was used for each participant was contingent upon availability and ease of transport. Those who could meet at the same time typically participated in a focus group, while those whose schedules did not align participated individually. The interviews occurred in varied settings: some were conducted in cafes in the city center and others in the public spaces of direct provision centers, whichever was most convenient for the participant. While it would have been ideal to have a designated space that was private and quiet in which to conduct interviews, I lacked sufficient resources to rent such a space. As it happened, cafes were a suitable substitute because they are relatively anonymous and non-threatening. We had little chance of being overheard or noticed. All interviews were recorded in their entirety.

The interviews started out with questions about participants' experiences with the police in their countries of origin in order to understand their backgrounds with law enforcement and other figures of authority before coming to Ireland. After discussing this question, most participants naturally progressed to comparing the Garda Síochána with police in their countries of origin, and I would take their direction to start asking more specific questions about the purpose of their interactions, what happened, and how it made them feel. If a participant said something particularly interesting, I would hone in on that and ask a few more clarification questions to tease out the response. If a participant said something that was confusing or contradictory, I would ask them follow up questions on it as well. At this point, many participants took the initiative to talk about other times when they may have seen or heard something involving Gardaí, but with which they were not directly involved. I would then ask questions that gauged the extent to which they trusted Gardaí and were comfortable approaching them. I also asked questions about situations in which they would definitely report to the Gardaí and situations in which they might be more reluctant, both hypothetical. Interviews were generally concluded by asking about the extent to which they believe Gardaí demonstrate cultural sensitivity, whether or not asylum seekers have responsibilities to the Gardaí, and other questions about their knowledge and preferences regarding Gardaí.

I also interviewed four Gardaí who were stationed in jurisdictions that included most of the areas where the asylum seeker participants resided. There was no separate written questionnaire for them. Garda participants were recruited through the Garda Research Unit. Two Gardaí were interviewed individually and the others interviewed together. All interviews were conducted in private within the stations. I began each by asking demographic questions and about the nature of their jobs within the institution. Next, I asked about the extent to which they interact with civilians, Irish, and non-Irish alike. I then asked about the extent to which they had interactions with asylum seekers on a weekly basis. I also inquired into the nationalities of asylum seekers with whom they came into contact most frequently and how they characterized their interactions. In addition, I asked about what kind of training they had had in cultural sensitivity and the degree of knowledge that they and their peers had about asylum seekers. I concluded the interviews with questions about any changes they observed in the attitudes of their peers and of the institution and whether they had participated in any programs that aimed at reaching out to the asylum population.

## Themes

Eight themes stand out from the interviews with asylum seekers. These themes are opinions and remarks that were repeated by a significant percentage of the participants. These themes should be understood to be interrelated; that is, they ought to be interpreted as a whole, rather than as individual findings. Only in this way can the nuances of participants' attitudes toward the Garda Síochána be understood. The order in which they are presented does not necessarily reflect the importance, salience, or pervasiveness of the themes.

### Theme 1: The need for identifying documents

By and large the most frequent reason that brings asylum seekers to Garda stations is the need to obtain certain documents that serve as identification. The most commonly sought-after documents are the age card and the ML10. Almost everyone who said they had had interactions with the Garda Síochána cited the need to obtain specific documents. Most of the participants lacked crucial identifying documents such as birth certificates and passports because they either left their home countries without them, they were being held by the Department of Justice for the duration of the case, or they never had them to begin with. This poses a difficulty for asylum seekers because it prevents them from accessing basic services, which is compounded by their already limited access to services and abilities on the basis of seeking asylum.

For example, without any identification asylum seekers cannot open bank accounts. It may seem strange for people who are not working and only getting €19.10 per week to want to open bank accounts, but the reason is simple. Most asylum seekers still try to save a small amount of their weekly stipends because saving is always a prudent thing to do. It may be as little as two euro a week, but it is not safe to store cash in the direct provision centers because of how dense the living spaces are. A single male would most likely share a room with at least another person, a person who is most likely a stranger. This kind of environment makes theft relatively easy, so individuals strive to be vigilant about safeguarding their personal belongings. Aside from renewing their asylum cards (which do not serve as ID), most other documentation of relevance to asylum seekers must be obtained through An Garda Síochána.

### Theme 2: Inconsistent and unpredictable experiences

Twenty-four percent of participants explicitly remarked on what they perceived as inconsistency of service, knowledge, and attitudes within the ranks of An Garda Síochána. That is, the level of attention, sensitivity, knowledge, and cooperativeness varied greatly depending on the official attending to the case. One might go into one's local Garda station on a Monday and find someone who is dismissive and offers contradictory or confusing information and go back on a Wednesday to find someone who is cooperative, attentive, and who interprets the policy differently from the person on Monday. For the most part, those who referenced this issue felt that the greatest problem was the inconsistency with which policies were interpreted. Most participants qualified their statements on this issue with the recognition that people are simply different, and it would be unreasonable to expect all Gardaí to behave in a like manner, but it would be reasonable to expect that they all interpret policies and laws in the same way, that being one of the fundamental assumptions under which the Garda Síochána functions.

In addition, those who referenced this issue seemed to imply that it is well understood within the asylum seeker community that one should expect variability in experiences, such that if the first visit to the station is unsuccessful, one should keep trying because at some point one will encounter a guard who will oblige. Below I highlight a few excerpts of participants discussing this issue:

The following is taken from an interview with a Ugandan woman between the ages of 31 and 45 about her experience obtaining an age card.

When you go it depends on the one you find at the counter. Because at one time I met somebody, and she was like, “You’re not supposed to apply for this if you’re over 18.” But when you read on that form, it’s written that you must be over 18. But for her, she was like, “You have to be under 18.” Because she even went to the extent of asking me “How old are you?” And I have to tell her my exact age. And she says, “You do not have to apply for this if you are over 18.” I said, “But it says you have to be over 18, if you are under 18...” because I can read and understand what’s written there. So she says, “No, you don’t.” And I went back and talked to my colleagues, they say that, “No, it depends on the person you find there. You have to go back.” So I went back again.

So when I went back the next time, the guy I found there, he said, “OK, let me first try and see.” So he said, “Can you provide any form of ID?” I said no. “Do you have a passport?” I said, “No, I don’t have a passport, but I can give you my card, the card I have, like I use.” So he’s like, “OK, let me first check.” Because I had presented my birth certificate, and my, that card. When he took it inside there, behind the counter, coming back he said that he has called my boyfriend and they’ve said that I’m not supposed to apply for it, unless I get my status. So it was quite confusing. (I1P1)

To sum up, she said that the first time she went for an age card, the guards denied her on the grounds that she was too old (over 18), and the second time a different guards denied her on the grounds that she had to obtain refugee status first. These grounds were especially troubling to this participant because the way she heard about the age card was through a presentation that a couple of Gardaí gave at her direct provision center urging asylum seekers to apply for it, so for the Garda Síochána to go to a direct provision center, knowing that no one there had been granted asylum, and urge them to apply for something for which they needed refugee status is absurd.

