Begging, Charity and Religion in Pre-Famine Ireland

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Introduction

Among the witnesses who gave evidence to the Whately Poor Inquiry in Dublin city were two policemen: Chief Constables Michael Farrell and Henry Gilbert Goodison. Both were senior and experienced officers, Farrell having served in that position for the previous 26 years, while Goodison had been based in the College Street police division for more than a decade.1 When asked to provide estimates as to the number of mendicants in Dublin city, however, these two men gave strikingly disparate figures. Farrell divided the beggars into four categories: approximately 100, excluding their children, who resorted to begging from genuine destitution, ‘whose very manner of begging, look and dress bespeak them at once to be objects of real charity, so that he [Farrell] cannot himself refrain from giving them alms in the streets’; 500 regular beggars, including children; 500 who lived on the outskirts of the city and begged in surrounding villages; and 100 who were ‘strangers passing through’.2 Farrell’s figures gave a total of 1,200 mendicants in Dublin city. Goodison’s estimate, however, put the figure at closer to 8,000 ‘beggars … using the word in its widest significance, including men, women, their children, and orphans’.3 The significance here lies in the gap – a sixfold variance – in estimates. We may assume the two senior officers shared an intimate knowledge of the city’s streets and a first-hand appreciation of the extent of visible poverty and mendicancy. The disparity in their estimates, therefore, must be explained by these two individuals’ different definitions of what constituted a ‘beggar’, the term used by both men. Farrell drew upon some manner of rudimentary categorisation,

1 PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 41a*; Dublin Evening Mail, 27 Aug. 1824.
2 PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 41a*.
3 Ibid.
while Goodison decided to interpret the word ‘beggar’ in broader terms. This example illuminates an inherent challenge when discussing beggars and begging. As already discussed, definitions of what constituted begging and beggars were never precise, with outright solicitation constituting just one of the ‘pauper professions’ which prevailed in the ‘economy of makeshifts’. The Poor Inquiry commissioners in Macroom, County Cork observed that ‘It is scarcely possible to form anything like an accurate notion of the number of persons who beg. There are some who live entirely by begging, and some beg only at particular seasons’. The difficulty in defining begging and beggars shaped contemporary attempts to measure the extent of the problem, a significant feature of the discourse surrounding poverty and the Poor Laws in pre-Famine Ireland.

Matthew Martin, whose 1790s investigation into beggary in London pioneered statistics-based inquiry into this field, earning him the sobriquet ‘Mendicity Martin’, spoke of the need to ascertain the true extent of street begging, ‘both in respect to the average number of London beggars, and the gross amount of the sums annually extorted from the public by their importunities’. In proposing measures to curtail street begging in the city, Martin asserted his aim as being to reduce the expense to the public of managing the poor. To develop this study, it is necessary to examine attempts to undertake in Ireland what Martin did in London, by exploring how contemporaries tried to establish the number of beggars (at national and local levels) and the amount of money doled out in alms to mendicants. The significance of these questions, and the heightened urgency in the 1830s to resolve them, will be set in the context of the developing Poor Law debates in Ireland and Britain in that decade, wherein the monetary cost to ratepayers of new (as in Ireland and Scotland) or reformed Poor Law systems (in the case of England and Wales) proved crucial.

Emergence of Statistical Inquiry

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of statistics as a scientific discipline. The popularity of the ‘statistical revolution’ was

4 PI, Appendix A, p. 660.
5 Francis Place’s account of the 1815–16 Mendicity Committee, 1825 (BL, Place papers, Add. MS 35145, ff. 70–78); Anon. (rev. Anita McConnell), ‘Martin, Matthew’ in ODNB, xxxvi, pp. 966–7.
7 Ibid., pp. 14, 21.
closely linked to prevailing concerns in educated, elite circles for the moral and spiritual condition of the population at large, but particularly the lower classes. The compilation of vast quantities of figures, which were collected in a scientific manner, allowed researchers and social campaigners to argue from a higher moral platform than would otherwise be the case. Statistics allowed for the testing of subjective theories and opinions through the use of cold, objective facts. The pioneers in statistical inquiry saw their endeavours as being part of a wider movement that was abounding in excitement, intellectual stimulation and promise, which could be achieved through the development and refinement of new methodologies. These individuals sought to affect great change throughout society, with the ultimate goal of ‘improvement’, which was ‘one of the guiding ideas of social thinkers in this period’.

In a paper to the Dublin Statistical Society in the late 1840s, founding member James Anthony Lawson reflected on, first, his contemporaries’ attempts to define the new discipline of statistics and, secondly, the objectives of the society. Lawson stated: ‘Upon the best consideration I can give it, I think Statistics may be defined as “the collecting of facts which relate to man’s social conditions”’. The Statistical Society of London defined statistics in its maiden publication as the collection of ‘facts which are calculated to illustrate the condition and prospects of society’ and the purpose of statistical science was ‘to consider the results which they produce, with the view to determine those principles upon which the well-being of society depends’.

Early statistical inquiries focused on what Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle termed ‘the Condition-of-England question’ – namely, the state of the working and domestic lives of the labouring classes. The founding members of the statistical society in Manchester, a city whose economic and demographic expansion in the opening decades of the century epitomised the modern city, defined their aim as being ‘to assist in promoting the progress of social improvement in the manufacturing population by which

they are surrounded’. At a time of increasing industrialisation and urbanisation, the condition of the urban labouring classes and the slums in which they resided not only worried but threatened the middle and upper classes, in both Ireland and Britain. In a century that was ravaged by numerous disease epidemics, comprehensive statistics on mortality rates and their connection to housing and sanitary conditions was considered of utmost importance to the common good. Jacinta Prunty has observed that:

On investigation all aspects of poverty were found to be inter-connected: high mortality, poor sanitary provision, overcrowded and substandard housing, ‘immorality’, vagrancy and casual work, drunkenness and the dispiritedness due to unemployment, criminality and the mixing of all sorts in the ‘rookeries’ of the back streets; illiteracy, prostitution, irreligion, the disintegration of the family unit, and indeed the degeneration of the ‘urban’ race. The spiralling nature of poverty, where children born into such circumstances were unable to escape, was especially worrying.

As Bulmer et al. have noted, these early statisticians were ‘working in a time receptive to the statistical approach’, while the spirit of the age has also been captured by G.M. Young, who observed that ‘it was the business of the [1830s] to transfer the treatment of affairs from a polemical to a statistical basis, from Humbug to Humdrum … Statistical inquiry … was a passion of the times’.

**Statisticians’ Interest in the Problem of Mendicancy**

From the earliest days of the statistical movement the issues of poverty and mendicancy attracted the interest of the pioneers of this new discipline. Many of the founding members of the Dublin Statistical Society were leading contributors to the Irish Poor Law debate. Archbishop Richard Whately (president of the society) chaired a royal commission of inquiry into this topic, and devoted much time and energy to the question of poverty, both in Ireland and during his early career in England; Mountiford Longfield (vice-president)
delivered a number of lectures (subsequently published) on the question of the Poor Laws; James Haughton (council member), as well as Whately, were active members of the city’s mendicity association for many years.\textsuperscript{17} Other founding members, such as Thomas Larcom, John K. Ingram and William Neilson Hancock, became leading Poor Law commentators in the post-Famine period.\textsuperscript{18} Just months before the foundation of the Manchester Statistical Society, its main instigator, William Langton, founded a Manchester branch of the Provident Society, which had the stated objective of encouraging ‘frugality and forethought, the suppression of mendicity and imposture, and the occasional relief of sickness and unavoidable misfortune amongst the poor’.\textsuperscript{19} Founding members of the London Statistical Society also paid much attention to the Poor Law question: Thomas Spring Rice, MP chaired the 1830 parliamentary inquiry into Irish poverty,\textsuperscript{20} historian Henry Hallam was an early member of the London Mendicity Society’s board of management,\textsuperscript{21} and an early vice-president of the statistical society was MP and Poor Law reformer William Sturges Bourne.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Measuring Mendicancy}

