

25 years of change in the Western Region: Population, Dependency Ratios & Diversity

In 2024, the Western Development Commission is celebrating its 25th anniversary and has published a [new Report](#) which both details the impact of the WDC in that time-period and highlights key areas of economic, social and demographic change in the Western Region generally over 25 years. It is a story of great, if uneven progress and development, of new opportunities and new challenges, of notable and enduring regional particularities and in some cases, of persistent gaps between the national and regional picture.

In a **series of blogposts** which will be released over the coming weeks and months, we will describe in greater detail the changes and patterns highlighted in this Report and in doing so, illuminate a range of topics which are of relevance to life, economy and society in the Western Region¹. In this first blogpost in the series, we focus on four related areas of change – changes in the size and distribution of population and in the proportion of females and males in the population; shifting age structures and dependency ratios; and the increased diversity of the Western Region.

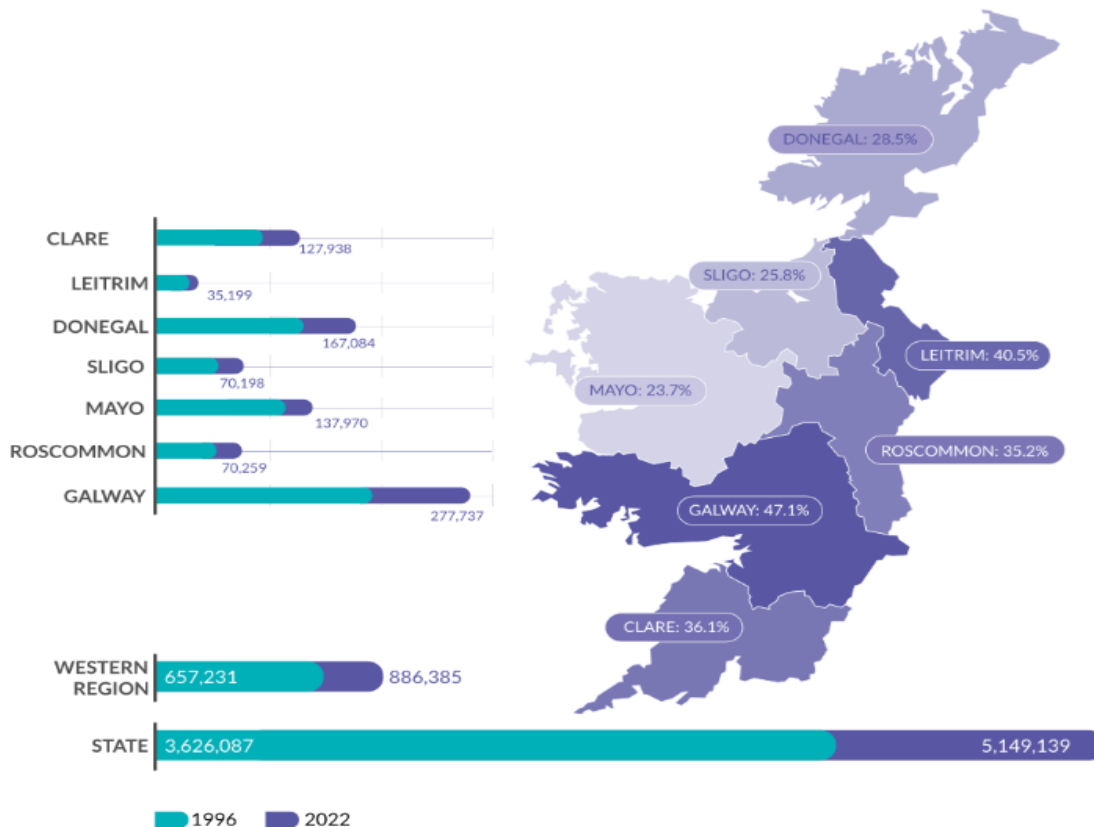
Population Change

In 2022, the total population of the Western Region was 886,385, up from 657,231 in 1996, a substantial increase of 34.8%. However, the population of the state overall increased by 42% in this time-period. This also means that the *share* of the population of Ireland living in the Western Region has continued its historical decline, from 30.7% in 1841 to 18.12% in 1996 to 17.2% in 2022. This and data presented in other blogposts in this series confirm the need for continued targeted regional development efforts which will stimulate population growth and vitality in the region and help address regional imbalances overall.

While the population of each individual county has increased substantially, there is significant variation in the rates of growth. Galway experienced by far the highest growth rate at 47.1% and

¹ For this we rely on a number of data sources. Foremost amongst these is the landmark report *The State of the West* [\[provide link\]](#), published by the WDC in 2001 and which examined its recent trends and future prospects. It, alongside a range of other sources including the 1996 Census, provides us with an excellent starting point for comparisons between then and now. For contemporary statistics, we largely rely on Census 2022 in this blogpost but draw on other data sources where relevant throughout the series.

Mayo the lowest at 23.7%, followed closely by Sligo at 25.8% and Donegal at 28.5%. Galway now accounts for 31% of the region’s population, compared to 28.7% in 1996.