Another example comes from a Kenyan woman between the ages of 31 and 45:

I needed to get a document signed called the ML10. You can get the guards to sign for you and the perception I got was that it depended on who you met at the counter, and it took me several attempts and I went to several different Garda stations. One in Finglas, one in Trinity College, and another somewhere else in Dublin. And I made several trips from Finglas to Dublin city center to get this form filled out but I always got stoppages because they wouldn’t sign it; they didn’t know what it was; they didn’t think they were in a position to do it. Others thought I wasn’t qualified to get it at that point in time, and they want some form of ID before they will sign it, but the reason you are asking for it is because you don’t have any form of ID and you need one. Some seem to be unaware of what your position is or what your status is in the country. The Department of Justice will issue you an asylum seeker’s card, but this card even says on it that it’s not to be used as an ID. So it’s like you’re between a rock and a hard place. But thankfully I went to another Garda station in Finglas just as I was about to give up; there was a lady there, and I asked her to sign an ML10 for me, and before I could even get the sentence out she was like, “Yeah, bring it over.” She couldn’t wait to get rid of me, just like, “Yeah, here, thanks.” And she knew exactly what the form was, and she knew exactly what procedure to do with it.

It’s not something that is more me, asylum seeker, black person. It more has to do with the form and what it means and how someone chooses to interpret it. Because the lady who signed it [ML10 form] didn’t give it a second thought. But for someone else, that was an issue, because they didn’t feel that that was enough [that she had all the necessary documents to qualify for an ML10]. And it could be the same for anyone else...it really just depends on who is over the counter. (I2P5)

This participant made seven attempts to get an ML10 in several different locations in and around Dublin and was met with different reasons for refusal with every attempt until she was finally successful.

Another Ghanaian woman between the ages of 25 and 30 remarked after I asked if she had ever needed to go to a garda station to get an age card or ML10, “Yes, and it was successful. But one thing I noticed about the garda station—when you go there, one person may have this information, the other person may not know it. I don’t know if there are laid-down procedures on how to do it or what...I think different guards just have different opinions on what you’re supposed to do” (I14P24).

The fact that asylum seekers are receiving different results from different Gardaí, besides being disturbing on the grounds that the Garda Síochána as an institution is designed to have standardized policy, creates several problems for both asylum seekers and Gardaí. The fact that asylum seekers are making repeated visits to Garda stations upwards of six or seven times for the same problem or request results in anxiety, frustration, and opportunity costs, as they may spend the little money they have making time-consuming trips to Garda stations located far away in the hopes that they will find an official who will oblige their issue or request. Such a result also creates opportunity costs for the Garda Síochána, as they must devote several times more time and energy to resolve a problem that could be addressed in a single visit.

Another problem is that this inconsistency could create the impression, in the minds of asylum seekers who experience it, that the Garda Síochána is undependable. The frustration associated with having to make repeated visits for the same issue undermines faith in the institution. Going to the Garda station becomes a game of chance.

### **Theme 3: Majority positive attitudes**

Based on statements made in the interviews, 68 percent of participants expressed favorable views towards An Garda Síochána. The other 32 percent were either neutral negative. Interestingly, only 50 percent of participants expressed positivity towards the Garda Síochána in the written questionnaire. Some participants took pains to emphasize how much they appreciated the work of the Garda Síochána. For instance, one Nigerian man said, “The police in Ireland are great. They don’t harass, and they talk to people politely. They are good, they are doing their work” (FG3P14). When I asked this participant on what grounds did he base his opinions, he responded, “You see them! I see the work they’re doing! Even when you’re on the streets, and you see the Garda talking to some people, even the way you see them interacting with other people. You see them asking people questions and they just ask politely and once you answer them they say OK! Bye! Not like in Africa where they will stop you and beat you” (FG3P14).

The disparity between the interview results and those of the written questionnaire suggests that for whatever reason, the questionnaires were not capturing participants’ true feelings and opinions. This could be because of the difficulty of the wording in the questions, the possibility that there were not enough answer choices to fully capture varying sentiments, or the possibility that participants rushed through the questionnaire without giving it proper consideration, among others. It also implies that studies using only written questionnaires may not be the appropriate medium for studying asylum seekers. This is unsurprising considering that for many of them, English is not their first language, and so even if their conversational English is adequate or good, they may still not be familiar with more technical terms or complex grammar.

### **Theme 4: Initial attitude towards An Garda Síochána influenced by experiences with law enforcement in home country**

Every interview began with the question of how law enforcement behaved in participants’ own countries. All but two of the participants cited the presence of police misconduct in their home countries. Among the common characteristics of law enforcement were that they engaged in bribery, protected government officials and the wealthy

over everyone else, terrorized the citizenry, and did not respond to calls. For example, one Nigerian man said, “The police in Nigeria, we have corruption. Every day they have guns, checking points, they do nothing; they just exhort money from people” (FG3P14). Another woman from Sierra Leone said, “The police in Sierra Leone are very bad. They shoot anyhow, the people can’t go to them the way they can in Dublin. You’re scared if you see police five minutes away, you run away because they always have very long guns and they will kill anybody. It has been going on for a long time with no change” (I9P16).

Although only a handful of participants explicitly mentioned that police in their home countries were part of the reason why they are seeking asylum in Ireland, the impression given was that police conduct was part and parcel of the fundamental reasons participants were seeking asylum; that is, the police are inextricably tied to the governments whose conduct form the basis for leaving the country.

Thirty-two percent of participants remarked on how their attitudes toward An Garda Síochána were initially colored by their experiences in their home countries. For instance, one woman from Sierra Leone said,

I was very scared. Very scared. When police come there, in an ambulance, you know the ambulance cars? They look just like police. And when the ambulance came, I was in the compound and I started running and the manager saw me and asked why was I running? And I said because the police are coming and they said they are not police they are ambulance. And then they asked why would I run if it were police and I explained to them that I was scared of them, and they told me that police in Ireland are different and that I shouldn’t be scared of them. I didn’t really believe them. When I went to city center and I saw Gardaí on the streets, I go like this [shudder] and the person I was with had been here longer and she said no, police here are good, why are you behaving that way? (I9P16)

Another woman from Ghana responded to the question “What were your initial reactions to the guards in Ireland?” with, “I think, because I hadn’t seen a white police before, I thought maybe the police here would be like the police in my own country.” Yet another woman from Uganda said, “When I first came here, I just thought police were all the same. I did not trust the police in Ireland. It was my first time in Europe so I did not know what the police were like. My perception of the police was very negative” (I13P23).