Attempts to gauge the level of mendicancy in a particular area at any one time were inherently beset with challenges. First, as reflected in the policemen’s estimates at the beginning of this chapter, definitions of what constituted begging and who could be classed as beggars could be vague, and frequently varied from person to person. Secondly, the sheer extent of mendicancy in pre-Famine Ireland, in both rural and urban areas, also prevented a reliable enumeration of this body of people. Furthermore,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} The best account of the Whately commission is Gray, \textit{Making of the Irish Poor Law}, pp. 92–129. See Mountiford Longfield, \textit{Four lectures on Poor Laws, delivered in Trinity term, 1834} (Dublin, 1834). For Haughton’s involvement in the society, see \textit{FJ}, 15 Apr. 1839; \textit{The Advocate; or, Irish Industrial Journal}, 1 Mar. 1856. For his wider interest in poverty and poor relief, see Samuel Haughton, \textit{Memoir of James Haughton, with extracts from his private and published letters} (Dublin, 1877), pp. 42–3; James Haughton, ‘What is doing for the people in Dublin?’ in \textit{People’s Journal} (London), ii (1846), pp. 232–6.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ashton, \textit{Economic and social investigations in Manchester}, p. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} \textit{Gentleman’s Magazine}, i (Apr. 1834), p. 422.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid.; \textit{The first report of the society established in London for the suppression of mendicity} (London, 1819), p. 6.
\end{itemize}
transience was a regular part of life for such individuals, with seasonality shaping the cultures of mendicancy, especially among the rural poor. The blurred line between work and beggary is reflected in a police report of June 1817, which described a group of ‘sixteen men, apparently country men’ who arrived in Dublin city seeking employment or alms. ‘There are groups only of a Monday, in consequence of going to Dunleary expecting to commence a week’s work, and not being able to procure it, they beg their way back to their respective parishes’, the report stated. While this sole report contained a specific estimate of the number of people identified, this was not possible in most cases. The transiency of large portions of the population was captured in one Limerick gentleman’s striking, yet exaggerated, assertion that ‘the whole country appeared to be in motion’. The above factors – difficulties in negotiating vague definitions, large amounts of people and a transient population – are encapsulated in the account of the Poor Inquiry testimony of Rev. Vaughan, a Catholic priest in Killaloe:

Inquiries were first made as to the number of paupers subsisting on charity in the town of Killaloe, and it was estimated that they amounted to about 16. ‘But,’ says the Rev. Mr. Vaughan, ‘the beggars are for the most part strangers; but it is my opinion that there are in the whole parish about 100 families, or about 1,000 persons who are occasionally obliged to beg; and I do not think I know the face of more than one in twenty that I see in the streets.’

In large urban areas, most notably in Dublin, indigenous and ‘strange’ poor people increasingly ‘swarmed’ into the teeming tenements and slums, subsisting out of sight in city back streets which were perceived and spoken of by elites as unchartered territories. Social surveys of this period reflected the otherworldliness of these hidden parts of the city where, as Prunty has observed, ‘the “natives” were depicted as “denizens” and “poor creatures”, despite the proximity of the slums to the wealthy districts’. When combined, the above factors explain the difficulties in enumerating the extent of an inherently marginalised and mobile part of the population at a time when modern state-driven census-taking was in its infancy. The difficulties in

23 Police report on country beggars in Dublin, 17 June 1817 (NAI, State of the Country papers, SOC 1825/6).
24 F[rank]. Barker and J[ohn]. Cheyne, An account of the rise, progress, and decline of the fever lately epidemic in Ireland, together with communications from physicians in the provinces, and various official documents (2 vols, Dublin, 1821), i, p. 40.
25 PI, Appendix A, p. 629.
26 Prunty, Dublin slums, p. 18. For the international context, see Fuchs, Gender and poverty in nineteenth-century Europe, pp. 114–15.
quantifying beggars were known to contemporary commentators and were described by antiquary John Peter Boileau, in a paper to the Statistical Section of the British Association in Swansea in August 1848. Boileau, who was among the vice-presidents of the London Mendicity Society, stated:

The statistics of mendicancy in the united empire, if they could be correctly collected and compiled, would be a valuable addition to our knowledge, and lead to many important conclusions for the management and employment of our poor, enabling us more correctly to appreciate the large funds devoted to these purposes. I fear, however, that no means at present exist for this general object.

One anonymous writer, seemingly associated with Dublin’s House of Industry, commented that ‘accuracy in the first attempt [at measuring indigence in the city] ought not to be expected’, while the problem of quantifying the number of those reduced to utter destitution persisted into the late nineteenth century, when Charles Booth, in his famous survey of the labouring classes in London, commented that ‘the lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals … are beyond enumeration’. Anna Maria Hall, whilst eager to describe the habits of some beggars she encountered upon entering Wexford town, experienced similar difficulties in gauging the number of mendicants, given their sheer ubiquity: ‘You cannot walk out in a country town without meeting at every turn a population of poverty. I have attempted to count the beggars – I found it impossible; the barefooted creatures were beyond number’. Hall’s remarks are revealing in highlighting the sheer extent of beggary as well as many contemporaries’ attempts – rudimentary or otherwise – to gauge the level of poverty and mendicancy. For many, including Mrs Hall, the problem of beggary was simply beyond quantification.

29 Observations on the House of Industry, Dublin; and on the plans of the association for suppressing mendicity in that city (Dublin, 1818), p. 23.
31 Hall, Tales of Irish life and character, p. 95.
Why Count Beggars?
The desire to quantify beggary on both a local and a national scale was grounded in the urge to understand Ireland’s seemingly singular extent of poverty and misery. Travellers to Ireland invariably commented on the prevalence of impoverishment and misery, and beggars and beggary were arguably the most visible manifestation of the country’s endemic poverty. The French traveller Gustave de Beaumont’s oft-quoted assertion, following his visit to the country in 1835, reflects this sense of Ireland’s omnipresent, overwhelming poverty:

Misery, naked and famishing, that misery which is vagrant, idle, and mendicant, covers the entire country; it shows itself everywhere, and at every hour of the day; it is the first thing you see when you land on the Irish coast, and from that moment it ceases not to be present to your view; sometimes under the aspect of the diseases displaying his sores, sometimes under the form of the pauper scarcely covered by his rags; it follows you everywhere, and besieges you incessantly; you hear its groans and cries in the distance; and if the voice does not excite profound pity, it importunes and terrifies you.\(^{32}\)

To outsiders, among the distinguishing features of Irish society, in contrast to neighbouring countries, was the extent of beggary.\(^{33}\) Poor people were (and are) to be found in every society but the sheer numbers in Ireland who were engaged in mendicancy, a practice worthy of curiosity, observation and comment by reason of its persistent visibility, ensured that Ireland’s unique experience and culture of mendicancy was prominent in any public discourse (involving politicians, clergymen, social commentators and other members of the elite) on the question of poverty.

The need to count Ireland’s beggars also arose from the wealthier classes’ concern for the monetary cost of poor relief and alms-giving; people wished to know how much money beggary was collectively costing them. In a period when the suitability of a statutory rate-based Poor Law for Ireland was being vehemently debated, the cost of such a scheme required contrast with the prevailing situation of voluntary assistance, either private or organisational. Calculations of the level of mendicancy were frequently accompanied by estimated costs of alms-giving and commentators invariably concluded that the prevailing system of casual alms-giving was more expensive than any rate-based relief system. To George Nicholls,

\(^{32}\) Quoted in Gray, Making of the Irish Poor Law, p. 1.  
\(^{33}\) Ó Ciosáin, Ireland in official print culture, pp. 122, 168–9.
the designer of the New Poor Law, begging was ‘the most expensive and the most demoralising’ ‘mode of relief’.\textsuperscript{34} The cost of poor relief was a significant part of the prolonged Poor Law discourse in Ireland, which was closely linked to parallel debates in Britain and from the 1790s the rising costs of relief took centre stage in the Poor Law debate in England and Wales, arising from the Speenhamland system of allowances for the able-bodied poor (from 1795) and societal awareness of the rising population, whose growth was concentrated along the bottom rungs of the social ladder. Ratepayers were aggrieved that more money was being spent to relieve the distressed through the Poor Law system, yet the number of paupers was rising significantly.

But, in Ireland, the Poor Inquiry evidence reveals a level of hesitancy among the poorer classes to quantify the number of mendicants and the alms given to such individuals.\textsuperscript{35} For numerous witnesses from humble social backgrounds, any such attempt would result in a measurement in tangible terms of their charity, an endeavour they found to be inappropriate and unnatural. In County Clare, it was observed: ‘There appeared to be much reluctance on the part of all the witnesses present to compute how much they were in the habit of giving away in alms; they did not wish to measure what they bestowed for the honour of God; and it was mentioned that it was a common saying, “that what was given away in charity never diminished a man’s substance, and that his crops were often increased by it”’.\textsuperscript{36} Another explanation would be that some people perhaps felt uncomfortable discussing in public, in full view of their neighbours and local community, the amount of alms (if any) they doled out to mendicants.