Source: WDC analysis of Census 1996 and Census 2022 figures

Proportions of Females/Males in the Population

There has been a small but notable shift in the female/male split in the population of the region over the last 25 years. In 1996, every county in the Western Region other than Sligo had more males than females. In Leitrim, males accounted for 52.06% of the population while in Roscommon it was 51.36% and the overall percentage for the region was 50.47%, compared to a national figure of 49.65%. Census 2022 indicates that this has switched, with 50.55% of the population of the region now female, almost exactly the same as the national figure. Only in Roscommon now do males outnumber females (49.9% female), one of only six counties in the state with more males than females.

Other notable trends in the region which will be highlighted in this series of blogposts – the decline in the numbers in agricultural, manufacturing and construction employment, increases in the numbers in public sector employment, shifting emigration patterns – will all help shed further light on this interesting shift.

Age and Dependency Ratios

The dependency ratio of a given population is calculated by comparing the proportion of people both under 15 and over 64 years with the working age population (defined here as those between 15 and 64 years of age). It is based on the idea that those under 15 and over 65 are essentially ‘dependent’ on the working age population as they are generally not in the workforce.

Back in 1996, the dependency ratio for the Western Region overall was notably high at 61.3, compared to 53.1 for the state as a whole. There has been some positive movement over the last 25 years. By 2022, the ratio had decreased to 57.8 and is now closer at least to the figure for the state as a whole (53.2). Put another way, and as Table 1 shows, there is now a slightly higher proportion of the population of the region now of working age (63.38%), compared to 62% in the 1996 Census. Much of the change is accounted for by the substantial decline in the proportion of the population under 15, a phenomenon at both national and regional level. In 1996, 24.3% of the population of the Western Region was 14 and under: in 2022 this had decreased to 19.6%.

However, both in the state as whole and in the Western Region the **old dependency ratio has increased substantially** in the last 25 years and now stands at 23.1 for the state and 26.9 for the Western Region compared to 17.5 and 22 respectively back in 1996. The increasing proportion of the population over 65 (17.03% in 2022 vs 13.73% in 1996) has significant implications both economically and socially. This is particularly so in those counties in the Region with notably high old dependency ratios, which include Mayo (32.4), Leitrim (30.6) and Roscommon (30.2). Of the eight counties with the highest average age in the State, six are in the Western Region: Mayo has the highest at 41.6 followed by Roscommon, Leitrim, Sligo, Clare and Donegal. On the other hand, Galway City with its very high proportion of population at working age has an age dependency ratio of only 17.7.

Table 1: Percentage of population in each age category in Western Region and State, 1996 and 2022

	1996 Census			2022 Census		
	14 and under	15-64	65 and over	14 and under	15-64	65 and over
Western Region	24.30%	62%	13.73%	19.59%	63.38%	17.03%
State	23.07%	64.90%	11.40%	19.65%	65.28%	15.07%

Source: WDC analysis of Census 1996 and Census 2022 figures.

In the Western Region as elsewhere, knowledge and understanding of age structure and dependency ratios is essential for current and future workforce planning, to ensure adequate provision of appropriate housing, health, social and other public services and to create and support the kind of businesses and services which can meet the evolving needs of the population.

A More Diverse Region

It is only in more recent Census that specific and more detailed questions have been asked about nationality and citizenship - itself indicative of a changed Ireland - but we have some ways of measuring change over 25 years. For the 1996 Census, we rely on the question on 'place of birth', where those completing were asked to name the country of birth if outside of Ireland. When the results were compiled, only those born in Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the USA were delineated, all people born elsewhere were described as coming from 'Other Countries'.

From **Census 1996**, we know that 15% of the population of the Western Region was born outside of Ireland – interestingly, this was higher than the figure for the state as whole, which was 12%. But looking more closely, we can see that the overwhelming majority of the 15% were born in Great Britain, Northern Ireland or the USA. We can speculate that this is both a legacy of historical emigration patterns and a reflection of the geographical location of some parts of the region. In the region as a whole, only 8% of those born outside the state were born in countries other than Great Britain and Northern Ireland or the USA though with some significant regional variation. The figure rose to 13% in Clare and Galway but was as low as 3% in Donegal. In terms of the population as a whole, the number of people born outside of the state in countries other than Great Britain, Northern Ireland or the US hovered around 1% both in the Region and in the State as whole.

Census 2022 presents us with a completely different picture. While the proportion of people born outside the State has risen – from 15% to 19% at regional level and from 12% to 20% at State level –

it is the *makeup* of that population and of the population as a whole that is really interesting. For this, we look to the question on citizenship asked in Census 2022. Overall, **16% of the population of the Region is a citizen of another country or has joint citizenship between Ireland and another country.** Fully 72% of this group of 140, 903 people are citizens of countries *other* than Great Britain and Northern Ireland or the USA, a significant change from 1996 and indicative a significantly more diverse population.

Table 2 shows the **Top 20 citizenship categories in the Region.** As we can see, the UK (2.35%), Ireland-UK (0.90%), Ireland-USA (0.91%) and USA (0.28%) remain in the top 10 but are joined by Poland, with 1.69% of the population of the Region, India (0.61%) Brazil (0.38%), Lithuania (0.37%), Ireland-Australia (0.29%) and Ireland-Poland (0.27%).