However, in every instance except two, those participants who were initially fearful of Gardaí because of their experiences in their home countries grew to be positive about them. The transition usually took a long time, between 4 months and 2 years. One Ghanaian woman described the process of acclimating to the Garda Síochána: “I have to study them, gauge them. When you go out there and you lost your way, because they go around patrolling a lot, when you get lost, you approach them, they’ll show you. It’s good. That’s how I realized they’re good” (FG8P36). The woman from Sierra Leone said,

About a year. Probably because whenever I would go out in city center that first year, I would go out with a group of women who had come here before me, and so whenever I got scared of the garda, they would say to me no, no you don’t need to be scared of them. So about a year. After a year, I stopped and I knew they were good. Because I would be out and they would never attack me and I saw them always helping others. So after that I started loving the guards. Yes, that first year, we were going around city center at 8 o’clock that night and we didn’t know how to get the bus back home. So my friends asked me to ask the guards. And I said do you want me to get taken? And they said no, stop thinking about Africa. This place is good. I wanted to go to them, but I couldn’t go. I was too afraid. So then me and my friend went up together and the guard asked what was wrong with me and I said I was afraid of him and he just laughed. Afraid of me? And since that day I have been better. (I9P16)

However, there is also a notable example of a participant who expressly stated that her negative opinions of An Garda Síochána were colored by her experiences in her home country in Africa and that her opinions have not changed. She said, “The reason is I would say most of the time if you have a particular opinion of something, you’ll continue to carry that opinion with you wherever you are until it’s proven otherwise. Now, sadly, the guards here have not done anything different to change my perceptions of the police” (I1P5).

### **Theme 5: Misunderstanding questions about cultural sensitivity**

Twelve participants left the question about cultural sensitivity blank on the written questionnaire, and of those, 5 left all the opinion questions blank while the other 7 only left the cultural sensitivity question blank. This would suggest that 5 people did not answer the question because of basic deficiencies in literacy, while the others did not answer because they chose not to. This was reflected in the interviews as well; many times I had to explain what I meant in the question, or it was clear from participants’ responses that they did not understand. For instance, I asked one woman from Uganda, “Do you think the Garda are sensitive to your cultural practices? You said on the sheet that you disagree. Can you explain why?” to which she responded, “Because at time if you just go there [the Garda station] they’ve not really helped you, and you know that at least they’ve done it for some people in your situation. So at times they’re not really helpful” (I1P1). This woman’s response had nothing to do with cultural sensitivity. Being helpful and being sensitive to someone’s cultural practices are two separate issues, and it seems that this participant confused them or misconstrued the question to be about the efficacy of the Garda Síochána; thus, it appears that some of the time it is possible for asylum seekers to not understand the question of cultural sensitivity.

I asked another woman from Uganda, “Do you think the guards are sensitive to your cultural practices?” to which she replied, “Yes I think so, because some of them don’t know outside, some it’s their first time seeing black people...” (I6P9). This response is a non sequitur and the disjuncture between her assertion and her evidence shows that she does not really understand the question. Moreover, after realizing she did not fully grasp the cultural sensitivity question, I changed the wording of the question to approximate the initial question by asking, “Do you think they accommodate different people’s way of living?” to which she responded, “I don’t get it, that one” (I6P9).

Yet another example of how some participants had difficulty understanding the question of cultural sensitivity is from an interview with a Liberian woman. I asked her, “Do you feel that the Gardaí are sensitive to your cultural practices and norms?” to which she replied, “No.” I then asked, “Why do you say that?” after which she laughed and said, “I don’t know” (I7P10). Curiously, on the written questionnaire this participant responded “Poor” to the questions, “In general, the Garda provide what kind of service to your neighborhood?” and “In general, Garda presence in your neighborhood is...” But she responded “Agree” to the questionnaire’s statement, “In general, the Garda are sensitive to your customs and practices.” So this woman gave conflicting opinions to the same question in verbal and written form, and she also stated that she did not know why she held her opinions. She was quite negative about An Garda Síochána in her interview. Having said that the Garda Síochána delivers poor service and has a poor presence in her neighborhood, the implication is that she believes An Garda Síochána is not culturally sensitive, but then she could not explain why.

This finding is particularly relevant to past and future research in this area because, to the extent that it demonstrates that participants do not understand cultural sensitivity questions, it implies that research which seeks to gauge this factor may produce questionable results. Therefore, this project is inconclusive on its determination of the degree to which asylum seekers in Dublin believe that members of the Garda Síochána are culturally sensitive, and future researchers who seek to answer this question are cautioned to be careful about the way they measure this variable.

## Theme 6: Feelings of discrimination

Thirty-two percent of participants said that they had felt discriminated against at one point or another for reasons of race, nationality, or status (seeking asylum). Of those participants who cited discrimination, 42 percent still had generally positive attitudes towards An Garda Síochána and felt that the instances of discrimination were isolated events. Of the rest, three participants felt that the Garda Síochána exhibited wholesale discrimination: one woman from Nigeria believed that the Garda Síochána discriminated against all Nigerians (FG4P18), one woman from Rwanda believed Gardaí were racist (I3P6), and one woman from Sudan believed that the Garda Síochána discriminated against asylum seekers (I19P38).

The participant from Rwanda said, “Those people they are harsh on me, and they look as though they reject you... Maybe when they look at you and they see that you are not...because I’m black, that’s the impression I take” (I3P6). Another woman from Liberia recounted a story about her friend from their direct provision center: “The first time, it didn’t happen to me, it happened to my friend. She was fighting with the Georgian [man, also asylum seeker] because she said the Georgian he liked to embarrass the woman. The man has never embarrassed me, and so they were fighting. The manager called the guards and when the guards came, he did not ask anything from my friend. He just spoke with the man, and he said to my friend, he did not say to both of them, if you fight again, we will deport you back to Africa” (I7P10).

However, there is an attitude held by some participants that discrimination, though it may exist in the Garda Síochána, is mostly isolated and that the majority of Gardaí are not discriminatory. For instance, one Ghanaian woman said, “Some of them [Gardaí] are OK, but there is some racism, but there is racism everywhere” (FG8P36). An Eritrean man who also participated in the focus group echoed that sentiment by saying, “Yes, even in my own country there is racism. It may happen here sometimes, but I don’t think the guards are mostly that way” (FG8P37).

## Theme 7: Frustration with the institution or policies

Ten participants said they felt frustrated with An Garda Síochána as an institution and with their policies in conjunction with asylum policies spanning multiple institutions. That is, they did not feel discriminated against in an individual sense or by particular individuals they had encountered; rather, they felt that the *system* itself makes it very difficult for asylum seekers. For example, one woman from Zimbabwe said, “You ask them something and they tell you they don’t know, they’ll have to go and find out. And a lot of the things about the asylum process...they really don’t know” (FG1P3).