\textit{Counting Ireland’s Beggars: National Estimates}

Estimates of the extent of mendicancy throughout Ireland are available from as early as the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1731, Arthur Dobbs provided the strikingly particular estimate of 34,425 ‘strolling Beggars’ in the country, ‘of which there are not 1 in 10 real Objects’, a calculation arrived at by estimating the presence of 15 beggars (a figure warranting suspicion) in each of the kingdom’s 2,295 parishes; ten years later, Philip Skelton recorded contemporary estimates of up to 50,000 ‘strolling beggars … rambling from place to place’.\textsuperscript{37} Three decades later, Richard Woodward’s influential scheme for a national provision focused on ‘deserving’ persons ‘who occasionally may

\textsuperscript{34} Second report of Geo. Nicholls, Poor Laws, Ireland, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{35} This is discussed in Ó Ciosáin, Ireland in official print culture, pp. 79–84.
\textsuperscript{36} PI, Appendix A, p. 610.
\textsuperscript{37} Dobbs, Essay on the trade and improvement, ii, p. 46; Philip Skelton, The necessity of tillage and granaries. In a letter to a member of parliament living in the county of —— (Dublin, 1741), pp. 43–4.
want Assistance’. Woodward estimated this class to comprise 3 per cent of the population, certainly a significant underestimate, although he added that another 63 per cent subsisted on ‘only absolute Necessaries’. Habitual beggars and vagrants were omitted from his figures.\footnote{Woodward, \textit{Argument in support of the poor}, p. 53.}

The utilisation of statistical data in calculating the extent of beggary nationwide appears not to have been adopted by Mallow banker and former high sheriff Robert de la Cour in his testimony to the 1825 select committee on the state of the country, when he asserted that of the approximately 7 million people then living in Ireland, ‘I think I under-rate the number of those who procure the means of their subsistence by beggary and plunder at 1,000,000 including men, women and children; I think that is as low an estimate as can be taken’.\footnote{Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee of the House of Lords, appointed to inquire into the state of Ireland, more particularly with reference to the circumstances which may have led to the disturbances in that part of the United Kingdom. 24 March–22 June, 1825, p. 558, H.C. 1825 (521), ix, 558.} De la Cour offered no indication as to how he arrived at this calculation, yet echoed other commentators in claiming that a national system of poor relief would be considerably less expensive than the current system of casual and indiscriminate alms-giving, a question that is considered later in this chapter.

Societal understanding of Irish poverty, and the extent of beggary and beggars, was put on a new footing in the 1830s with the investigations and subsequent publications of the Poor Inquiry. In one of the most extensive analyses into the condition of the poor anywhere in nineteenth-century Europe, Whately’s commission drew upon three years of investigations, numerous public sittings (at many of which members of all social classes, from landlords to beggars, gave testimony) and thousands of completed and returned questionnaires from parishes throughout the country, to produce reports totalling more than 5,000 pages, which provide unparalleled information on social and economic conditions in pre-Famine Ireland. In their final report, the Poor Inquiry commissioners concluded that of the approximately 8 million people living in Ireland, 585,000 were ‘out of work and in distress during thirty weeks of the year’; taken together with their 1.8 million dependants, these 2,385,000 people constituted 30 per cent of the population, a proportion which by its very scale proved, in the commissioners’ view, the futility of a rates-funded workhouse-based Poor Law.\footnote{PI, third report, p. 5.} In this light, as Peter Gray has observed, ‘This statement of numbers was crucial’.\footnote{Gray, \textit{Making of the Irish Poor Law}, p. 118.} The inquiry’s secretary John Revans, however, dissented from this estimate and in a pamphlet criticising the final recommendations, suggested
that the number of persons who would be likely to avail themselves of a Poor Law was considerably less.\textsuperscript{42}

Among the most illuminating elements of the commission’s vast inquiry was a template questionnaire (Supplement to Appendix A) that was distributed to local elites, mainly clergymen and landowners. The completed forms (3,100 of the 7,600 circulated sets were returned from a total of 1,100 parishes) covered parishes throughout the country and 1,636 were included in the published supplement, across more than 400 pages. The nine questions on the form focus on gauging the extent of various social phenomena, such as the number of ‘bastard’ children, the number of widows and children and the number of infirm elderly people. Included among these questions were enquiries into the extent of mendicancy in the respondents’ locality: ‘What number of persons in your parish subsist by begging? and are alms usually given in money or provisions? What number of householders are in the habit of letting lodgings for strolling beggars, and what is the price usually paid for a night’s lodging?’\textsuperscript{43} The questions sought to identify definite and measurable quantities, yet the responses were largely subjective and impressionistic, displaying great variety and a lack of consensus on many matters.\textsuperscript{44} An interesting feature of the responses to these questions is the stark difference between respondents’ perceptions of begging and beggars in their locality. Almost invariably, rural respondents gave some indication of the extent of beggary in their parish and drew distinctions between local, ‘native’ paupers and ‘strange’ mendicants from other counties: in Modreeny, County Tipperary, Rev. William Homan’s assertion that ‘There are very few paupers of the parish begging, but immense numbers come from the surrounding parishes, and particularly at the period that the Irish go to England to labour’ is representative of the wider trend.\textsuperscript{45} In large urban centres on the other hand, respondents were almost universal in leaving these questions unanswered and the appropriate column blank; this was the case in the cities of Dublin, Kilkenny, Waterford, Cork and Limerick, as well as in Belfast, Drogheda, Athlone and Tralee. It suggests that for inhabitants of larger urban centres, the task of enumerating the number of mendicants was beyond their ability, due to the sheer scale of beggary and the associated difficulty in distinguishing between local and non-local mendicants.

In 1837, Poor Law Commissioner George Nicholls, who had been appointed the previous year to draw up a report on the suitability of the new

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} John Revans, \textit{Evils of the state of Ireland; their causes and their remedy – a Poor Law} (London, \textit{[c.1836]}), p. 95.
\item \textsuperscript{43} \textit{PI, Supplement to Appendix A}, p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ó Ciosáin, \textit{Ireland in official print culture}, pp. 30–50.
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{PI, Supplement to Appendix A}, p. 259.
\end{itemize}
English Poor Law system to Ireland, following the government’s rejection of the Poor Inquiry’s recommendations, presented a picture of unrestrained and uncontrollable beggary throughout the Irish countryside. For Nicholls, this ‘almost universal prevalence of mendicancy’ was such that ‘mendicancy and wretchedness have become too common to be disgraceful’. For the readers of his report the impression of Ireland was of a beggar-ridden country: ‘A mass of filth, nakedness, and misery, is constantly moving about, entering every house, addressing itself to every eye, and soliciting from every hand’. The number of beggars was ‘very great’ and indeed so great that ‘they are therefore of some importance as a class’. Nicholls did not view the problem of mendicancy as a mere nuisance and inconvenience; instead, he insisted that legislative measures aimed at suppressing mendicancy ought to be an indispensable part of his proposed Poor Law scheme. The passing of vagrancy laws was required ‘in unison with the Poor Law, for without such a harmony of action, both laws would be in a great measure ineffective’. The extent, as Nicholls saw it, of Ireland’s mendicancy problem and the unquestionable need for anti-mendicancy legislation required his readers, particularly members of Russell’s Whig government, to appreciate the seriousness of the problem and it is in this light that his assertions are to be read and understood.

Aside from these generalised comments on the prevalence of misery and mendicancy in Ireland, Nicholls provided specific estimates as to the precise extent of destitution and these warrant some discussion. In designing his workhouse system for Ireland, Nicholls estimated that (indoor) workhouse accommodation for the relief of the destitute poor ought to be provided for 1 per cent of the population of circa 8 million – that is, 80,000 persons. In arriving at this figure of 1 per cent, Nicholls drew upon recent precedents from four ‘highly pauperised’ English counties, where approximately 1 per cent of the population was catered for in workhouses. Strikingly, the source of these figures, a report of the English Poor Law Commissioners, reveals that the number of recipients of outdoor relief (a welfare provision excluded from Nicholls’s scheme for Ireland) totalled in some areas ten times the number of indoor recipients. When this omitted category is included and these revised figures are applied to the returns for the aforementioned four ‘highly pauperised’ counties, the proportion of paupers to the total population rises from 1 per cent to approximately 7.7 per cent. If Nicholls had applied

46 Report of Geo. Nicholls, Esq., to His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, on Poor Laws, Ireland, p. 5, H.C. 1837 [C 69], li, 207.
47 Report of Geo. Nicholls, Poor Laws, Ireland, p. 27.
50 Second annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales; together with appendices A. B. C. D., p. 32, H.C. 1836 (595), xxix, 32.
this figure to the Irish context as crudely as with his eventual calculation, his estimated total of Irish paupers would have risen from 80,000 to around 616,000. Here, Nicholls’s methodology deserves rebuke for, first, distorting the picture of Irish poverty and, secondly, for crudely assuming similar cultures of welfare in Ireland, and England and Wales.\(^{51}\) Despite widespread scepticism of Nicholls’s figures upon the publication of his report, his calculations were supported by the findings of Dublin statistician William Stanley, who estimated the destitute of Ireland to be 82,806 (1.1 per cent), defining the term ‘destitute’ to mean ‘only those persons who, without the aid of local charities, and the resource of mendicancy, must necessarily starve, if they obey the law against theft’.\(^{52}\) Stanley echoed Nicholls’s attack on the Whately inquiry for allegedly exaggerating the extent of Irish destitution; however, the crudeness of Stanley’s methodology left most critics unconvinced.\(^{53}\)