Table 2: Top 20 categories of citizenship (other than Irish alone) in Western Region, Census 2022.

Citizenship	Number	% of pop. of Western Region
1. UK and Northern Ireland	20,529	2.35%
2. Poland	14,773	1.69%
3. Ireland-USA	7907	0.91%
4. Ireland-UK and Northern Ireland	7863	0.90%
5. India	5360	0.61%
6. Brazil	3357	0.38%
7. Lithuania	3249	0.37%
8. Ireland-Australia	2575	0.29%
9. USA	2451	0.28%
10. Ireland-Poland	2399	0.27%
11. Germany	2334	0.27%
12. Latvia	2264	0.26%
13. Romania	2090	0.24%
14. Ukraine	1975	0.23%
15. Italy	1585	0.18%
16. Spain	1584	0.18%
17. France	1514	0.17%
18. Slovakia	1491	0.17%
19. Pakistan	1280	0.15%
20. Hungary	1111	0.13%

Source: WDC analysis of Census 2022 figures.

There are some **notable and interesting variations between the region and the figures for the state as whole and within the Region itself:**

- In the state as whole, Polish people comprise the single largest group of citizens other than Irish alone, at 1.84%, closely followed by citizens of Britain and Northern Ireland at 1.64% - a notably smaller figure than the 2.35% in the Western Region.
- Romanians account for only 0.24% of the population of the Western Region (13th place) but are the fourth largest grouping at state level (0.85% of the population).
- At 19%, Galway has the highest proportion of its population who are citizens of another country and/or joint citizens of Ireland and another country, followed by Clare and Roscommon at 17% each, Leitrim at 16%, Mayo and Sligo at 15% each and Donegal with the lowest proportion at 12%.
- Galway and Clare appear to remain the counties with the most diverse population base in the region across the 25 years – in both cases the highest proportion of non-Irish citizens are Polish (1.96% and 2.02% respectively) and they also have marginally higher proportions of citizens from countries like India, Latvia, Lithuania and Brazil than most of the other western counties.
- When we drill down to the level of **individual towns** however, it is some of the towns in Mayo and Roscommon as well as Galway where the highest proportion of the population are citizens of countries other than Ireland.
 - As Table 3 shows, Ballyhaunis in Mayo has the most diverse population of any town in the region. In fact it is has the most diverse population in the country. At least 36.9% of the population is a citizen of a country other than Ireland. However, as is the case with the other towns analysed, the proportion may in fact be higher – 5.9% of the population did not state their citizenship in the Census form and a further 0.5% are categorised as having ‘no citizenship’. What we do know is that 5.4% of the population of the town are citizens of Brazil, 3.7% of Poland, 2.8% of Croatia, 4.8% of a country in Asia (other than India) and 3.9% of a country in Africa.
 - Ballaghaderreen is the second most diverse town in the Western region, with at least 27% of its population a citizen of a country other than Ireland – but with similar provisos to Ballyhaunis in terms of the possibility of the proportion being higher. 8.4% of its population are citizens of a country in Asia (other than India).
 - Gort in Co. Galway also continues to be a notably diverse town in terms of population with at least 25.1% of its population a citizen of a country other than Ireland – though 7.5% did not state their citizenship. We do know that 13% of the population are citizens of Brazil.
 - No town in Clare, Sligo or Donegal has more than 20% of its population who are citizens of a country other than Ireland. Donegal in particular has some of the lowest proportions in the Western Region, with five towns (Carndonagh, Lifford, Convoy, Bunrana and Ballyshannon) having less than 10% of the population in this category.

Table 3: Top 10 most diverse towns/urban areas in Western Region, Census 2022

Town	County	% of pop. not citizens of Ireland ²
1. Ballyhaunis	Mayo	36.9%
2. Ballaghaderreen	Roscommon	27.0%
3. Gort	Galway	25.1%
4. Claremorris	Mayo	24.1%
5. Roscommon town	Roscommon	23.0%
6. Ballinrobe	Mayo	26.7%
7. Tuam	Galway	20.1%
8. Loughrea	Galway	19.8%
9. Carrick-on-Shannon	Leitrim	19.2%
10. Galway City	Galway	18.1%

Source: WDC analysis of Census 2022 figures.

The increased diversity of the population of the Western Region over the last 25 years has been a quiet but important demographic shift. Knowledge of the scale, nature and geography of this shift is important in terms of recognising and maximising its positive impacts but also in ensuring that the evolving needs and perspectives of the whole population of the region, of whatever background or citizenship, are integrated into the work of the WDC and other relevant agencies and actors.

² These figures are calculated by subtracting from 100% the percentage of those who are Irish citizens, who do not state their citizenship or who are categorised as having no citizenship in Census 2022. They are an imperfect measure because we can assume that at least a proportion of those who did not indicate their citizenship – as much as 7.5% in the case of Gort for example - are not Irish citizens. But they are a good indicator at least of the towns – and indeed the *types* of towns – in the region where there is a high proportion of residents who are not Irish citizens and which are therefore more diverse in terms of their population.