An example of someone who is disillusioned with the Garda Síochána because of policy is a woman from Rwanda who said,

What I have found is that they don’t respond to your case. Because they first ask you are you a citizen? Do you have an Irish passport? And when you say no, they ask for your passport or your birth certificate, if you don’t produce those documents, they say there is no action to be taken for you. There was a recent issue where I applied for an ML10, and still they asked for either a passport or birth certificate, and when I told them I don’t have either, but I have an ID, I told them my residential manager gave me a letter introducing me to them. But they said no, if you have neither a passport or birth certificate we can’t do anything for you. (I3P6)

In this instance, the participant was upset because she felt, on the basis that the Gardaí would not give her the document she wanted, that they do not respond to cases. She said that the Gardaí asked her for either a passport or a birth certificate, and she produced something she felt served as identification and was therefore equivalent, in principle, to a passport or birth certificate, and was upset when they failed to accept it as sufficient to grant the ML10.

Another factor that exacerbated this participant's negative feelings about the Garda Síochána is her assumption that Gardaí know that she is an asylum seeker from the outset. For example, she said, "Because as soon as you enter, and they look up and see you, even responding to you, it's just a problem to them. You can see that they don't come to you easily, and then they start asking you, and the first thing they ask you is do you have passport? Do you have birth certificate? And they know you don't have them." However, after speaking with some members of An Garda Síochána, it seems that most Gardaí would not know who is an asylum seeker and who is not, for they do not ask. In addition, they are not trained about asylum seekers so they would not necessarily know that an asylum seeker would not have his or her passport or birth certificate. This faulty assumption on the part of this participant is understandable, however, for one would assume that Gardaí would be informed about all the subpopulations in their jurisdictions.

### **Theme 8: Recognition that asylum seekers have a responsibility to An Garda Síochána**

Six participants were of the opinion that asylum seekers sometimes get frustrated with Gardaí for just doing their job. They believe some asylum seekers take one of two points of view: 1) that Ireland is like Africa or the Middle East and any rule can be bent; and 2) that Ireland, as the place where they are seeking asylum, ought to be perfect. These erroneous assumptions, some participants believe, may cause asylum seekers to unfairly criticize the Garda Síochána when they realize the reality is not as they expected.

For example, a woman from Malawi said of an instance when she tried to get a document signed and was rejected, "I tried before and they said I didn't meet the requirements and I was frustrated but I knew they were just doing their job. I guess I just expected that everything would be perfect" (FG2P12). This woman believed that her frustration, though merited, should not have been directed at the Garda Síochána. Another woman from Uganda said about her experience trying to get an ML10 and being denied, "So she [manager of direct provision center of which she was a resident] wrote me the letter [confirming her identity and residence in the direct provision center]. And I tried again [to get the ML10], and again they told me I needed an ID. That's the only instance that made me feel upset, but in the end I understand, that's the policy" (I6P9).

Two other male participants from Nigeria were especially emphatic about this point. They both believed that negativity from asylum seekers directed at An Garda Síochána were largely unjustified. For example, one of them said, "If I don't do anything wrong, they can't arrest me. You have to do things within the law here. They have their ways of doing things and you can't expect them to be the same as the way you do things. I don't break their laws, I go my way, I don't have any problems with them" (FG3P13). And the other followed by saying, "There are some things they can sign for you and other things that they can't. Why do you expect them to sign something they can't sign? They can't. There are rules about what Garda can sign and what they can't. What they can do, they will do. What they can't do, they won't do. And when the Garda says he can't sign for you, you be taking it that this Garda is not good" (FG3P14). Then the other added, "Some people might think that just because in Africa the police can do anything for you, that here it's the same way. People go to the Gardaí and they say I want to do this, I want to do that, but that's not the job of the Gardaí. It's [the Department of] Justice that they're supposed to be going to" (FG3P13).

Yet a third Nigerian man said, "What I would say is that being an asylum seeker it's frustrating. They deprive you of a normal way of life, so you might be depressed. Some people might be frustrated with their situation or with the policy but you can't blame the guards for that" (I10P17). Thus, it appears that there are some asylum seekers who view the problem between the Garda Síochána and asylum seekers, to the extent that there is a problem, as stemming more from asylum seekers' unreasonable expectations than from the Garda Síochána.

## Subthemes

In addition to the eight themes discussed above, there were a few minor, though notable, subthemes that emerged from the interviews. The first is that no one had ever heard of Ethnic Liaison Officers. The second subtheme is that several participants cited the fact that Gardaí do not carry guns as a large contributing factor for why Gardaí are approachable and why they are so different from law enforcement officers in their home countries. The third subtheme is that asylum seekers view An Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice as inextricably linked, such that whatever they say to the Garda Síochána will inevitably be passed on to the Department of Justice and could potentially affect their asylum cases. To what extent this is true I cannot say, but it is a perception that will not likely be changed easily. Those who have commented on this do not treat it as a negative aspect of the Garda; rather, they treat it as a truth of life, that one cannot ever fully trust law enforcement. For instance, one woman from Cameroon said,

I was invited once for counseling/advice, but I didn't go because when you start involving yourself with the guards and everything, maybe they'll be more receptive, but when you are in the asylum process, they want to know everything you do. They are in touch with everything, they get information, you know? If you hear that some people went to the guards and that information was passed on to the Department of Justice, you would not want to involve yourself with them. So then why should I go? I was talking about how good the guards are in the streets, but when I was invited to the garda station for counseling, I didn't go because I remembered that some people had went and their information ended up at [the Department of] Justice. I would not like to be involved in anything.

I'll be honest with you...what is a police? He's a protector for the government and the people. But the police are there to inform the government about the people. We asylum seekers are on the other side. Already being an asylum seeker you are not yet a citizen, so whatever you do, the police are there first and foremost to protect the government. That is what I know and understand. Even if you deal with them, there is always a limit. The guards can protect you, it's true. But for you to start treating a guard like your friend because oh he's so nice and so friendly...my dear, from the experience I have even in my own country where the police are nice too, if you are with the police he will document everything you say. (FG1P4)

So it appears that although asylum seekers believe they can never fully trust the Garda Síochána, they do not view it as something that ought to be fixed; rather, it is inherent in the structure between law enforcement and civilians.

## Discussion of Gardaí Interviews

Below are summaries of the Gardaí interviews, in the order in which the discussion flowed.

### **Garda 1: Ethnic Liaison Officer, male, 3 years service**

Ethnic Liaison Officers deal with ethnic minorities who may face particular problems and who may be especially suspicious of An Garda Síochána, in addition to their regular duties. The primary task for an Ethnic Liaison Officer is to organize four meetings a year, held in the Garda station, with non-nationals within the jurisdiction. The meetings have not been successful. He said they usually send out between 30-40 family invites, and the best attendance they ever received was 6 individuals. He was nominated to become an Ethnic Liaison Officer after having already joined An Garda Síochána, and he had to attend a three day training program:

The training I thought was, it wasn't great, no it wasn't...the second day we had an African woman in who was talking to us, and we had to stand around in a circle and throw a cushion around and the person had to nominate a letter and then you were to nominate a country corresponding to that, so A, Australia. I found it a bit, not really...it wasn't great no. You couldn't pass or fail it, you were going to fail it, you know. I thought the course was, it could do with improvements. It felt like being in school, you know.