**Area-Specific Estimates of Mendicancy**

The prevalence of poverty and beggary in Ireland was subject to national, and indeed international, factors, yet localised patterns of mendicancy were shaped by area-specific influences. The rise in the number of beggars in Belfast in 1809–10 was due to the closure of a number of factories in the town and 300 ‘beggars [engaged] in the daily practice of seeking alms’ were said to stalk the streets of Belfast. However, the anonymous author who provided this figure excluded these beggars’ families, as well as an estimated 200 ‘poor room-keepers’, presumably too respectable to resort to street begging.\(^{54}\) The significant rise in mendicancy in Wexford in the early 1830s, where the number of ‘vagrants’ in the town of approximately 10,000 inhabitants was said to total 600, tripling in the previous quarter of a century, was attributed to a mixture of national and local factors – namely, ‘the operation of the [1826] Subletting Act [which facilitated increased evictions], and the total failure of the oyster fishery’.\(^{55}\) In the mid-1830s the Poor Inquiry commissioners estimated that of 87,000 people living in Cork city, 22,000 could be considered as living in ‘distressed’ conditions – that is, being ‘only able to obtain about half employment, [and] who are living, therefore, from hand to mouth’. Of these 22,000 people, approximately 6,000 were estimated as being ‘destitute, their chief support being from begging: they live in crowded hovels, sleeping on straw with merely their day rags for covering’.\(^{56}\) However, this figure of

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\(^{51}\) For Nicholls’s defence of his figures, see *Second report of Geo. Nicholls, Poor Laws, Ireland*, p. 24.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., pp. 50–1.


\(^{54}\) Dubourdieu, *Statistical survey, county Antrim*, pp. 410–11; BNL, 1 June 1810.

\(^{55}\) *PI, Appendix A*, p. 597.

\(^{56}\) *PI, Appendix C, Part I*, p. 44.
6,000 habitual mendicants ought to be considered an overestimate, as there is no evidence, nor is it likely, that there were 6,000 mendicants soliciting alms on the streets of Cork at any one time.

As the capital city of Ireland, the largest urban centre on the island and a port town, Dublin always attracted countless scores of non-local vagrant poor; furthermore, there were numerous and frequent attempts (however rudimentary) to measure the extent of mendicancy and destitution in the city, far more than for other areas throughout Ireland. The most famous demographic survey of this period was that undertaken in Dublin city in the summer of 1798 by Rev. James Whitelaw, whose report is significant for its description of the hovels which constituted the homes of so many of the city’s poorer classes, who formed ‘the great mass of the population of this city’.

His was the first Irish study into the interlinked problems of overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions and epidemic disease that characterised nineteenth-century slums. Yet, the social backgrounds of the city’s population were crudely categorised by Whitelaw as ‘Upper and middle class’, ‘Servants of ditto’ and ‘Lower class’, whose breakdown among the population was calculated as 37,305 (21.8 per cent), 18,315 (10.7 per cent) and 115,174 (67.4 per cent) respectively. Whitelaw’s report regrettably did not offer an estimate of the begging poor in the metropolis, an element of the population who would have been included within Whitelaw’s category of ‘Lower class’. According to Rev. Thomas R. Shore, curate in the Church of Ireland parish of St Michan’s, out of an estimated population of 212,000 living in the city in the mid-1830s, there were ‘40,000 or 50,000 so destitute in Dublin who know not in the morning how they will obtain support in the day’.

This represented approximately 21 per cent of the capital’s population. However, a divisional president for the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers’ Society, Charles Sharpe, gave a significantly lower total of between 12,000 and 15,000 ‘persons now in Dublin who do not know where they will get a breakfast to-morrow’. In addition to this figure, Sharpe estimated that in the city there were ‘about 70,000 or 80,000 [persons] who would take alms, and would seek them if they thought they could get them, and have the means of supporting themselves’.

57 Whitelaw, Essay on the population of Dublin, p. 4.
58 Ibid., fold-out table facing p. 14. These figures do not include the north-eastern suburb of Spring Garden or a number of institutions (such as army barracks and prisons).
59 For the identification of Rev. Shore as being based in St Michan’s, see St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 23 Dec. 1828 (RCBL, St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 276.05.5); ibid., 27 Mar. 1837; Dublin Mendicity Society minute book, 4 May 1830 (NLI, DMSP, MS 32,599/4).
60 PL, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicacy in the City of Dublin, p. 32a.
61 Ibid., p. 4.
While the scale of the latter estimate is impossible to prove or disprove, it does reflect the common perception that large portions of the poorer classes were so immoral and work-shy as to consider seeking alms while being able-bodied.

Mobility was a regular feature of life among the poor of Dublin, both for those migrating into the city from rural areas and among those already resident there. Mobility fluctuated in line with wider social and economic conditions, invariably increasing to alarming levels at times of recession, epidemic and crop failure. Estimates as to the extent of mendicancy, therefore, ought to be considered in the context of the constant flow of (poor) people into and out of the city. William Stanley’s figures for Dublin city, wherein he estimated that 5,646 of the city’s 284,000 population (2 per cent) were destitute, claimed a higher prevalence of poverty than the rest of the country, a finding he explained by reference to the great numbers of rural poor who descended on the capital for work or relief. Of these 5,646 destitute poor, 960 were designated by Stanley as ‘street mendicants’ who were distinct from those individuals receiving relief in institutions such as the House of Industry and the Mendicity Society. \(^{62}\) Stanley was, therefore, estimating that in Dublin city there were almost 1,000 habitual beggars who, for unknown reasons, were not ‘on the books’ of the two main institutions with responsibilities for dealing with mendicants. This corresponds with the assertion of the Mendicity Society that there was a cohort of habitual street beggars who never applied to the organisation for relief, \(^{63}\) presumably preferring the freedom of a vagrant life to institutional enclosure, supervision, regulation and hard labour.

According to a pamphlet published in 1818 as part of the campaign to establish a mendicity society in Dublin, ‘it may be safely stated that there are not less than 5,000 begging poor in and about this city’. \(^{64}\) If this figure is to be believed and taking the city’s population to be just less than 180,000 (according to the 1821 census), \(^{65}\) it can be estimated that 2.8 per cent of the city’s people were engaged in begging. The reader is not enlightened as to how this figure of 5,000 was arrived at, but besides this fact other considerations must be taken into account. This estimate was made during a severe typhus fever epidemic, economic downturn and food shortage throughout Ireland, and at a time when many rural poor descended on the capital seeking succour; one Dublin physician asserted that ‘Mendicants in unusual number were to be seen in every quarter; and many wretched country labourers, sometimes followed by wives and children, their pallid and emaciated countenance testifying...

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\(^{64}\) Anon., Arguments in proof of the necessity of suppressing street begging, p. 7.

the reality of their wants, resorted to the streets of the city in expectation of obtaining employment and escaping from the horrors of want.\(^{66}\) Regardless of whether or not the estimate of 5,000 mendicants was accurate, we can be sure that the number of ‘begging poor in and about’ the city was at that time beyond all ‘normal’ levels; as such, any estimate must be interpreted as being unrepresentative. Furthermore, the fact that this estimate originated from a campaign aimed explicitly at gaining public support for the suppression of mendicancy raises further questions about the reliability of this claim; the social reformers who recorded this figure had an interest in embellishing the extent of mendicancy, so as to maximise public support for their campaign. The challenges inherent in negotiating estimates of beggary are illustrated in three authorities’ disparate opinions on the mendicity campaign’s calculation of 5,000 street beggars: Warburton \textit{et al.}, in their contemporaneous history of Dublin city, accepted the figure as being accurate; an anonymous writer, seemingly associated with Dublin’s House of Industry, which experienced tense relations with the mendicity society campaign, rejected the estimate of 5,000 beggars, lowering the figure significantly to 2,000; while the Poor Inquiry \textit{Report on vagrancy and mendicity in the city of Dublin} concluded that ‘5,000 is very considerably below the real number’.\(^{67}\)

Private citizens were known to offer their own estimates as to the number of mendicants in their localities. Pastry-cook and confectioner W. Mitchell of No. 10 Grafton Street in Dublin, one of a number of traders who employed a street inspector to ward off beggars outside their premises, estimated that there were no fewer than 15,000 beggars in the city, of whom ‘not less than 40 or 50 pass my door every day’.\(^{68}\) Two of the street inspectors employed by traders and property owners – namely, Edward Ost and William Flinn – each claimed to encounter between 40 and 50 beggars on their respective ‘beats’ every day but they did not speculate as to the extent of mendicancy throughout the city.\(^{69}\) Disparities arose in Clifden, County Galway as to


\(^{68}\) \textit{PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin}, p. 44a*.