When I asked whether he felt that he gained any practical information or experience from the training, he said no; however, they did outline protocol for certain cultures, but he has never had to put that into practice. He said that usually there are not any problems with the language barrier. He normally sees asylum seekers when they apply for passports or at traffic checkpoints, but he would not know whether the person is an asylum seeker. "We don't really define them as asylum seekers. We define them by nationality. We just see them as an African, or Asian, or Eastern European. The term 'asylum seeker,' we don't really deal with it. 'Asylum seeker' wouldn't mean anything to me." He said Gardaí would not have much knowledge on the asylum process, but that that does not affect the quality of service given. Along the same lines, he believes that there is stereotyping and some negative opinions of non-nationals within the Garda Síochána (especially for Romanians and Nigerians), but that it does not affect the quality of service given to individuals of those nationalities.

### **Gardaí 2 and 3: Ethnic Liaison Officers, male and female**

Discussing the training they underwent for becoming Ethnic Liaison Officers, they said that they had no more than five guest speakers, and they participated in different exercises designed to educate the trainees about the customs of different nationalities, including a role-playing exercise where trainees had to pretend that they were asylum seekers just entering Ireland who had to go through immigration. The objective of the exercise was to demonstrate how difficult the process is.

They found the training somewhat effective but remarked that much of the course was common sense: "There's only so much they can do with a course like that, really. They can show you different things and do exercises and such, but a lot of it is straightforward common sense, and just to have impartiality towards people which we're supposed to have anyway." They felt that the training gave them some practical knowledge about how to interact with people of other nationalities, and that ideally everyone would go through the course by incorporating Ethnic Liaison training into initial Garda training in Templemore, because ninety percent of the time individuals of other nationalities do not interact with Ethnic Liaison Officers; rather, they interact with whoever is at the station or on the street at that time.

They appear to be very active in forming relationships with asylum seekers in their jurisdiction. They drop in to, and hold talks at, the direct provision center. They also work with the Intercultural Center and organize events that put Gardaí in contact with members of the community. Some immigrant groups are more difficult to communicate with than others—the Polish and the Chinese communities, for instance. They make more of an effort to form a relationship with asylum seekers than with other non-national groups. Asylum seekers are not difficult to access and communicate with because they all live together and they need the Garda, but other groups who are in Ireland to work may not ever need the Garda and are not interested in becoming involved in any programs or initiatives that bring Gardaí and non-nationals together. These communities tend to police themselves and crimes tend not to be reported. About crime at the direct provision centers, they say that it is very rare.

On the topic of signing documents, participating Gardaí say that the age card and the ML10 are relatively minor documents and they usually do not have a problem issuing them to asylum seekers. Below is a quote from one participant on this:

If they have the relevant documentation, I have no problem dealing with them. And for ML10s, the purpose of it is to prove who you say you are. So, if you believe who they say they are, then I have no problem signing it. If I think that's who it is, there's no harm in it. They're only going to go set up a bank account, or whatever, which they're entitled to. I mean, they are living here... you can sympathize with them; they're in an awkward situation. You could be living in a direct provision center for three or four years before you are given residency in Ireland. So it's a bit ridiculous to consider that they don't have a bank account for that long, when they do have some kind of income coming in.

Guards are slightly suspicious of signing things unless they're a hundred percent certain. And like, it's grand when an Irish person comes in, like here's my passport. But then when they see, like I think Nigerian people have a...there's kind of a stereotype there that they're fraudsters, and there would be a certain amount of fraud going on, but there's a stereotype there. So when a guard sees a Nigerian person coming in, with a strange looking passport and an ML10 form, he's not going to be...not every guard is going to want to sign it, because they're not confident in themselves what this ML10 is going to be used for. I can understand that they're thinking, "I don't want to sign this and then have this guy using it to set up a false bank account or something." And then on the same hand, I can see the asylum seekers legitimately coming in, and it's not that it's biased against them; it's just that they're trying to follow procedure to cover their backsides. But it would be a lack of understanding as well, there, if people don't know the full situation, they're not going to sign it. You know, it's like you putting your name on something, you don't want it coming back on you later on. I think it's like something, like we were talking about earlier on, like if there was a better kind of understanding of the situation these people are in, guards would have no problem signing ML10s or age cards, and there's not a whole lot you can actually achieve with an age card and ML10 anyway. But it's just that slight kind of stereotype, and an ignorance of those people's situation.

He went on to say that he can definitely see how asylum seekers, upon making several attempts, could eventually get a guard to sign for an age card or ML10, because they could encounter a guard who is more experienced and understands their situation, or they could happen to go to a station at a particularly busy time, when guards are just signing and stamping without carefully scrutinizing every application.

He says that the younger guards would have some idea of different cultures, but the older ones would be more ignorant. But he thinks that Gardaí do not really need to know about asylum procedures because most jurisdictions do not have direct provision centers, and even if they do, the centers are very quiet. There are few incidents and little regular Gardaí-asylum seeker interaction.

In terms of confidentiality, they believe that asylum seekers should feel free to discuss their problems with Gardaí because there is no explicit information-sharing between the Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice. They said it varies on a case-by-case basis whether information gets recorded, but there is a certain amount of confidentiality that asylum seekers could avail themselves of.

#### **Garda 4: Community Garda, 8 years**

He rarely interacts with asylum seekers and says that most of the time one wouldn't know if someone was an asylum seeker. He did not receive any training on asylum seekers but did receive some on cultural sensitivity. It was not included in his initial Garda training but was a subsequent compulsory training that he did after a few years. The cultural sensitivity training was short (half a day) but helpful because when he was growing up, he rarely had any interaction with foreign nationals, but as he works with them now on a daily basis, it was helpful for him to gain some

of the practical knowledge from the training. He believes that Gardaí entering the force now should receive more training in cultural sensitivity than he did, and he recommends that the training involve more guest speakers and more role-playing exercises. He believes the level of awareness of asylum seekers and the asylum process would vary substantially from station to station, and from guard to guard. He believes it would be helpful for all Gardaí to receive some basic information on asylum seekers:

Even an hour just to go through what is the process, what is the process people have to go through when they arrive in the country, when they're initially seeking asylum. If they're refused asylum, what's the appeals process, what exactly it is, what they're entitled to do, what they're not entitled to do in the country, how would you know who is an asylum seeker, what identification they must carry, those sorts of things, and just to know the process and how long it takes, and what is their status in the country.