\(^{69}\) Edward Ost was ‘appointed and paid by the inhabitants of the five houses in Dawson-street nearest to Nassau-street’ and his duty was to ‘walk backwards and forwards, opposite to those houses, for the purpose of keeping beggars from importuning persons who frequent the street’, while William Flinn was employed by a ‘few of the inhabitants of Grafton Street’ to do the same: \textit{PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin}, p. 42a*. 
the extent of mendicancy in the locality. The town’s founder and landlord John D’Arcy expressed his belief to a public sitting of the Poor Inquiry that not more than three or four people in the town lived exclusively through begging, while a Catholic priest put this number at ‘fifteen and upwards’. Most interestingly, a group of five men, comprising a builder, two masons, a weaver and a freeholder, contradicted the local landlord and asserted: ‘There are more than fifty persons, this day resident in Clifden, who are supported entirely by begging’. The men then proceeded to name each of the approximately 50 persons included in this estimate. The question arises whether D’Arcy, who founded Clifden in 1815 as a regional commercial centre, publicly played down the true extent of poverty and mendicancy in his town in the interest of presenting his relatively new development as a hub of industry. Another possible explanation for the disparity in estimates is that D’Arcy was opposed to a proposed compulsory poor rate, of which, as a landlord, he would be a principal contributor. This explanation would correspond with Niall Ó Ciosáin’s assertion that it ‘could be in the landlords’ interest, therefore, to play down the extent and growth of poverty’. Yet, on the other hand, manipulated figures may have been presented for unknown reasons by the priest or the group of five men and it must be considered that these deponents and D’Arcy, divided by social class and probably religion, most likely possessed different interpretations of what constituted begging. Estimates of the number of beggars in an area could be loaded assertions, serving a particular individual or party purpose. A similar disagreement arose in the County Longford parish of Abbeyshrule, incorporating the town of Ballymahon. Two Anglican clergymen estimated the number of mendicants in the town and its immediate hinterland at around 30. After being challenged by a local merchant, who mentioned ‘the names of sixty persons who had no other mode of subsistence than begging’, the clergymen accepted the higher figure, but insisted that the local priest’s estimate of up to 250 beggars was excessive. In defending his estimate, the Catholic priest claimed that he spoke ‘not from calculation, but from actual observation, of the numbers residing in the different parts of the parish’, which can be read as an implicit criticism of the Anglican clergymen, alleging that he possessed a deeper understanding of social conditions in the largely Catholic locality than the clergymen of a minority denomination.

It may be suggested that such estimates as have been discussed above reveal, first, the difficulties faced by contemporaries who attempted to describe and categorise the multi-layered social substrata who constituted ‘the poor’;

70 PF, Appendix A, p. 485.
71 Ó Ciosáin, Ireland in official print culture, p. 43.
72 PF, Appendix A, p. 560.
secondly, the fact that begging was a common-sense and somewhat dependable survival strategy open to many people; and, thirdly, the impact that the visibility of public street beggars had on contemporaries, to the extent that the highly visible practice of public mendicancy was viewed as being considerably more prevalent than was truly the case. 73 Many mendicants were mobile, strangers in the areas where they begged and engaged in ‘face to face’ encounters with the public, and, as such, ‘these conditions of their existence undoubtedly made them appear to be more numerous than they were’. 74 While some of the aforementioned statistics of mendicancy are questionable in their accuracy and contradictory, they can serve a use for historians. These figures make clear that there were large, albeit not determinable, numbers of mendicants in pre-Famine Ireland, a fact which influenced the prominent place that public beggary played in the prolonged discourse about Irish poverty. Historians of poverty, welfare and mendicancy in Britain and Europe have also grappled with the difficult question of how to negotiate contemporary statistics for beggars in a given jurisdiction. Stuart Woolf has demonstrated how the statistics published by the Comité de mendicité, which detail the numbers of poor and the extent of poor relief in early revolutionary France, are questionable owing to the manner in which the figures were recorded and collected (an oversupply of figures rounded to the nearest ten and ‘suspiciously neat returns’ betraying the unscientific method of data collection), local authorities’ ‘different interpretations of the term “beggars”’ and evidence of bureaucratic altering of figures for unknown reasons. 75 In Beier’s study of vagrancy in Tudor and Stuart England, he outlines the complexities inherent in ‘the numbers issue’, given that ‘contemporaries’ estimates of vagrant numbers are nearly useless’; for Beier, surviving records for criminal proceedings against alleged vagrants are limited, raising the question of how representative those sources are of wider national patterns. 76 While the impossibility for historians satisfactorily to enumerate beggars in the past must be acknowledged, contemporary exercises in information-gathering can serve as a means to reach broader understandings of the nature of poverty and mendicancy. For instance, Tim Hitchcock utilises Matthew Martin’s information regarding beggars in late 1790s London and concentrates his focus not on the number of people begging on the metropolis’s streets but, rather, on the fact that these figures suggest that ‘many people,

73 For a case-study discussion of the interplay between the visibility and scale of begging in England, see Richard Dyson and Steven King, “‘The streets are paved with idle beggars’: experiences and perceptions of beggars in nineteenth-century Oxford” in Beate Altahammer (ed.), Bettler in der europäischen Stadt der Moderne: Zwischen Barmherzigkeit, Repression und Sozialreform (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), pp. 59–89.
74 Beier, Masterless men, p. 15.
particularly women, could preserve a begging life without being significantly troubled by constables and watchmen, and without becoming subject to the carceral ambitions of the state.\textsuperscript{77}

\textit{Statistics of Arrest}

The most common figures utilised by historians when examining begging and beggars are the statistics of arrest and prosecution for vagrancy offences. Throughout early modern Europe the range of activities and behaviours that fell within the remit of ‘vagrancy’ widened considerably, such that ever-larger proportions of the poor – especially the mobile poor – could be arrested and confined as deviants. Statistics arising from these arrests are widely available to historians of poverty in Europe, given the eagerness with which local and national governments kept records pertaining to the preservation of civil peace. However, these records are notoriously problematic: they only tell us what was recorded, reflecting the wider problems inherent in the relationship between recorded crime and actual crime. Fluctuations in arrests for begging and related vagrancy offences did not necessarily reflect ebbs and flows in the levels of begging but, rather, frequently represented changes in law-enforcement agencies’ fervour in enforcing the laws pertaining to these social problems. Increases in vagrancy arrests could also reflect seasonal movements of people (agricultural labourers migrating in the summer), a post-conflict demobilisation of soldiers and a movement of persons owing to temporary unemployment or a poor harvest.\textsuperscript{78}

A consultation of statistics for the arrest, prosecution and confinement of individuals under Irish vagrancy laws reveals that such sources are utterly inadequate as a means to gauge the extent of mendicancy. Between 1805 and 1810, the increase in the number of offenders committed to Irish gaols awaiting trial for alleged vagrancy offences rose from ten to 77, a significant rise proportionally but still remaining a relatively miniscule number among the total population;\textsuperscript{79} this small number of cases pertained to more serious offences under the vagrancy statutes, carrying high tariffs such as transportation, while most instances of criminal begging were likely to have been discharged at the petty sessions.\textsuperscript{80}

Figures for convictions for vagrancy reveal a relatively low rate of prosecution and the utter unsuitability of statistics of vagrancy convictions as

\textsuperscript{77} Hitchcock, ‘Begging on the streets of eighteenth-century London’, p. 481.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{A statement of the number of offenders committed to the several gaols in Ireland, for trial at the different assizes, commissions, and quarter sessions, in the years 1805, 1806, 1807, 1808, 1809 & 1810 …} p. 2, H.C. 1812 (246), v, 1006.
\textsuperscript{80} Garnham, ‘The criminal law’, p. 222.
a means of measuring beggary in Ireland is demonstrated in Table 2.1, which records the numbers convicted for vagrancy in select years between 1805 and 1831. Of these 1,454 convictions, 257 (17.7 per cent) resulted in transportation for seven years, with two cases of transportation ‘for life’, sentences which were not handed down for mere begging. The upsurge in vagrancy convictions between 1814 and the mid-1820s can probably be explained by the prolonged social and economic crisis of 1816–22 (encompassing poor harvests, famine conditions and disease outbreaks), coupled with the Rockite agrarian disturbances of 1821–4, both of which drove many poor persons across the countryside and heightened fears amongst the wealthier classes of the poor.