He believes that Irish people in general are used to the fact that there are asylum seekers in the country now. "It's just accepted that Ireland is host to a number of people who are seeking asylum. It's not a big issue anymore, I don't think, as it would have been eight to ten years ago."

## Recommendations

### Remedying inconsistent interpretations of policies

Asylum seekers are in a unique position because most of them lack the identifying documents that citizens take for granted. They are also in a tenuous position in Ireland because their futures are unclear. This poses a unique challenge for Gardaí, who must apply policies written for nationals and other visa-holding individuals to people who are essentially in political and national limbo, with little or no training to do so. Much of the frustration of asylum seekers stemmed from inconsistent experiences with the Garda Síochána, where it appeared that Gardaí had different interpretations of the policy and the way in which they applied it to asylum seekers. Asylum seekers got confused when they received conflicting messages from different Gardaí, and in the worst case scenarios, this frustration turned into resentment and the belief that the Garda Síochána has discriminatory practices.

A Zimbabwean woman commented on the problem as follows:

You ask them something and they tell you they don't know, they'll have to go and find out. And a lot of the things about the asylum process...they really don't know. It has been there a long time, but just because...it's from the government itself that needs to be addressed. Some of the things they just don't want to know, they just blindfold the asylum process so that it doesn't involve a lot of people, and so many people just don't know the process. So in the police that needs to be addressed, so that everyone there knows what the procedure is, so they understand what to do if we need certain documents, etc. But everything's been so closed that not much information is given to the guards. (FG1P3)

Neither the Garda Síochána nor the Department of Justice is directly implicated in this problem; rather, it stems from a fundamental disjuncture between roles, policy, and training. The Department of Justice is the ultimate authority for asylum seekers. The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) is under the umbrella of the Department of Justice, as is An Garda Síochána. Agencies like RIA directly serve the body of asylum seekers in Ireland and are intimately familiar with asylum policies and the limitations of it. On the other hand, An Garda Síochána does not have any direct connection to asylum seekers and as such, there is limited or no educational training provided on asylum seekers and how the policies are different (or the same) for them versus non-asylum seekers. Yet it would appear

that some members of the Garda Síochána are in semi-regular contact with asylum seekers because they are the ones who issue some of the documents asylum seekers wish to obtain.

Thus, the Garda Síochána is working with groups for which there is no formal training, and the agencies that would be prepared to work with asylum seekers are not involved in the process of obtaining the identifying documents which asylum seekers want. Therefore, it is recommended that one of two changes occurs: 1) An Garda Síochána develops a training program that is specifically geared towards educating Gardaí about asylum seekers and the policies that pertain to them, or 2) all services for asylum seekers besides the service of law enforcement is assumed by other agencies within the Department of Justice that already currently work directly with asylum seekers, such that they no longer go to An Garda Síochána for obtaining documents. This way, only agencies that are prepared to work with asylum seekers do so.

### **Develop a substantial training program in cultural sensitivity**

From the Gardaí with whom I spoke, it appears that there is not any significant training in cultural sensitivity incorporated into basic garda training. While ethnic liaison training is certainly a start, more could be done to prepare Gardaí to interact with individuals from all around the globe. For instance, there should be a more careful emphasis on how the various African countries are different from one another. Several African participants remarked that they felt they were treated like Nigerians, which is offensive to them because they do not necessarily identify with them. Examples of effective training programs would be to have speakers of different nationalities talk about their particular cultural norms and having trainees role-play potential situations.

### **Limitations**

This project has a number of limitations stemming from its limited time and resources (two months and limited funding) and the fact that it is the first of its kind conducted in Ireland. The first is the small sample size and over-representation of women, which made it difficult to find any statistically significant correlations in the quantitative data from the written questionnaire. Second, the method for identifying participants was not ideal. At the beginning of the project I had not been granted access to any direct provision centers, so I had to find participants through other means. Because of the limited timeframe, I had to use the contacts I already had to gain access to asylum seekers who were involved in Dublin NGOs, who are not necessarily representative of asylum seekers in general. During the second half of the project, I was granted access to a direct provision center in Dublin, which allowed me to sample a wider range of asylum seekers. Third, the setting in which the interviews took place was not ideal. Because it is nearly impossible to find spaces to use for free, most of the interviews were conducted in public spaces, such as cafes.

However, despite these limitations, these interviews are a worthy source of information because they are so in-depth. They portray nuanced opinions that written surveys fail to capture, and the themes discussed above are important because, for the most part, they were not elicited. That is, they came out naturally within the context of a broader discussion, which is important because that makes them more reliable as actual measures of opinion.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this study suggest that the majority of asylum seekers in Dublin have positive attitudes toward the Garda Síochána, but the figures are not as optimistic as those of the earlier study of traveler and minority attitudes conducted by the Garda Research Unit, which found that 92 percent of refugees were satisfied with Gardaí service. Only 68 percent of participants in this study had positive attitudes, and, isolating just the written question-

naire, which more closely approximates the methodology used by the earlier study, that figure drops to 50 percent. However, it appears that most of the problems that asylum seekers face in their interactions with Gardaí are easily overcome with more expansive and effective training, standardization of policy, and delineation of roles between the Garda Síochána and other institutions of the Department of Justice. For the most part, blatant discrimination of asylum seekers by Gardaí for reasons of race, nationality or status, seem to be rare.

## **Further Research**

Given the limitations described above, there is clearly a need for further research into this area. The relationship between the Garda Síochána and asylum seekers is complex, and there is still much more to be elucidated. For instance, some participants made it seem obvious that there are issues for which asylum seekers would not seek the help of the Garda Síochána, issues like domestic abuse and prostitution in the direct provision centers. But they did not elaborate on the issues nor did they provide any insight on how this might be addressed. Further research should be conducted on this troubling aspect.

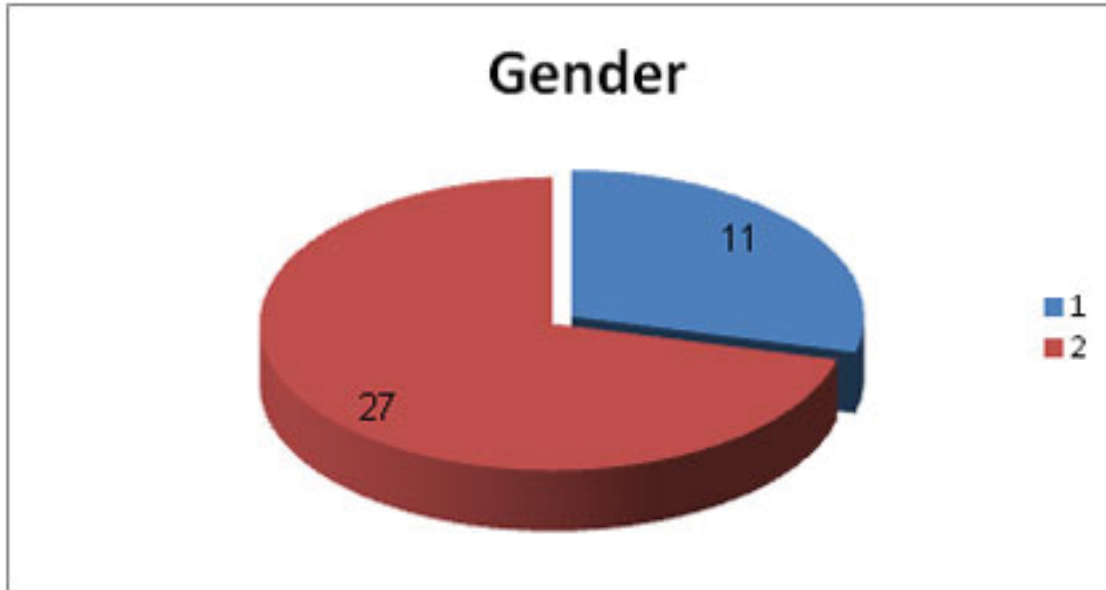
Another area that needs to be researched is the relationship between An Garda Síochána and non-English speaking asylum seekers. As mentioned above, all of the participants in this project spoke at least basic English, but there are many asylum seekers that do not, and they might be the group with the greatest difficulties in accessing needed services. Research should be done to assess whether this group is adequately serviced, and if not, to determine what changes ought to be made.

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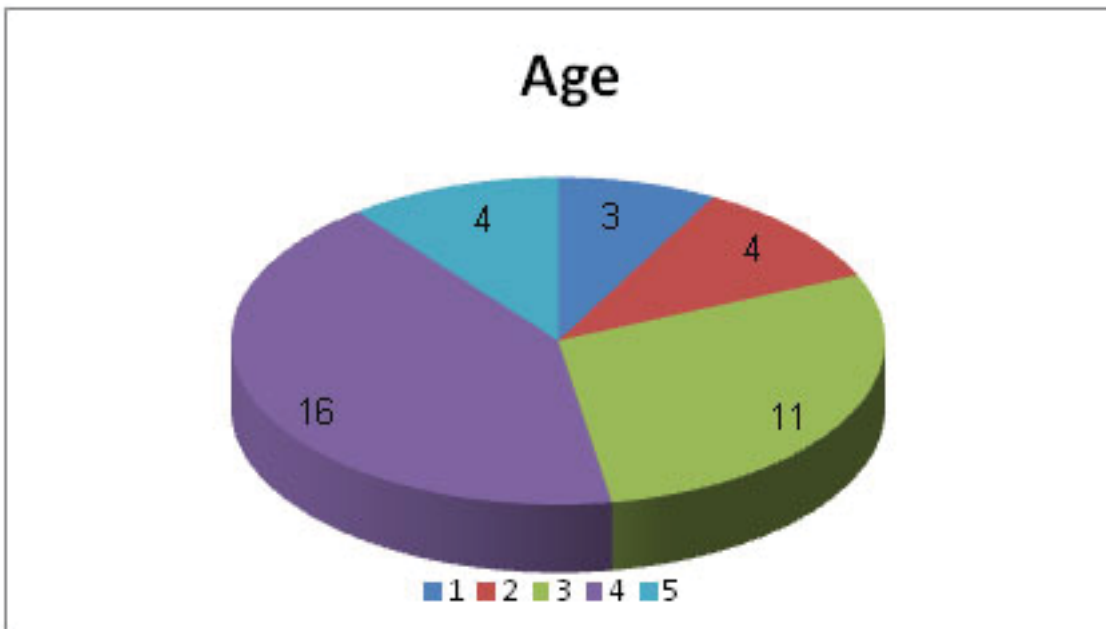
## Appendix

Figure 1: Gender



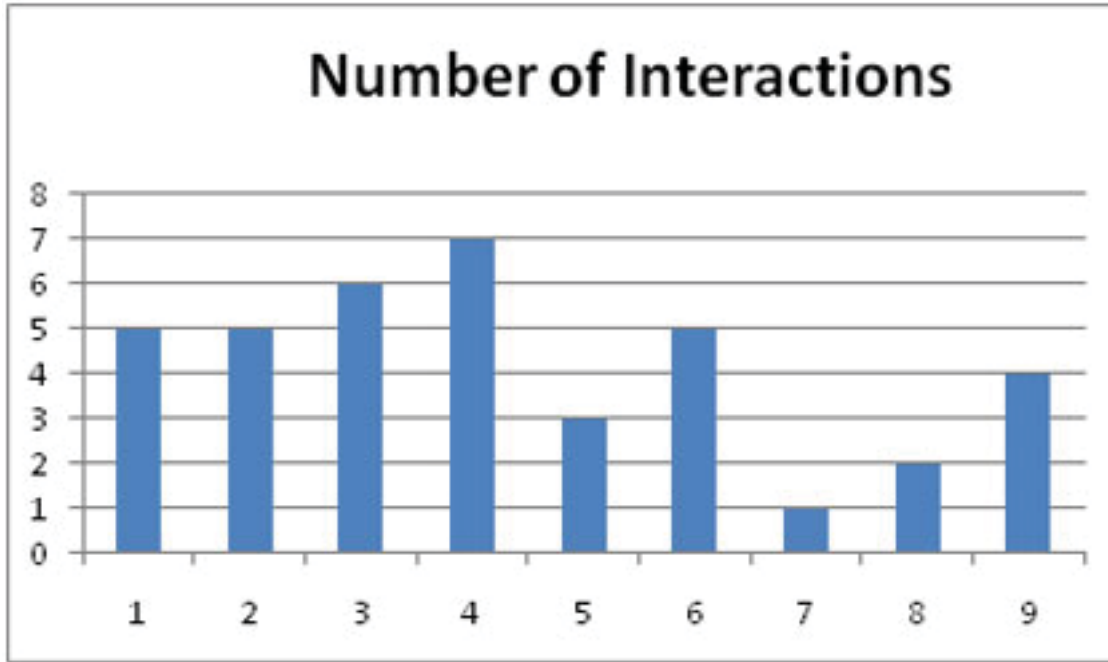
Note: 1= Male (29%), 2= Female (71%)