Table 2.1  Numbers convicted of vagrancy in Ireland, 1805–31

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Numbers convicted of vagrancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1805</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1806</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1807</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1808</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1809</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1814</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1823/1823(^*)</td>
<td>73/239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2 It appears that the discrepancy for the year 1823 is owing to the fact that the first figure (73) was compiled from the returns of clerks of assizes and the second figure (239) arose from returns submitted by the Inspector-General of Prisons.
Throughout this period, criminal statistics record prosecutions of vagrancy cases but not of instances of criminal beggary, as reflected in J.M. Wilson’s 1850s guide to Irish criminal statistics, which includes vagrancy within the category of low-tariff offences but makes no specific mention of beggary.\(^{81}\)

**How Much Was Given in Alms?**

Intrinsically linked to the question of how many beggars were in the country, or in a locality, was the consideration of how much was given to beggars, in cash or in kind. Those who contributed to the discourse on poverty and mendicancy wished to put meat on the bones of their arguments through the use of statistical methods and the deployment of hard figures. Calculating how much was doled out to mendicants served to emphasise the monetary burden that beggars placed on the general public, and the calculation and utilisation of such statistics strengthened throughout the 1830s, reflecting wider developments in the Poor Law debates throughout Ireland and Britain. These efforts also sought to reflect the significance of the perceived moral danger which mendicancy and associated activities posed to the citizenry; English magistrate and police reformer Patrick Colquhoun, who was also a prominent officer in the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, stressed that in ‘contemplating the state of the indigent, there is perhaps more to be dreaded from the increasing depravity of manners than from the great expense incurred in supporting them, enormous as it certainly is’\(^{82}\).

Dublin barrister James Butler Bryan claimed in his evidence to the 1830 Select Committee on the State of the Poor that, based on rather crude calculations, approximately £1 million worth of potatoes was given by rural householders to beggars every year.\(^{83}\) Addressing the same parliamentary investigation, Catholic bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, James Doyle, put this figure at £1.5 to £2 million.\(^{84}\) The Whately Poor Inquiry arrived at similar conclusions, estimating that between £1m and £2m was

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84 Report (summary) of Poor Committee, 1830, p. 33.
given annually in ‘spontaneous alms’, chiefly by ‘the smaller farmers and cottiers’. This alms-giving was carried out ‘without system, or without inquiry, to the good and the bad’ and, as a result, ‘the really destitute and the pretenders to destitution receive alike their maintenance out of the earnings of the industrious, to their great impoverishment, and to the great injury of the morals and good order of the kingdom’. While the most prominent contributors to the mendicancy discourse focused on the national scale, others were more concerned with the level of alms-giving in their localities. According to a letter-writer to the *Belfast News-Letter*, the town’s estimated 300 beggars (excluding their families) received £5,200 annually from inhabitants in private alms given on the streets, while one report claimed that £100,000 was given annually to street beggars in Dublin alone.

In considering how much was given to beggars in casual alms the most illuminating source is the collection of Poor Inquiry testimony from the mid-1830s. Numerous witnesses throughout the country offered estimates of the amount of alms that local farmers and shopkeepers typically gave, on a daily, weekly or annual basis, to mendicants. While most calculations were impressionistic and not grounded in scientific methodology, the range of such estimates from a wide array of witnesses throughout the country justifies the use of these figures as a means to explore the level of alms-giving, although the following exercise holds out no pretention as to comprehensiveness. As with many aspects of the mendicant problem, a rural/urban distinction must be made. In rural areas, nearly all alms-giving was carried out by farmers and labourers (and their families), and mostly in the form of potatoes. Solicitations at the cabin door resulted in the provision of a handful of potatoes, varying according to the number of beggars and the perceived worthiness of the case – a woman with children received the largest amount. In villages, towns and cities, however, cash played a greater part in the giver/receiver exchange, and sums of money were typically doled out to mendicants. In many towns, alms were provided to mendicants on specific days of the week: in the Donegal towns of Lifford and Letterkenny,

85 *Poor Inquiry (Ireland), Appendix (H) – Part I. containing reasons for recommending voluntary associations for the relief of the poor; and reasons for dissenting from the principle of raising funds for the relief of the poor by the voluntary system, as recommended in the report. Also, Tables No. I, II, II, referred to in Third Report*, p. 3, H.C. 1836 [41], xxxiv, 645.

86 *BNL*, 1 June 1810.

87 Anon., *Arguments in proof of the necessity of suppressing street begging, Dublin*, p. 8. This figure of £100,000 appears to have been accepted by other commentators on social conditions in Dublin: Whitley Stokes, *Observations on contagion* (2nd edn, Dublin, 1818), p. 55.
this occurred on Monday and Saturday respectively; in Stranorlar and
Ballybofey, the ‘helping-days’ were Wednesday and Friday respectively,
the shopkeepers giving ‘money, food, bits of soap and bits of tobacco’; in
Kilbrogan, County Cork, beggars calling on Fridays received ½d. each.\(^{88}\)
Bucking this trend, no weekly allowances were provided in Ennistymon,
‘for every day is helping day’, the Poor Inquiry commissioners were told.\(^{89}\)
Beggars in Cork city were said to receive between 3s. and 5s. each week in
casual alms, namely ‘fragments and halfpence’\(^{90}\)

Forty-seven instances have been identified in the Poor Inquiry report
where specific estimates were provided as to how much money the average
local shopkeeper doled out to mendicants, either daily, weekly or annually,
and these are represented in Table 2.2. The average sums provided were
greater in large towns and cities than in smaller locations, presumably owing
to greater levels of disposable income among larger shopkeepers in bigger
towns, as well as the greater number of mendicants in receipt of alms. In
the towns of Gorey and Wexford, as well as in Cork city, the average sums
totted between 3s. and 4s. per week; between 2s. and 3s. was given weekly in
other large urban centres, such as Carlow, Naas, Granard, Longford, Kinsale,
Derry, Coleraine and Carrickfergus. Smaller average sums were given in
smaller villages in Counties Antrim and Donegal. In Tuam, the Church of
Ireland archbishop Power Le Poer Trench estimated that shopkeepers gave
2½d. daily to beggars, totalling £3 16s. per year, although Trench qualified his
estimate by acknowledging that the amount given depended on factors such
as the number of people in the mendicant family.\(^{91}\) In Ballina, County Mayo,
the amount given by shopkeepers was estimated at £5 per annum (3¼d. per
day), while in Ballymahon, County Longford, shopkeepers were estimated to
give on average 1s. each per week.\(^{92}\) In Carlow town, ‘malster and brewer … a
respectable shopkeeper’ John Coffey (or Coffee) stated that he distributed 4s.
to beggars on a weekly basis, totalling £10 8s. per annum. With his property
valued at £50, the inquiry noted that Coffee ‘is actually charging himself with
a poor rate of 4s. in the pound’, that is, 20 per cent. Smaller shopkeepers in
the town were known to give 3d. or 4d. per day.\(^{93}\) In the parish of Dunleekney,
just north of Bagenstow in County Carlow, eight shopkeepers each gave
2d. to mendicants daily, totalling £3 0s. 10d. per annum each or £24 6s. 8d.
cumulatively.\(^{94}\)

\(^{88}\) PI, Appendix A, pp. 734, 736, 757, 653; Ó Ciosáin, Ireland in official print culture, p. 79.
\(^{89}\) PI, Appendix A, p. 638.
\(^{90}\) Ibid., pp. 671, 649.
\(^{91}\) Ibid., p. 488.
\(^{92}\) Ibid., pp. 496, 564.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., p. 539.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., p. 543.
Table 2.2  Estimated amounts given by individual shopkeepers in alms to beggars in 1830s Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town / parish</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Annually</th>
<th>( P_l, \text{Appendix A} )</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuam</td>
<td>Galway</td>
<td>2½d.</td>
<td>1s. 5½d.</td>
<td>£3 16s. ½d.</td>
<td>p. 488</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aughavale</td>
<td>Mayo</td>
<td>2½d.</td>
<td>1s. 4½d.(^1)</td>
<td>£3 11s. 6d.</td>
<td>p. 494</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballina</td>
<td>Mayo</td>
<td>3½d.</td>
<td>1s. 11d.</td>
<td>£5 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 496</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlone</td>
<td>Roscommon /</td>
<td>1½d.</td>
<td>1s. 0d.</td>
<td>£2 12s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 521</td>
<td>Average (20 shopkeepers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Westmeath</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlow</td>
<td>Carlow</td>
<td>3d.–4d.</td>
<td>1s. 9d.–2s. 4d.</td>
<td>£4 11s. 0d.–£6 1s. 4d.</td>
<td>p. 539</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunleekney</td>
<td>Carlow</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
<td>£3 0s. 8d.</td>
<td>p. 543</td>
<td>Average (8 shopkeepers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wells</td>
<td>Carlow</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
<td>£3 0s. 8d.</td>
<td>p. 543</td>
<td>Average (45 shopkeepers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tullow</td>
<td>Carlow</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
<td>£3 0s. 8d.</td>
<td>p. 547</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castledermot</td>
<td>Kildare</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
<td>£3 0s. 8d.</td>
<td>p. 552</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilcock</td>
<td>Kildare</td>
<td>3d.</td>
<td>1s. 9d.</td>
<td>£4 11s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 555</td>
<td>Average (60 shopkeepers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naas</td>
<td>Kildare</td>
<td>3d.(^2)</td>
<td>1s. 9d.</td>
<td>£4 11s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 558</td>
<td>Average (sixty shopkeepers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rathangan</td>
<td>Kildare</td>
<td>1½d.</td>
<td>1s. 0d.</td>
<td>£2 12s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 560</td>
<td>Average (45 shopkeepers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballymahon</td>
<td>Longford</td>
<td>1½d.</td>
<td>1s. 0d.</td>
<td>£2 12s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 564</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Granard</td>
<td>Longford</td>
<td>2d.–6½d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.–3s. 10d.</td>
<td>£3 0s. 0d.–£10 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 569</td>
<td>30 of 50 shopkeepers gave within this range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town / parish</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Annually</td>
<td>PI, Appendix A</td>
<td>Comments</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longford</td>
<td>Longford</td>
<td>4½d.</td>
<td>2s. 9d.</td>
<td>£7 3s. 0d.</td>
<td>pp. 574–5</td>
<td>Average of 2 cases (a merchant and a baker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullingar</td>
<td>Westmeath</td>
<td>8½d.</td>
<td>5s.</td>
<td>£13 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 590</td>
<td>One instance (Mort Mahon, shopkeeper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multyfarnham</td>
<td>Westmeath</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
<td>£3 0s.8d.</td>
<td>p. 592</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorey</td>
<td>Wexford</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>3s. 6d.</td>
<td>£9 2s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 596</td>
<td>Average given by ‘small shopkeeper[s]… in food or money’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wexford</td>
<td>Wexford</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>3s. 6d.</td>
<td>£9 2s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 598</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enniscorthy</td>
<td>Wexford</td>
<td>1½d.–2½d.</td>
<td>1s. 0d.–1s. 6d.</td>
<td>£2 5s. 7½d.–£4 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 600</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kildysart</td>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
<td>£3 0s.8d.</td>
<td>p. 617</td>
<td>Average given, ‘in food and money’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miltown Malbay</td>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>2d.–3d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.–1s. 9d.</td>
<td>£3 0s.8d.–£4 11s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 623</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killaloe</td>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>½d.–⅓d.</td>
<td>4d.–5d.</td>
<td>17s. 4d.–£1 1s. 8d.</td>
<td>p. 632</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newmarket-on-</td>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>2d.–3d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.–1s. 9d.</td>
<td>£3 0s.8d.–£4 11s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 646</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newmarket-on-</td>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>2d.–3d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.–1s. 9d.</td>
<td>£3 0s.8d.–£4 11s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 646</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Trinity</td>
<td>Cork city</td>
<td>6d.–8d.</td>
<td>3s. 6d.–4s. 8d.</td>
<td>£9 2s. 0d.–£12 3s. 4d.</td>
<td>p. 649</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macroom</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>&lt; ½d.</td>
<td>&lt; 1s.</td>
<td>&lt; £2 12s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 662</td>
<td>Average in most cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinsale</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>2d.³</td>
<td></td>
<td>p. 674</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town / parish</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
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<td>PI, Appendix A</td>
<td>Comments</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clonmel</td>
<td>Tipperary</td>
<td>£0.50</td>
<td>£4.50</td>
<td>£1 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 701</td>
<td>£1 ‘in meat’ given by shopkeepers with annual incomes of £400–£500, in addition to contributions to charities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahoghill</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>&gt;£0.50</td>
<td>1s.</td>
<td>&lt;£2 10s.</td>
<td>p. 703</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballymoney</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
<td>£3 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 707</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>&lt;£0.50</td>
<td>&gt;1½d.–</td>
<td>10s.– £2 10s.</td>
<td>p. 709</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrickfergus</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>4¼d.</td>
<td>2s. 6d.</td>
<td>£6 10s.</td>
<td>p. 711</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasharkin</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>1d.</td>
<td>7d.</td>
<td>£1 10s.</td>
<td>p. 728</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenarm</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>½d.–1d.</td>
<td>3½d.–6d.</td>
<td>15s.–£1 5s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 730</td>
<td>Average; shopkeepers in the town ‘are not wealthy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenavy</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>1d.</td>
<td>7d.</td>
<td>£1 10s.</td>
<td>p. 715</td>
<td>Average, ‘in food or in money’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larne</td>
<td>Antim</td>
<td>3¼d.</td>
<td>2s. 0d.</td>
<td>£5 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 720</td>
<td>Average, in alms and contributions to mendicinity society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layde</td>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>£0.50–2½d.</td>
<td>4½d.–1s. 6d.</td>
<td>£1 0s. 0d.–£4 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 722</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buncrana</td>
<td>Donegal</td>
<td>1¼d.</td>
<td>1s.</td>
<td>£2 12s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 744</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letterkenny</td>
<td>Donegal</td>
<td>1¼d.</td>
<td>1s.</td>
<td>£2 12s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 737</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moville</td>
<td>Donegal</td>
<td>1¼d.</td>
<td>1s.</td>
<td>£2 12s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 755</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town / parish</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Daily</td>
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<td>Annually</td>
<td><em>PI, Appendix A</em></td>
<td>Comments</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleaine</td>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>&gt;4½d.</td>
<td>&gt;2s. 8d.</td>
<td>&gt;£7 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 763</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newtown</td>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>&gt;1½d.–2½d.</td>
<td>1s.–1s. 6d.</td>
<td>£2 10s. 0d.–£4 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 770</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungiven and Banagher</td>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>3½d.–5d.</td>
<td>2s. 1d.–2s. 11d.</td>
<td>£5 8s. 4d.–£7 11s. 8d.</td>
<td>p. 773</td>
<td>Weekly distribution of ½d. to 50–70 beggars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilrea</td>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>1d.</td>
<td>7½d.</td>
<td>£1 12s. 6d.</td>
<td>p. 780</td>
<td>Average; distributed among around 30 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maghera</td>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>2d.–2½d.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.–1s. 6d.</td>
<td>£3 0s. 8d.–£3 18s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 784</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magherafelt</td>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>1d.</td>
<td>7d.</td>
<td>£1 10s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 786</td>
<td>Average (minimum estimate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derry</td>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>3½d.</td>
<td>2s. 0d.</td>
<td>£5 0s. 0d.</td>
<td>p. 791</td>
<td>Average of ‘higher classes’ of shopkeepers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The table lists instances in the *PI, Appendix A* where specific estimates, or a range of estimates, for the amount of alms provided by local shopkeepers are recorded. In the ‘Daily’, ‘Weekly’ and ‘Annually’ columns, the figures in bold illustrate the specific estimate that was provided; the other two figures for that instance have been extrapolated from the base figure. For the ease of the reader, these extrapolated calculations have frequently been rounded and are to be interpreted as rough rather than precise calculations.

1 Calculated as follows: 40 shopkeepers who gave 2s. 6d. weekly, as well as another 60 who gave between 3d. and 1s. (the average of this latter group taken as 7½d.).