Figure 2: Age



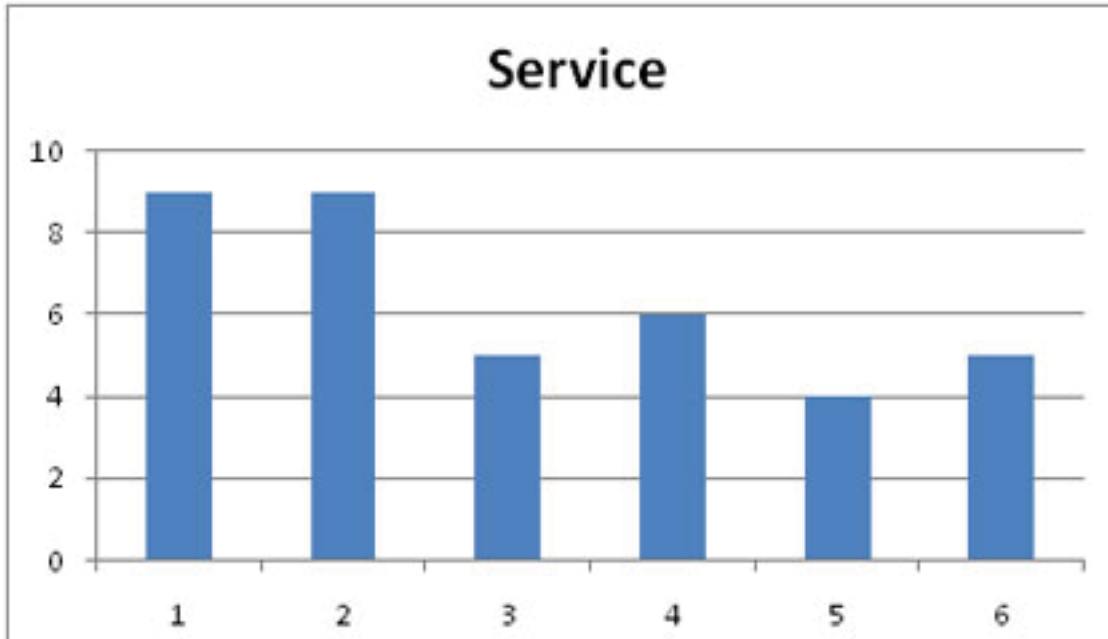
Note: 1= 18 or younger (8%), 2= 19-24 (11%), 3= 25-30 (29%), 4= 31-45 (42%), 5= 46-57 (11%), 6= 58 or older (0%)

Figure 3: Number of Interactions



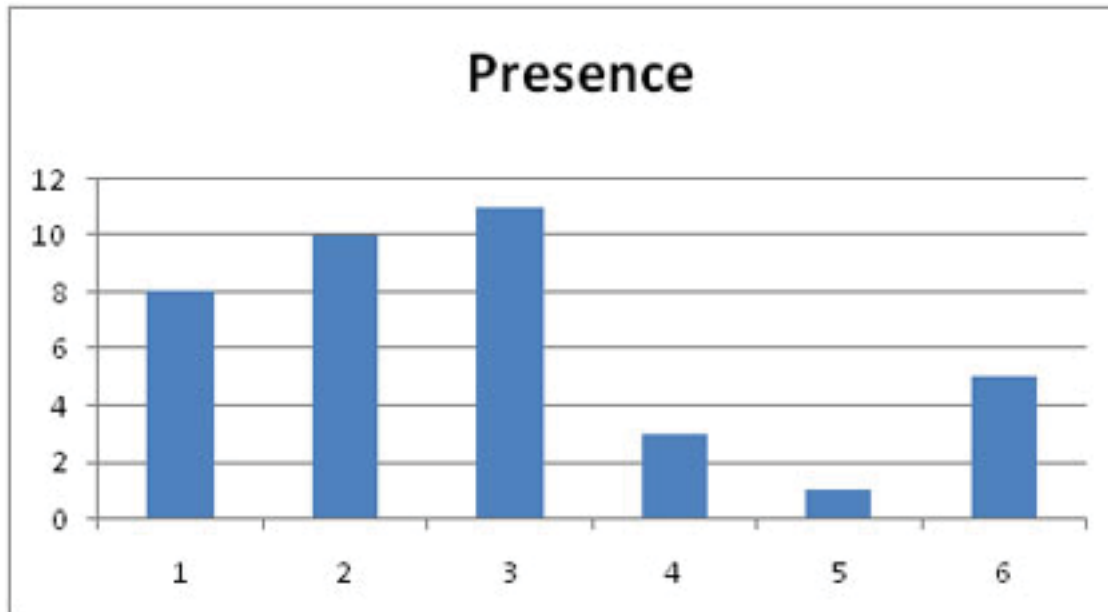
Note: 1 = Zero interactions, 9 = No response

Figure 4: Service



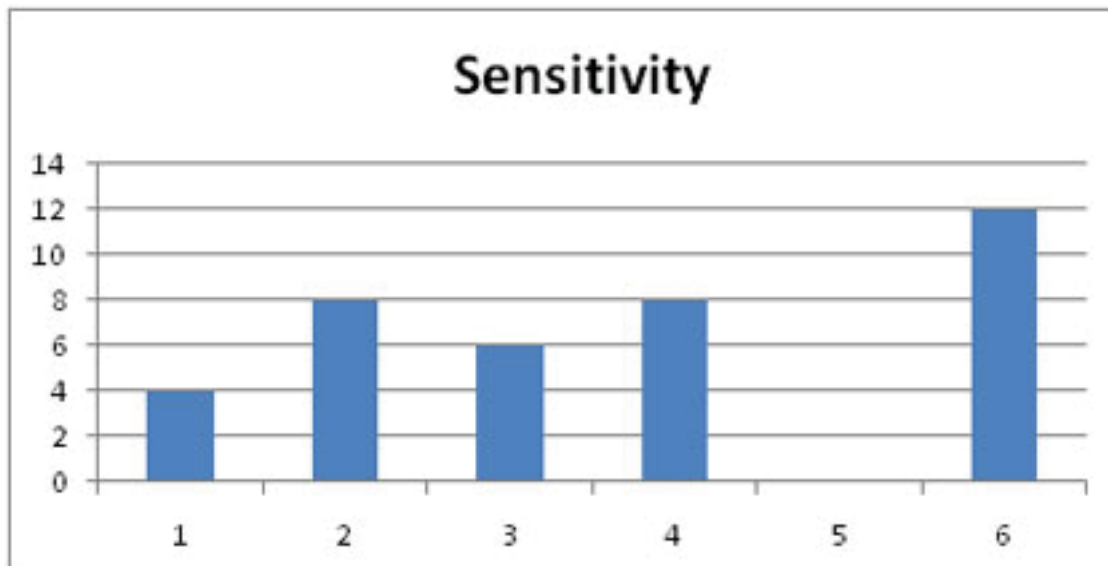
Note: 1=Very good, 2= Good, 3= Adequate, 4= Poor, 5= Very poor, 6= No responseA

Figure 5: Presence



Note: 1=Very good, 2= Good, 3= Adequate, 4= Poor, 5= Very poor, 6= No response

Figure 6: Sensitivity



Note: 1=Very good, 2= Good, 3= Adequate, 4= Poor, 5= Very poor, 6= No response

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