2 The average daily assistance provided by ten shopkeepers giving 8d. and 50 giving 2d.

3 As 2d. per week appears like an unusually small sum in a large town, this figure may be an error in the primary source. If 2s. per week is correct, it would correspond to daily and annual contributions of 3½d. and £5 4s. 0d. respectively.
The Poor Inquiry evidence reveals that in many instances shopkeepers’
alms to beggars were provided due to the lack of an alternative relief
mechanism for these individuals. In towns where mendicity societies
and poorhouses were established shopkeepers typically ceased or severely
curtailed their indiscriminate alms-giving, preferring instead to subscribe
or donate to the local charity. Crucially, the average subscription to a
local mendicity society was considerably lower than the amount doled out
in casual alms, thus relieving shopkeepers of both the nuisance and the
monetary burden of beggary. In Carrickfergus and Coleraine, shopkeepers’
habit of giving weekly allowances ceased following the opening of the towns’
respective mendicity asylums; in the latter case, some shopkeepers’ burden
was said to have been relieved by a total of 5s. weekly, equivalent to £13
per annum.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 711, 763.} That more was given in casual alms than in subscriptions
to charities was evident in Ballymena, where subscribers to the town’s
mendicity society reported that their subscriptions totalled ‘half the amount
of what they formerly gave’, while in Derry, ‘since the establishment of the
Mendicity, the custom of helping-days has ceased’, with one man reporting
local shopkeepers as saying ‘that 1l. [i.e., £1] to the Mendicity saved 5l.
[£5] to the beggars’.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 718, 791.} In Ballymoney, shopkeepers were said to have been
much relieved by the establishment of the mendicity society, removing
from them the burden of doling out on average £3 per annum to beggars;\footnote{Ibid., p. 707.}
the average contribution to the Ballymoney society, based on a listing of
95 named subscribers and their contributions, was 10s. 9d.\footnote{OSM, xvi, pp. 16–17. The average is based on omitting three large subscriptions, which
would have distorted the calculation.} The average
subscription to the Ballyshannon Mendicity Society in 1834 was £1 17s.
6d., but this figure may have been skewed by a small number of dispropor-
tionately large subscriptions by members of the local gentry.\footnote{PI, Appendix A, p. 749.} In Sligo town,
shopkeepers were noted as giving very little to beggars by the mid-1830s,
instead subscribing to the town’s Mendicity Society, as they ‘consider it a
great advantage to their trade, as the beggars are kept out of the streets’.
\footnote{Ibid., p. 535.} George Nicholls concurred with the view that more was given in casual
alms than would be paid through organised means, stating that, from his
investigations, ‘the shopkeepers too and manufacturers and dealers generally
… [would] be gainers at the end of the year, whatever might be the amount
legally assessed upon them; for that they could neither close their doors, nor
turn their backs upon the wretched objects who were constantly applying
to them for aid’. Table 2.2 presents supporting evidence for Nicholls’s assertion: in 38 of the 47 cases recorded, the average sum given in casual alms on an annual basis was greater than £2 5s., considerably more than the typical subscription to a mendicity society. These figures point to a driving motivation among Ireland’s middle classes, particularly merchants and shopkeepers, to establish charities for suppressing street begging – namely, the provision of institutional assistance that cost significantly less than the prevailing system of private and largely indiscriminate alms-giving.

With the establishment of the Poor Law system in the late 1830s and early 1840s, financed through locally specified rates on owners and occupiers of land, the provision of assistance for the destitute poor was put onto a statutory footing. There was now, in Ireland, a formal structure, framed by legislation and overseen by a centralised authority (the Poor Law Commission), for the relief of those categories of the poor who formally had resort to mendicancy. The survival of a small number of poor rate books allows us to identify the amount levied on individuals in given locations and contrast these figures with the aforementioned estimates of casual alms-giving by shopkeepers and subscriptions to mendicity societies. Regrettably, it is difficult to source information on individual payments of poor rates for areas that correlate to locations where information exists as to the extent of private alms-giving and subscribing to mendicity societies. Nonetheless, some informed suggestions can be made.

A poor rate book for Castleblaney Poor Law Union in County Monaghan for 1847 shows that in the rural townland of Toome, the average holding by the 28 tenants measured approximately nine acres, for which the average annual poor rate was 9s. 4½d. Caution must be applied in this case, as this level of rating dates from the autumn of 1847, when the destructive impacts of the Great Famine were particularly acute. A more accurate reflection of levels of payable rates from non-crisis times can be found in the rate books for the Thurles Poor Law Union from the early to mid-1840s. In the town of Thurles, where there were 171 ratepayers listed with addresses on Main Street, the commercial hub of the town where property valuations and, subsequently, rates were highest, the average annual poor rate paid in 1845 was 8s. 6½d. Individuals who paid in and around this average rate were typically food retailers: for instance, baker Patrick Fanning and grocer Valentine Mara (O’Meara) paid 6s. 8d. and 8s. 4d. respectively, while professionals (as occupiers of typically more valuable properties) were liable to higher rates, with medical practitioner Thomas (O’)Sullivan and bank

manager Michael Bird paying £1 1s. 8d. and £1 11s. 8d. respectively. The properties occupied by ratepayers living and trading on smaller streets in the town were valued at a lower rate, leading to lesser levies. In less significant towns, comparatively reduced property valuations led to smaller levies: the 155 ratepaying occupiers of property on Francis Street (now Main Street) in Templemore paid on average 3s. 1d. in 1842. In the rural district of Inch, where approximately half of the holdings measured ten acres or less, the average levy (charged at a rate of 5d. in the pound) paid in 1842 was 6s. 9¾d. In the same year, ratepayers in Ballycahill, another rural Tipperary parish, were levied with an average payment of 5s. 1d. These figures demonstrate that, as with subscriptions to charitable societies, amounts paid in poor rates were significantly less than those doled out in casual alms to beggars: in monetary terms, indiscriminate alms-giving was without question the most expensive form of charity – at least for those who decided to dole out alms in this manner.

Conclusion

Estimates as to the extent of mendicancy and the amount doled out in alms to beggars formed a crucial part of the Irish Poor Law debates in the first half of the nineteenth century. The main contributors to this discourse, such as the Whately commissioners and George Nicholls, presented calculations of the extent of the problem in Ireland and there were good reasons for attempting to quantify beggary. The wealthier classes, who faced being the principal ratepayers under any new statutory Poor Law scheme, had an economic interest in identifying the cost of maintaining the prevailing system of voluntary charity in contrast to the proposed new rates-based system. Efforts to quantify mendicancy were also part of a wider effort to employ statistical analysis and supposedly objective methodologies in the ‘improvement’ of the moral condition of the lower classes. Such calculations rarely reflected a consensus and a number of reasons have been suggested:

103 Thurles E.D. rate book, Dec. 1845 (Thurles Library, Thurles Poor Law Union records, BG151/N/26/1). The ratepayers on Main Street are listed at numbers 542–638 and 959, 961–1034. The named individuals’ occupations were identified in Slater’s national commercial directory of Ireland … (Manchester and London, 1846), pp. 315–17.

104 Templemore E.D. rate book, Jan. 1842 (Thurles Library, Thurles Poor Law Union records, BG151/N24/2). The ratepayers on Francis Street are listed at numbers 560–714.

105 Inch E.D. rate book, Jan. 1842 (Thurles Library, Thurles Poor Law Union records, BG151/N/11/1).

106 Ballycahill E.D. rate book, Jan. 1842 (Thurles Library, Thurles Poor Law Union records, BG151/N/1/1).
for disparities, the prime explanation being the dissimilar definitions held by different individuals and parties of who and what constituted beggars and begging. The mobility of large numbers of persons, a distinguishing feature of the poorer classes in pre-Famine Ireland, compounded the difficulty. Analysis of the Whately Commission reports suggests that rural dwellers had a firm understanding of the extent of mendicancy in their locality through the greater likelihood of their being acquainted with ‘local’ paupers and able to distinguish them from ‘strangers’. To urban dwellers, greater proportions of their poorer neighbours, whether ‘local’ or ‘strange’, were unknown to them.

Even in cases where some form of statistical methodology was utilised, both the perceptions of the extent of beggary and the resulting estimates were highly impressionistic: as Laurence Geary has correctly observed, ‘it is easier to qualify than quantify begging in pre-Famine Ireland’. Statistical methodologies could produce detailed calculations of beggary and alms-giving but, as demonstrated for both national and local estimates, figures varied. The example of the Dublin mendicity campaign’s estimate of 5,000 beggars in the city points to complexities in the experiences and perceptions of poverty. One topic on which consensus was reached was that casual alms-giving was more costly, in material terms, than subscribing to a local charity such as a mendicity society. The establishment of a mendicity society served to provide an immediate solution to the nuisance of mendicancy – by removing street beggars and accommodating them in an industrious environment – as well as, crucially, reducing the monetary burden on traders. It is no surprise, then, that shopkeepers and merchants were at the forefront of efforts to establish mendicity societies in towns and cities throughout Ireland. However, the desire to quantify mendicancy did not transcend social barriers and was not felt necessary by the poor themselves. For the large numbers of the poor, mendicancy was a practice neither to be subjected to considerations of statistical analysis nor to be thought of in material terms, thus marking out definite variations in how the problem was perceived across the social spectrum.

107 Geary, “The whole country was in motion”, p. 127.